

## RESEARCH REPORT

Kinga Sekerdej

### THE AMAZING LICHEN

Our research project was initially concerned with the market of religious objects in pilgrimage places. In order to undertake this project, we decided to visit and stay for 4 days in Lichen (The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lichen The Sorrow Queen of Poland), a pilgrimage site. There was 6 participants of the research, including myself. Before going to Lichen, we also spent half a day at the Lagiewniki Sanctuary in Kraków (The Divine Mercy Sanctuary), during the biggest feast of this sanctuary, which is the day of Devine Mercy (April 18). Both places were recently enlarged, and the central churches are fairly new. Both were built fast, in order to accomplish the whole enterprise (or at least its part) before the visits of the Pope John Paul II to the two sanctuaries, during his pilgrimages to Poland.

In this report, however, I will focus mainly on our impressions from Lichen. Lichen is situated circa 10 km from the city of Konin. It has been a pilgrimage place for decades, notably after the coronation of the Icon of St. Mary from Lichen in 1967. However, during the 1990s, the parish priest decided on building a huge basilica, meant to be a 'votive of the Polish nation for the year 2000'. The basilica is now by far the biggest building in the area, the interiors are still being finished off. Actually it is repeated very often that the basilica is the biggest church in Poland, the seventh biggest in Europe, and it holds the thirteenth place in terms of cubature in the world. The Holy Icon will be placed in the basilica this year, right now it is situated in the older church, a few hundred meters from the basilica.

The Holy Icon represents Mary with an eagle on her chest. According to the legend, this is how she appeared to a Polish soldier fighting at the battle of Leipzig in 1813. This soldier searched throughout 'Polish lands', until he found the exact effigy of St. Mary, and brought it to his homeland, close to Lichen. The painting was placed in the forest in Lichen. The second time the effigy proved its sanctity, was prior to an epidemics of cholera, when St. Mary warned a local shepherd about the upcoming disease. After those events, people believed that this is a holy icon and the cult of St. Mary of Lichen began. In fact, we did not reach any sources that would testify the approximate time, when a local cult turned into a national one. Surely the date of 1967, when the icon was crowned, is very important in the history of the sanctuary.

Initially our project was to focus on the market of religious objects. However, after reaching Lichen, where the bulk of our research was held, we decided also to analyse the Lichen site

itself, also because there were a lot of similarities between the religious complex and the market of religious objects. The other reason that led us to look closer at the **Religious Complex of Lichen (RCL)** itself was our amazement with the whole enterprise. It is not an exaggeration to say that we have not seen anything of the kind elsewhere.

The first problem we encountered was the **esthetical aspect of RCL**. We considered it to be unbelievably ugly, the kitsch was overwhelming. Therefore during our first day at Lichen, we explored this 'ugliness' and concentrated mainly on this aspect of RCL. Hence our initial major difficulty was to transcend our esthetical disgust and instead to attempt to understand different meanings and relations we could observe at RCL. However, due to our esthetical impressions, we wanted to know the opinions of other visitors on this subject. And our interviewees very keenly affirmed that they thought RCL is beautiful.

It is important to notice that the majority of people we spoke to in RCL were visitors in Lichen, from other parts of Poland. The locals we talked to reacted somehow different to our questions about whether they like Lichen or not. Those, who made their living out of RCL (selling religious objects or providing food and beverages) were quite suspicious of our intentions. Others were outwardly critical of RCL. One man told us that the locals simply don't visit RCL, it is for outsiders. And when we parked our car in a place we weren't supposed to, the policemen told us, that they won't make us pay a fine, only if we promise not to leave a single penny in RCL. "Rather give the money to poor children" - so they said. Hence, we could observe very sharp differences in the perception of Lichen. However, they were much more visible outside RCL. In Lichen itself, everything that we considered amazingly ugly, to the people, whom we talked to, it seemed indeed beautiful.

Another striking feature of RCL was **the intertwining of religious and national symbols**. The Holy Icon itself is an example of this symbiosis: Holy Mary holds an eagle (the Polish emblem) on her chest. And it is not an exaggeration to say that in RCL, each official object conveys those two (religious and national) meanings. The obvious examples are the monuments, which are scattered throughout RCL in abundant numbers. One can find, for example, monuments of the Warsaw Uprising (an angel holds a dead partisan, above them there is a sign: 'Warsaw accuses'), of the Polish various military formations, of the Poles that died in concentration camps and the gulags, to name just a few. There are monuments commemorating specific figures: at least three monuments of the pope, one of father Jerzy Popieluszko (an active Solidarity priest, murdered by the intelligence police), father Maksymilian Kolbe (a priest that offered his life in Auschwitz for an inmate, and as a result died in the hunger cell), and many others.

