

**Agata MIKRUT-KUSY<sup>1</sup>**  
**Krystian SIKORSKI<sup>2</sup>**

## **SELECTED ASPECTS OF MONUMENT PROTECTION IN POLAND IN THE INTER WAR PERIOD**

The article concerns research on the history of the conservation of architectural monuments in Poland in the interwar period. A comparison of the first post-independence resolutions covering the protection of Polish monuments shows that the content of the provisions is based on the findings and assumptions developed while the partitions were still in progress. Undoubtedly, the work of societies and conservationist groups, for the purpose of popularizing knowledge about historical objects and making the public aware of the need to undertake conservation activities, became the foundation for the organization of future conservation services.

The article presents an analysis of the process of forming Polish conservation structures in the independent state and presents the methods of work of district conservators adopted at that time. This paper pays attention to the attitude of the clergy, scientific circles and the general public to the formed concept of conservation. It should be emphasized that many of the organizational assumptions and legal regulations of the time have influenced the practice and methods of contemporary conservators today.

**Keywords:** conservation, architecture, historic preservation, inventory, cultural heritage

### **1. Introduction**

The directions and methods of historic preservation developed during the Partitions became the foundation for specific conservation activities falling in the interwar period. The new statehood forming at that time also required the formation of a system of monument protection. The devastation of World War I and the difficulty of estimating losses made people aware of the necessity of keeping inventories and documenting historical objects. The lack of inventories

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Agata MIKRUT-KUSY, Faculty of Civil, Environmental Engineering and Architecture, Rzeszow University of Technology, Department of Historic Preservation, a.mikrut@prz.edu.pl, orcid.org/0000-0002-4703-8167

<sup>2</sup> Krystian SIKORSKI, Faculty of Civil, Environmental Engineering and Architecture, Rzeszow University of Technology, Department of Historic Preservation, k.sikorski1@prz.edu.pl, orcid.org/0000-0002-4093-0697

of monuments not only hindered the estimation of war losses, but also prevented their faithful restoration [Lewicki 2011, pp. 172-173].

It is difficult to outline a rigid time frame on the issue of legal protection of construction and architectural monuments in the interwar period. This is because the roots of the regulations adopted in the new legal order went back at least to 1914, the beginning of the war, and even the activity of conservators under the partitions [Mikrut, Sikorski 2021, pp. 16-27]. Thanks to this earlier activity, since 1918 it was possible to adopt appropriate legal regulations in a specialized field such as the protection and care of monuments and to begin organized conservation work. Without prior substantive preparation, in the realities of the emerging new statehood and the political conditions of the time, it would not have been possible to undertake conservation activities in a timely manner, which would probably have translated into the irreversible loss of a much larger part of the historic cultural heritage [Pruszyński 1988, p. 76]. Postwar activities focused on rescuing, as well as rebuilding, the architectural legacy were carried out under the slogan "naufrágio eripere" (Latin: to rescue from disaster, to snatch from destruction), popularized by Jerzy Remer - the general conservator of historic buildings in 1930-1937 [Remer 1930/1931, p. 6; Nowiński 1979, p. 147].

Significant legal regulations, developed after the restoration of independence, made it possible to take specific actions aimed firstly at drawing up current inventory of historic buildings and assessing their state of preservation, and then at implementing the principles and methods of real protection.

Thus, the overriding goal became to make the public aware of the need to care for monuments, as well as to point out that these issues should be handled only by people with the appropriate training and sensitivity, thus limiting arbitrary actions, which, although done in good faith, often led to the loss of the values of the preserved objects [Opieka nad zabytkami i ich konserwacja 1920, p. 7]. Targeted activities resulted in the development of awareness both among the scientific community, the clergy and the general public.



Fig. 1. Jerzy Remer, general conservator of monuments in the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment. Portrait photography; Author: Jan Bułhak, 1930-37; Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, sygn. 3/1/0/2/2699/1

In this publication, the complexity of the issue of conservation of architectural monuments is taken into account, and attention is paid to the fact that the introduction of norms and laws will have no effect without educating the public about the preservation of tangible cultural heritage. Taking into account modern concepts of historic preservation, and especially the provisions of the Charter of Krakow 2000 [Vademecum konserwatora zabytków 2015, p. 135-138] indicating the important role of society in the care of monuments, special attention was paid to administrative and social issues.

