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# AN ETHOS OF A GERMAN LIBRARIAN? GERMAN LIBRARIANS IN THE GENERAL GOVERNMENT IN THE LIGHT OF MEMORIES FROM THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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## ABSTRACT

In their memoirs written after World War II, German librarians delegated to work in occupied Poland put forward a thesis about the decisive influence of the ‘ethos of a German librarian’ on the library policy in the General Government. They believed that the main goal of German library employees was to protect the Polish and European cultural heritage collected in libraries (Ulrich Johanssen, Wilhelm Witte). These opinions have not been verified and were accepted by the historical community at face value (Andrzej Mężyński). The following text is an attempt to compare the perspectives of German librarians with the evaluation of their activities made by their Polish colleagues who during the occupation were subordinate to their German supervisors.

**KEYWORDS:** cultural policy of the Third Reich, libraries during World War II, Gustav Abb, Wilhelm Witte

In the account written in January 1959, Ulrich Johanssen presented the thesis that the ‘Ethos of a German librarian’ had a decisive impact on the state of library policy in the General Government.<sup>1</sup> Johanssen was active in the Kraków and Lviv *Staatsbibliothek* and later, on his own request, enrolled in the Wehrmacht. In his thesis, he declared that the ‘goal of the German librarians was to secure libraries of academies, universities, technical universities, academic and scientific societies, private foundations and their collections, libraries at churches, monasteries, and schools, as well as large family book collections’.<sup>2</sup> These goals, he claimed, ‘perfectly harmonised with the professional ethos of a German librarian’.<sup>3</sup> He added that, from the point of view of librarians, the ‘question about the future of those libraries was but of secondary importance’, since the principal goal was to prevent the collections from destruction.<sup>4</sup> This sounded very much in line with what Wilhelm Witte, Head of the Warsaw *Staatsbibliothek*, said about the goals of the German library authorities in the late 1950s.<sup>5</sup>

My intention in the present paper is to challenge these views of the German librarians by evaluating their work as reported by their Polish fellow librarians under the realities of the occupation that subjected them to their German supervisors.

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1 See A. Mężyński, ‘Ulrich Johanssen’, in: *Biblioteki naukowe w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie w latach 1939–1945*, comp. A. Mężyński, coop. H. Łaskarzewska, Warszawa 2003, p. 471.

2 ‘Diese Aufgabe bestand in erster Linie in der Sicherung der erfassten Bibliotheken. Dazu gehörten im Einzelnen: Die Bibliotheken von Akademien, Universitäten und Technischen Hochschulen, von wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften, Stiftungen und ihren Institutionen, die Bibliotheken der Kirchen, Klöster und Schulen sowie die großen Adelsbibliotheken,’ U. Johanssen, *Hauptverwaltung der Bibliotheken des Generalgouvernements Polen*, ibidem, p. 358

3 ‘Diese Ziele entsprachen voll dem Berufsethos des deutschen Bibliothekars’, ibidem, p. 360.

4 ‘Die Frage der Zukunft dieser Bibliotheken [war], rein bibliothekarisch gesehen, von untergeordneter Bedeutung’, ibidem, p. 360.

5 ‘Herr Direktor Abb [...] ließ keinen Zweifel darüber, was für Absichten er habe, und zwar selbstverständlich als Bibliothekar die polnischen wissenschaftlichen Bibliotheken Warschaus so zu organisieren, dass sie, soweit es unter den Kriegs- und Besetzungsverhältnissen möglich sei, funktionierten und dass ihre Bediensteten ihre Arbeit verrichten könnten’, *Tonbandgespräch mit Wilhelm Witte*, ibidem, p. 335.

In the accounts written after WWII by the Polish librarians who were first employed in the Warsaw libraries, three German librarians are principally mentioned. The most attention is paid to Gustav Abb, Head of the Office for Libraries under the authority of the General Government, Chief of the Main Library Directorate, and Director of the State Library in Krakow, created from the Jagiellonian Library. Abb enjoyed high esteem among German librarians as from 1935, he served as Director of the Berlin University Library, and from 1937 to 1942, he chaired the Association of German Librarians. He remained in occupied Poland until the end of July 1944, and from November 1944, he resumed the management of the Polish libraries. He perished in Berlin in late April 1945.<sup>6</sup> In the reports of the Polish librarians, much attention is also paid to the activity of Wilhelm Witte, who, from July 1940, was Director of the Warsaw State Library, comprised of the combined National Library, the Library of the University of Warsaw, and the Krasiński Library. Having graduated in Slavic studies from the Frederick Wilhelm University in Breslau (Wrocław) in 1931, he started working at the university library there. He left Warsaw during the last days of July 1944 to return for a brief period in late October of the same year.<sup>7</sup> Another individual spoken of by the Polish librarians was Alexander Himpel, born in St Petersburg, and affiliated to the Prussian State Library in Berlin. In 1942-43, working at the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, he lived in the General Government as of March 1943. Beginning in October 1943, he was working at the Lviv State Library, and in January 1944, became its head. In the autumn of 1944, he participated in the Pruszków Action for saving the resources of the Warsaw libraries.<sup>8</sup>