Many monuments, chapels and caves are devoted not to the history of the Polish nation, but to the idea of the nation: a monument of a Polish family (with four to five children), a monument of the Polish children (which in fact is a cave devoted to the anti-abortion cause, with red stones imitating splatters of blood around an image of a foetus, with a 'grave of the unborn child' and with a baby facing a wall, on which we can read among others: "Mother, father, Mr doctor, sister nurse, Mrs neighbour: Don't kill me!"). Religious paintings also incorporate the idea of the nation: i.e. the nativity painting represents the Holy Family in the middle, whereas on the right important historical and political figures are represented, on the left, the painting pictures 'normal people'. Among the normal people there are representatives of various occupations, there is also a tourist with a book (entitled 'Poland for a weekend'), the painter (signed with his name), and in the middle the parish priest holding the basilica in his hands. The pattern of including national symbols in religious paintings is a rule in RCL. So is the presence of the effigy of the parish priest.

One can go on describing the intertwining of national and religious symbols. There is an abundance of written texts about the nation in RCL; interestingly enough, they are full of stylistic, grammar and spelling mistakes. For example on one of the two main columns of the basilica, there is a paragraph, engraved in gold, speaking about a very important battle in the Polish national memory: the battle of **Monte Cassino**. Here is the translation of the text: "The eagle, as the symbol of Poland is the proof of our connection with the Roman tradition. The eagles safeguarded the victory of the Polish soldier under **Monte Casino**". Certainly I am not a gifted translator, however this sentence seems at least awkward in Polish as well (as most of the paragraphs in RCL do). What more, there is a spelling mistake in the name of Monte Cassino, reducing the name of a very important historical site, to a name of, one might suppose, a nightclub! And this is engraved in gold on one of the two main columns leading to the biggest church in Poland! Other examples include the shape of the benches in the basilica that resemble the gear of the Hussars, also the eagles are everywhere. Because of the quantity of national symbols, of their organic relation to the religious ones, they are so obvious, that as a result they become almost invisible. When we asked several people what do the eagles mean according to them, they replied that they had no idea. In RCL there is the Golgotha Hill, with a huge cross on the top. Under the cross one can read a mini poem that is the sheer expression of the idea of the mixture of religious and national symbols:

Pod tym własnie krzyzem  
Pod tym własnie znakiem  
Polska jest Polska  
A Polak Polakiem!

Beneath this cross  
Beneath this symbol  
Poland is Poland  
A Pole is a Pole!

Another striking feature of Lichen is its **resemblance to an amusement park**. Visitors have maps of the complex; when we passed some groups they often discussed what to see next. We participated in the sightseeing tour organised by the church (once we've attended the whole tour, and twice we witnessed some parts of it). The nun (who was the guide) repeated that one needs a whole week to visit everything, she spoke of the season period and off-season. On the official videotape we bought, there is an 'interview' with three teenagers, who explain why people should come to Lichen. And they say: "Instead of going to Florida, come to Lichen!", or: "People should visit Lichen to see that Poland is not boring, that it is really an exciting place!". The complex is full of small paths, ponds, fountains and monuments. There is a lot to see, and visitors can choose the sequence of sightseeing. There is a few restaurants in the RCL, several shops and hotels (apart from them, there is a whole infrastructure of religious objects, food and drinks and accommodation offers just outside the complex). There are also museums and galleries.

After our day in Kraków in Lagiewniki sanctuary, we were afraid that our presence in Lichen might be visible, for example because of the photo cameras (this was the case in Lagiewniki). On the contrary, in Lichen, most of the people had cameras and took photos of everything. The only time we felt we're not acting like everyone else was when we took pictures in the building of the 'history of the basilica museum', because we've took pictures of the written texts on the wall, which did not seem normal. Otherwise, most of the people there looked like tourists, and so did we. What struck us was the fact that there is no quiet place in RCL. So we asked people where one can go to pray in peace. Most of the interviewees advised the Golgotha Hill. However, the hill was one of the main attractions and it was always crowded. Although there were signs ordering silence and prayer, people took their ice-cream there and behaved quite loudly. And in this respect we did not notice any qualitative difference between the Golgotha Hill and other places in RCL. Also the paintings I have mentioned, with national figures on them, to our impression were considered by many as an amusing riddle. People would exclaim with joy after recognising a historical or political figure, they were lively commenting them.

