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ANTIQUITIES COLLECTIONS IN SILESIA – TERRA INCOGNITA?

Abstract

Our cultural memory is shaped by museums and monuments. There are many regions, and Silesia is one of them, where during WW2 and in the post-war period the artistic and intellectual heritage was devastated – and the collective memory suffered as well.

The history of collecting artefacts in Silesia is a case of a selective historical amnesia in post-war Europe. There are many reasons why this field still remains a *terra incognita*. The manors and palaces which used to house the art collections were abandoned or emptied more than 70 years ago, with many of them falling into ruins. The works of art were dispersed, and even if they found their way into museums, there were neither showed to the public nor subjected to research for over half a century.

The situation changed with political upheavals of 1989, which reshaped European remembrance of the past centuries. Some significant art collections are slowly reappearing in the collective memory. This case study will be dedicated to the collections of the Ingenheim and Minutoli families.

Keywords: art collections, Silesia, remembering, Alexander Minutoli, Gustav Adolf von Ingenheim

In “The Book of Laughter and Forgetting”, Milan Kundera wrote: “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (Kundera 1983: 22). The process of forgetting is rather complicated. The specialist in this field, Paul Connerton, a scholar in the Department of Social Anthropology at

the University of Cambridge, has addressed these issues in several books, including “How Societies Remember” and “How Modernity Forgets” (Conner-ton 2009). Last year, I read his essay “Seven Types of Forgetting” (Connerton 2011: 33–50) and a couple days later a colleague of mine, Ms. Urszula Bonczuk-Dawidziuk called me and asked if I would participate in this conference. Dear Urszula, thank you very much, I’m very grateful to speak about the antiquities collection in Silesia. The history of collecting in Silesia is also a history of forgetting.

I was born in Wrocław and already in kindergarten I realised that there is something strange about the past in this city. There was a term that was used, when people described something that was old – *poniemiecki* – the literal translation would be “post-German” and the meaning was neutral, it meant “built by Germans”. For me, when I was little, it meant simply “old”. When I used this word once when we were on the trip with our distant relatives in Cracow, when I saw an old palace or church, it caused the indignation of my family. They were shocked I could have said something like that; it was a “Polish monument” they said, a part of “our culture”. I was shocked too, because Wrocław was “my city,” not Cracow, and I did not quite understand what they meant, but I decided not to ask or argue. They were already angry with me.

It took time until I realised that I lived in a city, in a region, that had at least two identities in the recent history. Studying art history was very helpful to understand this dichotomy. In the first year we had classes in “introduction to the history of architecture”. We were to describe a building, it was the “White Stork Synagogue”. I remember standing there and thinking for the umpteenth time “I still don’t know my city, my post-German, post-Jewish city”.

Like I said, the history of art collecting in Silesia is also a history of forgetting. The collections were dispersed several decades ago, and the region became a “*terra incognita*” that now needs to be rediscovered by the researchers. The shaping of the collective memory in Silesia right after the World War II had many faces. The formation of the new identity for the *Ziemie Odzyskane* – the so called Recovered Territories, literally Regained Lands, was essential. In the destroyed cities, deserted villages and emptied palaces, the national narrative was important and for a long time the only one that mattered. How hard the new beginning was, is shown in the book by Gregor Thum “*Die fremde Stadt: Breslau nach 1945*” (Thum [2003]) – in English translation “Uprooted – How Breslau Became Wrocław during the Century of Expulsion”.

There are many regions, and Silesia is one of them, where during WW2 and in the post-war years the artistic and intellectual heritage was devastated – and the collective memory suffered as well.

Cultural forgetting in Silesia started with renaming the streets, removing the monuments, purifying the commons space. It was seen as necessary after the destructive, violent past. The Silesian palaces, castles and villas, once housing art collections, were emptied and used for other purposes.

