

# *Polish State Archives*

by TADEUSZ WALICHNOWSKI

After one hundred and twenty three years of captivity, Poland reappeared on world maps in 1918. The creation of an independent Polish state laid the foundations for the organization of a state archival centre following the decree of 7 February 1919.<sup>1</sup> Archives in Poland are subordinated to the Department of State Archives at the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Knowledge. The network of State Archives with a total of seventeen centres is made up of five central archives in Warsaw: the Central Archives of Old Documents, the Archives of Old Documents, the Treasury Archives, the Army Archives (later transferred into the Archives of New Documents) and the Archives of Public Education. In addition, there were provincial archives in the following towns and cities: Grodno, Kalisz, Kielce, Cracow, Lublin, Lvov, Łomza, Piotrków, Płock, Poznań, Radom and Suwalki. The Archives of Old Documents of the Silesian Voivodship, in existence since 1932, were not included in the network of the state archives.

During the World War II, certain archives were completely destroyed: the Archives of Education, the Treasury Archives and the Archives of Old Documents. This destruction, deliberately carried out by the German occupying power, wrought irreparable losses on Polish archives. In some instances, collections were totally destroyed and in others, damage reached proportions of seventy per cent. Lost forever were many collections of archival materials of importance to the whole of Poland: respecting the central and local authorities of the former Republic, the Warsaw Duchy, the Polish Kingdom, the supreme authorities and offices of the Second Republic, and documents of social, economic and cultural institutions.<sup>2</sup> Immediately after the liberation of Poland in 1944-45 the state archival service embarked on a period of reconstruction which lasted until 1950. During that time everything possible was done to find and to safeguard archival collections. The legal foundation for the existence and activity of the archives during that post-war period continued to be the decree of 7 February 1979, concerning the organization and care of state archives under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.

1 Decree on the organization of state archives and the safeguarding of archival documents, *Journal of Laws*, no. 4, 1919, item 182.

2 See further details in Tadeusz Walichnowski, *Przynależność terytorialna archiwaliów Państwa Polskiego w stosunkach międzynarodowych* (Territorial Provenance of Archival Documents in International Relations), Polish Scientific Publishers, (Warsaw, 1977).



*New archives building (1961) for modern state records, Warsaw.*

The socio-economic transformations during 1944-1951 in Polish land reform, nationalization of industry and banking produced a take-over by the state authorities of the entire national legacy of manuscripts making it possible for state legislation to encompass the entire spectrum of archival matters. In connection with this, a new decree was issued on 29 March 1951,<sup>3</sup> to consolidate a uniform network of state archives in Poland. Responsibility for the network was first placed under the general direction of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers; in 1956 under the Minister of Culture and Art; and finally, in 1958 under the Minister of Higher Education. Today, the General Director of the State Archives answers to the Minister of Science, Higher Education and Technology. The State Budget allots financial means from the section of "Science", just as to universities, technical universities and other institutions of higher learning.<sup>4</sup> State archives in Poland are considered "scientific archives" and their employees enjoy the same rights as scientific workers of the Polish Academy of Sciences, universities, and technical universities. The state archives of 29 March 1951 defined the range of competence of the General Direction of State Archives regarding homogeneous state archives. Based on the regulations of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, 14 January 1952, and connected with the decree on state archives, there have been

<sup>3</sup> Decree of state archives, *Journal of Laws* no. 19, 1951, item 149.

<sup>4</sup> The following ministries have separate archives which do not belong to the state archives: the Ministry of National Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Archives of political parties also have their separate collections. The Central Direction of State Archives has entrusted the former with archival collections, retaining only files providing information and the right to professional supervision.

established three central archives in Warsaw, seventeen voivodship archives placed in voivodship towns, sixty-seven country archives and twenty-three local branch departments.<sup>5</sup>

This structure has undergone changes through an act of 28 May 1975, passed by the Sejm of the Polish People's Republic, concerning the two-level administrative division of the Polish state.<sup>6</sup> By this act, counties have been abolished and Poland is now divided into forty-nine voivodships. Such changes in the administrative division of the Polish state brought about modifications in the network of state archives. The County State Archives have been abolished, and their place taken in 1976 by an additional sixteen Voivodship State Archives.<sup>7</sup> The present establishment of three central archives and thirty-three voivodship archives does not correspond with the number of voivodship towns. In these towns, work is performed by branch departments, administratively subordinated to the closest Voivodship State Archives.

