

## Polish Army Museum as Poland's Largest Military Museum

Julia Pronobis Polish Army Museum in Warsaw, Poland

The Polish Army Museum in Warsaw was established on 22 April 1920 by the decree of the Marshal Józef Piłsudski. It was established thanks to efforts of Bronisław Gembarzewski, at the time the director of the National Museum of the Capital City of Warsaw (today the National Museum in Warsaw), who wrote about the military museum in his memorandum to the Polish War Ministry: *the shrine of war glory of past generations: the glory that our young forces should consider themselves heirs to*<sup>1</sup>. Born in 1872 in St Petersburg, Russia, Bronisław Gembarzewski was a Colonel in the sapper force of the Polish Army and an artist by education (he studied painting arts at the Artistic Academy in St Petersburg, 1892-1894, and at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Metiers in Paris, 1895-1896), while his passion for history made him a worthy founder and for many years the director of the Polish Army Museum. As a painter, he created mainly landscapes. Before World War I he dealt with organising the collection of the Polish National Museum in Rapperswil, Switzerland. According to Bronisław Gembarzewski the mission of the Army Museum was to show the deeds (battles, sieges, military tactics), things (weapons, clothing, paintings, flags) and humans (heroes, leaders). He based his vision of the museum on regimental museums, created by soldiers who served in the occupants' armies, and transformed into tradition rooms after the World War I. Gembarzewski defined clearly the aims of the museum: it had to accumulate old objects, research them and make them available to researchers and the public, following the periodisation of the history of Polish arms.

In addition to the historical departments of the Army Museum, also specialised departments were going to be created, dealing with clothing, gear

and modern Polish and foreign weapons.

The time of establishment of the Polish Army Museum coincides with the beginning of the formation of military museums in Poland. One of the most prominent museologists in this field was Władysław Dziewanowski, who wrote, among others, *the Zarys dziejów uzbrojenia w Polsce (Outline of the History of Arms in Poland)* and *Uzbrojenie w rozwoju dziejowym (Armament in the History Development)*. These publications are important in that they show Poland's first systematic breakdown of the old weapons in terms of armaments and methods of use (blade weapons, pole arms, battleaxes, shooting weapons, firearms, etc.). In addition, Dziewanowski created definitions and terminology that allowed accurate classification of data of the old objects. Thus, the area of interest of the developing modern military museums was self-determined. It included weapons of Polish make and foreign weapons used in Poland or those that affected the development of Polish arms. One of the key achievements was to identify and characterise the most important and most precious examples of old Polish armament and to present them against European and Oriental weapons, while at the same time creating research apparatus for determining the provenance and origin of old Polish arms. Dziewanowski's proposal to see old military objects as important, and impossible to neglect, historical sources for the study of military history, is reflected today in the activities of the Polish Army Museum.

Currently in Poland we can distinguish about a dozen institutions that have the nature of a military museum or a museum of Polish arms. These museums mostly began to take shape after the end of World War II, which is understandable,

both in terms of collections, and specific activities. The following can be distinguished among the most important of them: Navy Museum in Gdynia, Army Museum in Bydgoszcz, Air Force Museum in Dęblin, Museum of Polish Arms in Kołobrzeg, Wielkopolska Military Museum in Poznań, Museum of Armoured Weapons of the Land Forces Training Centre in Poznań, Military Museum in Białystok, Military Museum in Sochaczew, 'White Eagle' Museum in Skarżysko Kamienna (governed by local authorities), Military Museum in Zielona Góra, based at Drzonów.

In addition all kinds of private initiatives should count among common forms of establishments and collections of military museum nature. Those worthy of mention include the Museum of Coastal Defence in Hel, Fort X Gerard in Świnoujście also known as the Eastern Fort, and the 'Arsenal' Museum of Fortifications and Weapons - Museum of Zamość. The Museum of Coastal Defence is located on the Hel Peninsula - one of the most popular vacation destinations for Poles. In the spring of 2006, on a former coastal artillery battery built by the Nazis during the World War II the Museum of Coastal Defence was opened, founded and ran by the 'Friends of Hel' Association. This noble initiative is supported by a group of volunteers and enthusiasts of history, who prepare the display, give tours to tourists, and publish materials and guidebooks. The Museum of Coastal Defence is the only military museum of its kind in Poland.

The general division of museums in Poland follows the global one, such as presented by Saur in the 'Museums of the World'.<sup>2</sup> Polish museums are defined as follows, under the Museums Act of 2007 (Dz. U. of 2007, No. 136, p. 956, as

amended):

*A museum is a non-profit organizational unit whose purpose is collecting and durable protection of natural and cultural heritage of mankind, both material and non-material, informing on values and content of the accumulated collections, promoting the fundamental values of history, science and culture, both Polish and worldwide, shaping cognitive and aesthetic sensitivity, and enabling the use of accumulated collections ...*

Museums in Poland can be divided according to: the subject of collections (museums-temples, archaeological, biographical, pharmacy, history, literature, martyrdom, marine, terrestrial, science, industry, natural, religious, artistic, technical, theatrical, university museums, etc.); their range, such as regional museums; formal and legal criteria: common and registered museums; the governing entity: e.g. state and local government, university, public or private museums. A new trend emerging today is to organise museum as cultural and scientific centres of more or less specific profile of action.