Another interesting feature was **the marketing aspect of RCL**. Our impression very often was that it's all about money. There is a lot of places one can donate money, and several information boards how to buy a brick/tablet for the church. The walls of the interior of the basilica are

made of such tablets with the names of the founders. One regular tablet costs 1000 PLN (circa 250\$). At the end of a mass we listened to, the priest asked for money, saying that even if one doesn't have it at the moment, he or she should write down the address, and send the money later. Interestingly enough, the money should be sent to (and this was also stipulated on the information boards): ks. Eugeniusz Makulski, Lichen near Konin – just the name of the priest, without any bank account number (and without any specified address, apart from the village of Lichen). On the other hand, we encountered quite often the information that it was possible to build this or that monument, or a part of basilica thanks to the great donations of the Polish nation. So the aspect of recognition of the people's participation in establishing RCL was visibly underlined. We had the occasion to observe another, quite amusing marketing activity, while sightseeing the complex with the nun. At the end of the tour, the nun would say (and it repeated each day we've been there) that today there is with us a priest (his name would follow), who – apart from being engaged in normal priestly activities – is a poet, God gave him talent. Following that introduction, the priest would say hello, and then took a book out of a box, which he brought with himself, and said (we have this recorded): “I will start with the most expensive book, for 19 PLN, hard cover, you won't get a better price elsewhere. This is a great gift for your daughter or granddaughter. It is a nice little poem about Lichen.” And so he continued presenting his other (cheaper) books. Then he would say that he prayed for his readers. The first time we saw it, we were amazed and concentrated on the priest. However, the other two days, we observed mainly the reaction of the listeners: the younger exchanged smiles and left earlier, but the older people listened without a blink, and some of them bought a book. We've also been a target marketing group: along with some other young girls, the nun distributed to us leaflets advertising joining their order.

We were struck by the lack of subtlety in all those marketing actions, but again when we talked to people, it was considered a good thing. (It must be noted though that the easiest group for us to reach were ladies over 60, happy to chat with young people. Others, like parents with children were not that talkative). They usually stressed that it is amazing that the parish priest could create that great Lichen almost by himself. Although actually the priest was the biggest controversy there. Either the people seemed to love or hate him. If we heard any critical remarks, they were usually aimed at the activities of the parish priest. However, some interviewees assured us that they pay regularly for RCL. When we asked, what do they think, where did the money come from, people usually would say that from America (the Polish emigration there), or from ‘an agreement with the pope’.

Another striking feature of RCL is **the lack of visible borderlines between the sacred and the profane**, which actually created an impression that there is no qualitative difference between

the nearby market of religious objects and RCL itself. Official informative boards using the same font showed the direction to the Holy Icon, the Golgotha Hill, Holy Water, as well as to the bar, the toilets or the market (elsewhere there was a separate sign: 'toilets by the Golgotha'). Although upon entering RCL visitors are informed that this is a sacred place and it should be treated as such (i.e. visitors should be quiet, contemplative, properly dressed etc.), our impression rather was that usually this request wasn't treated literally. In fact people seemed to consider RCL rather as a park (i.e. riding bicycles on the cemetery alleys). The several restaurants that are within the complex advertise their offers by writing at the entrance: "when you eat here, you help to build the basilica". The interior of the basilica itself is not a designated sacred area: there are huge informative boards how and where one can donate money, in the centre of the building a kiosk offers religious press, religious objects, it is also a place one can leave donations for RCL. In the museum shop, there is a huge assortment of both religious and non-religious objects. Thus, the official videotape of RCL is placed together with a tape about the pope's pilgrimages to Poland, but also with such films as: "Mars Attacks!" or "Look Who's Talking III". The park in the RCL was full of the sacred/profane mixture. A monument of Virgin Mary next to a fountain representing dolphins, Jesus surrounded by a pond with fake geese and ducks etc. This kind of intermingling of religious and secular objects was also striking at the market place. Fluffy dogs, hanging witches or devices for scratching one's back were kept together with crosses, icons and various objects of a religious purpose. Also the traditional religious objects were innovated (a kit with Jesus on the cross that can be put on the table for the visit of a priest and later disassemble for hanging on the wall). However we encountered the most surprising innovation in the Lagiewniki sanctuary, where one could buy rosaries in the shape of a credit card (we were told that they are functional, because they fit very well in a wallet). It was our impression that what mattered to the people was that the object had the sign 'a souvenir from Lichen' and it was not very important for the object to convey a clear religious meaning. (For instance, two of us witnessed the following scene: a lady wanted to buy a glass dolphin, but she was disappointed that no indication was given on this dolphin that it is from Lichen. The seller answered that it wasn't a problem, and he attached a sticker 'a souvenir from Lichen' on the dolphin. And the lady bought it.).