Thus, the present state network of archives in Poland is as follows:

1. The Central Direction of State Archives in Warsaw;
2. The Archives of Mechanical Documentation in Warsaw (Central archives);
3. The Archives of New Documents in Warsaw (Central archives);
4. The Chief Archives of Old Documents in Warsaw (Central archives);
5. The State Archives of the Capital City of Warsaw;
6. Voivodship State Archives in the towns of Bialystok, Bydgoszcz, Czestochowa, Elblag (located at Malbork), Gdansk, Jelenia Gora, Kalisz, Katowice, Kielce, Koszalin, Cracow, Leszno, Lublin, Lodz, Nowy Sacz (located in Nowy Targ) Olsztyn, Opole, Piotrkow Trybunalski, Plock, Poznan, Przemysl, Radom, Rzeszow, Siedlce, Skiernewice (located in Zyrardow), Suwalki, Szczecin, Tarnobrzeg (located in Sandomierz), Torun, Wroclaw, Zamosc, and Zielona Gora (located in Stary Kisielin);

Branch archives in the towns of Bedzin, Bielski-Biala, Bochnia, Brzeg, Dzialdowo, Elk, Glowice, Gora Kalwaria, Inowroclaw, Jaslo, Konin, Krasnystaw, Legnica, Lubczyno, Lomza, Mlawa, Morag, Nowy Dwor Mazowiecki, Nowy Sacz, Oswiecim, Otwock, Pila, Pinczow, Ploty, Pszczyna, Pultusk, Radzyn, Podlaski, Rawa Mazowiecka, Sieradz, Slupsk, Starachowice, Szprotowa, Tarnow, Walbrzych and Wloclawek.

Because of the damage caused by World War II—and above all by the scorched-earth policy practised by the withdrawing German armed forces in 1945—parts of both archive buildings and archival materials in Poland were completely destroyed.<sup>8</sup> The Central Archives in Warsaw suffered the most distressing losses. Against the backdrop of the general losses in people and material suffered by the Polish during 1939-1945, unprecedented in their his-

<sup>5</sup> *Monitor Polski*, no. A-9, 1952, item 87.

<sup>6</sup> Act on the two-level administrative division, *Journal of Laws of the Polish People's Republic*, no. 16, 1975, item 91.

<sup>7</sup> Instruction no. 4 of the Ministry of Science, Higher Education and Technology of 21 January 1976 regarding the setting up of voivodship state archives.

<sup>8</sup> Tadeusz Walichnowski, op.cit.

tory, the authorities could hardly consider the rehabilitation of archives as the most pressing problem facing them. Temporary solutions were sought. The Central Direction of State Archives, with the assistance of the Ministry of Culture and Art, took over forty-eight historical buildings (some erected as far back as the fourteenth century) for the use of the state archives. The adaptation of these buildings for archival purposes was an expensive and difficult undertaking. Each building had to be restored to its former state, in strict accordance with the recommendations of the authorities responsible for the preservation of historic buildings. In this manner, Polish culture regained forty-eight historical buildings, and the archives obtained 200,000 cubic meters of usable floor area, of which 150,000 cubic meters have already been handed over. The demand for archival building has become a very complicated issue in Poland. Historic structures which can be used to house archives have in principle already been rebuilt by the state and made over for use to various institutions. Yet there remains a painful shortage of space in the store-rooms, proof of which is given by the fact that sixty-six percent of our state archives have to limit acceptance of records and documents, or attempt to overcome the lack of storage space by compressing more documents in available space than might be advisable considering the structural limits of buildings. Research has revealed that another 250,000 cubic meters of archival storage space will have to be built in Poland during the next twenty years.

