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Colloquia Jerzy Skowronek dedicata in the Co-operation of European Archives (1995-2004)

Proceeding to the preparations of the jubilee, X International Conference of Archives of the States of Central and Eastern and Southern Europe, organized by the Head Office of State Archives (Naczelna Dyrekcja Archiwów Państwowych), we raised several questions regarding the origins, course, results, and the future of these meetings, often grouping also the representatives of other regions of Europe and international organizations. One of the clauses of the resolution of the first conference from the series – held on 28 September – 1 October 1995, and devoted to the archives of former communist parties in the states of Central and Eastern Europe – encouraged us to conduct such an analysis. The participants of the conference – 26 representatives of archives from 13 countries and the representatives of the International Council on Archives, the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, and the Hoover Institution of the Stanford University, stated that they recognized the following objective as purposeful: “To organize on a regular basis during the 10 years to come international conferences on subjects regarding the integration of archives of former communist parties within the system of state archives, and also on other subjects, both of common interest and country specific ones, from the field of archive science and policy in the states of Central and Eastern Europe. It is an important and requisite condition for the preparation and the implementation of the all-European rapprochement and integration on the archives based platform”¹.

Those who knew Professor Jerzy Skowronek – the main organizer of that conference and the Director General of the State Archives at that time, and also the initiator of meetings of archivists from that part of Europe - will recognize his style of expressing himself in the above quoted statement without any difficulty. The resolution was however adopted by all the participants of the conference, who - as one may assume - acknowledged Professor Skowronek’s position that it would require many conferences to be held to discuss the specific situation of archives in the region of Europe affected with systemic transformations as a result of the fall of the so called real socialism system. The reference to the need to organize ten conferences and to the problems of European integration clearly evidences that one of the objectives of taken up activities were the close relations of archives of the states of Central and Eastern and of Southern Europe with the archives in the remaining part of the continent. The indicated time perspective was the date of the accession to the European Union of many from amongst the states actively participating in these conferences - as then expected and currently accomplished in 2004.

Therefore, the all-European rapprochement and integration on the archives-based platform was commenced, on our part, with discussions on problems relating to party archives. To our satisfaction, we may claim that the principles of handling them as formulated during the conference in Stara Wieś have been implemented to a very significant extent. This comment refers, first of all, to the inclusion of party archives into the system of state archives with analogous legal grounds for their operation having been applied. That was perceived as the contribution of archives to the democratization process of the public life in Central and Eastern and Southern Europe. The need for further cooperation and contacts was also assumed, including the development of description standards for archive materials produced by communist parties with the examination of the possibility to use information and research computer systems in the course of such work, organization of subject-specific seminars, or attempts to identify possible sources of financial support on the international arena. Not all of these ambitious plans have been realized. In view of the above, we should favourably

¹ Rezolucja międzynarodowej konferencji “Archiwy bywszych komunistycznych partii w stranach Centralnoj i Wostocznoj Ewropy”, Stara Wies, 28 September – 1 October 1995, in: Sbornik maaterialow po międzynarodowej konferencji, Warsaw 1996, p. X.

welcome the proposal raised by Professor W. P. Kozlow – the head of the Archives of the Russian Federation – to organize a seminar devoted to former party archives at the International Congress of Archives in Vienna. I think that the Stara Wieś conference materials, published by NDAP, should constitute the starting point for the assessment of the current situation in that respect and they will be very helpful for the participants of the meeting in the capital city of Austria.

A subsequent conference from the series was organized on 28-30 June 1996 in Puławy, and it was devoted to the situation of archives in our region in the era of legal and systemic transformations². The organizers of that conference, that time attended by 44 archivists from 12 countries and the representatives of ICA and other international organizations, carried out a special questionnaire entitled “Archives in the Post Totalitarian Period” – referring to the decisions of the Stara Wieś conference. The conference proceedings were focused on the problems of the legislation on archives in the age of legal and systemic transformations, operations of current record archives under the conditions of ongoing changes, and the role and tasks of archive services in the new legal and systemic situation in Central and Eastern and Southern Europe. The participants acknowledged their meeting as an important stage in the understanding of common elements and national specificity of processes aimed at the reform of archive services in the states of the region. It was claimed that the legislation on archives enacted in these states complied with common European legal standards to a increasing extent, in particular as regards the protective function of the State in respect to archival heritage and archives, and the high level of independence of non-state institutions in the management of records they produce.