The art collections and their creators have one thing in common. Their nature is ephemeral, they exist only for a certain amount of time. The next generations are responsible for their commemorating and remembering. The history of collecting artefacts in Silesia is a case of a selective historical amnesia in post-war Europe.

There are many reasons why this field remains a terra incognita, except for some topics, such as the beginnings of collecting antiquities, rediscovered by researches like Michal Mencfel. The manors and palaces which used to house art collections were abandoned or emptied more than 70 years ago, with many of them falling into ruins. In the case of Jewish families, the owners perished in the concentration camps (Palica 2010b). The works of art were dispersed, and even if they found their way into museums, they were neither showed to the public nor researched for over half a century. The inventories of the collections and other documentation were mostly destroyed during the war.

The situation changed with the political upheavals of 1989, which reshaped European remembrance of the past centuries. Some significant Silesian art collections are slowly reappearing in the collective memory, as we will see at the examples of the Ingenheim and Minutoli Family.

Essential for the reconstruction of the collections of antiquities are the inventories or any other sources that allow us to understand how the collection was created, what were the most important artefacts, how they were presented. When I started to research various collections in Silesia, I met the descendants of the Ingenheim Family, whose private archive survived the war. They shared with me the inventory of the collection; some other list I discovered in the Secret State Archives Prussian Cultural Heritage. It was the beginning of the “new land” expedition for me.

The impressive collection of art was created by Gustav Adolf von Ingenheim (Palica M. [2015]). The big part of it was stored in the palace in Reisewitz/Rysiwice until World War II. Gustav Adolf von Ingenheim, born in 1789, was an illegitimate son of Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm II and a noble lady Julia

von Voss. Brought up in the court circles, Gustav Adolf was destined for a clerical career, during which he reached a position of a regular privy counsellor in service of his stepbrother, king Friedrich Wilhelm III.

After the last phase of the Napoleonic wars. Count von Ingenheim decided to pursue his true passion – art collecting. His keen interest in Italian art, reinforced by his studies and a journey to Italy with one of the most renowned specialists in that matter at the time, Aloys Hirt, resulted in including the Count in the group of experts who were charged with the task of purchasing Italian works of art for the newly established museums in Berlin. Remaining in royal service between 1816 and 1826, Count von Ingenheim amassed an impressive collection of paintings and antiquities at the same time, while financially supporting several artists as well. In his residences Villa Ingenheim in Potsdam and Palazzo Poniatowski in Rome he ran artistic salons of sorts, frequented by artists such as Bertel Thorvaldsen, Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Christian Daniel Rauch. He organised trips for the artist, like the “big breakfast” in Pompei that Schinkel described in his dairies.

Converting to Catholicism in 1826, against the king’s explicit request, resulted in Count von Ingenheim’s banishment from Prussia and severe limitation of his financial means for pursuing his collector’s passion. The collection created by Ingenheim was moved to Silesia over two decades after his death. His ashes were moved and buried in the chapel erected close to the family palace in Rysiowice.

The important part of the art collection of Gustav Adolf von Ingenheim was the collection of antiquities. He was acquiring the statues from the noble Roman families like Vescovali. There is also a letter in Secret Vatican Archives written by a German diplomat Josias Bunsen, asking Count Ingenheim to start archaeological excavations at the Via Gabina. I could not find a reply to it in the archives. We know that Ingenheim was also acquiring the antiquities in Naples, that he also visited Capri, Possilippo and Paestum, where he probably bought a set of terracotta figurines for his collection. Aloys Hirt, the already mentioned art historian and archaeologist of Ancient Greek and Roman architecture was his advisor. He wrote in 1825 a booklet on a Greek vase from the Ingenheim collection (Hirt 1825). The young count, who was also a gifted artist, was sending his drawings of the ancient artefacts to the famous scientists of the time, including Karl August Böttiger. To perform the restoration of the sculptures from his collection, he was commissioning the best artists, such as like Thorvaldsen or Rauch.

After his conversion to Catholicism, von Ingenheim had to sell part of his collection to the Museum in Berlin. Today we can admire those artifacts in the Altes Museum – the Old Museum in Berlin.