Against this background, the Polish Army Museum stands as a museum of tradition and clearly stated objective of operation since the beginning of its existence. Main collections of the Polish Army Museum include today over 89,000 objects referred to as three-dimensional movable heritage, or tangible historical sources. In general, they are products of human material culture related to the sphere of activity of war. Precisely speaking these are militaria: cold iron, firearms, uniforms and gear, riding equipment and gear, vexilia (flags and colours), faleristics (orders and decorations) and badges and emblems, protective equipment and pole weapons, battleaxes and

shooting weapons, as well as widely understood military equipment. It is of great importance for the Polish museums that the Army Museum collections suffered greatly during World War II. In October 1944 the Commission for Protection of Monuments of Culture was set up in Warsaw, as a response to the so-called Hitler's Orders No. 2, issued on 11 October 1944, that ordered the destruction of the city (razing it to the ground). Before destruction, goods of economic importance were to be removed from the city (this was the responsibility of the evacuation staff, headed by SS-Brigadeführer Paul Otto Geibel, the commander of the SS and police in the district of Warsaw). These activities included the evacuation and looting of property, and then blowing up more buildings in Warsaw. The most important archives and museum collections were burnt. The Commission report written by Ludwig Fischer read:

*In the reporting period also started the despatch of cultural goods. Until now, 5 railway cars of museum exhibits were despatched, 5 cars of valuable books and 7 cars of archives. Moreover, 3 cars of mortgage books were despatched to the Reich ...<sup>3</sup>*

And in regard to the museums it read:

*The National Museum and the Military Museum: despatched by 30 November: 49 boxes and 78 separate paintings. More than 14 boxes, 200 paintings, graphic art collections were packed. A total of 80 tonnes of collections were despatched in 5 cars.<sup>4</sup>*

Today, the Polish Army Museum also manages three divisions in addition to its main office: the Katyń Museum, which is going to open on 17 September this year, located at the Warsaw Citadel,

the Museum of Polish Military Technology, where heavy equipment is collected, and the Museum of Armoured Forces in Poznań, currently being established.

In addition to the main collections, the Polish Army Museum has special collections and collections of art. Created after World War I, special collections currently contain almost 110,000 inventory items. They were systematically given to the museum thanks to donations of known collectors (including Dominik Witke-Jeżowski, Leopold Meyer, Aleksander Leser, Kazimierz Woźniski and others). The first of them were drawings, photographs and documents of the Polish Legions donated in 1919 by the Military Archives in Cracow for the Polish Military Museum in Warsaw. After 1945 the museum's collections are systematically expanded mainly through purchases and donations. At the moment, they are divided into Polish and foreign graphics, drawings and watercolours (of such artists as A. Orłowski, J. Kossak, M. Stachowicz, P. Michałowski and of soldiers documenting the activities of Polish Armed Forces in exile: Aleksander Żyw, Antoni Wasielewski, Adam Bunsch), photographs, negatives, postcards, posters, maps and archival documents (including documents and manuscripts). All these objects relate to the history of the Polish forces, and to a lesser extent the history of foreign troops.

Iconography is a valuable resource that complements the narrative of our museum's exhibition. The art collections include over 5,000 exhibits entered in the books of the museum - these are: oil paintings, sculpture, medals, coins, textiles and handicrafts. When, in 1929, a part of the collection of the Polish Museum in

Rapperswil was transferred to the museum, it was enriched with works by such artists as Józef Brandt, Tadeusz Lenartowicz, Józef Chełmoński. Our collection still expands, and among unusual exhibits that we procure are such objects as plaques from memorials or monuments in Warsaw and memorabilia from battlefields.

Because of the subject matter and the location of the conference I would like to emphasise especially two exceptional collections in our museum. One has been accumulated in the so called Oriental Hall. With the eastern collection we are able, as a scientific institution, to adopt a broader perspective of research and thus better know the history of Polish objects. By analysing the changes of stylistic forms and technical solutions, as experts in objects of history we have a unique opportunity to determine the origin and provenance of Polish arms. Objects that deserve special attention include the amulet sword, created at the turn of the 18th/19th centuries, made of bronze coins from the period of Cien-Lung Dynasty, 1739-1795. 56 coins were arranged in the shape of a sword along an iron rod wrapped in thin paper. It was originally red and tied with cotton twine in the same colour. The core of the hilt of the sword was bound in thin, double-twisted brass wire. The sling at the guard was made from identical string and ended with an openwork knob made of 12 coins. It is worth mentioning that this type of swords were usually made of coins no longer in circulation and that they were suspended over the entrance door to drive away evil spirits and protect the landlord. The museum has three Chinese double-sided hilt swords from the collection of Bruno Konczakowski. All the swords were made in the nineteenth century, they are richly decorated with Chinese dragon motif

ornament and inlaid. Especially noteworthy are double-edged swords, their handles covered with silk and two twin falchions stored in a single sheath. The permanent exhibition also displays an eastern bow, known as the reflective one. Made of wood, horn and sinew. The dorsal side was decorated with a design resembling leaves, painted in black ink. The chord was intertwined from silk threads. Cover for the bow was made from leather covered with green velvet. Decorative corner applications on the outside were made of green leather and brass openwork overlays. The whole set is completed with an arrow, featuring an iron flat head shaped like an elongated triangle, with triple darts. The Chinese objects in our collections are part of oriental collections and are shown on display in their original context.