Another interesting aspect was the magical thinking unrelated to Catholicism, present both on the market and in the RCL. On the market the religious objects were accompanied by various talismans, books deciphering dreams, luck-trees etc. The guiding nun on her part told us that the basilica has many meanings, for example there are 33 steps leading to the entrance (number of years Christ lived), 52 doors (number of weeks in a year) and 365 windows (number of days in a year). In the official shops (where either nuns were sellers or at least the receipt affirmed that the Marian Order owns the store) also the religious objects and talismans of different

provenience were offered. Another interesting feature was the Holy Springs with **Holy Water**. There is no legend reaching distant past concerning the magical traits of the water. The story goes that the parish priest discovered the Holy Springs in Lichen. Interestingly enough, when we asked people why and how is this water Holy, they did not treat it necessary very serious. They said it's a good mineral water. One person affirmed that it is holy, because it never freezes, but another said that this is a sham, because there are special heaters installed near the taps. Hence once again, when we got closer to the subject of the parish priest, we received two alternative, indeed opposite explanations. Another interesting thing was one of the most popular 'religious objects' (?) at RCL, namely a figurine of Virgin Mary, with a crown serving as a cap. It was labelled: 'Container for Holy Water. Exclusively for religious purposes'. Many people did use the Mary figurine as a bottle for Holy Water, however others used various containers (including a vodka bottle). Although big signs asked to use only small bottles, so that there be enough water for everyone, this was rather disregarded by the public.

My overwhelming feeling was that Lichen is an area of a purely **invented tradition**. It is invented at least in three dimensions: architectural, religious and national. In RCL there is a museum devoted to the process of building the basilica. The main idea of the museum is to convince the visitors that this basilica is the purest and ideal realisation and synchronisation of various architectural styles, that it is the expression of several thousand years of architectural tradition. Furthermore, the claim was that every detail there was thoroughly thought through and placed according to deep traditional reasons. However to us the building and its interior did not seem to follow any architectural traditions, and we were not able to see the suggested link between the basilica in Lichen and Egypt or ancient Rome (as suggested). As none of us studied architecture, we consulted some internet pages. When reading the press or internet posts, the opinions on the architecture of Lichen are highly critical. On the portal [www.architekci.pl](http://www.architekci.pl) it is claimed that this building is an "architectural satire", that the "architects in Lichen negated all the achievements of architecture from the past two thousand years". Another interesting thing was that the local guidebook, the official videotape, and also the guiding nun claimed that the basilica resembles fields of wheat, and that because of this resemblance this project was chosen out of many others. However, seeing this similarity was beyond our imagination and this comparison seemed quite absurd. But it was repeated very often and maybe the people did see those fields of wheat (unfortunately we did not ask anyone about it).

To our surprise, RCL is also a religious invention. The Stations of the Cross from Christ's Passion are named differently than in traditional representations of Christ's Calvary. In Lichen they are much simpler. For instance, the Tenth Station "He is stripped of His garments" is labelled "unclothing", or the Fourteenth Station "His body is laid in the tomb" is called instead

“the funeral”. Furthermore the number of the Stations of the Cross is altered. Normally there are fourteen stations, however here an additional station is inserted. So instead of fourteen, in RCL the Christ’s Passion has fifteen stations, the last being the resurrection. Another example: on various tablets there are paragraphs in inverted comas, suggesting that one reads a quotation, probably from the Bible or the Gospels. They are styled to sound so, but either there is no reference (usually), or the reference is fake (we’ve spotted one such example). For instance we can read: “and the drunkards shall not enter the Heavenly Kingdom...”

