

## What the State Archives and the State Archivists in Poland are Today and Which Role They Perform

*MAGDALENA MAROSZ, DR.*

Director State Archive in Krakow, ul. Sienna 16, 30-960 Krakow (Poland)

e-mail: sekretariat@archiwum.krakow.pl

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### *ABSTRACT*

In the recent years the state archives in Poland have been going away from the tasks and duties which enabled to treat them exclusively as scholarly institutions. They have been accepting the function of state offices, ascribed to them by legal regulations. We should emphasise the fact that the specific nature of the state archives as both scholarly institutions and state offices results in specific relations between them and the archive users.

Qual è la situazione degli Archivi e degli archivisti di stato oggi in Polonia, e qual è il loro ruolo?

### *SINTESI*

Negli anni recenti gli archivi di stato polacchi si sono discostati dai compiti e dalle funzioni che permettevano loro di venir considerati esclusivamente come istituzioni accademiche. Essi hanno accettato le funzioni di uffici statali, ascritte loro in forza di legge. Va sottolineato il fatto che la specifica natura degli archivi di stato sia come istituzioni accademiche che uffici statali risultano dalle specifiche relazioni tra essi e l'utenza.

Državni arhivi in državni arhivisti na Poljskem in njihova vloga danes?

### *IZVLEČEK*

V preteklih letih so se državni arhivi na Poljskem odvrnili od dela in nalog, ki so jim omogočale, da se obravnavajo izključno kot znanstvene ustanove. Arhivi so dobili na osnovi zakonskih predpisov funkcijo državnih uradov. Potrebno je poudariti dejstvo, da se posebna narava državnih arhivov kot znanstvenih institucije in hkrati državnih uradov odraža v specifičnih odnosih med arhivi in uporabniki. V preteklih letih je opaziti jasno spremembo v profilu državnih arhivov na Poljskem. V preteklost so bili arhivi, čeprav so imeli vedno značaj državnih uradov, institucije, ki so imele znanstven in raziskovalen karakter. Danes pa se glavna dejavnost arhivov osredotoča na njihovo uradni vlogi. Ta sprememba je nedvomno povezana s političnimi spremembami na Poljskem po letu 1989. Zato se lahko vprašamo, kaj so državni arhivi in državni arhivisti danes in kakšna je njihova vloga? Ugotovimo lahko sledeče: državni arhivi, ki hranijo veliko večino nacionalne kulturne dediščine, so trenutno predvsem administrativne uradi, in le v majhni meri znanstvene ali kulturne ustanove. Vsakdanje potrebe arhivistov po uporabi pravnih predpisov, ne le Zakona o nacionalni arhivski zbirki, temveč tudi drugih, pogosto zelo zapletenih zakonov in predpisov, povzročajo veliko težav. Težave ali pomisleke v zvezi s pravnimi vprašanji vodijo do vprašanj etične narave. Pomanjkanje popolnih, jasnih razlag pravnih predpisov, neposredno ali posredno povezanih z nalogami, ki jih opravljajo državni arhivi, ima za posledico, da arhivisti sami interpretirajo le-te. V nekaterih primerih pa so lahko arhivisti v dvomih, če so bila vprašanja rešena v najboljšem interesu za uporabnika.

Czym są dzisiaj i jaką rolę pełnią archiwa państwowe oraz archiwiści w Polsce

### *ABSTRAKT*

W ostatnich latach archiwa państwowe w Polsce odchodzą od zadań i obowiązków pozwalających traktować je wyłącznie jak instytucje naukowe, a coraz bardziej spełniają określoną dla nich w przepisach prawa funkcję urzędów państwowych. Należy zwrócić uwagę na fakt, że ze specyfiki archiwów jako instytucji zarówno naukowych jak i pełniących funkcję urzędów państwowych, wynikają charakterystyczne relacje z użytkownikami.