Having introduced these important librarians, we can now move to discuss the attitude of the German supervisors toward the Polish cultural heritage found in the recollections of Polish

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6 A. Mężyński, *Gustav Abb*, ibidem, pp. 468-470.

7 Idem, *Wilhelm Witte*, ibidem, pp. 479-480.

8 Idem, *Alexander Himpel*, ibidem, p. 471.

librarians. The judgment of the Polish librarians was considered as severe, and the opinions formulated were almost unanimously negative.

### THE MAIN LIBRARY DIRECTORATE AND ITS TASKS

The first months of the occupation were underpinned by fears that the Polish library resources would be destroyed and dispersed. As recorded in the memoirs of the illustrious expert in incunabula and early printed books, Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa, ‘It was known that our enemies ... would begin looting our cultural heritage ... so one didn’t need a gift of clairvoyance to ... expect plundering’. Therefore, attempts were made to adjust to the new realities ‘by thinking out ways of evading the orders harmful to our culture’.<sup>9</sup> The foundation of the Main Library Directorate in July 1940 allowed the Polish librarians to anticipate more promising future developments. It seemed at that point, as Kawecka-Gryczowa wrote, that ‘libraries would regain the possibility of properly protecting and sharing their collections.... New regulations with respect to our institutions caused a little more optimistic attitude and hope for a sad, albeit, slightly better future’.<sup>10</sup> Optimism in relation to the establishment of the Main Library Directorate was also expressed by Wanda Sokołowska, who was working at the university library. She said, ‘In the opinion at the time, the fact seemed to secure the libraries their Polish character and herald their safe survival until the return of the Polish authorities’.<sup>11</sup> These hopes were based on the assumption that ‘the establishment of the Main Library Directorate was meant to provide Polish libraries with legal grounds for their existence within the invaders’ administration, thus allowing to secure and order the collections, making them available to Polish academic circles’. As explained by Sokołowska, ‘This view was based to a certain extent on the belief that international regula-

<sup>9</sup> A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, ‘Ochrona zbiorów Biblioteki Narodowej’, in: *Walka o dobrą kulturę. Warszawa 1939–1945*, vol. 1, ed. S. Lorentz, Warszawa pp. 192–193, 197.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 200

<sup>11</sup> W. Sokołowska, ‘W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej’, in: *Walka*, vol. 1, p. 285.

tions in this matter would be respected and, on the authority of German librarianship, generally appreciated in Poland, strongly represented by both Germans at the head of the institution, particularly Dr Abb, a leader among German librarians'.<sup>12</sup>

Soon, however, the Polish librarians found out that these calculations were unsubstantiated. Although in his post-war memoirs, Johannsen emphasised that the Directorate and the network of State Libraries were established to protect libraries, in reality, the German plans were entirely different.<sup>13</sup> The libraries were meant, first of all, to ensure the meeting of the Eastern research needs of the German academics. When delivering his address at the opening of the State Library in Krakow on 4 April 1941, Hans Frank emphasised that: 'I hope that the State Library which will continue developing affiliated to the extremely important Institute of German Works in the East will guarantee that one day the Führer will grant us a German university here. And let us be clear on this straight away, too, that it is also our goal. In this respect, there is a need to create a grand German research and teaching institution.'<sup>14</sup> In the General Governor's speech one can also identify various elements of key importance for German cultural policy and the role libraries play in it, with the core conviction that they should serve first of all (read: exclusively) German science. This thought was developed in the inauguration speech delivered by Gustav Abb: 'Amidst the war hubbub and widespread desire to win victory, the respectful, currently German, state library located on the conquered hostile territory, is to be given to the public

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12 Ibidem, p. 286.