## 2. The state of the knowledge

Among others, Jan Pruszyński dealt with the subject of monument protection in the revived Poland. In his article titled Organization of Monument Protection in the Interwar Twentieth Century, he particularly emphasizes the influence of conservation activities and postulates developed under the partitions on the shape of legal regulations formulated in independent Poland [Pruszyński 1988, p. 75].

Bogusław Szmygin devoted an entire chapter to the presentation of the conservation doctrine in the interwar period in his 2000 publication entitled Shaping the Concept of the Monument and the Conservation Doctrine in Poland in the 20th Century. As he points out, the year 1914 and the first destructions of the war should be taken as the beginning of the period marking the new directions of Polish conservationism. In his analysis of this period, the author also emphasized the influence of the ideas of modernism on the shape of conservation activities [Szmygin 2000, pp. 57-116].

The issue of the formation of Polish conservation thought has been repeatedly addressed in his works by art historian Paweł Dettloff. He described

the main assumptions and conservation practice of that period in a publication titled *Odbudowa i restauracja zabytków architektury w Polsce 1918-1930. Teoria i praktyka* [Dettloff 2007]. His work is a search for an answer to the question of whether the Polish conservator's protection, shaping at that time, was a continuation of the experience developed in the realities of the partitions, or whether it grew on foreign features and solutions, or perhaps constituted a completely independent thought.

Janusz Slugocki wrote about the importance of the interwar period for the shape of contemporary Polish conservationism in the article entitled *Notes on the Interwar Law of Care for Monuments and the Contemporary Model*. The author focused on the analysis of the legal solutions of that time, comparing them with today's functioning of the system of monument protection and the legal provisions in force. In the conclusion of the work, he also referred to the (still overlooked) necessity of taking into account other conditions and factors (political, economic, social, economic) in the broadly understood care of monuments [Slugocki 2020, pp. 245-260].

The need to recognize social value as a factor supporting the protection of monuments was considered by Joanna Sroczynska in the article entitled "Social value of architectural monuments in the light of selected documents of UNESCO, ICOMOS, the Council of Europe, shaping the theory of cultural heritage protection" [Sroczynska 2021]. The author noted that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, until the formation of new nation-states, the development of social movements supported and influenced the preservation of monuments. Contemporary conservation theories and trends are moving toward a return to these values.

### **3. Organization of conservation services and regulations**

After independence, the organization of conservation services was finally able to become a planned part of the administrative structures of the sovereign state, which took over the duty of caring for monuments by creating the respective Ministries: Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment (W.R. and O.P.) and Arts and Culture. This was, so to speak, a takeover of functions from the earlier societies dealing with this, which had been formed on a grassroots initiative (in Cracow, Warsaw, and Lviv) and the groups of conservators for Western and Eastern Galicia, as well as the National Conservator's Office in Cracow, established in 1914 [Remer 1948, p. 37; Mikrut, Sikorski 2020, pp. 16-27].

The first binding legal regulation was, issued at October 31, 1918, the Regency Council's Decree on the Care of Monuments of Art and Culture, under which the State was divided into conservation districts [Lewicki 1999, p. 377; Wojciechowski 1930-31, p. 9]. The elaboration of the document would not have been possible without the methods and directions of conservation activity that were still being developed under the Partitions. Indeed, many of the provisions were formulated

on the basis of the postulates contained in the document adopted at the First Conservation Conference in 1909 [Pruszyński 1988, pp. 75-76].

The decree was supplemented by three successively issued regulations [Pruszyński 1988, p. 77]:

- Decree of the Minister of Art and Culture of April 5, 1919, on the organization of conservation offices (M on. Pol. No. 81),
- Ordinance of the Minister of Art and Culture of April 5, 1919, on the subject of entering art monuments in the inventory,
- Ordinance of the Minister of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment of May 17, 1924 on the establishment of district conservation commissions (M on. Pol. No. 135, item 391).

