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PROFESSOR ZBIGNIEW WAWER, A MUSEUM CURATOR

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They say that people get to know an individual when he or she passes away. This brief albeit meaningful motto seems today, when Zbigniew Wawer is no longer with us, extremely true. However, a question arises whether even those who claim to have known Prof. Wawer indeed did.

Perhaps the above is not an appropriate beginning for an *in memoriam* paper, yet the person it is dedicated to was not conventional, either. Maybe authors of other recollections will write that he was born in..., he studied..., he published..., etc. However, it is generally known that Zbigniew Wawer was a historian, boasting a post-doctoral degree, an associate professor, a supervisor and reviewer of academic papers, an organizer and participant of academic conferences, a video producer, an author of numerous publications, etc. It seems that he could share his accomplishments with several CVs, yet this is merely a part of his activity. The acceptable size of this paper does not allow a broader presentation of Prof. Wawer's achievements, yet hopefully it will inspire broader studies into those. Hence, purposefully, the Authors have limited themselves to Prof. Wawer's museum-related activity.

Among the latter, three areas have to be distinguished: cooperation with museums, running the Polish Army Museum in 2012–2016, and the Royal Łazienki Museum in 2017–2022.

Cooperation with museums

Prof. Wawer was actually involved in cooperating with museums throughout the whole of his career, including the period when he was connected with museology as a full-time

employee. It is impossible to name all the effects of his contribution to the operations of those cultural institutions, therefore, let us limit ourselves to some of them.

In 2010, Wawer, still a PhD, participated in the national conference dedicated to the struggle of Polish soldiers for independence. It accompanied the exhibition mounted at the Museum of Mazovian Gentry in Ciechanów and a substantial number of other anniversary events prepared by local governments. When travelling along the sites of battles and skirmishes, he visited, e.g., Płońsk, Sarnowa Góra, Sochocin, Szydłowo. He participated in the re-enactment of the battles of Arcelin and Borkowo. Furthermore, he took vivid interest in other local-level projects, highly appreciating, for instance, the Laboratory of the Documentation of the Płońsk City History. He did not hide his esteem for the display of a unique craftsmanship in Sochocin presenting the process of the production of buttons made of river shells in the early 20th century. He visited those institutions as a part of his cooperation with museums.

As a result of this cooperation a short documentary, characteristic of his video production, was created: *The Year 1920: Northern Mazovia Defending Independence*. It showed less-known or literally forgotten sites of combats of Polish soldiers, such as the cavalry charge at Arcelin, fights of the Siberian Brigade at Borkowo, or of the 49th Infantry Regiment at Szydłowo. And although the documentary did not reach a wider audience, it has retained unquestionable educational quality. It revealed the true cruelty of the Bolshevik troops violating all the international conventions. Presented for the first time in 2010 during the celebration of the 90^s anniversary of the fights for defending

independence, it was shown after that at several anniversary events and cavalry reunions, yet it has remained known to few only.

In spring 2012, Prof. Wawer co-mounted and moderated the international conference dedicated to the combats of the Polish 2nd Corps of General Władysław Anders at Monte Cassino and Piedimonte San Germano. The project was implemented in a joint effort with the Embassy of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland in Warsaw. Attended by representatives of the central government, diplomats, veterans, academics, journalists, and museum curators, the simultaneously-translated conference was held at the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw. It provided an opportunity to present the findings of historians and specialists in tactics from Polish and British military academies.