Over 130 artworks, including Greek vases, Roman sculptures and gems, the terracotta figurine from Paestum, inherited by his son Franz von Ingenheim, were moved to the family manor in Rysiowice in Silesia, where they probably remained until 1945. Some paintings from the collection were sold in the early 1910s. I couldn't find any evidence of the same happening to the antiquities collection as well. I have not managed to locate any of the antique artworks listed in the inventory of the castle in Rysiowice so far. The great library from the castle in Rysiowice has been lost as well. According to the archive files, over 37,000 volumes including bookshelves were loaded on a train and transported on 10 May 1947 eastwards, but those books are still missing, as well as the antiquities collection once housed in Rysiowice.

The second great antiquities collector, whose collection was displayed until 1945 in one of the Silesian castles, was Heinrich Minutoli, a Prussian generalmajor, explorer and archaeologist. He and Ingenheim probably knew each other, they were both involved in purchasing the works of art for the Museums in Berlin, and had some mutual friends, for example Alois Hirt or Eduard Gerhard, both renowned archaeologists.

The collection of antiquities was inherited by his son Alexander von Minutoli and exhibited in Biedrzychowice/Friedersdorf on Queiss (Palica 2010a: 515–530; Minkels, Karig 2019). One of the landscape paintings once displayed in Biedrzychowice found its way to Ägyptisches Museum in Berlin. It shows an oasis in Egypt and in the middle Heinrich Minutoli. After many years in the Prussian military service and as a teacher to the son of the Friedrich Wilhelm III, Carl, he was entrusted with the direction of an expedition to Egypt in 1820. Accompanied by renown scientists, such as Wilhelm Friedrich Hemprich and Christian Gottfried Ehrenberg, he put together a big collection that formed the foundation of the Egyptian Museum in Berlin. Regrettably, the big part of the shipment never arrived in Berlin. On the night of 11/12 March 1822, the ship 'Gottfried' wrecked off the Germany's north coast. It carried a cargo of Egyptian antiquities, collected by general Minutoli and destined for the Egyptian Museum in Berlin. The ship went down somewhere between Helgoland and Cuxhaven. Until today sunken Egyptian treasure, sarcophagi, mummies, Fayum mummy portraits, steles and reliefs are often the subject of articles and

films. In you want to learn more about it, there is a fairly good documentary in the ZDF Mediathek.

The wife of Heinrich Minutoli, Wolfradine Auguste Luise von Minutoli, born as Gräfin von der Schulenburg, was a writer and she accompanied her husband in the Egyptian expedition. She was one of the first European women exploring ancient Egypt. Her travel diaries “Recollections of Egypt by the Baroness von Minutoli” were published in London and in Philadelphia in 1827, and also in Germany, France and England (Minutoli 1827). Heinrich published his diaries as well, richly illustrated (Minutoli 1824).

The couple had three sons: Julius, Adolph and Alexander. The youngest one inherited the collector’s passion from his father. Alexander von Minutoli was educated as a lawyer and an economist. However, his interests were focused on fine arts, as confirmed by numerous publications. In 1834, he took an office position in Liegnitz/Legnica, and around the same time he started assembling a collection of arts and crafts items and works of art.

Alexander Minutoli created an enormous collection (estimated at over 28,000 objects), which consisted mostly of applied arts items. His intention was to prepare a template book of sorts for contemporary artisans, which is why he pursued the plan of exhibiting the collection in public. Thanks to the support of the Prussian King Frederic William IV, exhibition rooms were made available to Minutoli in the castle in Legnica.

Not surprisingly, Alexander Minutoli looked for a new way to express his passion. His parents and older brother were esteemed authors, and he wrote a couple of books himself, but he still was not satisfied. Inspired by the pattern book *Vorbilder für Fabrikanten und Handwerker* by Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Christian Peter Wilhelm Beuth, he decided to give the idea of a pattern book and his collection a new dimension – a solution that allows us to admire his collection today, despite the fact that it has been dispersed.