The fate of proposals concerning further joint activities as included in the conference resolution was varied. While the motion regarding the inclusion of the publication of an information bulletin on archive materials and archives of common interest for the states of the region into the scope of work of the ICA is being implemented though in a different form³, the subject: “Problems of Preservation and Availability of Archives of Superior Bodies of the State” has not been taken up until today, and another proposal “Archivists’ Education System and International Cooperation Prospects in this Field” was carried out just on a partial basis, in the course of several subsequent conferences. We should, however, reflect on the possibility to implement these proposals from the year 1996 nowadays.

The conference in 1996 was the second and the last one organized by Jerzy Skowronek, who died in a tragic accident that summer. At the next meeting in 1997, the head of the Archives of the Russian Federation, who closely cooperated with the Director General of the State Archives on the preparation of these meetings, suggested naming the meetings as “Skowronkowyje cztenia”, which was favourably accepted by all. Due to difficulties in translating that expression into English, the expression in Latin - “Colloquia Jerzy Skowronek dedicata” – became a commonly used name.

The subsequent seven conferences from the series may be divided into three thematic groups, with the first one covering the direct continuation of previously approached problems – the influence of systemic transformations on the operations of archives in the states of our region of Europe. Two conferences organized in Małdralin near Warsaw, on 8 – 11 October 1998: “The Private Archives and Archive Materials in the Central and East European Countries”⁴ and on 16 – 16 October 1999: “Accessibility of Archive Materials in

² Archives of Central and Eastern Europe in the Age of Legal and Systemic Transformations. Materials of the International Conference of Archives, 28 – 30 June 1996, in Puławy, ed. by Bolesław Woswzczyński, with the participation of Ewa Rosowska, Warsaw 1997. (Publication in Polish, Russian, and English).

³ A programme concerning the common archival heritage, as referred to below.

⁴ This conference was attended by the representatives of 15 countries, and the conference materials were published under that title by NDAP in 1999.

Compliance with the Law and General Practices of the State of Central and East European Countries”⁵ constituted the reference to the content of previous conferences, focusing, however, on issues of fundamental importance in that period and still extremely important. The above finds its explanation in the fact that the problems regarding the policy of former states of the socialist block towards non-state archives and the State controlled right of access to archival holdings were most specific for the situation of archives in Central and Eastern and in Southern Europe. In both these cases, the features of the totalitarian system most painfully affected the forms and the scope of activities of state archives, which were forced to perform tasks unusual in the practice of archives in democratic states. The discussion on problems relating to the legal status of archive materials and private archives, including those of denominational institutions, with the characteristics of the policy of various states towards these holdings, very diversified in the region, both in the past and at present, should be considered as one of the greatest achievements of “Coloquia Jerzy Skowronek dedicata” conferences. It results from the recognition of the fact that private owners of archive materials have the right to dispose of them, and the obligations of the State towards that type of archive materials consist in securing them, of course, if necessary, under certain circumstances. The fact that archive materials of private origin make the integral part of the national archival holdings requires due legal and physical protection of these materials. They should also be available for scientific research in compliance with the standards of access to archive materials. In the conference resolution one may find an appeal encouraging the organization of special seminars and training courses concerning the way of approach to private archives. The organizers are not aware of the future of that appeal.

