

CULTURAL HEROES

The main role in saving the cultural goods of the capital was played by Stanisław Lorentz, director of the National Museum of Warsaw, and his employees and volunteers.

Sensing the outbreak of World War II, Lorentz ordered the preparation of crates to store the collections in April. By the time the conflict broke out, 230 chests made of metal and lined with conservation materials, intended for the most valuable collections, as well as hundreds of ordinary wooden chests were collected. At the same time, the custodians made lists of the collections that had to be packed in the first place. Starting June, works of art from rural and city palaces, especially from the western provinces, have been arriving at the museum. Under Lorentz's supervision, the collections of, inter alia, from the Royal Castle or the Royal Łazienki were transported to the museum.

On the day of the outbreak of the war, the most valuable works were already hidden in the basement of the National Museum. The collection was concreted under one of the museum's cellars. Lorentz did his best to make it difficult for the Nazis to plunder works of art and



Stanisław Lorentz

Lorentz Museum

then use them to save whatever they could. He was the one who, after the capitulation of Warsaw, convinced the German officers that it was worth taking the most valuable items away before the complete destruction of the capital. He was given two weeks to carry out the action. But thanks to bribes, it lasted longer. His team of 200 people packed the exhibits for two months and prepared lists of pictures, sculptures,

foto CZESŁAW CZAPLIŃSKI/FOTONOVA/EAST NEWS

books, and archives taken away. At the same time, the director maintained contacts with railwaymen and employees of transport companies, thanks to which he knew that the transports were ending in the Sudetes region. Throughout the war, he kept a thorough inventory of the destruction made by the Germans and the looted collections, thanks to which he facilitated their subsequent restitution and reconstruction. MO

They were saving the archive

foto WACŁAW KLAG/REPORTER, NAC



When the headquarter of the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Education at Aleja Szucha in Warsaw was taken over by the Gestapo, the priceless collection was threatened with destruction. To prevent this from happening, professors, Zachwatowicz and Szablowski decided to take them away.

Prof. Jan Zachwatowicz collaborated with the Central Inventory Office established by the ministry and headed by prof. Jerzy Szablowski. Together, they developed a plan for the removal of the collections. In October 1939, a truck pulled up to the office, on which about 130 boxes with documentation of Polish monuments were loaded. Surprisingly to the Poles, the Gestapo did not react. Apparently, they thought it was in line with the order of their authorities because no one would dare to act on it. This is how we managed to remove 30 thousand negatives with documentation of monuments. MO



Custodian of the Wawel collections Stanisław Świerz-Zaleski, Colonel Zygmunt Piasecki, Professor Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz

Wawel's treasures keepers

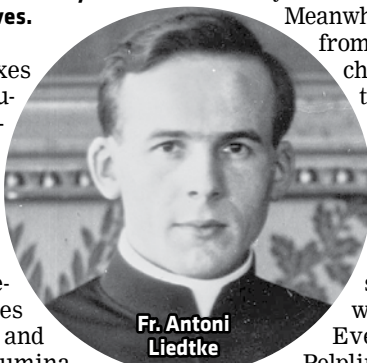
The decision to transfer the Wawel treasures was made two weeks before the war broke out. It was organized by the custodian of the collection, Dr. Stanisław Świerz-Zaleski, and the head of the castle renovation, Professor Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz.

In the first days of the fight, almost all escape routes from Krakow were cut off. The only evacuation route was the Vistula River, and the means of transport - a barge. The most valuable items from the Wawel Royal Castle were packed into 20 prepared iron boxes and cylindrical cases. In addition to the world's largest collection of tapestries, which King Sigismund Augustus ordered in Flanders, the coronation insignia of Polish kings, priceless silver and gold products, hetman's maces, and a collection of weapons were also taken away. The treasures were loaded onto a barge. On the evening of September 3, 1939, under the supervision of the custodian Stanisław Świerz-Zaleski and architect Józef Polkowski, they sailed down the Vistula River. After a few days, they reached Kazimierz Dolny. From there, the "unusual" cargo was transported to Romania. Next, they got to France, and then, to England. In 1940, they reached Canada on board the Polish ship MS „Batory”. Krakow's works of art have spent over 20 years in forced emigration in Ottawa. MO

Gutenberg's Bible in a suitcase

In the face of the war threats, in July 1939 in the bishop's curia in Pelplin a decision was made to transfer the most valuable works from the diocese capital. The act was supervised by Fr. Antoni Liedtke, diocesan conservator, director of the seminary library and diocesan archives.

In August, 29 boxes containing 411 manuscripts, 606 incunabula, and 707 polonicas from the 16th century were taken to the collegiate church in Zamość. However, the most valuable treasures: two volumes of Gutenberg's Bible and the 16th-century illuminated psalter from the Czech school, were personally taken by Fr. Liedtke to Warsaw in a leather suitcase and deposited it in the basement of the



Fr. Antoni Liedtke

Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego (National Development Bank). Immediately after entering Poland, the Germans began searching frantically for the valuable book. They sent an arrest warrant for Fr. Liedtke, whom they called "the Bible thief".

Meanwhile, the treasure from the capital reached Romania and then Paris. Later the Bible traveled through France, and in June 1940 it got on board the „Chorzów” ship on its way to London. Eventually, the Pelplin treasure found shelter in Canada. After 20 years, Gutenberg's Bible returned to Poland. It is kept in the safe of the Diocesan Museum in Pelplin. MO

Defenders of the „Battle of Grunwald”



Stanisław Mikulicz-Radecki

For ideological reasons, the painting was hated by the Nazis and from the beginning of the war, it was their target. Faced with such serious threats, Stanisław Mikulicz-Radecki, director of the Warsaw Zachęta, where Matejko's work was exhibited, decided to secure it.

After packing, the work, together with the „Sermon of Piotr Skarga”, another canvas by Matejko, was transported on 9 September 1939 on a horse-drawn platform from Warsaw to Lublin. They were escorted by the administrative director of Zachęta, Stanisław Mikulicz-Radecki, vice president of the gallery, artist and painter; Stanisław Ejsmond and painter Bolesław Surzałło. The paintings were handed over to Professor Władysław Woyda - the intendant of the Lublin Museum. Immediately afterward, the city was bombed. During the airstrike, Ejsmond and Surzałło died. The painting did not suffer any harm, it was hidden in the museum library - under the bookshelf. When in 1941 the Germans decided to occupy the building as the headquarter of the propaganda department, the paintings were moved to the City Caravans shed near Lublin. There, wrapped in tar paper and placed under the floor in a specially prepared sarcophagus, they survived until the end of the war. MO

Project co-financed by the Chancellery of the Prime Minister as part of the Polonia and Poles abroad 2021 competition



stowarzyszenie menedżerów.