Laying the groundwork for the organization of Polish conservation services initially assumed the appointment of conservators in all provinces. First independent Conservation Offices were soon decided to be merged as part of the consolidation of field administration. Thus, in 1920, they were incorporated into the structure of the Provincial Offices and merged with the Divisions of Art, with conservators appointed as heads of these divisions [Szmygin 2000, p. 63; Wojciechowski 1930-31, p. 14]. Subsequent reorganizations in the structures of state administration eventually resulted in the weakening of the position of the conservation service. The Provincial Conservation Offices were replaced by nine, new conservation districts that covered two or three provinces. The country's poor economic and business situation forced a reduction in full-time positions, which in effect meant that the conservator of such a district had a maximum of one employee at his disposal [Szmygin 2000, p. 64].

On substantive issues, all conservation problems and concerns were tried to be resolved through discussion and consensus among conservators. This took place mainly within the framework of the established Conservation Council, which, in addition to the district conservators, included the head of the Department of Monuments and Museums and, from 1928, the General Conservator of Monuments [Pruszyński 1988, p. 78; Dettloff 2010, p. 280]. The Council acted as a nationwide consultative body to support the state conservation service [Dettloff 2010, p. 280]. It was established by a 1919 decree on the organization of conservation offices [Wojciechowski 1930-31, p. 8].

In turn, the protection of movable church monuments was regulated by a decree of December 19, 1925, under an agreement between the Minister of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment and the Polish Episcopate [Wojciechowski 1930-31, p. 8].

The provisions contained in the first Decree of 1918 were not sufficient, as, among other things, they dealt with the care of monuments already listed in the state inventory, and this often necessitated the fulfillment of formal requirements before the actual procedure for securing endangered objects could begin. The streamlining and, most importantly, acceleration of this process

was regulated by a new bill - the Presidential Decree of March 6, 1928 [Wojciechowski 1930-31, p. 10].

#### **4. Activities of monumental conservationists**

The issue of creating conservation units and their organization was already discussed at the First Congress of the Council of Conservators in 1919 in Warsaw. First of all, the necessity of inventorying and documenting historical objects was pointed out. The problematic issues of restoration and reconstruction of objects were also raised. In the interwar period, successive conventions of the Council were organized regularly, in various cities, but mainly in Cracow and Warsaw. They were organized on the model of the German Days of Historic Preservation, which contributed significantly to the development of general conservation doctrines [Szydłowski 1919].

In 1919, the authority over monuments was entrusted to only nine conservators, whose duties included overseeing the work from both the financial side and the broader design and conservation work [Wojciechowski 1931, p. 3]. The conservator, in addition to his clerical duties, initiated the start of the work by supervising and assisting in its execution, providing advice and helping to raise funds. With his experience and knowledge, he determined the program of works necessary to be carried out in order to preserve the monument in a relatively favorable technical condition. In comparison, a decade later, in 1929, eight conservators covered a much larger area under their jurisdiction, because instead of a dozen counties it was several provinces [Wojciechowski 1931, p. 4].

The primary factor shaping the issue was the unfavorable geopolitical situation. Coinciding with 1920, repeated military actions related to the war with Ukraine and then with Bolshevik Russia resulted in the conscription of conservators into the army. The rescue of monuments in the areas of armed conflict itself consisted of securing them and taking them out of the combat zone if possible [Wojciechowski 1931, p. 4].

The lack of highly specialized conservation staff was also a consequence of the lack of an educational model for future conservators, who, as art historians or architects, gained knowledge and conservation skills during practical experience [Szmygin 2000, p.65].

The harsh geopolitical situation of the post-war period resulted in restrictions in the context of conservation of historic buildings. Standing at the beginning of its journey, the conservation school of the time faced a lack of funds, but this was not the only problem. A consequence of the war effort was also a shortage of personnel due to the drafting of craftsmen into the army or their death [Szmygin 2000, pp. 62-64]. Thus, in addition to financial constraints, there was a shortage of contractors. At the time, there were no companies specializing exclusively in historic preservation, so work on monuments was done by local construction companies [Szmygin 2000, p. 64]. From an administrative point of

view, the post-war generation of conservators worked under conditions of lack of knowledge of technical capabilities and complete documentation of historic buildings [Remer 1948, pp. 37-40].