The published conference materials concerning the availability of archive materials in Central and Eastern and in Southern Europe also deserve particular attention. The practices in that area of the states of the region, characterized by deep discrepancy between the declared principles and the practice of the archives, excluding in many countries the possibility of a free choice of archive materials necessary to carry out a research project, have never been subjected to such a profound analysis and assessment. It was agreed that in the conditions of democratic societies, the policy of access to archive materials, taking into account the possibilities offered by modern information technologies, should comply with international standards and recommendations of such organizations as the ICA, the Council of Europe, or the European Commission. Democratic rules of access to archive materials should also apply to collections of former special services of totalitarian states. A special UNESCO report, published in 1997, was presented and discussed during that conference. A panel discussion on the right of access to archive holdings in the conditions of the existence of the State interest and personal data protection systems was another contribution of conference participants into the progress in the activity of archives in Central and Eastern and in Southern Europe.

Another thematic group of the conferences included problems of the computerization of activity and operations of archives in the information society.

VIII Conference organized on 28 – 29 September 2001 in Warsaw was entitled: “Archives in the New Age. The Strategic Problems of the Automatization of Archives”⁶ and the subsequent one, on 31 May – 1 June 2002 in Popowo near Warsaw, was given the title of “Archives in the Information Society”⁷. In numerous papers and presentations in the course of the discussion, the opinion prevailed that the computerization of archives’ operations - the main challenge they face nowadays - must be considered the integral part of the policy aiming at the creation of information societies. These societies should enjoy free access to

⁵ The conference materials were published under the same title by NDAP in 2000. The conference was attended by the representatives of 15 countries.

⁶ Materials of the conference attended by the representatives of 18 countries, published under that title by NDAP in 2002.

⁷ In that case as well the materials of the conference attended by the representatives of 18 states were published under that title in 2002.

the content of archival holdings, which, however, requires the awareness of the importance of archives in individual countries and close cooperation ties to be established among them. Archives, on their part, need to solve methodological problems under these conditions, regarding the application of international standards allowing for the computerization of their operations and wide-scale, international exchange of information on the holdings possessed, with the gradual introduction of possibilities to use them via Internet. At the conference in Warsaw in 2002, a postulate was formulated, addressed to the ICA, regarding the establishment of cooperation with European organizations to facilitate the participation of archivists from Central and Eastern and Southern Europe in training on the application of modern information technologies. This issue was significantly extended during the conference in Popowo, in the course of which a separate session was held on the modern education of archivists, which should make it easier for them to fulfil the tasks entrusted to archives in information societies. The performance of these tasks, increasing in number with the increasing democratization of public life and the development of information technologies, is the requisite condition for the proper functioning of states today. The role of archives in current record management, including the sources produced with the use of electronic media, imposes new, important tasks upon archivists, which they should combine with the performance of their current obligations, including several functions of humanistic nature, referring to the great problems of mankind, but also some minor information needs of average citizens. These humanistic functions of archives were specifically emphasized by the representatives of the archives of the Russian Federation, arousing approval of the remaining conference participants.

A significant issue dealt with during subsequent "Colloquia Jerzy Skowronek dedicata" conferences was the presentation of international programmes of European organizations, implemented with the participation of archives from the region of Central and Eastern and Southern Europe. The Cultivate – CEE Programme, with NDAP being the Programme Coordinator, was discussed most extensively. Frequent appeals of the conference participants to international organizations, from which we await assistance and support in solving our numerous problems, make the interest in these problems a recurring aspect of our actions. They should, however, find their reflection in specific submissions of proposals regarding our joint projects to the European Commission. Our undertakings to-date regarding the problems of the common archival heritage seem to offer the greatest chance to accomplish that. We commenced to discuss this subject-matter during the conference in Goławice, on 22 – 24 October 1997⁸, presenting the results of common actions at several subsequent ones. That conference was attended by the representatives of archives from 20 states. The participants also included the then Secretary General of the ICA, Charles Kecskeméti, whose paper was of a program character for the entire project. This thematic scope should also include the issue taken up in 2000, regarding the archives of former international organizations, first of all, the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Treaty.⁹

This subject-matter makes me share some comments of a more general nature, as the archival heritage, included into the cultural heritage of states and nations, arouses increasing interest. In reading rooms of archives, next to professional historians, we may frequently meet many other persons – genealogists, researchers – lovers of the past of their towns or regions, journalists, lawyers, etc. A still larger number of persons try to reach archival collections by way of correspondence, usually using electronic mail. The young

⁸ See: *The Common Archival Heritage of States and Nations of Central and Eastern Europe*,. Materials of the international conference ed. by Władysław Stepniak, Warsaw 1998.

