

# Visitors at Archives: Guided Tours Organized by Archives Section of the Institute of National Remembrance in Poland

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## ABSTRACT

The specific of archival documentation stored in archives of The Institute of National Remembrance and legal grounds for the availability of records at the beginnings of its activity situated our archives as an institutions closed to the general public. In order to change this common belief The Institute took part in *The Long Night of Museums* in 2009. The strong interest of people encouraged The Institute to continue this initiative. In this paper I would like to present experiences with organizing exhibitions in Warsaw and in archives of other branches of The Institute in Poland and its social reception, including media resonance. It should also be mentioned that The Institute organizes archival lessons for students. Moreover there are arranged guided tours, which aim is to present activities of archives from the most interesting for guests point of view.

I visitatori in archivio: visite guidate organizzate dalle sezioni archivistico-didattiche dell'Istituto per la Memoria Nazionale di Polonia

## SINTESI

La specificità della documentazione d'archivio conservata negli archivi dell'Istituto della Memoria Nazionale e le ragioni giuridiche per la disponibilità dei documenti dagli inizi della sua attività hanno situato il nostro archivio come un istituto chiuso al pubblico. Per cambiare questo sentire comune l'Istituto ha preso parte alla lunga notte dei musei del 2009. Il forte interesse delle persone ha incoraggiato l'Istituto nel continuare questa iniziativa. In questo articolo vorrei presentare alcune esperienze nell'organizzazione di mostre a Varsavia e in archivi di altre filiali dell'Istituto in Polonia e la sua ricezione sociale, tra cui la risonanza mediatica. Va inoltre ricordato che l'Istituto organizza corsi di archivio per gli studenti. Inoltre sono disposte le visite guidate, il cui obiettivo è quello di presentare le attività degli archivi dal più interessante punto di vista per gli ospiti.

Obiskovalci v arhivu: vodeni ogledi, ki jih organizira arhivski oddelek Inštituta narodnega spomina na Poljskem

## IZVLEČEK

Specifično arhivsko gradivo, ki ga hrani arhiv Inštituta narodnega spomina in pravne podlage, ki so ob začetku delovanja uredile vprašanje dostopnosti gradiva, uvrščajo naš arhiv med institucije, zaprte za javnost. Da bi spremenili to prepričanje, je Inštitut leta 2009 sodeloval pri projektu „Noč muzejev“. Velik interes javnosti je spodbudil Inštitut, da nadaljuje s to pobudo. Prispevek predstavlja tudi izkušnje z organizacijo razstav v Varšavi in v arhivih drugih oddelkov Inštituta na Poljskem ter njihovo družbeno sprejemanje, vključno z medijskim odzivom. Prav tako je potrebno omeniti, da Inštitut prireja arhivske učne ure za učence in študente. Poleg tega Inštitut prireja tudi vodene oglede, katerih namen je predstaviti aktivnosti arhiva iz najzanimivejšega vidika za obiskovalce.

Zwiedzający w archiwum: wycieczki z przewodnikiem organizowane przez pion archiwalny Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej

### *ABSTRAKT*

Specyfika dokumentacji archiwalnej zgromadzonej w archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej i prawne podstawy jej udostępniania w początkach jego aktywności usytuowały nasze archiwum jako instytucję zamkniętą dla szerszej publiczności. W celu zmiany tego przekonania Instytut w 2009 r. wziął udział w „Nocy Muzeów”. Ogromne zainteresowanie tą inicjatywą zachęciło Instytut do jej kontynuacji. W swoim referacie zaprezentuję doświadczenia z organizacji ekspozycji w Warszawie i pozostałych jednostkach organizacyjnych Instytutu w Polsce oraz ich społeczny odbiór, z uwzględnieniem oddźwięku w mediach. Należy także wspomnieć, że Instytut przygotowuje lekcje archiwalne dla uczniów szkół ponadgimnazjalnych. Ponadto są organizowane wycieczki, których celem jest ukazanie aktywności archiwum z najbardziej interesującego dla gości punktu widzenia.

The Institute of National Remembrance is an institution with specific place in polish regulations and sort of collecting archival materials. Its part is The Public Education Office responsible among others for educational activities, which manage many interesting projects for young generations. In following paper I will mention few of them, but its main subject are initiatives of archives section with guided tours, which I assume as the one of the best ways of presenting archival work.

The Institute of National Remembrance - Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation was established by the Polish Parliament on 18 December 1998 with a special bill. Its mission is to preserve the memory of:

- “the losses which were suffered by the Polish Nation as a result of the World War II and the post-war period;
- patriotic traditions of fighting against occupants, Nazism and Communism;
- citizens’ efforts to fight for an independent Polish State, in defence of freedom and human dignity”<sup>1</sup>.

