

Madonnas in pits, c

Some of Polish national goods were inconvenient in shape, while others were larger than the average. All of them had to be hidden from the Nazis (taken down, buried, replaced with tacky pieces). The Germans were just around the corner, the radio was constantly talking about the war. And war means plunder.

The „The Battle of Grunwald” painting survived the war, reeled on a large wooden spool. Once removed from the hiding spot, the first restoration works began.

The operations of archiving and hiding works of art had their heroes - wise, brave, and hardworking. Thanks to them, cultural goods survived the war. The trick was to camouflage a priceless painting, sculpture, and old print in a way that no one, including the Sturmbannführers, would have guessed. There were many possibilities. It all depended on the size of the work. It was difficult with some of them, but thanks to the vast undergrounds of churches and the favor of parish priests, who welcomed priceless engravings and medieval valuables with open arms. Many of those secret undertakings were successful.

Summer 1939

The summer of 1939 was not only hot but feverish as well. As far as the eye could see, on the wall of Zachęta, Matejko's „Battle of Grunwald” stretched out, in St. Mary's Basilica, the altar of Wit



On September 7, 1944, in Lublin, the transfer of Matejko's canvas to the new authorities took place

Stwosz climbed up to the ceiling like a giant ivy, various masterpieces hung in gilded frames in the galleries. All non-Nazi Europe was hiding its treasures in an extreme hurry. You had to hide what you could. Due to the enormous commitment of the churches, which opened

their basements to packed works of art, almost the entire history of removing our treasures from the enemy's eyes can be called „tales from the crypt”. There was hardly any basilica, cathedral, collegiate church, parish, or monastic church that would not store in its dungeons the priceless work, stored in boxes to keep it dry and filled with sawdust. In July and August 1939, i.e. moments before the tragedy, several dozen scientists, priests, and firefighters struggled with a giant altar in the pleasant coolness of St. Mary's Church. The Altar of Wit Stoss, a real Godzilla of medieval woodcarving and sculpture, had to be disassembled into pieces and then, archived and stored so that it could be recognized when reassembled. The place was holy, but a hell of a job. The most valuable monument in Krakow, which had not been moved for 450 years, resisted. Nevertheless, it was taken into over 2,000 pieces and packed in numbered crates. Large and in-

divisible monolithic figures, which were reaching 13 m high, were loaded onto barges and floated down the Vistula to the hiding place in the cathedral in Sandomierz. The rest was hidden in lockers, inter alia, in a tomb located in the presbytery of St. Mary's Church. It felt that the Germans would not rummage among the rotten coffins of the bishops. Nothing could be more wrong. The Nazis found and put it together by October, and a month after the outbreak of the war, an altar, made by their ancestor from late Gothic, was on its way to the West. At least till it returned to Poland.

Meanwhile in Warsaw

Meanwhile, in Warsaw, in the newly constructed building of the National Museum, the hectic work lasted from dawn to dusk. There was a lot to pack. Sometimes there was even not enough paper to wrap all the valuables, paintings, canvases, sculptures, and amusing trophies from Egypt. Thus, additionally, mummies were wrapped, and painters and cartoons with

canvases and drawings were packed into boxes. The curators made a list of all the most important objects, that needed to be hidden first. After debates and arguments, it was decided that the museum property would stay in the museum but in its basement. For this purpose, bunkers covered with reinforced concrete were built there. Crates, boxes, and other various-shaped packages were placed in them. Plank pavements were put on all of them to avoid recognition. The National Museum's bunkers also received exhibits from the Royal Castle and particularly valuable objects from private collections and Warsaw churches. The secret cultural care center, as the museum was called, did not turn out to be the most subtly conceived hiding place. The Germans, seeing the boards, looked underneath. They buried them in the rubble and just like that, got back home. They robbed most of the outstanding works of art except the architectural details of the royal castle. So a lot of goods were saved.