

Prof. Piotr Gliński, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Culture and National Heritage

Poland will not abstain from recovering Polish cultural goods

With the outbreak of World War II, Germany started a coherent and deliberate campaign of erasing Poland from the map of Europe. The Polish nation was to be deprived of its intellectual elites, identity, and sovereignty. Destruction and plundering did not spare Polish culture. Literature, music, film, theatre, arts: all the cultural areas suffered irreparable losses that still can be felt today.

As a result of World War II, Poland lost proportionately the highest number of citizens with respect to population from before the war. Every sixth Polish citizen from the pre-war population died. We cannot overestimate the losses incurred as a result of extermination of the elites: professors, engineers, lawyers, politicians, priests, students, and people related to culture. Their death inhibited the process of educating new intellectual and artistic elites for years and slowed down the development of Polish culture.

There is just one area that the historical harm caused by the occupant's actions can be partly repaired: the looted but undestroyed cultural goods taken away from Poland can still return to it.

Polish war losses can be found across the world, both in public and private collections. Further generations often do not know the history and origin of such items. They are often unaware of how destructively the occupation forces dealt with Polish cultural heritage. The losses in mobile cultural goods incurred by Poland are estimated at over 516 thousand items, with museums alone being deprived of approximately 50 percent of their collections, while library losses are estimated at 70 percent of the pre-war stock. The estimates are, however, certainly underestimated because the documentation of collections and libraries was usually also ceased or deliberately destroyed.

From the very onset of war, Polish collections of art were an area of struggle for influence zones among the representatives of the highest authorities of the Third Reich: Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, Luftwaffe field marshal Hermann Göring, and Hans Frank – the Governor General on the occupied territories of Poland. On the western territories of Poland, incorporated into the Reich, there was an office established by Göring: Haupttreuhandstelle Ost, while the General Government made of occupied lands was a playground of a special commando: Einsatzkommando Paulsen, operating within the structures of “Ahnenerbe” organisation established by Himmler, special representative for drafting a list and securing the works of art and cultural heritage, Dr. Kajetan Mühlmann sent to Kraków by Göring, Hitler's special representative for establishing Führer's museum in Linz: Dr. Hans Posse, and finally of Governor General Hans Frank himself, as he did not approve of all other units looting the works of art.

The Germans were fully aware they were breaking the Hague convention but attempted to make this plunder seem legal. Both on the Polish lands incorporated into the Third Reich and in the General Government, circulars and resolutions were passed to sanction requisition of the works of art from private, church, and public collections. Looting from public collection was unprecedented when compared to the Western Europe, and did not take place in other occupied countries, such as the Netherlands, or France. The persons directly involved in the procedure were not accidental: these were honoured German and Austrian historians, art historians, and archaeologists, employees of museums, universities, and research institutes.

The occupant's operations in Poland followed the thought expressed by Joseph Goebbels: “Polish nation is unworthy of being called a cultural nation.” Destruction of Polish culture also occurred through its deliberate depreciation. The Germans proved the dependence of the art

developing on the Polish lands on German art or argued for its low individual artistic value. In the preface to the *Sichergestellte Kunstwerke im Generalgouvernement* catalogue, which summarised the works of Mühlmann's team and contained a description of over 520 most precious works of art seized from Polish collections, we can read as follows: "It seems irrelevant to speak about autonomous development of Polish culture in historical eras. There is art with German properties, there are Dutch or Flemish works which, in their spirit and nature, do not express anything other but German essence and the strength of German culture."

Also Dr. Hans Posse, director of Gemäldegalerie in Dresden, and special Hitler's representative for construction of Führer's museum in Linz, who arrived in Poland in November 1939, ridiculed: "Both in Krakow and Warsaw did I manage to visit public and private collections, as well as church goods. The inspection confirmed my suspicion that, except for the highest-ranking works of art, already known to us in Germany, namely the altar by Veit Stoß and the altar paintings by Hans Süss from Kulmbach from Our Lady's Church in Krakow, works by Rafael, Leonardo, and Rembrandt from the Czartoryski collection, and a few exhibits from the National Museum in Warsaw, there are not many exhibits there which could extend the German collection of paintings."