Recent years have witnessed a significant change in the profile of state archives in Poland. Although having been previously described as offices of the state, they possessed much more the character of institutions of scholarly research, since they would edit and analyse source materials and actively cooperate with other academic institutions in the fields of history, archival sciences and those sciences auxiliary to history. Currently, however, the main activity of state archives is in the execution of tasks related to their role as state offices. Undoubtedly, they still maintain the carrying out of academic and educational activities, publishing and providing professional help to people who want to make use of the files, but the focus has moved decisively towards administrative issues<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, the question can be asked as to what is the role of state archives today? The reply may be formulated along the following lines that state archives are now primarily administrative units, and only secondarily academic institutions. Moreover, their academic, educational and publishing activity has now been subsumed into the documents produced for the needs of their functioning in the State administrative system.

Furthermore, we can also ask the question about just how archives and archivists are perceived today by the society they serve, namely by the individuals who often make use of archival resources in one way or another? Has anything been changing in the image of the archives over the years? Do the archives themselves and the archivists who work in them actually have a real influence over the change in their image?

Stanisława Pańków, a renowned archivist, historian and long-time employee of the State Archive in Krakow, wrote in the preface to her book *Archiwa* (Archives, published 1969), among other observations that, 'In the introduction to 'Penguin Island', Anatol France included a very meaningful picture of an archive: when in order to find information about the life and habits of Penguins, and wandering into the studio of a great scholar of history, he saw ... *at a desk, behind a huge pile of papers, an unheard-of little myopic man, squinting from behind gold-rimmed glasses. To compensate for the defect of his eyes, his mobile nose, elongated, gifted with an excellent sense of touch, examined the outside world. It was with that organ that Fulgentius Tapir maintained connection with art...* So there he stood, a terrified seeker of truth, among the stacks of paper which filled the room completely, and *looked with timid admiration at the cataracts of erudition*. As we know, the visit ended tragically and poor Fulgentius Tapir vanished, carried off in the infernal whirlwind of the papers he had himself collected. The ironic picture that emerges under the pen of Anatole France has not lost its relevance today. It is so because the work of archives is accompanied, on the part of society, by some kind of indulgence, sometimes coloured with irony, sometimes dressed in lyrical insertions about documents *sprinkled by the dust of centuries*, and only in exceptional cases drawn *from the darkness of oblivion*, and further about strange people-archivists, digging in *the graveyard of past epochs*. A small grain of the assessment of the role of archives may also be found in the popular dictum that something (or ... someone) is suitable only for the archives, which means total uselessness.

Unfortunately, we have to admit that a little of this kind of image of the archives and archivists persists in common perception to this day. Museums and libraries, institutions of a similar nature as the archives and performing a similar role in culture and education, began changing their image some time ago and with some considerable success. As a result of this, they have become institutions whose role, tasks and resources are perceived very differently among the general public. They are more likely to be seen as modern and interesting institutions, and thus more needed.

Archives became aware of their image a little later and concerned as to how they were perceived by the 'average citizen', who was often at the same time the actual user of their resources. Hence there is a concern for reaching out through various methods and aiming to convey information that the vocation of the archives is to accumulate and maintain sources which testify to the history and culture of the nation.

At present the state archives' commitment to educational and publishing activities, various types of popularisation projects and also to the digitizing and scanning of archival materials to make available, for a mass audience, an on-line resource, is in strict compliance with the stipulated procedures binding for all public administration offices.