In 1854–1855, Minutoli, with the assistance of photographer Ludwig Belitski, published a monumental book “*Vorbilder für Handwerker und Fabrikanten*” featuring selected objects from his collection in 4,500 photographs (Anon 1821–1837). Some of them showed antiques, an important source of the classical motifs. It took over 10 years to prepare those daguerreotypes.

In 1858, during an exhibition in the castle in Legnica, 28,000 artefacts were showed. The visitors came from all over Europe to see this great presentation. In 1875, the collection had to be removed from the castle. Minutoli moved it to the

palace in Biedrzychowice, which he had bought over 10 years earlier. Some of the exhibits were stored in two other buildings, also located at Minutoli's estate.

The Minutoli collection was dispersed after the WW2. Some Egyptian artworks are exhibited in the National Museum in Warsaw. Several glass dishes of historical value from the collection in Biedrzychowice can be seen in the National Museum in w Poznań. The painting gallery consisted of several hundred objects, 199 of which were auctioned in 1899. Gemäldegalerie in Berlin and Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna acquired some of those. The paintings that were on display in Biedrzychowice until 1945 can be seen today in the National Museum in Wrocław, the castle in Oporów and the National Museum in Warsaw.

Large parts of the two collections were housed until 1945 in the family manors in Rysiwice and Biedrzychowice. During and shortly after the WW2, the collections dispersed, and from time to time its items are appearing on the art market, like the painting "Minutoli in Oasis Siwah" that was acquired by the Egyptian Museum in Berlin in 1987. But this case was an exception; most of the artworks from the Silesian collection offered on the market have unknown provenance and establishing it will take years of research.

In the history of the forgetting and remembering there is sometimes a lack of something, that keeps out curiosity alive. The most visited exhibition in Germany in the autumn 2019/2020 was the presentation "Making van Gogh" in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, and one of the most photographed objects was an empty painting frame (Eiling et al 2019). Not that the visitors were not allowed to take pictures of famous painting, on the contrary. Expecting many visitors, the museum put online a free audio guide, to be downloaded on mobile phones. Most of the visitors were constantly taking pictures.

The empty frame showed in the exhibition in Städel was once framing the famous Portrait of Dr Gachet. The painting was owned by Städel Museum and sold during the Nazi period. Only a few insiders know where the portrait is today, and it was not possible to show the painting at the exhibition. Nevertheless, the curators asked the journalist Johannes Nichelmann to prepare a five-episode podcast about the missing painting (*Finding van Gogh...*). The podcast "Finding van Gogh" was nominated to the Goldenen Blogger 2019 Award in Germany. I recommend it, it is really an interesting story.

The situation of antiquity collections in Silesia is very similar to the history of the Portrait of Dr Gachet. Only few insiders know where the missing pieces

are today. The only artefact that the visitors can see today is the empty frame or an empty castle.

On the other hand, the biggest difference between the two is that everybody knows who van Gogh is, and his missing masterpiece is well known as well. Portrait of Dr Gachets, created shortly before the painter died, belongs to the most googled pieces of art. In comparison, not many people know about the collections of Ingenheim and Minutoli.

It is a question of remembering about what we choose to forget as a society. Do we want to share the amnesia about the collections of art in the Prussian Silesia, or do we want to contribute to our collective memory? Indeed, the almost forgotten stories about the two collectors are so interesting that could be turned into a podcast script or even a Netflix series.

Silesia is called the land of a thousand castles and palaces. Many of them housed different art collections, Kunstkabinetts, libraries. Many of them are still standing and an increasing number of them have been restored. They are like empty frames, once containing artworks. You can see those artworks in many famous museums today, and some of them you have probably seen without even knowing it.

To me, the empty villas and empty castles are like the frame of the van Gogh painting asking: 'Do you want to know what was once here?'

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