

Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/9694,quotPieces-of-Polish-Historyquot-by-the-IPN-President-Karol-Nawrocki.html>

18.05.2024, 19:29

07.07.2022

"Pieces of Polish History" by the IPN President Karol Nawrocki

In the latest issue of "Wszystko co najważniejsze," the IPN head explains how archival contributions from individuals and organizations allow archivists and historians to fill the blanks in our understanding of the past. He points out that nearly 3,500 donors who entrusted thousands of memorabilia to the Institute, or projects like the IPN's Archive Full of Memory help "assemble a broader picture of history and effectively pass it on to future generations."



There are still many documents abroad - sometimes in the collections of associations and private individuals - that are crucial for the story of the 20th-century fate of Poland and Poles. Saving this legacy is in the interest of taking care of our history.

It was June 2010 when the Cracow branch of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) received a phone call from Piotr Leleń, the owner of a company that dealt with the disposal of rubbish, waste and debris. He stated that he would like to hand over to the IPN archive the materials that were supposed to end up in the rubbish dump. It soon turned out that the materials in question were 21 folders of posters and leaflets of the Solidarity - the independent trade union the birth of which, in the summer of 1980, triggered the collapse of the communist

system in Central and Eastern Europe.

The documents came to us just in time because most of them were already a bit worn out and covered with fungus. The collection was transported to Warsaw and underwent conservation. Our specialists did an excellent job. Today, researchers and journalists from Poland and all over the world can freely use the saved materials of unquestionable historical and artistic value.

Archivists from all latitudes know very well that priceless documents can be found where no one would expect them to be – in rubbish heaps, attics, cellars or communal gardens. What may be just a dusty family heirloom for some people, in the hands of a researcher can become fascinating source material. From such pieces of history, we can later – like from a jigsaw puzzle – assemble a broader picture of history and effectively pass it on to future generations.

Without donors, archives around the world would be incomparably poorer. At the Institute of National Remembrance, we found that out very quickly. The first of my predecessors as the President of the Institute of National Remembrance took office in the summer of 2000 and in May of the following year, the first private donor approached the Institute. As the years passed, more and more donors came. Gabriela Grabowska gave us mementoes of her uncle Aleksander Kołodziejczyk, a prisoner from the first transport to Auschwitz in June 1940. At almost the same time that the Germans were setting up a concentration camp in Oświęcim (renamed Auschwitz), in Katyn and other localities the Soviets were murdering thousands of Polish

citizens: Polish Army officers, policemen, and civil servants. Among the victims was Julian Gruner, murdered in Kharkiv. His daughter, Ewa Gruner-Żarnoch, gave us photos and documents of her father and items he had with him at the time of his death. There are many more similar stories. It is enough to say that we already have almost 3,500 donors.

They increased especially after 2017 when the Institute of National Remembrance launched the 'Archive Full of Memory' project (<https://archiwumpamieci.pl/>). The idea was to undertake a systematic - and properly publicised - campaign to save, preserve and share documents from private collections. The response exceeded our wildest expectations.

For years, IPN donors have also included people and institutions from abroad. Thanks to the kindness of Sam Bryan, we obtained several thousand scans of photographs and documents of his father Julien Bryan, who as an American photographer and filmmaker documented the German siege of Warsaw in September 1939, the life of pre- and post-war Poland, the Soviet Union and the German Third Reich. Julita Portait has donated a distinctive striped uniform from her uncle Jean Puget, a French citizen born in Warsaw and a prisoner in the German concentration camps of Natzweiler and Dachau. Examples of foreign donors could also be multiplied.

The preservation of archival material located beyond Poland's current borders is one of our priorities today. This is also the aim of the new instalment of the 'Archive Full of Memory' project, inaugurated at the

end of May this year. We are intensifying our cooperation with foreign archives in order to obtain materials depicting the history of Poland and Poles in the 20th century. We are also trying to reach our compatriots scattered all over the world and the Polish institutions they manage. Many such institutions have priceless collections. Often, however, there are not enough resources to properly store, describe or digitise them – and to effectively present them to the world. The Institute of National Remembrance wants to remedy this.

‘A nation that does not know its past dies and does not build a future,’ warned Pope John Paul II. But Poland’s 20th-century past was also marked by many transnational experiences, led by two cruel totalitarianism – communism and national socialism. It is in the common interest of humanity to preserve and appropriately assemble the pieces of this difficult history.

Karol Nawrocki

"Pieces of Polish History" by Karol Nawrocki also available in Polish, French, Spanish or Ukrainian on ["Wszystko co najważniejsze" website](#).

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