At present, state archives in Poland have 152,000 meters of documents in store, or approximately twelve million archival units (volumes, records and documents).<sup>9</sup> These collections are being systematically enriched through the transfer of documents from state and cooperative institutions, and by bringing together in one place scattered archival material from various archives, libraries and museums. Added to the collections are microfilms, which the state archives in Poland receive through exchanges with many foreign archives. Purchases are made and documents are bought from private persons or received as gifts. These come within the competence of the Central Commission for the Purchase of Archival Documents at the Central Direction of State Archives and the Purchase Commission at the various Voivodship State Archives. Polish state archives include all kinds of documents, volumes, correspondence, financial, technical documentation and statistical data, maps, plans, photographs, films, sound recordings, audio-visual material of lasting value as well as of scientific, cultural, political, social and economic significance. This type of archives is the outcome of the activity on Polish territories of Polish authorities, offices, institutions, organizations, families and individuals. The oldest documents reach back to the twelfth century, the most recent to 1975.

Central and voivodship state archives in Poland make it possible for scientific workers to have access annually to approximately 20,000 volumes, books and collections of records. The archives have about 8,000 customers and answer approximately 20,000 research queries each year. The interest in genealogical research is growing steadily, especially by those Poles whose fate compelled them to emigrate from Poland. While they have become assimilated

---

9 As of 30 August 1978.

citizens of the states where they are now living, they now wish to know the genealogy of their forebears and often seek certified documents.

Thus, during the partitions of Poland at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, North America including, of course, the territories of present-day Canada, became the second fatherland of the Poles. Poles too had contact with that continent at an earlier date, though emigrants from the period of World War II are not lacking or even some from the post-war period. Some people emigrated for political reasons, others to earn a living, and migrations between Poland and Canada take place regularly, as is the case with other countries in their mutual relations. No wonder, therefore, that keen interest in Polish archives is shown by Canadians and the Canadian Polonia.

To the important tasks of the archives belong: giving access to archival documents kept in our state archives; research and examination for questions asked by private individuals at home and abroad, as well as microfilming of archival documents ordered by customers.<sup>10</sup> With each year, the interest of researchers in our archives grows in a variety of scientific subjects, including also habilitation work (qualifying for assistant professorship), doctoral dissertations and master's theses. Recently, the number of customers has been increased by representatives of various offices, institutions and enterprises, seeking material from archival documents to facilitate the preparation of papers on administration and management. The increase in this category of researchers, who simply are specialists in various fields of state administration and economy, testifies to society's need for historical knowledge. In this case, our new clientele conducts itself on the correct principle that one cannot administer and plan properly without knowing about past procedures of administration and planning.

The principal tasks of the Central Direction of State Archives derive from its fundamental functions—organizational, research and informative—subordinated to the general goal of the state archival service centres: to educate, collect, safeguard, prepare scientifically, and to utilize archives for various institutions, scientific centres and private individuals at home and abroad. The Central Direction coordinates the work of all the archives, ensuring that there is a uniform principle observed for basic work in the archives directly subordinated to it as well as in those that have been set apart. The chief tasks of the Central Direction of State Archives consist of organization of work and administration, research, filing, information and providing access to documents. These three principal sections are under the direct management of the General Director of State Archives, who, at the same time, performs the functions of scientific head of the entire state archival service in Poland. Administrative matters are handled by the Deputy General Director. The organizational structure (central and local) of the state archives in Poland is not of a permanent nature, for it will change along with the development of service functions and

---

<sup>10</sup> Permission to make use of archival documents which came into being before 1 September 1939 and exceptionally also up to 1 December 1950, is given by the directors of central and voivodship archives. For documents which came into being after 1950, such permission is given by the General Director of State Archives, who also gives permission to foreign institutions and the citizens of foreign states to make use of archival documents.

research. Better management of the state archive collections and organization of work and administration will help to create an up-to-date model of scientific archives in Poland.