Moreover, Prof. Wawer's contribution to projects implemented by international museums was highly appreciated. Let us mention here those dedicated to the Polish 1st Armoured Division and Gen. Stanisław Maczek himself, as well as the role of the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade commanded by Gen. Stanisław Sosabowski. They resulted from his preliminary research into museum collections in the Netherlands, France, Belgium, or Germany. The research into the participation of Polish soldiers in the battles of Tobruk, Monte Cassino, Bologna, etc., required research into archives in Australia, New Zealand, and Italy. Prof. Wawer's intense research to obtain new sources allowed new ample academic findings. Through his publications in foreign languages he had the ability to reach various circles, not merely academic ones, in many a country. Furthermore, his personal contacts gave him the opportunity to display numerous exhibits from foreign museums in Poland. Prof. Wawer's cooperation with museums included,

first of all, conferences, exhibitions, video productions, but also consultancy in historical re-enactments or shows. Another aspect of this cooperation should also be mentioned, since he was member of museum councils, author of questions for and jury member in history contests, and he also participated in the Chapter of the 'Willow' Mazovian Museum Events.

Polish Army Museum 2012–2016

Prof. Wawer was able to thoroughly fulfil his museological and academic passions when on 17 September 2012 he was appointed Director of the Polish Army Museum. He was the originator of Museum's participation in numerous scholarly projects. Let us recall here, e.g., the participation in international *In Hoc Signo Vincens* vexillological seminars, and it was thanks to Director's personal commitment that the Polish Army Museum co-organized and co-hosted one of them in 2014. Another important event was that organized at the National Museum in Krakow on 16–18 September 2015, when a joint academic congress was held for two organizations: International Committee for Museums and Collections of Arms and Military History (ICOMAM) and International Committee for Museums and Collections of Decorative Arts and Design (ICDAD), both members of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). It was the first such joint event at ICOM, and the first organized in Polish territories following a several dozens of years' break. The Polish Army Museum marked its participation by mounting a post-conference tour.

Apart from its strictly museological activity, under Prof. Wawer as Director, the Polish Army Museums also welcomed on its premises encounters allowing an exchange



1. Photo from a conference held by the Museum of Mazovian Gentry in Ciechanów on the 90th anniversary of fights against the Bolsheviks in northern Mazovia. From the left: Antoni Krzysztof Sobczak PhD, Prof. Lech Wyszczelski, and Zbigniew Wawer PhD; Photo from Antoni Krzysztof Sobczak's collection



2. Launch of the *Great War 1914–1918. True End to the Belle Époque* Exhibition. Its curators: Izabela Prokopczuk-Runowska and Prof. Zbigniew Wawer, Director of the Polish Army Museum, are showing the display to Tomasz Siemoniak, Minister of National Defence, and other invited guests, Photo Maciej Skoczeń

of knowledge and views representing various disciplines. Among such events let us mention the conference held on 12 June 2015: 'Threats Resulting from the Illegal Purposeful Use of Unmanned Mobile Platforms'. The importance of the topic, including the use of reconnaissance drones in the context of Russia's invasion of Crimea in February 2014, can be seen clearly today during the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Importantly, despite an array of the new responsibilities, Prof. Wawer continued active in the Academic Council of the Museum of Polish Arms in Kołobrzeg, where, e.g., in May 2015, he chaired the 'History of Polish Border Guard Formations' Seminar. However, academic conferences were merely a fraction of his activity as a museum curator. His greatest passion was mounting exhibitions, The first of them: *From a Horse Carriage to a Tank: General Maczek and His Soldiers* was opened already within the first month of his directorship. In total, within four years the Museum inspired by his ideas mounted 16 exhibitions, put together 26 occasional displays and board displays, as well as some dozen presentations prepared by the Polish Army Museum's branches: the Katyń Museum and the Museum of Polish Military Technology.

Unquestionably, the grandest project, both in terms of the number of heritage pieces and of the involvement of domestic and international museums, was the *Great War 1914–1918. True End to the Belle Époque* Exhibition. Launched on 28 July 2014, it coincided with the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of WW I. The preparation for the project lasted over a year, involving numerous preliminary researches in

Polish and European museums. Director Wawer either supervised them or conducted them personally. As the outcome of those efforts the first in Poland such an extensive display dedicated to WW I in its universal dimension was mounted. It brought together over 1,000 heritage pieces from some dozen foreign and Polish museums as well as over 1,000 photos and drawings blown up or shown in multimedia presentations. Apart from the uniforms, arms, and equipment of all the sides of the conflict, the Exhibition also showed changes in warfare, as well as social transformations caused by the War. An important aspect was the presentation of the Polish cause through showing Polish military formations created within the armies of the fighting states: soldiers enrolled in the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian troops, and frequently involved in fratricidal battles. Extremely popular with the public, the Exhibition was also appreciated by other museums, being awarded the prestigious 1st Prize in the 2015 'Willow' Mazovian Museum Events for the most interesting exhibition in 2014.

