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FAMILY ARCHIVES OF INDEPENDENCE PROJECT – A MUTUAL LINK BETWEEN ARCHIVE AND USER

Abstract

The project 'Family Archives of Independence' encompasses the whole of Poland and addresses everyone for whom domestic collections of documents, sometimes having grown over many generations, are of incalculable personal value. There are many family archives which have the potential to evoke great emotion and create a social history more colourful than that of textbooks, however such collections are still not as yet widely appreciated.

The aim of the project 'Family Archives of Independence' is to combine national and private history and highlight the role of yet anonymous people, families or the local communities in the restoration of independent Poland in 1918.

All those who cultivate memories of their predecessors and wish to seek professional advice on how to care for their archives are encouraged to participate in the project and archivists from 33 state archives in Poland offer their help by sharing their knowledge and experience.

Such cooperation is a good example of the connection between archives and their users, including those who have never used archives before. Contemporary habits, resulting from technological development, are also helpful in the preservation of the content of home archives in digital form with the option of making them widely available on the Internet. This is of mutual benefit for both sides, but also for a wider audience, who have the chance to appreciate very interesting, sometimes unique, materials concerning the history of the nation or local community.

Key words: local history, home archives, archival exhibitions, digitalization.

1 INTRODUCTION

Calculating from the first partition, in 1918 Poland regained independence after 146 years, or after 123 years, from the third. The partitions are the period (from 1772 to 1795) within the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (that is Poland and Lithuania united by a union) when neighbouring states: Russia, Prussia, and Austria divided the lands of the Commonwealth between themselves. As a result, Poland disappeared from the map of Europe for one hundred and some dozen years.

The 11th November 1918 is recognised in Poland as the date of regaining independence, in remembrance of which, National Independence Day is celebrated. The holiday, established by the law of April 23, 1937, abolished by the communist authorities in 1945, was re-established after Poland regained sovereignty in 1989. Of course, the regaining of independence by Poland was a gradual process, lasting many months. The choice of this specific date was dictated by a coincidence of events perceived as directly relating to the regaining of independence: on the 11th November 1918, an armistice was concluded in Compiègne, finally ending World War I hostilities, plus on the day before this Józef Piłsudski, previously imprisoned by the Germans in Magdeburg, arrived in War-

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saw. Piłsudski was an icon of the fight for independence and in time became recognized as one of the fathers of the independent homeland.

2018 was the centenary of Poland regaining independence and was celebrated with many events and projects. One of these was the project 'Family Archives of Independence', organised by the Office of the Head Director of National Archives, in cooperation with local archives. At each of the archives, a consultation point was set up where information could be obtained on how to run a family archive, how to develop and protect it and also how to create digital copies. Within the framework of the project, exhibitions were held, however at present, due to the pandemic situation, only virtual projects have been realised. Along with the online presence, there are also other activities promoting the project, among others a project called 'Become a Family Archivist'.

2 THE FAMILY ARCHIVES OF INDEPENDENCE

2.1 ASSUMPTIONS OF THE PROJECT

Naturally, the project's main focus are the events connected with the regaining of independence in 1918, the centenary of which has prompted an emblematic résumé. However, it was decided at the very beginning that the project ought not be confined to the events of November 1918, and its subsequent years, since the statehood regained then was also built by subsequent generations. Therefore, the wider aim of the project intends to uncover the broader relationship between the history of the nation and the histories of particular families and individuals. A further concern was also (perhaps most importantly) to explore the roles played by the great number of private citizens within a community and not the figures from the front pages, who made a more visible contribution to these events.

Everyone in possession of materials from this time: documents, photos, films, or recordings, has been encouraged to participate in the project; both those who have long forgotten their valuable possessions, and those who cultivate the memory of their predecessors. The project organisers also offer expert advice on how to take care and preserve family souvenirs for future generations.

Fifty nine consultation points have been set up throughout the national archives and their local branches, and are run by experienced archivists, sometimes with the help of archival conservators, providing all information regarding the organization and management of a family archive, its proper storage and protection of files, as well as advising on the making of digital copies.

Digitalisation and online sharing of materials from family archives is one of the main objectives of the project. Virtual exhibitions are created and presented both on the project's home page and the home pages of particular national archives engaged in the project. („Archiwa Rodzinne Niepodległej", 2018).

2.2 A POLAND-WIDE EXHIBITION 'FAMILY ARCHIVES OF INDEPENDENCE. A COLLECTIVE PORTRAIT OF FAMILIES WITHIN THE SECOND POLISH REPUBLIC.'

The exhibition, organised within the framework of the project 'Family Archives of Independence', has successfully achieved its main goal, namely the sensitising of people to the unique value of family remembrances, while concurrently encouraging them to actively celebrate the centenary of the regaining of independence by Poland.

Between the 2018-2020, many priceless historical materials were donated to the national archives from all over Poland. They are being sequentially digitalised, and copies placed on the website: archiwarodzinne.gov.pl. A substantial part of the collections obtained in this way are photographs that uniquely document the life of Polish families from the end of the 19th century to modern times.