The institutionalised and extended German looting was accompanied with non-documented requisition by German dignitaries and their families, who took works of art for the purpose of decorating their offices, headquarters, and apartments. In 1944, the awareness of the approaching defeat of Germany and the shifting eastern front brought about a new wave of looting: simple thefts committed also by simple soldiers. In this way, apart from the planned looting campaign, many of the works of art from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw and other Polish collections, also private, were stolen and taken deep into the Reich.

Germany was not the only country committing destruction and theft of Polish cultural goods. At the Eastern Borderland of Poland, incorporated into the USSR, private property was confiscated, cleared churches were turned into warehouses, and works of art evacuated to the Eastern Borderland from central and western Poland were seized by the Red Army. The second phase of Soviet looting was the offensive of the eastern front, followed by *trophy brigades*. The units comprised specialists in various fields of art, intended as a compensation for soviet losses caused by the Germans after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war. It soon, however, turned out that the planned compensation turned into regular, brutal robbery, which did not spare Polish heritage. Storages of stolen works of art, established by the Germans, were taken over by the Soviets. Some of these later returned, during the times of the People's Republic of Poland, as gifts from the "brotherly Soviet nation" but many still remain at the warehouses of Russian museums.

The broad-range, deliberate robbery of Polish works of art by German and Soviet occupants left a thorough sensation of loss in the Polish culture. The loss which, despite over 80 years from the outbreak of World War II, is still sensed as painful. The database of war losses held by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of Poland includes almost 66 thousand items, which is a fragment of the estimated number of 516 thousand lost items. The Polish Ministry of Culture does not stop in its efforts to document, seek, and recover the lost works of art, thus continuing the actions taken by Polish museum workers, archivists, or librarians who started recording losses to the collections, archives, and books as early as in September 1939. Within the framework of a special programme, every year, the Minister of Culture awards funds for research on the lost collections. Since 2017, as a result of these actions, the database of war losses has been enriched by almost 3.000 entries of previously unidentified items that were lost in relation to World War II. The information contained in the database forms grounds for search actions, followed by restitution of the works of art lost during the war.

Restitution activities conducted by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of Poland, as well as many information and education projects conducted for years contribute to raising awareness on war losses. A tangible dimension of such measures involves more information about possible places of storing the cultural goods sought and, unfortunately individual, gestures of people returning the works stolen by their ancestors to the original collections. This is what a German citizen did by returning Franciszek Mrażek's painting *Na przypiecku* stolen during World War II by his grandfather stationing as a Wehrmacht officer at the Spała palace. At the end of 2018, the National Museum in Warsaw also recovered a red-figure lekythos, an ancient vessel stolen by the Nazi authorities and returned by a private owner from Germany. In turn, Kunstgewerbemuseum in Dresden returned a Chinese-style desk and cabinet to the Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów, identified as Polish war losses as a result of provenience research conducted by the museum workers in Dresden.

And although these individual cases are promising, we must remember this is just a drop in the ocean of the stolen cultural goods that are kept, and often hidden, in private collections. It is only a change of attitude by the authorities, and changes to the legislation of countries such as Germany, where works of art stolen and taken away from Poland during World War II are still kept, and put on sale, which may lead to the need for citizens of such countries to return the items to their original collections.

Let us remember and let us speak loudly that stealing of cultural goods cannot be time-barred not only in the ethical and moral dimension, but also in the sphere of the international law. Due to special nature of the works of art and their non-material value, the return of stolen items to the place from which they were stolen is the most appropriate form of compensation, irrespective of solutions such as reparations, digitalization, or copy-making. Restitution is a continuous and unending process, and the Polish state will never stop to pursue it. While entering into the new area of cultural goods restitution involving the recent examples of returning the stolen colonial goods to the countries of origin, as performed by western European museums, let us remember that the matters related to restitution of the works of art stolen during World War II still remain open.

Prof. Piotr Gliński

The text is simultaneously published in the Polish monthly "Wszystko Co Najważniejsze" as part of a project carried out with the Institute of National Remembrance and the Polish National Foundation.