Moreover, Prof. Wawer established close contact with the National Museum in Krakow. These yielded the joint *Art of the Polish Legions* Exhibition inaugurated in Krakow in 2016 on the 100th anniversary of an exhibition organized under the auspices of the Supreme National Committee.

From among large-scale interesting exhibitions let us mention two dedicated to important events from WW II: the topic, as it is generally known, Prof. Wawer was an expert in and a great researcher into. One of them mounted on the 75th anniversary of the air Battle of Britain: *Forgotten*



3. Professor Zbigniew Wawer together with Estonian museum curators; in the background a gift from the Polish Army Museum, Photo from Izabela Prokopczuk-Runowska's collection

Heroes. The 75th Anniversary of the Battle of England presented both sides of the conflict, recalling, among others, Polish flying aces. The second was dedicated to the Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade and its participation in the fights in Libya: *Tobruk 1941. On the 75th Anniversary of the Fights of the Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade Defending the Desert Stronghold*. Both displays were a result of an international cooperation involving, e.g., German and Czech museums, and also the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London.

Thanks to Prof. Wawer's efforts, the Polish Army Museum presented, albeit for merely a month, a unique display of famous drawings by Artur Grottger titled *Polonia* and *Lithuania* from the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest and the National Museum in Krakow.

The exhibitions Prof. Wawer initiated and inspired were often characterized by a new outlook or perspective on the tackled topic; not only did they display heritage pieces from the rich collection of the Polish Army Museum and other Polish museums, but also from numerous European institutions. Cooperation with them allowed the Polish public to become acquainted with international collections. Moreover, it provided the opportunity to present Polish museum collections abroad.

A lot more could be said about display inspirations Director Wawer had and his contacts with European museums. However, let us only mention one extraordinary event from Tallinn in January 2015. At the Estonian War Museum - General Laidoner Museum housed in a historic manor house, in the inter-war period property of the General, a friend of Poland and of Marshal Józef Piłsudski, a ceremony of donating a T-34

tank from WW II by the Polish Army Museum to the Estonian institution was held.

Out of chronicler's duty, mention should also be made of Director Wawer's other museological activity: the acquisition of many new precious exhibits for the Museum collection, settling the ownership status of Gen. Jan Henryk Dąbrowski's mementoes, as well as some dozen publications released by the Museum or in cooperation with other institutions, including papers authored either by Prof Wawer or Museum's staff and affiliates.

Being Director of the Polish Army Museum over that period additionally implied the commitment to the restructuring process the Museum was undergoing. The major change was the opening of the new seat of the Katyń Museum, a branch of the Polish Army Museum, on 17 September 2015; it was a long-awaited by Polish society institution dedicated to the Katyń massacre. In April 2015, the Polish Army Museum gained a new branch: the Armoured Weaponry Museum in Poznan.

The role the Polish Army Museum played at that time can be judged from the fact that many of the events it held were under the patronage of the major state figures: President of Poland or its respective ministers, while representatives of central and local governments, diplomatic corps, and wide museum-related circles attended the gala openings of its exhibitions.

Royal Łazienki Museum 2017–2022

Prof. Wawer enthusiastically assumed his new responsibilities as Director of the Royal Łazienki Museum in Warsaw

in March 2017 conscious of the extreme potential of the place, despite being also aware of the pending ownership matters of the Museum and the need to adjust its facilities and functions so that they could properly serve for Museum operations, mainly the displaying activity. His decision to modernize and upgrade the Officer Cadets School yielded an exhibition of Hungarian painting as early as in 2018, and shortly afterwards the following ones: *Splendour of Orders, Virtuti Militari, Shared Destiny of Brothers, Polonica from the Budapest Museum and Archive Collections, Splendour of Power, Dulwich*.