The archives section of The Institute of National Remembrance, called Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records, as you can learn from our website: “is the part [...], which handles recording, acquisition/collection, safekeeping, compilation/elaboration, preservation, dissemination, and publication of documents, produced and accumulated by the state security authorities in the period from July 22, 1944 to July 31, 1990, as well as by the security apparatuses of the Third Reich and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”<sup>2</sup>. There are 15 branches of this Office in Poland, in cities where are situated courts of appeal. Moreover in 9 cities there are delegations.

The specific of archival documentation stored in archives of The Institute and legal grounds for the availability of records at the beginnings of its activity situated our archives as an institutions closed to the general public. After 1989 archival materials created by state service authorities of People’s Republic of Poland were objects of great emotion. There is still part of documentation, access to which is limited only to small group of archivists, because of information, which has to be protected. In order to change common belief of The Institute’s character in 2009 it took part in *The Long Night of Museums*. That event, when numerous of museums, cultural, scientific and educational institutions at night make available their collections and insides special for visitors I believe does not have to be advertised. This is a great opportunity for museums, but also for another educational institution to present their work to the society. The strong interest of people in The Institute’s exhibitions was encouragement for further initiatives.

This cultural event gives Archives a chance to present an archival work and is a great opportunity to show objects from archival collections. For archives it is also occasion to present space, which isn’t normally available for visitors (usually hosted at reading-room). As I have already mentioned in The Institute there is educational section that is why presentations are collective success of archivists and

1. <http://ipn.gov.pl/en/about-the-institute> (last visit on 20th May 2013).

2. <http://ipn.gov.pl/en/about-the-institute/structure/offices/office-for-the-preservation-and-dissemination-of-archival-re> (last visit on 20th May 2013).

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employees of the section. Visit at The Institute's units during *The Long Night of Museums* includes exhibitions, presentation of archivists' work, such as methods of preservation of documents and rules of working of systems of searching. There were cases of cooperation with re-enactment groups. Guests are also invited to take part in contests and tournament with prizes. This is also opportunity to present books published by The Institute.

The exhibits of our expositions are not only a documents but also things, such as belongings which were taken from citizens by state security authorities (for example radio receivers). To attract exhibitions there are presented audiovisual documentation, including photos and films (from archive and documentary) as well as media presentations. There are exhibit also sort of documentation less popular, such as card index and other division help. The additional form of exhibition is exposition outside the buildings. The other idea for showing history is organizing meeting with people, who narrate about their experience of living in Poland before 1989 or opportunity to print something on historical printers used by opposition against communist rule.

It's hard to describe all the ideas, which my colleagues from The Institute's units in Poland used to make this night attractive for our guests. That's why before I describe initiative in Warsaw I would like to present two examples from 2012. That year in Poznań the theme of night was "A day at People's Republic of Poland", which aim was to come back to the 80's of twenty century. First attraction was ride to the building of The Institute by original bus from the 80's. There were also several expositions, which subjects were: motorization, everyday use items and comics. Moreover there were organized shows of old comedies, which even after so many years still have very enthusiastic reception by audience, preceded by historical lecture, shows of short documentary and presenting secrets of archival work. At the end of trip very popular turned out the symbol of the 80's and the most popular those years sweet - candy floss.

Entirely different idea for that night was presented by my colleagues from Szczecin. Their subject was nuclear war and chemical danger. That was a theme of lectures and expositions of things which were used to protection at times of People's Republic of Poland. There were also presented difference between the theory of rescuing people at that time and at presence. Visitors had also opportunity to try on original protect mask.

In Warsaw every year there are two points, where guests can visit The Institute. In one for three years The Public Education Office in Warsaw organized "The night festival of historical board games" in cooperation with board games' editors with one of the most popular over the recent years historical game "Kolejka" (which can be translate as "quote" or "line", showing how difficult was buying products at Poland before 1989). The second one is dedicated to archive.

Because of different aim of archives then museums visits must be pre-planed. Visitors are collected in groups with two guides and walk by set route. At reading room our guests can find out what kind of documents they can get an access to and what are the procedures. We present how the process of looking for information thanks to the archival systems starts. For example there is presented International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen - the most significant archive of personal information from the time of The Second World War, about victims of persecution, captives, forced workers and victims of concentration camps.

Guests of our institution can see how the documentation is restored, how it is collected, processed and digitalized on the specialized scanners. The great interest arouse also techniques for materials preservation. Service security authorities of People's Republic of Poland have enormous amount of secrets. There are documents in which some lines were inked out by officers in order to hide the real text. In possession of The Institute is a machine which can reverse this process. Our guests are very interested in seeing this procedure and have a lot of question of its working.