In 1921-23, 13 conservators took care of the monuments. In his remarks on the state of Polish conservation until 1930, Jaroslaw Wojciechowski, in addition to the inadequate number of conservators, also points out the inconvenience of logistical and financial issues. Wojciechowski points to the tardiness of the authorities, which, combined with the devaluation of money, resulted in an insufficient budget. This was one of the factors that led, in 1923, to 7 conservators being left in charge of duties beyond their competence [Wojciechowski 1931, p. 4]. These financial constraints meant that conservators, as a consequence, were unable to sufficiently carry out conservation tasks in the sixteen provinces [Szmygin 2000, p. 64].

Despite the criticism of the office's functioning, Wojciechowski underlines that under certain conditions 9,000 cases were managed to be processed resulting in numerous inventories including 20,000 photographic plates and 4,500 architectural-measurement charts [Wojciechowski 1931, p. 3].

Conservators, aware of public attitudes and a number of constraints, focused on inventorying objects with an emphasis on reviewing them and formulating conclusions indicating further care [Rymaszewski 1992, p. 45].

Some of the most significant restoration work of that period included that carried out on the royal castle at Wawel, the royal castle in Warsaw or the palace in Łazienki. The ruins were cared for, and research was conducted resulting in excavations and the advancement of restoration techniques (an example is the restoration of the walls of the church in Tuma near Leczyca) [Zachwatowicz 1965, pp. 15-16].

Polish conservators, to the extent of modest possibilities, tried to draw on already existing solutions. An example of the need and willingness to educate was the participation of the Polish delegation of conservators in congresses, including one in Athens in 1931 [Zachwatowicz 1965, pp. 16-17].

Working on objects in the conditions of the time posed a challenge, while at the same time enabling experience to be gained. The knowledge acquired over time by conservators in cooperation with the academic community provided motivation for further activities. Unfortunately, the general poor economic condition of the country and the resulting lack of funds to carry out work involving the restoration or protection and preservation of historical objects contributed to a significant impoverishment of the collection. In this atmosphere, many objects survived until 1939, which was the beginning of a trying period for Polish conservation [Remer 1949, p. 22]. It is worth noting that the destruction noticeable from the first days of World War II motivated history lovers to form conspiracy conservation groups. These groups worked for the preservation of historical monuments undertaking activities with the idea of continuing them even after the end of the war [Rymaszewski 1992, p. 50].

## 5. The role of society in monumental preservation

Summarizing from today's perspective the activities of the conservation community and the attitude of the general public to the issue in the interwar period of the 20th century, it is possible to look at the prevailing mood of the time through the prism of the provisions contained in the preamble of the Charter of Krakow 2000 [Vademecum konserwatora zabytków 2015, pp. 135-138]. It is not enough to have patrons of historic buildings in the form of groups of conservators, and the issue of care should be considered more broadly, in the context of society as a whole. Being aware of the economic and political hardships, one should not forget about the social factor, which, skillfully formed, gives support often allowing to survive the hardest times. For this reason, it is worth asking the question in what realities conservationists worked after independence. What was the awareness of the monument among the intelligentsia, the clergy and in the society.

In order to understand the level of awareness of people living at that time, it is necessary to keep in mind the beginning of the 20th century. Feliks Kopera, who served as conservator for the Tarnów-Rzeszów region from 1905 to 1918, in his publication entitled *Ze wspomnień konserwatora* (From the Memoirs of a Conservator), points unequivocally to a lack of understanding of the need to ensure the permanence of the monument [Kopera 1949]. Retrospection of the events preceding the interwar period may be crucial in the context of assessing the mentality of Polish society during the indicated period, which, unlike finance, is not shaped by laws, and changing customs through education will take years. In light of the accounts presented by Kopere, a misunderstanding of the issue was evident among the clergy, who, widely regarded as educated and morally oriented, were role models for society. Therefore, a certain attitude must have resulted in a lack of understanding among the general public. Kopera points to numerous clashes with the clergy over both movable monuments, polychromes and immovable monuments. An example of a conservator's dispute over the preservation of a monument were the medieval polychromies in the Czchow church, where the parish priest, having previously removed the decorations from the nave unaware of their importance, sought to remove the remains in the chancel. Kopera recalls relations with the Pastor as heavy and unpleasant [Kopera 1949, p. 86]. The above-mentioned situation was not an exception, and it is also an indication of the lack of awareness of the value of monuments among the clergy and the public at the time.

