



Library archives

The old building of the Gdańsk Library opened its doors in 1905 but the library itself has celebrated recently its 400th anniversary

Renaissance Online

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Keeping alive ten centuries of history preserved on the pages of rare volumes requires not just sturdy, modern facilities but also institution staff able to keep up with the times

The origins of the Gdańsk Library stretch back to 1596, when the city's councilors formally founded the *Bibliotheca Senatus Gedanenses* (Gdańsk City Council Library) in order to serve "schools with embellishment, the city with adornment, and students with encouragement and benefits."

The need for a city library in wealthy and educated Renaissance-era Gdańsk matured gradually, coming to fruition as a result of a unique coincidence. Giovanni Bernardino Bonifacio, the Marchese d'Oria (known in Polish as Jan Bernard Bonifacio), an enlightened Italian aficionado of books and a man of the Renaissance and Reformation, was once sailing off the Gdańsk coast in his journeys through Europe - and he might have drowned here had he not been aided by the city's inhabitants, who rescued both the castaway and the precious volumes he had with him. To repay Gdańsk for the lifelong care, shelter and upkeep it subsequently provided him, Bonifacio later bequeathed his most cherished treasure to the city: a collection of 1140 tomes of exceptional scientific and artistic value, covering the fields of philosophy, history, theology, astronomy, medicine, and literature, produced by the most renowned

publishing houses in Europe at that time. Bonifacio's philanthropic act of 1591 marked the beginnings of the library in Gdańsk, which was expanded in later centuries by successive donations, bequests, and also purchases.

Particularly worthy of mention among these many acquisitions are the whole collections donated by such outstanding personalities as: Krzysztof Celestyn Mrongovius, Jan Uphagen, Heinrich Schwartzwald, Gottfried Lengnich, Rafał Knofius, Bartłomiej Keckermann, Piotr Krüger, and Jakob Breyn. Many of these collections had been gathered together over the course of entire generations, and reflected the intellectual interests of their prominent owners.

Medieval manuscripts and *incunabula* (works printed before 1501), Renaissance manuscripts and prints, the painstakingly gathered literature of successive centuries, an excellent collection of 19th century writings, cartography including precious maritime atlases, graphics, numismatic materials, *ex libris* bookplates, photographs, and documents of social life: such acquisitions gave rise to an overall collection with a profile oriented towards historical, legal, philological, philosophical, theological, and naturalist works. With time, this profile took on a clearly humanist accent, with particular attention paid to compiling works dealing with Gdańsk itself, the surrounding Pomerania and Prussia regions, and the Baltic Sea basin.

Books for the masses

For many years, the Gdańsk Library principally served the Gdańsk Academic Gymnasium, as a research workplace for its students and professors. It was only when this institution was disbanded that the library entered a new stage in its history, becoming a City Library (*Stadt Bibliothek*). And it was for this institution, then of an explicitly public character, that a new library building - modern for the times, including extensive stack facilities and a novel construction - was designed and built, opening its doors on Jacobstrasse (today's Wałowa street) in 1905. This stage in the library's history saw the production of printed catalogs of manuscripts, a uniform, systematic, and alphabetic catalog of the whole collection, and a catalog of prints featuring Gdańsk.

The next stage in the institution's history, which stretches to the present day, began just after WWII. In April 1945 the City Library was taken over by Marian Pelczar, at the behest of the new Polish Authorities. Pelczar and his devoted staff began restoration work and recovery efforts immediately, and were already able to reopen the doors of the Library to Gdańsk readers on 22 June 1946, with the highest Polish state authorities and numerous library community representatives in attendance. The war-torn city was then direly in need of a broad network of reading rooms and lending collections, to make Polish books available to children, young people, and adults.

Fully realizing that conditions had to have a negative impact on the state of preservation and conservation of the

most precious segment of the Gdańsk collection (the oldest items, some of which date back to the 10th-12th centuries), the directors of the Library then divided the institution into an education section and a research section, housed in separate facilities. When the Polish Academy of Sciences was being established in subsequent years, in view of the vast importance of the Library's historic collections for Polish and even world research, efforts undertaken by representatives of the research community (such as the Board of the Gdańsk Society of Friends of Science and Art) led to the Library's research division being incorporated into the new Academy's structure on 1 January 1955.

New beginnings

Gdańsk Library staff members have produced numerous research works based on the institution's collections, including bibliographical and documentation works. The Library is also the source of various other scholarly publications, as well as the periodic journal *Libri Gedanenses*. It organizes research conferences, exhibitions, and popular-science events. It also constitutes an important center linking together the scholarly community in Gdańsk, as an institution preserving and cultivating an impressive segment of cultural heritage, and as an institution maintaining and granting access to its book collections. The library's historic duty, which remains ever the same today, is to cultivate and educate successive generations and to promote knowledge and science.

Now entering its fifth century, the prestigious Gdańsk Library is likewise making great efforts to keep up with the times. Current cataloging of the collections is being done by computer, meaning that catalog information as well as some works themselves are now available online, generating an ever-broader database of library novelties. Moreover, the existing catalogs are now being scanned and made available on the Internet. For several years now, the rarest portions of the collection, most threatened by damage or deterioration, have been systematically archived and digitized. Efforts are also underway to successively conserve and restore the Library's unique facilities.

In 1999, the Gdańsk Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences prepared itself for the next step, to propel its long history of development into the next millennium: launching the construction of a second building encompassing stack facilities to house 800,000 volumes, workshops, reading rooms, and a computer catalog system. Following five years of construction work, the new facility was opened on 18 November 2005, in a ceremony attended by Polish state authorities - a ceremony that symbolically marked the one hundredth anniversary of the first building's grand opening as well as the five hundredth anniversary of the Library itself. A new website, www.bgpan.gda.pl, was also set up to make the constantly expanding electronic catalogs available to all. ■