Bearing in mind the steady development of archives and the effort to raise their rank in science and society, the Central Direction of State Archives has prepared a draft bill to be presented to the Sejm on archives and archival documents. Following this bill, executive regulations will be issued regarding the present and future state of the work of archives.<sup>12</sup> Old structures and concepts shaping the activity of various fields of political, scientific, cultural and economic life undergo changes through the influence of the scientific and technical revolution. The foundation and superstructure of the state changes in favour of progress, better forms of organizational work, and basic activity. This phenomenon has been noticed by the state archival service in Poland in its entire aspect. During the now historical conference of the directors of central and voivodship state archives in Warsaw on 2 December 1976, there were laid down the objectives of state archives in Poland on the basis of general tasks, stemming from the current needs of the country.<sup>13</sup> It was stressed that the coming years will be marked by a growing need for archives to play a useful role in satisfying the requirements of society and the national economy, in supporting today's much more intensive development of research, combined with the simultaneous regulation of the activity and competences of the state archival service with regard to the creation of a scientific workshop for future researchers of the history of our people, our culture and state economy. The conference delineated the guidelines for contemporary and future tasks of archives and *archivistique* in Poland, referring to the experience and scientific achievements of Polish archives during previous years. This new level of tasks and development of the state archival service in Poland has become a major challenge for archivists and has provided an opportunity to raise the social rank of their profession.

An important event in the implementation of contemporary tasks facing the state archives outlined in December 1976 was the First National Conference of Research Workers of State Archives, organized in Poznań on 28 April 1977 by the Research Institute of *Archivistique* at the General Direction of State Archives. The choice of the site for the conference was not accidental. The Poznań scientific centre maintains close contact with the well-organized Voivodship State Archives in this city, and is prepared for cooperative research work with the Research Institute of *Archivistique*. Thus it was possible during this historic national conference, which was a turning point, to discuss not only the principal scientific guidelines for the development of archives, the needs of science and the national economy in the broad sense of this word,<sup>14</sup>

---

12 A draft bill, before it is presented for discussion to the Legislative Sejm of the Polish People's Republic, has first to be accepted by the various ministries and the office of the Council of Ministers. The passage of this bill is expected in the second half of 1979.

13 Tadeusz Walichnowski, "Aktualne zadania archiwów państwowych w Polsce" (Current Tasks of State Archives in Poland), *Archeion*, LX-B, (1977): 9-25.

14 Tadeusz Walichnowski, "Scientific Activity of State Archives in Poland" (The present state, perspectives for the next few years) in *Scientific Activity of Polish Archives. First National Conference of Research Workers of the State Archives, Poznań, June 28, 1977*, Tadeusz Walichnowski, scientific ed. (Warsaw-Łódź, 1978), pp. 5-19.

the scientific staff of researchers in state archives<sup>15</sup>, but also the results of correctly organized scientific work using as an example the Voivodship State Archives in Poznań.<sup>16</sup> Conference participants included representatives of various fields of science, above all of history, economy, law, agricultural sciences, forestry and political sciences. This was the first conference in the history of the state archival service in Poland devoted exclusively to problems of scientific work in state archives. The main guideline was to define *archivistique* as a separate scientific discipline and to map out new directions of activity for archives on the basis of past achievement and through the entire range of archival work.<sup>17</sup>



*Royal privilege granted by Stephan Batory to the Guild of Potters of Torun, 1576.*  
(Voivodship State Archives in Torun) Detail

The activity of the state archival service and the new programme of scientific activity in the archives, presented during the First Conference, met general understanding and the support of the Polish scientific community. To raise the rank of archives and *archivistique*, a Subcommission of Archives of the Commission of Information, Libraries and Publications and the Publishers of the Chief Council of Science, Higher Education and Technology, was set up in 1977. The General Director of State Archives is the chairman.

15 Maria Lewandowska. "The Current State of the Research Staff of State Archives", in *Scientific Activity of Archives*. . . , pp. 36-59.

16 Stanisław Kłys. "Scientific Activity of the Voivodship State Archives in Poznań," in *Scientific Activity of Archives*. . . , pp. 20-35.