In 2009 the Polish Army Museum received the other collection that is specially related to today's meeting: memorabilia, photos and documents of Brigadier General Witold Aleksander Urbanowicz, presented by his son Witold K. Urbanowicz Jr. The memorabilia of Urbanowicz, who had died in 1996, stored until then at the family home in New York, were incorporated into the Polish Army Museum collection, where they were analysed, subjected to thorough investigation and preservation procedures. The memorabilia include many original documents, badges and decorations, as well as uniforms and parts of uniforms. Nearly 600 photos taken at various periods of life of the pilot deserve special mention. It is extremely important that it was only at the time of their donation to the museum that these items were made available to historians, and thus revealed to the world. Taking off from the USA in late September 1943 on board a DC-4, travelling through America, Africa and India, Urbanowicz

arrived in on 11 October aboard a DC-3 of the ATC airline. He shared his journey with T. V. Soong, the Chinese Foreign Minister, from whom he received a letter of recommendation addressed to all citizens of China:

*Witold A. Urbanowicz [...] has volunteered to fight the Japanese in China - each act of kindness towards him will be highly appreciated*

which, as it turned out, made all contacts and his stay in China much easier. At the time when Urbanowicz came to China, the war with the Empire of Japan was in its seventh year. Pilots of the American Volunteer Group known as the "Flying Tigers" appeared in China from the autumn of 1941, in order to assist China and restore balance of forces in the country. It was organised by then already famous aviator, Gen. Claire L. Chennault, who greeted Urbanowicz on his arrival with these words: *What am I going to do with you here?* To which Urbanowicz replied immediately: *Just give me an aeroplane and I will find something to do.*<sup>5</sup>

In October of 2008 our museum opened the exhibition "Brigadier General pilot Witold A. Urbanowicz - a legend of Polish wings". The exhibition presented life of Urbanowicz against the background of Polish aviation history. It included 350 exhibits from the collections of our museum and of the Regional Museum in Suwałki, the Urbanowicz family collection, and private collections of Polish aviation history enthusiasts. Items shown included a cadet uniform of No. 2 Cadet Corps, of which Urbanowicz was a student in 1925-1930, and summer fighter pilot's suit from the pre-war and September 1939 period. Uniforms in our collection, which we can be proud of, include the service dress from the period

of his service in the Polish Air Force in Exile (including the coat and forage cap), the tropical uniform and the general's uniform that he received after his general's commission, shortly before his death in 1996. Much space in the exhibition was devoted to the participation of Urbanowicz and other 303 Squadron pilots in the famous Battle of Britain. Aircraft weapons, items of equipment and aviation gear used by pilots of the RAF and the Polish Air Force fighting in the West were shown in showcases. Photos and memorabilia related to Urbanowicz's participation in battles over China against the Japanese were among the most important elements of the display.

Thanks to the generosity of the Urbanowicz family the Polish Army Museum received rich and unique legacy of this outstanding Polish pilot. Surviving memorabilia include many documents, photographs and manuscripts, and among them quotations from Witold Urbanowicz. However, there are two that I would like to specially mention:

*I am proud that I could fight together with the top two flying schools in the world - the British*

*and the American Chinese.*

*We Polish soldiers gave our souls to God, our bodies to British soil, and our hearts to Poland.*

[Notes]

1. The first memorandum by Bronisław Gembarzewski to the Polish War Ministry of 25 December 1918. Henryk Wielecki, *Za otwartą i zamkniętą bramą. Muzeum Wojska 1920-1939 (Behind the open and closed gate. Army Museum 1920-1939)*, [w:] Muzealnictwo Wojskowe (Military Museology), vol. 6, Warsaw, 1995, p. 25.
2. Walter De Gruyter Saur, *Museums of the World*, 2012.
3. Piotr Majewski, *Wojna i kultura. Instytucje Kultury polskiej w okupacyjnych realiach generalnego Gubernatorstwa 1939-1945 (War and culture. Institutions of Polish culture in the reality of the occupied General Gouvernement 1939-1945)*, Warsaw, 2005, p. 335.
4. *ditto*, p. 334.
5. HAO! BOO HAO!, *Jing bao JOURNAL. Official publication – Flying Tigers of the 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force Association*”, January/February 1977, p. 4.