

ARTYKUŁY RECENZYJNE I RECENZJE REVIEWS

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Adriana Merta-Staszczak, *Niechciane dziedzictwo. Nieruchomości zabytkowe na Dolnym Śląsku w latach 1945–1989*, [Unwanted heritage. Historical properties in Lower Silesia in the years 1945–1989], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, 2018, pp. 394.

The end of World War II meant a fundamental political and social change for Lower Silesia, because, after two centuries of belonging to Prussia and then to the German Reich, it changed its state affiliation as a result of World War II. As a result of the decision of the Big Three, i.e. the United States, United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, made at the Potsdam Conference on August 2, 1945, German territories located east of the Oder and Lusatian Neisse rivers were temporarily, that is, until a future peace conference, put “under the administration of the Polish state”. This decision concerned Opole Silesia and Lower Silesia, Pomerania with Gdansk, and part of East Prussia. At the same time Poland lost its voivodships east of the Bug river, which were incorporated into the Soviet Union. The post-war border shifts meant huge population transfers, as Germans were expelled across the Oder, and Poles had to leave the Eastern Borderlands and move to lands unknown to them. These lands were characterised by a developed infrastructure of numerous cities and towns and the existence of many historic buildings, which were the result of the changing state affiliation of Silesia in the past: Polish, Bohemian, Austrian, Prussian, and German. Confessional and social changes took place at that time, which was evidenced by the presence of Catholic churches, Protestant and Lutheran parishes, castles and palaces, as well as government buildings. During the war, they often had been severely damaged and required reconstruction.

The monograph by Adriana Merta-Staszczak, a historian from Wrocław, known for her multiple scientific works on the history of Polish agriculture after 1945 and the fate of Lower Silesian mansions after World War II, focuses on the attitude of Poles towards the existing buildings, mainly residential and historic ones. Considering the tragic course of World War II and the huge losses suffered by the Polish population, the Author, as the obvious starting point of her analysis, observes in the new inhabitants a lack of a sense of “sentimental or aesthetic value that was linked to the traditions and history of the nation” (p. 9), which was the cause of this distress. Thus, aversion to everything “post-German” (i.e. of German origin) was visible. Architectural objects were assessed mainly in terms of their usability and less damaged ones were occupied; in the case of others, devastation or stealing them “piece by piece” was an everyday occurrence. The titular “unwanted” heritage was marked by the stigma of the enemy and gradually wasted, so the book analyses the process of destroying historical objects as culturally alien and burdened by war experiences.

The Author focused mainly on the legal aspects of preserving monuments and their protection after the war. The authorities supported it with the legislation of the pre-war Poland, although their organisation and political foundations were completely different from the pre-war German administration, so the monuments were taken from private hands and became the property of the state. The decrees of the new authorities firstly informed about the transfer of German property to the state treasury. However, the treasury authorities did not create regulations for securing the acquired buildings, so – as the Author demonstrated – the lack of responsibility for their protection was exhibited both by the state administration at the *poviat* (county) level and by the authorities of the Wrocław Voivodeship (p. 13), for they did not concern themselves with the way historic buildings were used and did not control their conversion or adaptation. There was also no conception of historic buildings’ protection and forms of their new use. In this lack of interest on the part of the central authorities and in the neglect of the duties of local authorities, in spite of the publicly declared reconstruction of the war damage, the Author rightly sees the genesis of much devastation and further losses on the territory of the so-called Recovered Territories.

Adrianna Merta-Staszczak documented the reality of the time and various processes occurring in Lower Silesia on the basis of the resources of the archives of Wrocław Voivodeship, especially those of the Department of Culture and Art and the Presidium of the Voivodeship National Council, stored in the State Archives

in Wrocław. Apart from these, the research was based on the collection of the National Museum in Wrocław, from where the Author obtained materials concerning the issues of securing works of art in the first post-war years. Due to the fact that these resources were largely destroyed or dispersed across the territory of Poland, a necessary supplement of recognising their present condition and fate was a search of materials produced by central administration. In the Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, there are official documents and oral accounts of witnesses, i.e. Lower Silesian conservators and art historians of that time. Through this research, A. Merta-Staszczak proved that, in fact, the protection consisted in the inventorying of property and the exportation of movables (in a manner rather chaotic and enabling looting on a mass scale) to other parts of Poland.

The work is divided into five chapters. In Chapter I, the Author made an assessment of the general legal situation of historic buildings in Lower Silesia in the years 1945–1989, i.e. until the beginning of the political transformation in Poland. Chapters II and III were devoted to the post-war institutions in Wrocław, namely the Provincial Department of Reconstruction and the Wrocław Directorate of Reconstruction, as well as the Department of Culture and Arts of the Voivodeship Office, which were statutorily responsible for the reconstruction of the capital of Lower Silesia and the management of its monuments. An analysis of the activity of the Provincial Conservation Office were presented in Chapter IV, and in the last chapter, Chapter V, the activity of social organisations which have been active in Lower Silesia for many years promoting knowledge about monuments and their protection were discussed.