17 Representatives of the Ministry of Science, Higher Education and Technology, members of the Presidium of the Archival Council, the Commission of Archivists and Associations of Polish Archivists also attended. The work of the First Conference aroused keen interest among the authorities of Poznań and Wielkopolska (Poznań Region), the Poznań Branch of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Adam Mickiewicz University.

The new programme of activity in the archives makes it necessary to look at the qualifications of archivists and their education. A serious problem still requiring solution is the as yet insufficient number of research workers with doctorates or those who have qualified as assistant professors. Neglect in this respect is enormous, unproportional by comparison with the knowledge and possibilities of the employees of the archival service. In order to change the existing state of affairs, a number of regulations have been issued regarding concessions and privileges for those archivists who improve their scientific qualifications.<sup>18</sup> The problem of raising the level of university education of archives personnel was the subject of discussions held in Gdańsk on 9 December 1977, during a conference devoted to university education of archivists. This conference was organized by the Commission of *Archivistique* and Auxiliary Sciences of History at the Executive Board of the Polish History Society.<sup>19</sup> The conference was attended by scientific and didactic specialists from university centres, specializing in training archivists, employees of the Research Institute of Archivistics at the General Direction of State Archives, and employees of central and voivodship state archives. The Gdańsk Conference adopted above all the attitude that modern state archives, doing scientific work and simultaneously serving science as well as the national economy and society, should employ highly skilled scientific personnel with complete professional training. Such training would guarantee independent development of *archivistique* along with a study programme accommodating the requirements of archives. A separate university department of *archivistique* is undoubtedly still a matter for the remote future, but the path for it is being cleared by existing archival specialization in history studies as a post-graduate study course and by the growing demand for archivists with higher education.

The Second National Conference of researchers employed by the State Archives, held on 17 April 1978 in Katowice, was organized by the Research Institute of Archivistics at the Central Direction of State Archives. This conference confronted problems related to the utilization of archival material for the current needs of the national economy. In contradistinction to the First National Conference, which was of a programmatic nature outlining the trends of research work and the development of the scientific staff in archives, the Katowice Conference provided outlines for a narrower range of problems. Attention was drawn during the Second Conference to the fact that urban and rural planning of the country, undertaken by the Planning Commission at the Council of Ministers of the Polish People's Republic, makes provision for such matters as "acceleration of the development of the country through rational utilization of the resources and reserves of the various regions and rational site development".<sup>20</sup> These recommendations found confirmation in many documents shaping the system of forecasting as a foundation for the laying down of five-year and long-term plans, taking into account reserves in science. It was most forcefully stressed in Katowice that the usefulness of archives for the requirements of the national economy makes it necessary to examine pos-

18 Selection of the most important regulations in *Scientific Activity of Archives*. . . , pp. 140-148.

19 Records of the Gansk Conference were published by the Research Institute of Archivistics, See: *Uniwersyteckie Kształcenie Archiwistów* (University Education of Archivists), Warsaw-Łódź, 1978.

20 Town and Country Planning up to the year 1990. See *Town and Country Planning Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences*, Fascicle 85 (Warsaw, 1974) p. 58.

sibilities, temporary as well as long-range ones. These important research centres must cooperate in the implementation of the economic plans of the government. The function of archival documents should be thoroughly analyzed, since they are not only a source of information about the experience and historic past of the nation, but also depict national achievements in the sphere of state economic development. Collected and properly housed archival documents can in many cases be used now and will be in the future to promote the development of the Polish national economy.<sup>21</sup>

Good conditions have been created in post-war Poland for the development of science; the role played in everyday life by research and teaching staff in accelerating economic, social and cultural changes is being fully appreciated. The tasks of post-war rebuilding and expansion in Poland have been carried out with great effort and patriotic devotion. In the present decade, the entire nation has been faced with the intensified task of modern building, and the demands on scientific workers and technical as well as engineering personnel have increased. In connection with this, an up-to-date system of organizing research and developmental work has been created and new forms of research coordination have been drawn up through ministerial and interdepartmental programmes. Such important economic ventures as the programme for the regulation and site development in 1981-2000 of three principal Polish rivers (the Vistula, Odra and Warta) have become a guideline for Polish prosperity. Obviously, archivists should not be missing when such important transformations are taking place in Poland, since they have at their disposal rich scientific resources that have taken shape and been enriched over the centuries. It was precisely in Polish archives that one could find documents relating to regulation of these same rivers and to site planning of areas situated on their banks.