⁹ *Archives of Former International Organizations of the States of Central and Eastern Europe. Papers of the International Conferences Warsaw, October 13 – 14, 2000; Moscow, May, 21 – 22, 2001* ed. by Władysław Stepniak, Warsaw 2001 (the representatives of 14 states and archives of international organizations, including NATO and European Institutions, participated in the conference).

generation sometimes to its surprise learns that it is not possible to get access to the holdings of historical archives via Internet.

This new cultural and civilization phenomenon emerged in Europe on such a great scale in the period of intensive integration processes, based on economic ties and mutual technological interdependence, accompanied by the search for the sources of the European identity. This extremely interesting phenomenon must incline an archivist and a historian to make several reflections, first of all, to become aware of numerous ties and interdependence among European states and nations. It is particularly visible in the area spreading from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, where throughout the last millennium, no form of a political organization of societies, i.e. the states, had been in continuous existence. In this part of Europe, there are nations which gained independence organizing their own states for the first time in their history not earlier than in the last decade of the 20th c.! Those which managed to establish their statehood earlier and maintain it for centuries, though never without a break, prevail in number. This state of affairs results in many problems¹⁰, which should not pass unnoticed by an archivist – the custodian of the archival heritage of his own State, which at the same time appears to be the heritage of one or more neighbouring states.

Problems concerning the common European cultural heritage started to arouse particular interest after the year of 1989, when, as a result of the change of the situation in Poland upon the fall of the system of the so called real socialism, a chance emerged for Europe to overcome the dichotomous division lasting from the end of the Second World War and to restore democratic foundations of the functioning of the states throughout the continent. It was not by accident, that the symposium on the cultural heritage of the Participating States to the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe, held on 28 May - 7 June 1991, took place in Poland. Analyzing the course and the results of that important conference¹¹, it should be stated, that it was just the introduction to further activities in Europe, which contributed to the crystallization of the contemporary concept of the common European cultural heritage.

The attention of the participants of the Cracow meeting was focused on the problems of the preservation of the cultural heritage of individual European states and nations and on the need for the promotion of mutual tolerance towards its diversity, which should be handed down to future generations and made available, to the broadest possible extent, to all the interested persons and institutions. Those decisions that referred to the obligation of the European states to cooperate in respect to the protection of the common cultural heritage with the use of state-of-the-art technologies were also of great importance. Generally speaking, that conference was proceeding still in the atmosphere of the 70s, when the new forms of the European cooperation were initiated within the organization frames of the Conference. Not diminishing its significance in any way, it should be stated that it did not exceed the scope of the convention on the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage, as adopted on 21 November 1972.¹² It provides that the world cultural heritage is the collection of cultures of all states and nations and its value consists in its diversity. In view of the above, any damage in the state of preservation of culture of one of the states is the damage to the entire world cultural heritage. Numerous imperatives for protective actions, the taking up of which is the obligation of all the states, result from the above prerequisites.

¹⁰ A. Gieysztor, *Uwagi o sukcesji historycznej w Europie Środkowo – Wschodniej i Wschodniej*, in: *Z dziejów polityki i dyplomacji Polskiej. Studia poświęcone pamięci Edwarda hr. Raczyńskiego Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej na wychodźstwie*, Warsaw 1994, pp. 13 – 17.

¹¹ Document of the Cracow Symposium of the Cultural Heritage of the CSCE Participating States, Cracow, 6 June 1991.