1.. See: Magdalena MAROSZ, *Polish legal regulations concerning providing the access to archival materials in the state archives. Ethical and legal issues*, "Atlanti" 16(2006), n.1-2, pp. 95-101.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2010, the Head Director of the State Archives in Poland announced *the Strategy for the State Archives for the Years 2010 – 2020*. In the introduction to this document it is written: 'Management of the network of state archives in a dynamically changing environment should be based on a wise and clearly formulated strategy of action. The task of creating and implementing such a strategy has also been imposed on us by new legislation on public finances, which introduces the notion of managing control, and also particularly by the regulations from the Minister of Finance of the 16<sup>th</sup> December 2009 concerning the implementation of its standards. Thus, there has arisen the need for clear vision, a long-term strategy with a well defined direction of mission, strategic and operational objectives and ways of measurement of the tasks which are being realised. The strategy of the state archives for the years 2010-2020 is a long-term action plan, defining the main aims and directions of development for the Polish state archives. The realization of these aims should serve, above all, to satisfy the information needs of the state and society. While creating our strategy, we took into consideration the specific moment of development in Poland, and also state of the archives as an important part of public administration. Being aware of our strengths and weaknesses, we wish to participate actively in the rapidly changing reality, using increased efficiency and improvement in the management of the resources we possess, creating a better execution of the tasks imposed on us. The objectives formulated in the *Strategy* result mainly from the statutory responsibilities of the state archives, but they also follow from our own ambitions concerning our current and future place in the state administration. [...] The ambition of the state archives [...] is to catch up with the standards of other European countries, both in terms of the quality and availability of service and archive educational activities. The most important steps to accomplish the set objectives is the improvement of the state of the archives' infrastructure and making archival resources more accessible on-line. [...] Our ambition is also to make modern and user-friendly archives centres of knowledge and culture, especially in small towns. [...] We also intend to participate in the creation of a modern infrastructure of public services and digital resources by providing citizens, through a vast Internet web, our very interesting and useful resources. [...] We perceive our educational activities as the key. It is also important for us that the improvement of the quality of our services should be accompanied by an improvement in the quality of human capital. It is worth noticing that a professional group of archivists are well-educated people with wide general knowledge, high intellectual potential and the capacity to learn and teach others. We appreciate the challenges associated with the necessity of continuous improvement of staff and we see a place for ourselves in the creation of a society based on knowledge. An unquestionable advantage of the archival network is the fact that it is deeply rooted in the local environment. The archives are often the only places which provide educational, academic and cultural activities and are an important background for the rapidly growing non-public school and university sector, which often have neither a reading room nor library of their own. We want the state archives to be citizen-friendly offices, open to the needs of the public. We will systematically assess the level of our services. We also plan to improve the effectiveness of our activities through the implementation of modern systems of documentation management. The Head Director of the State Archives and the 34 archives which are subordinate to him have undertaken steps leading to implementation of a new public management, through the implementation of an entire network of subsequent stages of budgeting. Moreover, as one of the first public institutions they have started to implement management control, especially risk management, which will serve for more efficient and effective realization of the objectives of this *Strategy*.'

As can be seen, the need for creating this document is closely connected with the financial and administrative procedures in force within the state administration, and results directly from the necessity to be in the position of having to use them. However, basic activities of the state archives set within the 10-year perspective, which aims primarily at making these institutions and their resources move closer to wider public needs, have been included very well within the administrative context.

This document also defines the mission ('Our mission is to permanently preserve the artifacts that testify to the past, and ensure open access to them in order to enhance the development of both state and civil society.') and envisages the functioning of the archives ('we intend to: 1. ensure for every citizen a user-friendly, continuous and secure access, at anytime and in any place, to the information resources gathered in the archives. 2. Inspire and support the public sector in the field of management of documentation preserved in any form, in order to secure the sources of historical memory, as well as safeguard the interest of the state and its citizens. 3. Create and support educational projects which help to teach about and understand the past of the nation and state, the past of local communities as well as individual citizens and also to strengthen the need to participate in the shaping of the national

heritage. 4. Make the general public aware of the importance of archival resources and their potential. 5. Continuously modify the archives to adjust them to the changing environment and its needs.')