These unique materials, showing extraordinary moments and everyday life during the Second Polish Republic (1918-1939), were presented at the open air exhibition 'Family Archives of Independence. A collective portrait of families within the Second Polish Republic' from the 3rd November 2020 to the 20th January 2021 in Warsaw.

The exhibition comprised five main thematic sections, presenting: a national and religious cross-section and multiculturalism within the Republic; diversity of social status (from peasant families to aristocracy); participation in regaining the independent state and in the fight for its borders; everyday life; the role of women in the reborn state. The exhibition was created solely on the basis of abundant materials from family collections donated to the resources of national archives from all over Poland. („Ogólnopolska wystawa", 2020).

2.3 COLLECTIONS

As of 12.02.2020 the project website has accumulated 56 so-called collections. A 'collection' is comprised of scans of archival materials from a single family archive, concerning either the family as a whole or one of its members particularly. We can find here photographs (being of most interest to the general public) and also official documents, correspondence, membership cards, identity cards, diplomas, and many other documents from the end of the 19th century to the second half of the 20th century. The documents are accompanied by descriptions which present the history of a family or a specific person; all scans have been captioned. Individual collections differ in size, and the proportion of archival material to its description also vary, but each collection undoubtedly presents a really interesting and meaningful history. The collections are made available by particular state archives which received original archival materials or their scans donated by individual families. Certainly, the collection will continue to grow throughout the duration of the project. („Kolekcje", 2018-2021).

2.4 LOCAL EXHIBITIONS

In 2020, within the framework of the project 'Family Archives of Independence', national archives all over Poland organized exhibitions presenting family collections donated to their archival resources and thus included in the national archival collection. All the exhibitions were available to be visited in real for a set period of time, while they are also available at all times online. Twenty-one such exhibitions were prepared by the archives. Their subject matter is diverse: they present the histories of individuals, of families, social or professional groups, inhabitants of a given town or village, as well as most interesting individual documents. All exhibitions focus on issues related to the regaining of independence by Poland, the shaping of the borders and structures of state, some documents dating even up to World War II. They try to present the history of individual families or people against the background of Polish history. („Archiwa Rodzinne Niepodległej - wystawy lokalne", 2020).

3 HOME ARCHIVE

3.1 BECOMING A FAMILY ARCHIVIST: A GUIDE

Along with the implementation of the project, a special guide was prepared for all those who showed interest in preserving their family archives in the best possible way. 'Each of us can become a guardian of a family history', write its authors, explaining that the guide is intended both for those who already have their own family archives and those who would like to create one.

Using the guide, we can find out how to professionally take care of the documents that have already been collected in the family archive, as well as of those that will only get there in the future. The authors of the guide give advice on how to arrange the collected

archival materials and how to properly catalogue them. They advise on how to safely perform basic conservation and how to correctly digitalise files.

The information presented in the guide is divided into categories describing the handling of the particular types of materials that can be found in the family archive. Thus, four sections were created, entitled: 1. The Family Archives of Independence - introduction. How to use the guide. How to start taking care of a family archive. 2. Family Archives of Independence - documents (manuscripts, typescripts, posters) 3. Family Archives of Independence - photos 4. Family Archives of Independence - mementos. Each of the above-mentioned parts of the guide has been prepared as a PDF file, and can easily be printed or downloaded and used on a computer at any time. („Domowe archiwum”, 2019).

The preparation and sharing of the guide is designed additionally to encourage people to take care of and save artefacts of the past gathered in houses, sometimes forgotten and thus perhaps doomed to destruction over time. However the basic argument in appealing to a larger audience, encouraging interest in family archives relating to the history of Poland was the possibility of presenting them to the general public on the project website and on the websites of individual national archives or at traditional exhibitions.

3.2 COMPETITION ‘HISTORIES FROM FAMILY ARCHIVES’

In 2020, a competition was launched where participants were invited to present the history of their families, intertwined with the history of the homeland being reborn. The participants in the competition were to describe and document their family history basing upon, among other things, family members' accounts, documents, photos, and souvenirs kept in the home archive, the history of the region and the history of the family in historical context plus a focus was set on literature and archival query.

The entry work could be submitted in the form of manuscript, printout, text file of a size not less than 15 pages, or as a film of a minimum of half an hour's length. The authors could supplement their works with, for example, photos, maps, illustrations, a family tree, fragments of diaries, recordings.

The aim of the ‘Histories from family archives’ competition was to focus attention on cultivating memory and tradition, respect for the past, shaping patriotic attitudes, education and increasing the sense of national identity of the society as well as arousing interest in the culture and history of ‘small homelands’: of the region and local communities. The works created for the competition were intended to preserve and propagate the testimonies of ‘little history’ set against the background of historical events. („Konkurs”, 2020).

It is important to mention that the competition was directed both to adults and children alike, so that, apart from the patriotic dimension, it also pursued an educational goal. Seventy-seven entry works were submitted, and the winners were selected in two categories: ‘adults’ and ‘under 18’. („Wyniki konkursu”, 2020).