In the introductory narrative to the monograph, the Author recalled the destruction of castles and residences as a result of military operations – such damage in various regions of Lower Silesia reached 50–80% of the discussed buildings. Wartime losses were aggravated by looting and arsons, especially by the Soviet army, which at first went unpunished because in the face of its omnipotence, the Polish administration was helpless, but even in the following years little was done to secure the historical buildings. The authorities gave the impression that they were not interested in preserving cultural heritage and protecting German monuments, convinced that after the years of war, they still aroused hatred. The subsequent attitude and change in approach was the result of the aforementioned lack of a treaty-based and definitive border with divided Germany. In view of this perspective, the main focus among the administration was on searching for traces

of Polishness of the region and Polish rights to it, and finding them in buildings which reminded of the Piast rulers of Silesia. However, due to the lack of certainty about the national status of Lower Silesia, according to the Author's research, even the latter monuments were not particularly cared for. The only idea to find a use for most of the structures was to designate them as warehouses, or office or residential buildings. The palaces and manor houses were usually handed over to the State Agricultural Farms (Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne – PGR), which usually resulted in their gradual devastation. A better fate was met by buildings fulfilling educational requirements, where a school could be created, or social facilities, i.e. a nursing home, a crèche, an orphanage, or a resort house. They were thus given a chance to survive, but no care was taken to preserve their valuable interior furnishings, furniture, and paintings. Parks and gardens were also devastated.

Adriana Merta-Staszczak meticulously compiled a list of the existing monuments and the conservation measures they underwent in particular years. A total of 32 tables have been included in this work; these data show that the care for historical monuments was at the end of the list of tasks financed by the state administration, even in situations when specific structures were specifically indicated by the conservation offices to be saved. Sometimes devastation proceeded in accordance with the law, as multiple buildings were simply dropped from the list of protected buildings without giving any justification (p. 85). The Author emphasises that this was not the fault of the conservation service, which undertook actions to save the monuments and carried out registration works (p. 92). However, the degradation continued and many monuments were simply gradually demolished, often in an uncontrolled manner, as the budgets of the local administration lacked funds for their renovation. In these circumstances, voluntary guardians of historical monuments, associated in the Polish Tourist and Sightseeing Society (Polskie Towarzystwo Turystyczno-Krajoznawcze – PTTK), became very important. They carried out unpaid clearing of ruins, repaired historic buildings, and prepared appropriate documentation.

The dissemination of knowledge about the historical objects in their possession was statutorily the responsibility of the National Councils, i.e. local government units. However, the documentation discussed by A. Merta-Staszczak shows that the authorities were more concerned with popularising the Polish character of various objects, mainly to “counteract the revisionist propaganda of West Germany”. It indicates that there was an additional reason for the officials to be officially suspicious of individuals, organisations, and societies that worked to promote

knowledge about local monuments. These associations mainly involved representatives of the local intelligentsia, who – especially until 1956 – were considered a threat to the socialist system and as undermining the “worker–peasant alliance” (p. 287). The Author has no doubt that the National Councils, following the example of the central authorities, also failed to fulfil their tasks regarding the protection of historical monuments and did not make efforts to protect them from degradation. The only reason for their interest in old buildings was the possibility of their adaptation into residential buildings. The Author’s findings clearly show that in Lower Silesia, both the state administration (voivodeship and powiat) and the local government administration (National Councils) failed in the field of monument protection, and the only institution which took its duties seriously was the Provincial Conservation Office in Wrocław. However, the effectiveness of its small group of employees was limited and generally developed on a larger scale only in the late 1950s. The exceptions were churches, renovated for the needs of the faithful.

All in all, Adriana Merta-Staszczak’s findings do not come as a surprise, but they do confirm the tragic condition of Lower Silesian monuments after World War II. It was the result of a deliberate policy of the authorities to erase the heritage of its former German inhabitants. The attitude of the authorities, however, had wider negative effects, probably unnoticed, because it intensified the general disrespect for monuments in the society, so that even the “Polishness” of a building did not guarantee its protection. Therefore, the interest in historical monuments was casual, opportunistic, and often led to their “thoughtless and unreflective destruction” (p. 295). The Author explains intricate relations between the various organs of local authority in a lucid way, showing their indolence.

Against this background, a more interesting and encouraging theme presented in the book is the social movement for the protection of historical monuments, which has been emerging since 1956 and was gradually growing. By the 1970s, there were approximately 1,500 voluntary caretakers of historical monuments, in Lower Silesia. Their influence proved to be socially and politically significant because, together with Poland’s political stabilisation in Europe, it proved that the new population was gradually rooting themselves in the Western Territories and that local patriotism was gaining momentum. However, it was not until the systemic changes in Poland after 1989 and an increased sense of security in Europe that public interest in the former heritage of the Western Territories and concern for its preservation became stronger.