The *Strategy* describes the tactical and operational objectives of the activities undertaken by the state archives and determines the methods used for their measurement. The realization of individual aims by a specific archive will be assessed on the basis of the measurement of their effectiveness. The document lists the following objectives of the state archives:

1. Satisfying the informational needs of the society, through:
  - a. providing on-line access to archival collections
  - b. making archival records available on-line
  - c. preparing archival materials to be accessible on-line
  - d. development of a system of information about archival resources
  - e. providing direct and indirect access to archival resources
  - f. improvement of the quality of services provided by the state archives.
2. Creating the image of the state archives as a modern and friendly institution, which actively participates in the educational process of an open society, through:
  - a. popularization and promotion of knowledge about the archives, their resources and activities
  - b. conducting educational and research activities to build up social capital
  - c. releasing historical and archival publications
  - d. recognizing the needs of the society as far as the use of the offer of the state archives is concerned.
3. Providing efficiency in document management, including electronic documents, in the agencies performing public tasks, by:
  - a. support for new legal solutions in effective document management through participation in the legislative process
  - b. promotion of good practice in record management
  - c. supervision of handling of documentation in the agencies performing public tasks
  - d. supervision the evaluation of records in the agencies performing public tasks
  - e. the development of human resources in the field of supervision of the handling of documentation, including electronic documents.
4. Providing appropriate conditions for the collection and preservation of archival resources in standard and digital form by:
  - a. improving the conditions of storage and providing storage space for archival resources
  - b. creation and development of a system for the collection and management of archival resources in digital form
  - c. preservation and conservation of archival collections
  - d. collecting archival resources of the standard and digital form
  - e. preservation of archival resources in the traditional and digital form

As we can see, the *Strategy* includes both well established and consistently performed tasks, plus subsequent activities, resulting from changing circumstances of the functioning of the state archives. At the very beginning the assumption was made that in future the *Strategy* would be subject to ongoing updating resulting both from the changes in the operating conditions of the archives and as well as from the assessment of the effectiveness of planned activities.

In its assumptions, and in accordance with the principles of the operation adopted for the whole administration, the *Strategy* is to be an important instrument in the process of management of the state archival network and it is also to be an important message addressed to the outside world, to all agencies affecting the functioning of the state archives and to all partners and archive users.

With a view to building their new image, the state archives are also involved in the construction

of the so-called *Educational Zone*<sup>2</sup>. Its aim is to provide in one place the broadest possible information on all educational activities conducted by all state archives. It is here that we can find information about educational news (e.g. exhibitions, seminars, competitions, publications), the possibilities of training for archivists (universities, schools, internships, trainings), about archival lessons conducted in various archives, about competitions organized or co-organized by the state archives, about historical projects involving the state archives and about conferences organized or co-organized by the state archives.

As can be seen, the archives are pursuing the use of modern competencies to communicate with their users in all fields of archival activity, as far as possible. Digitization and making resources available on-line is now one of the priorities in the activities of the state archives. Through international cooperation and the carrying out of various joint digitization projects and projects allowing the free electronic flow of archival data, a significant effect on the shaping of the image of the archives has been achieved. Creating the possibility of free access to files and communication via electronic links is even of more importance given the fact that in recent years it can be observed more and more clearly that there is arising an increased interest in these very forms of the use of archival resources and their recording.

#### SUMMARY

It is plain that in the recent years the state archives have been losing more and more the nature of being an academic institution and started carrying out more and more tasks related to their function as state offices. In order to emphasize their cultural role, the archives include their scholarly, educational and publishing activities in its programme, the necessity of which results from the procedures and standards describing the methods of the functioning of state administration. In the introduction to *The Strategy for the State Archives for the years 2010-2020* written by the Head Director of the State Archives in Poland we can read: 'Management of the network of the state archives in a dynamic environment should be based on a wise and clearly formulated strategy of action. The task of creating and implementing such a strategy is also imposed on us by new law on Public Finance, which introduces the notion of managing control, and especially by the regulation of the Minister of Finance of the 16<sup>th</sup> December 2009 concerning the implementation of its standards. Hence the need for long-term strategy together with a clearly defined mission, vision, strategic and operational objectives and measures for the tasks which are to be realised.' Clearly, we are heading towards a situation in which archive management processes will not differ much from any other processes of management of any other state offices.

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2. [http://archiwa.gov.pl/pl/aktualnoci-edu.html?template=archiwa\\_edu](http://archiwa.gov.pl/pl/aktualnoci-edu.html?template=archiwa_edu) (last visit on 9th July 2011).