4 BUILDING OF THE ARCHIVE – USER RELATIONSHIP

One of the aims of the project ‘Family Archives of Independence’ was to draw the public's attention to the unique value of family souvenirs in relation to historical events. Documents and other materials kept in homes are an exceptional testimony of the history of individuals, families and local communities. Within the framework of the project, state archives have encouraged people to appropriately care for these invaluable items and to deepen their knowledge about the roots and the history of their predecessors.

At the same time, the owners are encouraged to digitalise these materials and transfer their copies to archives. The originals remain in the family archives, while their digital copies are stored as separate collections in national archives and through them made available to the general public. In this way a kind of special relationship is created between the institution of the archive and the private owner of archival documents. Furthermore, making digital copies not only additionally secures the information contained in files, but also gives them a new life, in a space and dimension completely different than before.

Thanks to the project, a new possibility of obtaining documents has opened up for the archives. Up to now, documents in electronic form (originals or digital copies of documents in traditional form) have been transferred to the archives mainly from public institutions as documents created or collected in the course of the activities of these institutions, and also from non-public institutions or as the legacy of private individuals. The archives have also collected scans of materials which supplement particular collections of a given archive, but which are stored in other institutions. The electronic documentation collected by all national archives from public institutions, that is the most frequently appropriated, is to be finally stored at the emerging Electronic Document Archive (ADE – Archiwum Dokumentów Elektronicznych). Its creation is connected with the necessity to take over an increasing amount of documentation created in electronic form, especially as institutions use electronic documentation management systems. ADE is to ensure the possibility of permanent, safe storage of this documentation, ensuring its integrity and authenticity. Unfortunately, the rules for sharing archival materials in electronic form have not as yet been discussed and agreed upon. This concerns both the documents which are already included in the resources of individual national archives and those to be acquired in the future by ADE. In the latter case, it is intended that users will be able to use special functions within the system, enabling searching, ordering, and downloading of archival materials transferred to national archives in electronic form. (Czerniak, Orszulak, 2017, pp. 73-77).

Up until now, the collecting and sharing of documents, photos, recordings and films related to specific events, people, or places, whether original documents or digital copies, has been mainly the domain of so-called social archives, created through the social activities of grassroots foundations, associations, local government or just a group of people. Social archives collect various types of documentation, the vast majority collect photos and also keep personal documents, iconographic materials, and documentation of social life. They obtain archival materials in various ways and collect them from various angles, depending on the basic purpose of the institution organizing a given social archive. (Ziętał, 2015).

Social archives play a very important role in the safeguarding archival materials kept by private individuals and institutions. Certainly, thanks to them, a significant part of these materials will be preserved for future generations because their owners have been made aware of the significance and historical value of the materials in their possession.

The project 'Family Archives of Independence' assigned similar tasks to the national archives. By encouraging people to search for family souvenirs, offering help in the field of their proper analysis and protection of files, national archives are trying to encourage the creation of family archives, thanks to which it will certainly be possible not only to preserve many historical sources but also share their digital copies with a wide audience via the Internet. The possibility of obtaining comprehensive information and practical help is an incentive for closer cooperation with the archive, convincing the materials' owners to transfer scans of family souvenirs, and sometimes also the original materials to the national archive. It certainly serves to build in the public awareness the image of archives as open institutions, focused on helping and cooperating with anyone who wants to care for cultural heritage, even on the smallest scale.

5 SUMMARY

In 2020, in recognition of all the donors who have enriched the national archival resource by donating the originals or digital copies of their priceless collections to the network of nationwide archives, encouraging others to undertake such cooperation, the Head Director of National Archives announced the 6th December as Donor Day. In 2020, unfortunately, due to the epidemic, no special celebrations took place, but in the future, on this day, various events (such as meetings, conferences, exhibitions) will be held in the national archives to honour the present and future donors.

It should also be emphasized that it is thanks to the large group of donors – home archivists, that the implementation of the project 'Family Archives of Independence' was possible on such a large scale, despite the restrictions and difficulties common in 2020.

The project was directed primarily to amateur archivists, both those who had previously managed their family archives, and those sensitised by the project itself about the need to care for historical sources, including those on a smaller scale; to all those who remember their predecessors and care for their survival in memory and perhaps would like to do it even better. Therefore, great emphasis was placed on issues related to the protection and conservation of archival materials.

Within the framework of the project, archivists from many national archives conducted stationary workshops for small groups and on-line workshops and recorded crash course videos.

The project has not as yet finished, it will be continued until 2022. Summing up its functioning so far, it can be claimed that it is fitting well with the user-archive interaction and has already contributed to the development of many relationships, and possibly through future new initiatives, these relationships will still develop.

One could ask a question of who/what this type of project is intended for? Looking at its results, it appears that the answer immediately apparent: it serves both sides, exactly how has been set out above. But it is also worth paying attention an additional aspect, also extremely important in my opinion: such activities, projects undertaken by archives, are directed to the general public, that is people who often have nothing to do with the archives, and sometimes even have misconceptions about them. They are an excellent advertisement and promotion of archives as a public utility institution, at the same time helping to establish contact and cooperation with such an audience. They bring history closer – perhaps above all – local history, promote patriotism, teach the care for historical souvenirs, at the same time enabling the archives to obtain new archival materials that in many cases would probably not see the light of day or even be lost.

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