Monumental conservators, realizing the level of education of the public resulting in a certain attitude towards the subject, paid attention to the political aspect of monument protection. Szydłowski points out unequivocally that, by definition, the protection of monuments that represent the nation's identity should be a matter of priority, especially when we are talking about a young nation that regained its freedom after many years of partition. The opinion of the

Conservators was shared by the intelligentsia and history lovers [Rymaszewski 1992, p. 45].

Referring to the interwar period of the 20th century, it is important to keep in mind the attitude of the authorities of the time to the classification of the monument. Both own heirlooms and remnants of the invaders were seen as objects that should be given attention. Here it is worth emphasizing the difference between the two sides. Historical monuments, the significance of which was due to the passage of time or the special circumstances of their occurrence, and which bore witness to the activities of past generations wanted to be preserved. Among the intelligentsia and part of society there was a desire to assess the value of an object through a historical prism relating to patriotism, and this also influenced the preservation of movable monuments, as well as small architecture. On the other hand, monuments that were remnants of the occupation were destroyed without considering their historical, archaeological or cultural value of the region [Rymaszewski 1992]. Transformations and demolitions of monuments that were symbols of the invaders were a common phenomenon [Rymaszewski 1992, p. 47]. As a result, this led to the loss of many objects, which were dismantled despite meeting the criterion of time and the fact of the cultural connection to their location.

The indicated attitudes of obliterating the memory of the partitioners were not only the domain of the Polish nation. An example is the eastern part of former Galicia, where the result of the Polish-Ukrainian war was the intensification of anti-Polish sentiment. As a result, armed actions led to the mass destruction of Polish culture, including buildings [Szydłowski 1919, p. 10].

Referring to the activities of the public in securing objects, it is necessary to remember the economic situation of post-war Poland. It directly affected the material and labor potential, thus limiting the possibility of a professional approach to carrying out the work. Managers and users showed a desire to keep the objects in good technical condition. Unfortunately, the repair methodology should be assessed as rather detrimental due to the fact that managers, guided by economic considerations, sought to rebuild or reconstruct not infrequently without paying attention to preserving the value of the monument. The tendency, dictated by economic and legal issues, to renovate only the front elevations of townhouses was noticeable. Conservators did not have the resources to carry out comprehensive renovations or buy the object from the owner. An example was Warsaw's Old Town, whose tenements were given colors incompatible with historical ones [Rymaszewski 1992, pp. 45-47].

## **6. Inventory of monuments**

As in the case of considering the public's attitude to the mission of preserving historic buildings, it is worth underline that activities aimed at inventorying monuments were carried out with varying degrees of success

immediately before Poland regained its independence. This fact is indicated, for example, by the records of Feliks Kopera, who notes that, in cooperation with the conservator Leonard Lepszy and the architect Stefan Wąs, they obtained assistance from the Central Commission and the Galician Parliament, resulting, as late as 1916, in the printing of the study *Wooden Churches of Western Galicia* containing an inventory of 59 churches [Kopera 1949, p. 85].

With the establishment of sovereignty, an initiative was taken to complete the incomplete inventory documentation. This task was carried out as part of the program of activities of the Polish state, as well as on the initiative of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences [Szablowski 1949, pp. 73-83]. Pursuant to a decree in 1919, the position of a special inventory clerk was created in the Ministry of Culture and the Arts, and additionally an instruction treating the methodology of the inventories performed was issued.