¹² See W. Sieroszewski, *Ochrona prawna dóbr kultury na forum międzynarodowym w świetle legislacji UNESCO*, Warsaw 1974, pp.197 – 212.

Activities aiming at the significant increase of the number of the EU Member States affected a significant extension of the scope of approach to problems of the common cultural heritage. Under these new political conditions, the common cultural heritage was begun to be treated in terms of the ideology of uniting Europe.¹³ It found its reflection in the decision of the II Summit of the Heads of States and Governments of the Council of Europe, proceeding on 10 – 11 October 1997, on the carrying out of the “Europe: A Common Heritage” Campaign. It was then assumed, that the 12-month campaign planned to be carried out in the period September 1999 – September 2000, was to be the evidence of the existence of united Europe, thanks to its common cultural heritage, enriched with the diversity of national cultures.¹⁴ The campaign was to meet several objectives. For example, on the political platform, the common archival heritage is the factor facilitating the unification of societies, and from the point of view of culture, as a result of many-centuries' collaboration and community of European tradition, it supports mutual understanding among the representatives of different nations. The attention was also drawn to the economic aspect of this issue. The common heritage encompasses many different values and it may be the source of work for the present and future generations, thus contributing to the general development.

The organization of that campaign at both the all-European and the national level¹⁵ was the unprecedented event in the history of the Old Continent. The initiative taken up in Goławice in 1997 should also be considered as part of these activities. One of its visible effects is the website of the programme: “The Common Archival Heritage of States and Nations of Eastern and Central Europe” – www.archiwa.gov.pl/cah/index.html. Before we succeeded to achieve that, we were forced, first of all, to define the notion of the “common heritage”¹⁶. It was considered to combine archive materials produced by central and local authorities of former multinational states, posthumous papers of significant personages, and materials concerning national minorities. In general, it was determined that the most transparent criterion would be to cover within the scope of this definition archive materials and collections produced as a result of activities of the administration of state, public, and private institutions, including political parties, religious institutions and natural persons, which might comprise information regarding the history of the region, possibly of the neighbouring state/states.

The final programme outcome was to be the directory to archives making the common archival heritage of the states of that region of Europe.¹⁷ It is, however, a very complex project, the implementation of which may be the result of the comprehensive elaboration of archival holdings with the use of modern information technologies. Under these conditions, the programme assumed a more flexible character, allowing for the achievement of the ultimate objective by way of the implementation of several intermediate actions, including, inter alia, the operation of the above-mentioned website. The structure of the website is as follows:

1. General information on the programme.

¹³ Ważną rolę odgrywa Rada Europy. Zob. European cultural heritage. Volume I. Intergovernmentaal co-operation: collected texts: Volume II. A review of policies and practice, Strasbourg 2002.

¹⁴ Council of Europe. Guide to the “Europe: A Common Heritage” Campaign, Strasbourg 14 December 1998, Dokument CC-PAT (98)87 revise 2.

¹⁵ Council of Europe. “Europe: A Common Heritage” Campaign. Transnational Projects, Strasbourg 2001, Doc. CC – PAT (2000) 50.

¹⁶ W. Stępiak, A Survey on the Project; “ The Common Archival Heritage of the States and Nations of Central and Eastern Europe “, in: The Private Archives and Archival Materials in the Central and East European Countries, ed. by W. Stępiak, Warsaw 1999, pp. 21 – 27.

¹⁷ E. Rosowska, The Project of an international edition of the directory of archives of Central and Eastern Europe: The common archival heritage of the countries and nations of Central and Eastern Europe, in: Accessibility of Archival Materials in Compliance with the Law and General Practices of the States of Central and Eastern European Countries, ed. by W. Stępiak, Warsaw 2000, pp. 203 – 212.