Some of the items displayed there were shown in Poland for the first time, others, namely the Polish royal regalia robbed in Dresden, are never to be seen again. One of the major aspects Prof. Wawer was always after was the unique character of exhibits. On his initiative the *Single Item Exhibition* series at the Royal Łazienki showed pieces of Thracian gold, *The Good Samaritan*, or *The Polish Rider*. A team of experienced specialists in many disciplines supported him in the attempt to accomplish his goals. And although sometimes a debate among that group on the presentation of exhibits became quite heated, the missionary character of this activity and pressure of the deadline resolved all the possible doubts. The majority of the exhibitions resulted from cooperation with other museums, but also with diplomatic missions, of e.g. Bulgaria, Finland, Japan, Lithuania, Latvia, Germany, Hungary, Ukraine, and others.

The Royal Łazienki was for Prof. Wawer not only a symbol of the King Stanislaus era, but also a venue of many

later historical events. He frequently emphasized the role of the site during the November Uprising, which is best testified to by his last year's decision to stage *The November Night* by Stanisław Wyspiański. He often recalled Marshal Józef Piłsudski who used to stroll along the Łazienki paths; his bonds with Łazienki not merely resulting from the state functions he was performing when living at the Belvedere, but also from the more personal ones: Marshal's wedding with Aleksandra Szczerbińska took place at the Royal Łazienki. Equally often would Prof. Wawer recall the residents of the Myślewicki Palace: Prince Józef Poniatowski, Marshal Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, or Gen. Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski. In 2018, a conference, an exhibition, and a publication were dedicated to the Finnish general. When asked by journalists during the preview: 'Why at Łazienki?', he responded briefly: 'Where else? It was here that he served as regiment commander for four years'.

In the course of conservation works, traces of Łazienki's history were revealed. In 2020, during the works on the Kubicki Stables, 19th-century newspapers, prescriptions, and ceramic pieces were discovered. In 2021, during the thermal upgrade of the Hermitage Outbuilding perfectly preserved hunting rifles, Nagant revolvers, and Browning pistols were found. The newspapers discovered in the hiding place dated July 1946 prove that the weapons were hidden there following the end of WW II. Owing to Prof. Wawer's efforts they were included in the Museum collection demonstrating that the history of the Łazienki still needs to be investigated. Furthermore, Prof. Wawer initiated non-invasive



4. Royal Łazienki Museum in Warsaw. Vernissage of the *Polish Rider* Exhibition, Rembrandt's work from The Frick Collection. From the left: Xavier F. Salomon PhD, Izabela Zychowicz, Prof. Zbigniew Wawer, Prof. Andrzej Betlej, Dorota Juszcak PhD, Royal Łazienki Museum, Photo Paweł Czarnecki



5. Vernissage of the exhibition at the Royal Łazienki Museum displaying *The Good Samaritan* painting at the Palace on the Water. From the left: Minister of Culture and National Heritage Prof. Piotr Gliński, Prof. Zbigniew Wawer, Royal Łazienki Museum, Photo Paweł Czarnecki

archaeological studies. As of 2020 they were continued in cooperation with Newport University specialists headed by Dr Richard Freud. Archaeological supervision was obligatory for every new project. This allowed, e.g., the discovery of the remains of a facility identified as a Chinese Pavilion, the identity confirmed by a preliminary research of documents from the collection of the Print Cabinet of Warsaw University.

Following in the footsteps of Marshal Piłsudski, Prof. Wawer would often stroll across the historic garden. Not avoiding talking to visitors, he often spoke to the staff. I can recall his conversation with the late Mr Waldemar Kобрzyński, a technical department staff member, whom he started chatting to when the latter was involved in some gardening: 'In 1920, not so far away from here, there was a hospital', and in response he heard the following: 'I know, my granddad ended up there after he had been wounded. We have his Cross of Valour with the card in our family collection'.