13 'Um die Sicherung der Bibliotheken durchführen zu können, gründete Direktor Abb in den Hauptstädten der Distrikte' [...] U. Johannsen, *Hauptverwaltung*, p. 358.

14 'Ich wünsche, daß aus dieser Staatsbibliothek, immer weiter wachsend im Zusammenhang mit dem sehr bedeutenden Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit, die Gewähr gegeben wird, daß wir einmal vom Führer eine deutsche Universität hierher bekommen. Und, wir wollen das auch heute gleich sagen, das ist auch unser Ziel. In diesem Raum muß eine große deutsche führende Forschungs- und Lehranstalt erstehen', 'Die Eröffnung der Staatsbibliothek in Krakau. Rede des Herrn Generalgouverneurs Reichsminister Dr. Frank', *Zentralblatt für Bibliotheks-wesen*, 58 (1941), p. 258.

to use.<sup>15</sup> When commenting on the librarians' tasks, he claimed: 'These facts point to the direction in which German library administration should work: broadly complement and continue extending the German resources of scientific literature, extend the topics related to mathematics and science as well as medicine, yet first and foremost to comprehensively amass new German literature on National Socialism, race and population, planning and regional settlement, law and administration, as well as the history of Germany. Particular tasks, however, are formulated for the Library with respect to a wide range of issues connected with the East.'<sup>16</sup>

Polish librarians soon realised what the actual goals of the invaders were, and so they began losing their initial hope. Certain efforts undertaken by the German specialists, e.g., attempts to retrieve heritage pieces taken to the Reich in the first weeks and months of the occupation 'seemed, according to Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa, to herald bearably regulated relations ...; however, the near future disillusioned them'.<sup>17</sup> Shortly afterwards, Wanda Sokołowska also 'discerned' the actual goals of the Nazi administration, which was 'the establishment of the German library authorities as one of the elements of Germanisation ... and a means to destroy the research conditions in Poland'.<sup>18</sup> Let us quote Kawecka-Gryczowa again: 'At the beginning of the cooperation, Witte displayed substantial

15 'Und wiederum mitten im Kriegslärm und im Siegeslauf soll heute sogar im eroberten Feindesland eine ansehnliche, nunmehr deutsche Staatsbibliothek der Öffentlichkeit übergeben werden', *Die Eröffnung der Staatsbibliothek in Krakau. Vortrag des Leiters der Hauptverwaltung der Bibliotheken des Generalgouvernements Bibliotheksdirektor Dr. G. Abb*, ibidem, p. 247.

16 'Dieser vorgefundene Tatbestand weist der Arbeit der deutschen Bibliotheksverwaltung die Richtung: weitgehende Ergänzung und Fortführung der Bestände an deutscher wissenschaftlicher Literatur, Ausbau auch der mathematisch-naturwissenschaftlichen und medizinischen Fächer, vor allem aber umfassende Sammlung des neuen deutschen Schrifttums über Nationalsozialismus, Rassen- und Bevölkerungswesen, Raumordnung und Siedlung, Recht und Verwaltung und deutsche Geschichte. Eine besondere Aufgabe aber ist der Bibliothek in bezug auf das große Gebiet der Ostfragen zugewiesen', ibidem, p. 254.

17 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 207

18 W. Sokołowska, 'W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej', p. 287.

goodwill, and it seemed that he could be won to side with the Polish library policy ..., however, promptly, discrepancies in views as well as local and personal complications emerged'.<sup>19</sup>

### CURRENT LIBRARY OPERATIONS

One of the more challenging issues that the Polish librarians confronted in the summer and autumn of 1940 related to staffing. Kawecka-Gryczowa concluded that 'personnel questions became the reason for various and excessively unpleasant complications. Abb did not agree to employ 29 people from the previous staff, including the author of the present memoirs, generally not providing the motivation for his refusal'.<sup>20</sup> The German authorities fired many specialists, among them Stefan Vrtel-Wierczyński, the pre-WWII Director of the National Library of Poland. Furthermore, a part of the staff working in the reading rooms, lending libraries, and storage areas before the war were not given jobs.<sup>21</sup>

A much greater challenge was the issue of the organisation of the libraries. The Warsaw State Library is recalled by Kawecka-Gryczowa as 'created on the ruins of the biggest Warsaw research libraries'. The researcher was aware of the purpose of these divisions: 'I - University Library of utilitarian nature, with development prospects, naturally for the needs of German readers; II - National Library, focused on Polish studies, of archival character, with no prospects for multiplying and sharing ... Such a position was unacceptable to Polish librarians'.<sup>22</sup> Wanda Sokołowska noted that 'the concept of creating one library ... implied various consequences, albeit, always harmful to Polish culture'.<sup>23</sup>

The most important criticism of German management concerned the restructuring of the resources of the Warsaw libraries ordered

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19 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 202.