2. Internet exhibitions presenting archive materials of the common heritage. As a guiding principle, it was assumed that each of the participating states will on a temporary basis present independently, or in consultation with other partners, archive materials concerning a selected subject.
3. "Colloquia Georgio Skowronek dedicata" and other international conferences dealing with problems of the common archival heritage in Europe.
4. Bibliography to the subject, according to the names of participating countries, also including data regarding any published finding aids – inventories, catalogues, indexes, and directories to archives.
5. "Common Archival Heritage" database, being at the same time the basic element of this website. ISAD (G) i ISAAR standards, set by the International Council on Archives, are to be the basis of archive description¹⁸. It was also agreed to introduce an additional index field concerning the names of the countries that the materials of the described fond refer to.

Thus, after a few years of preparatory work, the practical implementation of the pioneer international programme of archives concerning the common archival heritage was inaugurated. The programme is the outcome of numerous efforts of archivists, librarians and historians, whose professional experience explicitly indicated the need for taking up such efforts in order to create conditions allowing for the studies of the past based on all sources to a given subject preserved within the holdings of different states. Due to the complex character of the European historical process, the need to reach for archive materials preserved within the holdings of archives in many states has emerged on an increasingly general scale. This situation found its reflection, among others, in the reference to the "Reconstitution of the memory of Poland" Programme adopted by the Council of Europe¹⁹, which is the fragment of efforts to the benefit of the common European archival heritage.

At present, the continuation of our common project "The Common Archival Heritage", requires in-depth reflection. It seems that the submission of the project to the Culture 2000 Programme is a chance for the intensification of efforts in that respect. As our subsequent initiative concerning the creation of the scientific and retrieval system for the CMEA archives has not been realized despite of the relevant protocol signed in Moscow on 22 May 2001, due to – according to our knowledge - the lack of funds, it seems purposeful to combine these two projects within the frames of one application, that being the Culture 2000 Programme. Of course, this issue requires the official position to be expressed by the authorities of the Archives of the Russian Federation which, according to the will of the former member states, exercise control over the CMEA archives.

"Colloquia Jerzy Skowronek dedicata" conferences are nowadays highly appreciated by the world community of archivists. One of the manifestations of that appreciation was the request of the International Council on Archives to combine the proceedings of the IX Conference with the pre-congress meeting Vienna 2004. Thus, it happened that the conference which proceeded in Elbląg on 22 – 24 May 2003²⁰ was the conference on the world-wide scale. It grouped the representatives of the most important ICA Committees and our colleagues from Central and Eastern and from Southern Europe. The prevailing theme of our considerations included problems of the integration of the activity of archives in Europe in view of the accession to the European Union of a significant number of states, the representatives of which have been active participants of Colloquia since 1995.

¹⁸ Międzynarodowy standard opisu archiwalnego. Część ogólna, Warszawa 1995; Międzynarodowy standard archiwalnych haseł wzorcowych (ISAAR (CPF), Warszawa 2000

¹⁹ Council of Europe. Reconstitution of the Memory of Poland. Sources to the History of Poland and Poles (1772 – 1945) in the European Countries' Holdings, Warsaw 2000.

²⁰ See Archives in the Society. ICA pre-congress meeting – Vienna 2004. Papers of the International Conference Elbląg, May 22 – 24, 2003 ed. by Władysław Stępnik, Warsaw 2003.

On 1 May 2004, the European Union significantly increased the number of its members. Poland – the host of “Colloquia Jerzy Skowronek dedicata” conferences also became the member of the European Union. That fact, however, does not signify the decline of the idea of “Colloquia Jerzy Skowronek dedicata” conferences, until now also attended by the representatives of archives of the EU Member States, such as Austria, Finland, Sweden, United Kingdom, and Italy. The nature of our meetings also should not change. Being continuously fully open to contacts and cooperation with the external world, including first of all two regional divisions of the ICA that the archives of the conference participating states belong to – EURBICA and EURASICA, we should continue efforts aimed at solving our specific problems resulting from the features of the historical process in the region of Central and Eastern and Southern Europe. I think that the patron of our conferences would have also agreed with that proposal – if he had been among us – although he was of the opinion that these meetings should be organized within the time frames of 10 years.