Prof. Wawer was fond of children. He would greet them, starting a conversation. Even today children of some of the employees refer to him as 'Uncle Director'. It was, e.g., with children in mind that the garden space of the Royal Łazienki was designed. In 2018, an integrative playground, and in April 2022, the Educational and Playing Garden were opened to the public. He did not really hide his disappointment reading critical remarks in social media expressing annoyance at the noisy joy of the children. He would

often recall his own childhood when he used to live in the Czerniaków area nearby, and came to Łazienki to play in an old car.

The projects he initiated were often thoroughly modified. His decisions to supplement the facilities, the changes of colours or scenarios happened frequently. Additional works yielded, however, substantial effects. Many of the projects were awarded or honoured, Among them, for instance, *Sybilla* (2019) or the 'Willow' on several occasions, e.g., for the *Splendour of Orders. On the 100th Anniversary of Regaining Independence* Exhibition (2019), the Golden Pin (2020) awarded by Google to the most highly appreciated tourist attractions in Poland. Prof. Wawer's decisions with respect to the landscaping of the historic gardens were appreciated by the Polish Rose Society who awarded him with the prize for preserving and promoting historic



6. Professor Zbigniew Wawer, Royal Łazienki Museum, 2018, Photo Marcin Klaban

gardens. Furthermore, under Director Wawer, the Museum received some dozen awards for publishing and educational projects, as well as those connected with accessibility.

Despite a pessimistic doctors' diagnosis he was determined to fight, believing in his final success. He fought against the illness for over two years. Bursting with ideas, he worked until the last moments. To all those who had the privilege of having worked with Prof. Wawer it is clear that he saw his work as a mission. He did not care about the working hours, instead he perceived needs and spotted potential, always ready to undertake new challenges. He is very likely to continue facing them in another space.

Abstract: Following a long disease, on 12 December 2022, Zbigniew Wawer passed away: a historian, boasting a post-doctoral degree, an associate professor, author of numerous publications, and a film producer. In 2012–2017, he ran the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw, as of 2017 having become Director of the Royal Łazienki Museum. The period of his career connected with museology was marked by the process of establishing contacts with international partners focused mainly on presenting research results.

It was also characterized by a high dynamics of displays meant to expose some unique artefacts, particularly Polonica, and of publishing projects. He considered these two aspects the most important in fulfilling the museum's mission. Prof. Wawer also paid similar attention to collection extension, having demonstrated high efficiency in fundraising for the purpose. Furthermore, he strongly opted for the upgrading of his staff's qualifications, while also seeing the necessity to verify museum-related competences. Many museum curators

followed his encouragement to study. The paper presents the profile of a widely known individual in more detail; he was a researcher focused on revealing the historical truth and a museum curator frequently appreciated for his activity.

Keywords: director, museum, cooperation, exhibition, publication, conference

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A historian, licenced curator, since 2017 Deputy Director for Managing the Royal Łazienki Museum in Warsaw. In 2012–2016, Deputy Director of the Museum of the Mazovian Gentry in Ciechanów. Since 2014 he has been focusing on investigating border guard formations of the Second Polish Republic, concentrating on the operations of the Mazovian District of the Border Guards. Author of several dozen publications, and author as well as organizer and participant of academic conferences.

Izabela Prokopczuk-Runowska

Senior curator, superintendent of the Main Collection Department at the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw. A historian, museum curator, specialist in phaleristics and symbolism. Curator and author of awarded exhibitions at the Polish Army Museum and an exhibition at the Royal Łazienki Museum. Author of books and papers on orders and patriotic jewellery. Consultant on phaleristics and national as well as independence symbolism with central state and army institutions. Since 2006 she has been affiliated to the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland as member of the Team for New Military Decorations, since 2017 as member of the Team for studying and assessing orders, decorations, heraldry, and vexillology.

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