20 Ibidem, p. 201.

21 W. Sokołowska, 'W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej', p. 291

22 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 201.

23 W. Sokołowska, 'W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej', p. 288.

by Wilhelm Witte in February 1941<sup>24</sup>. The idea was conceived by Julian Pulikowski, born and raised in Germany, promoted in Austria, and in 1934, served as the Head of Central Phonographic Archives in the Second Polish Republic. In Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa's opinion, 'He felt neither instinctive nor cultural reluctance to Germans, contrary to all of us'.<sup>25</sup> The essential plan consisted of transferring all the special collections to the Krasiński Library. As recalled by Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'the building had been damaged in the course of the war, the conditions for people and collections being entirely inappropriate'.<sup>26</sup> Jerzy Zathey, the expert in mediaeval manuscripts, forwarded an additional argument that 'the building located close to bridges (particularly the railway one) and the cross-city route would [not] be safe in view of bombarding'.<sup>27</sup> The National Library was to remain closed and dedicated to Polish studies, collecting materials produced after 1801, while the University Library was to serve as the basic research library used by Germans only.

'It seemed that counterarguments pointing to the harm that the move could imply,' noted Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'should convince not just a professional librarian, but anyone who had any common sense. It was obvious that accumulating Polonica at one place and non-Polonica at another would create a countless number of doubles and triplets, that drawing out cards from one catalogue to put them into another would consume years of futile work, all the more so since the cards featured different formats, and they would have

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24 Librarians particularly feared this kind of actions. In July 1940, when preparing for talks with Gustav Abb prior to his first visit to Warsaw, the staff of the Warsaw librarians accepted the guidelines proposed by Józef Grycz 'to try to preserve the institutions as a whole, to oppose the mixing of the collections to secure their inviolability', A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 200.

25 Ibidem, p. 198. The role of Pulikowski who died during the Warsaw Uprising was generally assessed negatively by librarians. Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa characterized him as an 'unrestful intriguer of police inclinations who was more than once extremely nagging, prompted to play the German library authorities against his Polish colleagues'. At the same time, she observed that 'he helped many colleagues and ... defended the interests of the National Library and other libraries', ibidem..

26 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 207

27 J. Zathey, *Dział rękopisów Biblioteki Narodowej w okresie okupacji*, Biblioteka Narodowa, MS Call No. akc. 3868, p. 17.

to be hand-copied, etc., etc. Once again were the German ignoramus warned against amassing all the most precious collections in one building. However, neither protests nor factual arguments worked. Contrariwise, they made Witte even more reluctant... The restructuring consequences could shake the very core of the bodies of our libraries since they included not only moving around books and periodicals, disassembling catalogues, and outdated inventories but also a thorough change in the purchase policy and the procedure of complementing the collections in general. Witte knew very well that both heads of Sections I and II opposed that move, ridiculous from the point of view of both Polish interests and professional librarianship; yet, he continuously suspected everyone of sabotage, and assigned Pulikowski to supervise the move, himself introducing measures of stricter control through working *diaries*. ‘We had to stop all the previous activities, and the whole staff became involved in packing, carrying, taking books, and drawing out cards from catalogues.’<sup>28</sup> In view of Stanisława Sawicka, an expert in prints, illuminations and drawings, and working at the Print Cabinet of the university library, Witte’s only goal was ‘the constant movement and statistics of the transported works, demonstrating intense activity, preventing him from being sent to the frontline’.<sup>29</sup> She judged the restructuring negatively by saying, ‘Commissioner Witte’s instructions led to a disintegration of the collections of historic provenance, to annulling messages of Polish culture, while the accumulation introduced a new chaos into already depleted and mixed Polish collections’.<sup>30</sup> Zathey, in his writing, judged that the introduced restructuring ‘demonstrated bad will towards the [library] works we were doing and the desire to keep the staff busy not with mental occupations, but with physical labour’<sup>31</sup>.

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28 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, ‘Ochrona zbiorów’, pp. 207–209.