Since 1929, the activities of the Conservation Office were also assisted by the establishment of the Central Bureau of Art Monuments Inventory (CBIZ of Art), which led to the standardization of inventory methods during the period of operation. In the first period (1929 - 1935), three counties were inventoried and a catalog of art monuments was created. An act emphasizing the positive attitude of Poles toward Jews was the start of inventory work on Jewish cultural monuments. By the time World War II began, the CBIZ of Art had managed to make a photographic and measurement archive and print a photographic inventory consisting of 30,000 negatives [Szablowski 1949, pp. 73-83].

However, it is not possible to speak of a complete inventory of historical monuments, since during this period the focus was mainly on objects that suffered as a result of warfare, omitting the inventory of monuments preserved in relatively good technical condition [Lewicki 2011, p. 172].



Fig. 2. Employees of the Central Office for the Inventory of Art Monuments, 1937. Visible include: general conservator Jerzy Remer, Ph.D. Jerzy Szablowski, architect engineer Wilhelm Hennberg.

Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, sygn. 3/1/0/2/2711a

## 7. Academic activities

In reference to academic activity focused on the conservation of monuments, it should be pointed out that despite the desire and continuous development of specialized groups functioning within the framework of a specific monument, education with a conservation specialization did not exist, and the conservation groups that were created were born out of purely social movements, associated under the aegis of art historians and architects. The field for exchanging opinions, experiences and gaining knowledge was cooperation in the Society for the Care of Monuments, the Association of Art Historians or meetings at conservation conventions [Zachwatowicz 1965, p. 17].

The society's lack of understanding of the subject was also a consequence of the unsatisfactory state of education in the discussed specialization. Both Kopera and Szydłowski pointed out that the only right way to protect the monuments on a large scale is education. Promoting the need to identify with monuments among ordinary people and arousing the feeling that although they are not the work of Michaelangelo, they are legacy of their ancestors and are part of their culture [Kopera 1949, p. 84; Szydłowski 1912, p.5].

It should be emphasized here that the efforts of the teaching Staff of the Lviv University of Technology and the Warsaw University of Technology were worth noting. Conservators of the Lviv district, wanting to increase their work efficiency, commissioned students to carry out inventories as part of their summer internship. As a result, the collection was expanded to include documentation covering regions of Sandomierz, as well as Kujawy and

Pomerania. Unfortunately, the collections stored in Lviv Faculty of Architecture and Historical Architecture were irretrievably destroyed by the Russians at the beginning of World War II [Lewicki 1999, pp. 375-390]. At the Warsaw University of Technology, as part of the work of the Department of Polish Architecture and Art History operating at the Faculty of Architecture, design documentation containing measurements of sacred buildings and selected folk architecture objects was prepared and then archived [Zachwatowicz 1965, p.65].

## 8. Summary

Independence regained after World War I, filling the hearts of compatriots with joy and hope, at the same time burdened them with the great responsibility of building statehood from scratch. In his work „The Ruins of Poland”, Tadeusz Szydłowski emphasizes the seriousness of the situation and asks the question whether future generations will be able to at least partially understand the importance of the issue [Szydłowski 1919]. Are we currently able to understand the realities prevailing in the resurrected Republic of Poland? Can we appreciate the issues of decisions made at that time regarding the direction of shaping the thought of the Polish School of Conservation? Ultimately, can we understand the Conservators of the early 20th century, their love for their homeland and perseverance in pursuing their goal, which was often met with lack of understanding and public outrage? Being aware of the answers to the above questions, it is worth emphasizing the merits of conservators of the interwar period in the development of conservation theory and the implementation of its assumptions into the awareness of people who, struggling with the hardships of the realities of the Republic of Poland in the interwar period, often did not pay attention to the need for education and preservation of cultural heritage.

The war damage of World War I became a factor shaping Polish conservation after 1918 [Szmygin 2000, p.57]. They made people aware of the need to keep inventories and accelerated the process of inventoring historic buildings.

Without the activities of the Group of Conservators of Eastern and Western Galicia, the Cracow Scientific Society and other people and associations of great merit for monuments established under the partitions, the protection of monuments after the outbreak of World War I and in the interwar period could not have developed.

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