In order to present original materials, they are exhibited in show-cases. There are also Microfilm Readers, which enable reading documents stored as microform. For exhibitions there are very often choose materials, which were the subject of public debate and are point of interest. This make our archives more open to public and make history closer to people. It also gives an opportunity to clear up terms, which are very often misunderstood. The evaluation of service security authorities' terminology and its specific make it hard to understand by people, who are not familiar to its language. We can also

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notice the wrong idea about the documentation collected at The Institute' archives. It is a common belief, that all documents are gathered in personal files, which can be easily read. Showing the variety of materials help people realize, that writing a history is collecting a pieces of information. This is also a great way to show methods of work of the services. At 2012 was the year when Euro archive at Warsaw exhibited documents about how security service authorities stalked and guarded polish athletes, especially football players.

At the beginning with *The Long Night of Museums* employees involved in the event were curious how this initiative will be received. As it was already written it has become with attention of society. The first visitors came one hour before the opening. Among the visitors there were also people, who fought for polish freedom. Basically there were enormous number of questions, related to the exhibition and whole tour, sometimes very surprising and demanding. It was easy to notice people, for whom history is a real passion. At end of the tour there was opportunity to sign in guest's book, from which we can learn many flattering opinions, which was very inspiring for us. People write how high they estimate our work and how important for them was that visit.

The Institute's participation in the event was noticed as well by central as local media. The biggest attention to its involvement was at 2009 and 2010, but every year there are numerous mentions at press and electronic media, a few at TV and radio. The most precious value in access to *The Long Night of Museums* is change in opinion about The Institute as an institution closed to the people. Seeing from inside and publications of photos from visit end up these beliefs.

The other forms of the presentation of archival work are archival lessons which are dedicated to students of secondary and high schools. First part of lesson takes place in archive. Similarly to the trips at *The Long Night of Museums* it is a walk on set route with two guides. The difference is that students can see our employees at work and the exhibition is much smaller. There are presented places of collecting materials, preserving the documents and digitalization. The main guide refers general information about archival work and one of the archivists responsible for digitalization describes digitalization's process. After that students are going to another place, where representative of Educational Office organize course of historical documents interpretation.

Moreover there are arranged guided tours for other group of visitors, such as representatives of polish and international institutions, among them universities, which aim is to present activities of archives from the most interesting for guest's point of view. In that kind of tours there are similar points, such as showing places where the documents are collected, short exhibition, which is occasionally changed (exhibit refers to archival work, there aren't presented archival materials), presenting process of digitalization and systems of records (there are two main systems of that kind: Zeus - system of photos collected at archive with description and Cyfrowe Archiwum (Digital Archive) - system of records about files in every form collected at archive).

Naturally the tour has to be adequate to our visitors. Lecture for representatives of archival institutions can be more professional. We focus on subjects, which can be discussed and be a platform to exchange experiences. More carefully are selected also subjects for university students. This is more showing how can look like their future work at archive. I believe it is very important to show the archival theory in practice. That kind of tours from my student's carrier I have remembered as very helpful. Thanks to them I have known customs at various archives different because of its size, number of employees and type of collected materials. Obviously there are common principles, which have to be obeyed but the system of working can diverse largely.

Students of archival specialization aren't the only students, who visit our archive. We are open to present our work and collection from different point of view. For example we were asked for presentation of files from the time of Holocaust for students interested in Jewish history. I noticed that our guests were prepared to this meeting and had particular information about our institution. Two of our employees, who work with that sort of documentation for years, showed the most interesting archival materials. According to the knowledge of our guests we didn't have to make sharp selection of files. Because the group was quite small we were able to allow personal work with documents. Contact with important documents, which are usually read from the copies, where great experience for them and they were grateful for that opportunity.

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Certainly archives do not have as much possibilities as museums, but in my opinion guided tours are one of the most attractive ways of presenting archival work. In small amount of time and without disorganizing ordinary work archivist are able to show their basic duties. In our archives that kind of activity is the most valuable for students from high schools and universities, because of the sort of collected documentation. Although we try not to forget about students from primary and secondary schools, for example during *The Long Night of Museums* at this year in Warsaw there were organized lessons and games for children between 6 and 11 years of age.

**Sources, literature**

<http://ipn.gov.pl/>

***SUMMARY***

The archives section of The Institute of National Remembrance puts effort into presenting its work to society, paying special attention to young people. According to this The Institute decided to take part in very popular cultural event - *The Long Night of Museums*. A common initiative of educational and archives sections appeared great opportunity for promotion, especially for archives, usually closed to general audience. A cooperation of above mentioned sections result as well in archival lessons dedicated to students of secondary and high schools. Moreover guided tours are organized for students of universities and any other guests, who are interested in such visit. This form of exploring archival work I assume as the most attractive. Showing insides and basic archivists' duties enables visitors to develop their own personal impression of that kind of activity.

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