Not surprisingly, RCL is also an invented national tradition. In the already mentioned museum, the bulk of the texts on the wall are devoted to proving that in fact Lichen is the heart of Poland. The centrality of Lichen is presented over and over. The first tablet in the museum represents an obscure text about the history of Lichen, however on this text the most visible element is an attached strip of paper suggesting with capital letters: “What if Lech was from Lichen...”. Lech was the legendary antecedent of the Polish nation. It is a sentence with no relation at all to the whole paragraph, but this is the most visible phrase there. On many other occasions the central role of Lichen for Poland is attested. Another example from the museum: one of the descriptions on the wall is entitled as follows: “Why can we speak about the Polishness of the architecture of the sanctuary in Lichen?”. Various explanations are mentioned: the specific Polish blend of simultaneous feeling of exultation and reality (sic), or the architecture in accordance with the style of ‘Gusto Polacco’ (?!). Elsewhere, it is mentioned that “one must admit that Poland has unique predilections to represent humanity”. The nationalistic texts on the walls of the museum form a sharp contrast to the exhibited marbles beneath them. The paragraphs stress the Polish character of RCL and the basilica, however each block of marble has an attached note, indicating the place of origin: Spain, Italy, Brazil, but not Poland. The examples of invented national tradition are very numerous in RCL, and very obvious as well.

The issue that begs the question in Lichen is: **why do the people actually buy it?** Our hypothesis is that RCL ‘works’, because it’s an amusement park, but a very specific type of an amusement park. It uses symbols deriving from two different traditions, and those are very familiar types of symbols to many people. Firstly it uses communist symbolism, Lichen aesthetically seems to represent “**religious socialist realism**”. The monuments are of the socialist realist type, except that they represent religious figures. The paintings look like the communist ones (in Bucharest the students remarked that they resemble the manner, in which Ceausescu was painted). Also the **one man cult** fits this image. The parish priest, Eugeniusz Makulski, is depicted on most of the paintings. He is also immortalized on a monument (near the entrance of the basilica) presenting him together with the pope. We managed to buy a postcard with the priest as well. Also in the basilica one could pick up a newspaper *Mysl Polska*



(‘Polish thought’ – an extreme right-wing paper) from 2001 (No 36, 1521) with an article on Lichen. We can read there about Eugeniusz Makulski, that he “calls himself the beggar of Mary. According to the testimonies of local believers, miraculous healings occur thanks to this humble priest” (p.7). The texts in the museum bring to mind communist times as well. For instance, one of the persons responsible for designing RCL is presented on a photograph with a short note beneath: “Engineer Ryszard Wojdak, the main constructor of the sanctuary, transforms our dreams into steel and concrete, into material reality”. We found this quite similar to the poetics of the communist period.

The second set of symbols that RCL evoked, was **the semiotics of soap operas**. Adding the fifteenth Station to Christ’s Passion might be fulfilling a need for a happy ending. Many figures, especially on the Golgotha Hill, were cartoon-like. Even the nun that guided the group made use of TV vocabulary. In front of one monument she said: “This is a monument commemorating the event of St. Mary warning the shepherd, that if people go on sinning, a terrible disease would fall upon them. Ladies and gentlemen: did the disease occur or did it not? We will find out in the next episode!” It turned out that the next episode was the next monument. On our way to it, the nun said: “In the meantime, let us pray together aloud”, and she began: “Our Mary...”. The prayer finished exactly when we reached the next monument, and the nun exclaimed: “Ladies and gentlemen: Yes!, a terrible disease struck the people! and here is the Choleric Kurgan commemorating those events”. Our impression was that the tour was organised according to the logic of TV series, the nun’s story was divided into episodes, while the prayers in between looked like repeatable (dare I say it?) advertisements.

It is not difficult to criticise RCL for its aesthetics or commercial aspects. However, we had to admit that the people enjoyed it and considered it to be a very important religious place. Maybe this is the form of religiosity that makes many feel comfortable and familiar. Lichen is unique, because on one hand it offers the grandeur and splendour of a huge church, on the other it does not demand detaching oneself from popular religiosity. Although it is monumental, by alluding to commonly familiar symbols, it is also understandable.