29 P. Sawicka, ‘Fragmenty wspomnień’, in: *Walka*, vol. 2, p. 327.

30 Ibidem, p. 327.

31 J. Zathey, *Dział rękopisów Biblioteki Narodowej*, p. 17.

The Director of the University Library, Adam Lewak, protesting against such activities, was dismissed by Witte.<sup>32</sup> Finally, owing to the protests of the Polish librarians in the autumn of 1941, Gustav Abb gave the order to stop work on moving special materials to Okólnik and transferring other materials between the *Staatsbibliothek* branches. In their memoirs, the Polish librarians emphasised that the Head of the Main Library Directorate was able to act in a much more reasonable way than his Wrocław colleague delegated to work in Warsaw: ‘When it turned out that the majority of charges against Director Lewak were groundless, not only did Abb restore Lewak as Director, but he also instructed them to stop all the works connected with the disintegration of the library collections’.<sup>33</sup> Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa wrote: ‘He ordered to immediately stop drawing out catalogue cards respective of the enumerated books’.<sup>34</sup> Knowing that he was unaware of Abb’s actual intentions, Wanda Sokołowska observed that ‘not all the elements of that skirmish in which a Pole beat a German are known’<sup>35</sup>. She suspected, however, that one of Abb’s aims was to limit Witte’s independence, and make him more strongly subordinated to the Krakow centre. The decision of the Head of the Main Library Directorate merely brought about a partial solution as ‘It ordered the interruption of further work on the segmentation, and not the restitution of the collections already taken .... This incomplete solution allowed Witte to implement his own structural concept ... on those sections of the plan that had already been completed’.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in harmony with Witte’s plans, now backed by Abb’s authority, ‘The university library [was to be] a *utilitarian* library in the

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32 ‘The open criticism of Witte’s ideas presented by Director Lewak caused the Commissioner, under a pretext, to suspend him, then banned him from entering the University Library, and wanted to dismiss him. This is how the long-nurtured reluctance to the University Library’s Director by the German found release’, A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, ‘Ochrona zbiorów’, p. 209.

33 W. Sokołowska, ‘W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej’, p. 297.

34 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, ‘Ochrona zbiorów’, p. 209.

35 W. Sokołowska, ‘W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej’, p. 297

36 Ibidem, pp. 297-298

range of all its collections (including the Polonica), while as for the purpose and profile of the National Library, Abb did not alter his genuine position. It was, therefore, to collect materials of archival character, give up acquisitions of newer writing, this was greatly unfavourable in view of its future development altering its basic functions in respect of Polish interests'.<sup>37</sup> State Libraries were to satisfy the needs of German Eastern studies while the collections related to Polish matters were to remain unavailable, and the chances for their extension were also meagre.

Soon, attempts were introduced to give a German character to the libraries. As recalled by Wanda Sokołowska, at the University Library 'Witte's first instruction was to introduce a new division according to the language. The librarians hoped that they would be able to demonstrate to the Commissioner how useless such a plan was; when they failed, they tried to sabotage the project'.<sup>38</sup> Germanization was to take place in the broadest way possible: 'For German readers, the full range of reference book like in German libraries, was to be introduced; also, the catalogues were to be Germanized by introducing cards with headings in German. The replacement of old library forms with new German ones, and particularly of the ownership logos - the library stamp with the historic logo of the University of Warsaw - being replaced with the stamp with the Nazi crow, was meant to complete also the external transformation of the University Library into a *Staatsbibliothek* branch'.<sup>39</sup>

In reality, Poles were unable to use the collections of the State Libraries. This is the fact acknowledged in Johanssen's memoirs already quoted above. In another section, he says, 'Libraries for the time being [JK's emphasis] were to be open only for Germans and Poles working for German institutions. Polish academics work-

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37 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 209.

38 Ibidem. As stated by Wanda Sokołowska, 'the reading room prepared with so much fuss for German readers remained deserted', (W. Sokołowska, 'W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej', p. 307).

