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She is interested
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Keeping Archives Safe and Sound

“People are more important than such stuffy old papers. Maybe they have been around for ages, but they’ll just rot away someday anyway, and are of no use to anyone.”

Anita Chodkowska

PAS Archives in Warsaw

The above opinion was once voiced to Piotr Bańkowski – an archivist who, during the Warsaw Uprising, near the end of WWII, by happenstance became the caretaker of the national collection of books and archives that had been deposited at Warsaw’s Sokolnicki Fort for safekeeping. The provocative assertion Bańkowski recalls in his memoirs raises the question: How important is it to protect the national heritage, to pass records of the national identity on to future generations?

At the Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences, we believe this is a very important task, indeed. Formally called into being by a resolution passed by the Academy’s Scientific Secretariate on 1 December 1953, the Archives are officially tasked with gathering, indexing, curating, and preserving archival materials, as well as providing access to them. Each stage of this work entails certain risks that need to be precluded or mitigated.

The most significant challenge in day-to-day archival work is preventing potential damage by various phytochemical, biological, and mechanical factors. As such, we make certain that the archive storage facilities are properly lit, that the right temperature and humidity levels are maintained, and that the collections are properly protected against bacteria, fungi, insects, and rodents. All storage rooms must be carefully monitored, especially in the case of collections that – like

ours – have been preserved in the same conditions for 70 years.

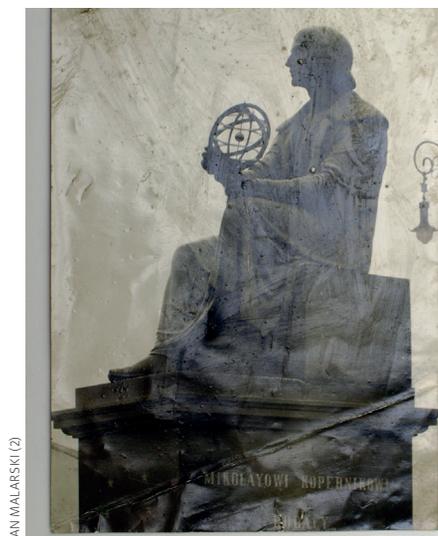
Mechanical factors, in particular, pose a significant danger to the longevity and integrity of archival materials – including how they are stored and how access to them is granted. Here we strive to be as pro-active as we can with our prevention efforts. The archives are organized and filed in keeping with current standards, and the materials themselves physically protected in acid-free folders, enclosures, and boxes. At each stage, materials are carefully cataloged and marked as belonging to the PAS Archives, in case they might become dispersed in the wake of some unforeseen event. The safest method of granting access to archival materials is now recognized to be repography (reproduction photography), which ensures safe preservation of the original materials, facilitates repeated non-invasive access, and moreover protects against theft.

In all cases, we are guided by the two overarching principles of archival methodology: the “principle of provenance”, which holds that records created within or outside a given territory, but in the course of the exercise of authority over it, should belong to that territory, and the “principle of original order,” recognizing that any interference, i.e., for example, a change in internal order or rearrangement of organic whole, is inappropriate. These principles are extremely helpful in keeping archival resources properly secured.

The most destructive events that can befall an archival resource are natural disasters such as fires or floods, and the devastation of war. The immense problems such events entail is a topic for a separate article. ■

Further reading:

Bańkowski P.,
*Archiwista na powstańczym
Żoliborzu: Wspomnienia
sierpień–wrzesień 1944*
[An Archivist in Insurgent
Żoliborz: Memoirs
August–September 1944],
Warszawa 2014, p. 132.



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The Monument
to Nicolaus
Copernicus
in Warsaw,
before and after
its conservation.
From
the collection
of Zbigniew
Wasiutyński,
PAS Archives,
ref. III-449