The definition of the developmental trends of state economy in Poland and, above all, of medium and long-term development forecasting connected with problems of socio-economic development does not take place in isolation from the achievements of the past. The results achieved by generations are reflected in documents acquired by archives and are often very useful for present and future state developmental strategy. In this light, Polish archivists can supply most useful information through their research and examination of documents, helping to find reserves concealed in science. Practice has shown that well prepared archival material from state archives, approached from the perspective of current and future needs of the country, can be most helpful in finding scientific solutions important to the needs of the national economy. In many voivodships, there is growing interest in archives on the part of the authorities, institutions of higher learning, research centres, industrial associations of enterprises and economic institutions.

Present-day state archives are inseparably linked to research work which is becoming more thorough because of archival practice, itself, in turn, taking advantage of the results of research. All this has to be accompanied by the con-

21 Attention was drawn to the latter fact by Professor Stefan Ingot in his introductory address to the participants in the Wrocław Conference on November 22, 1977, devoted to the history and present time of fuel, ore and rock mining in Lower Silesia. Cf. *"Górnictwo Energetyczne, Kruszcowne i Skalne na Donym Śląsku wczoraj i dziś* (Fuel, ore and rock mining in Lower Silesia), Wrocław 1977, p. 6.

stant improvement of the archivists' qualifications by means of higher studies in the field of *archivistique*, post-graduate studies, and work aimed at obtaining scientific degrees (doctorates and assistant professorships). A positive sign is the widespread interest among the employees of state archives in post-graduate courses, in foreign languages, and in other avenues for obtaining knowledge. During the years 1981-2000, research teams and individual researchers from the archival service in Poland should find the place they deserve in government, ministerial, branch and inter-departmental plans, the aim of which is to bring about the economic and cultural development of the country. In this manner they will be able to make their contribution to the development of science and, above all, will participate in the patriotic tasks of state building. Provision should also be made for the further cooperation of archivists in the publication of archival source material dealing with the history of the Polish people (joint ventures of the Polish Academy of Sciences and institutions of higher learning), and for the preservation of documents. Much attention is being devoted to raising the scientific qualifications of the archivists of the Polish archival service network and, above all, to those of the leading staff of the archives.<sup>22</sup> Until quite recently, a Master of Science who was just a lecturer without a doctor's degree was the typical research worker in archives, and docents, who had not qualified as assistant professors constituted the vanguard of the few independent scientific workers.

The situation in Polish archives is improving. The best proof of this is the commitment of archivists to elevate their qualifications and to enhance the basic activities of archives. Publications issued by the Research Institute of *Archivistique* at the Central Direction of State Archives include "Archeion" (a journal appearing twice yearly) and "Teki Archivalne" (appearing once a year), which concentrate on the preparation of scientific work for publication, and discuss Polish archival theory and practice. It is, therefore, to be expected that the achievements of Polish *archivistique* will be more broadly popularized in science than has been the case so far.

---

22 To guarantee the proper development of the state archival service all the managerial posts (with the exception of administrative ones) in the state archival service are exclusively to be filled with research workers (Regulation no. 9, General Director of State Archives, 10 June 1978).

## Résumé

L'état de guerre presque continuel qu'a connu la Pologne a rendu extrêmement difficile la préservation de ses archives. Cependant depuis 1951, des dépôts nationaux et régionaux ont été établis et servent les besoins de l'État polonais. L'auteur insiste sur les problèmes du recrutement de personnel professionnel qualifié et de la formation permanente de ce même personnel.