39 Ibidem, p. 288.

ing as free-lancers were not admitted to use the collections; such a restriction was not applicable in the case of Ukrainian users'.<sup>40</sup> However, librarians at the Polish libraries tried to beat the ban. Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa wrote as follows: 'Clearly, our libraries sabotaged these restrictions in many ways. So there was a large-scale lending of books and other materials to academics, or to clandestine school and university courses'.<sup>41</sup> Against this background, what was surprising is the matter of access to the manuscripts kept in the Krasiński Library. Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa recalled that 'manuscripts were made accessible generously, formally and unofficially; all the academics could access the materials they needed. It may seem strange, but the Commissioner was generous with access cards to the reading room ... . Even Prof. Bałaban was able to benefit from the collection, using his pass to leave the Ghetto until it was annihilated'.<sup>42</sup> The illustrious expert in early printed books was pondering the motivation of the Head of the Warsaw *Staatsbibliothek*. She decided that he was eager to record 'an increased statistics of readers (it would have looked miserable had it included merely German ones)'. A greater number of readers 'accounted for the utility not only of the *State Library*, but mainly of its Commissioner managing in the rear'.<sup>43</sup> It is also likely that in this way, Witte intended to justify his decision to restructure the Polish libraries, and have the special collections moved to the building of the Krasiński Library.

At the University Library the collection was mainly shared illegally. The number of readers 'was usually the biggest between 1 and 3 pm, namely, when Dr Witte would leave the library'.<sup>44</sup> The

40 Die Bibliotheken [waren] zunächst [emphasis: JK] nur für Deutsche und für die Polen, die für deutsche Dienststellen arbeiteten geöffnet. Privatim arbeitende polnische Wissenschaftler waren zur Benutzung nicht zugelassen, eine Einschränkung, die für ukrainische Benutzer nicht galt", U. Johanssen, *Hauptverwaltung*, pp. 359-360.

41 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 203.

42 Ibidem, p. 212

43 Ibidem, p. 203

44 W. Sokołowska, 'W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej', p. 307

professor of Polish studies, Julian Krzyżanowski, recalled that when, in the summer of 1943, the German library authorities found out that the Korbut legacy kept at the Potocki Palace was used for clandestine classes with students, the materials collected by Gabriel Korbut were sealed.<sup>45</sup>

Polish librarians had to face the challenge of taking care of book collections, either of institutions or individuals liquidated by the Nazis. Numerous volumes reached the university and national libraries. It would be very appropriate to quote here a longer section of Wanda Sokołowska's statement, which reads 'It could be read from the reports Witte submitted to Abb that he greatly cared for securing books from the Ghetto and other liquidated institutions. In reality, not all the attempts of the Commissioner to protect and preserve cultural goods, which de jure, remained in his care, came about on his initiative. In the majority of cases, they came from Polish librarians intent on saving the book collections of academics or the more outstanding activists as they informed him about their owners' arrest and the need to secure the libraries'.<sup>46</sup>

The fact that both *Staatsbibliothek* branches took over the books led to serious complications. According to Witte's assumptions, duplicates and exchanges were to become the source of supply for other state libraries in the General Government and the Reich. However, there were only very few research libraries in the Polish territories not incorporated into the Reich. Apart from the Warsaw libraries, let us recall that the Nazi authorities created libraries of this kind in Krakow, Lublin, and, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, also in Lviv. Polish librarians feared that duplicates from Warsaw's libraries would be taken outside the Polish territory. As commented on by Wanda Sokołowska, 'the full implementation of the duplicate policy could lead to stripping the part of Poland under the German occupation of academic books, which

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45 J. Krzyżanowski, 'Dziwne losy książki w okupowanej Warszawie', in: *Walka*, vol. 1, p. 158.

46 W. Sokołowska, 'W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej', p. 298.

would mean depriving Polish society of the possibility to study and conduct academic research'.<sup>47</sup>

As mentioned above, in keeping with the decision of the authorities of the invaders, the intention to extend the collections applied only to that of the University Library. Wanda Sokołowska observed that 'an important role was played by purchases, while the legal deposit, donations, and exchanges yielded really few acquisitions for the library'.<sup>48</sup> During the war, only very few people were ready to donate their book collections to the University Library. 'Looting and the destruction of Polish cultural goods by the invaders also boosted the atmosphere of mistrust towards the German library administration. Fears about an insecure future of library collections under German care did not favour the increase in their number through donations'.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, it was possible to convince the German management to also increase the collections of the National Library of Poland. According to Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'responding to Grycz's insistence, Witte allowed the National Library, which was meant to be

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47 Ibidem, p. 288.

48 Ibidem, p. 299. Quite a lot of books and periodicals were purchased at the Kraków Staatsbibliothek during World War II. It is worth quoting a longer passage from the memoirs of Helena Lipska, who worked in the library: 'Director Kuntze knew how to suggest and present to Abb the need to continue the publications previously subscribed to by Jagiellonian Library and other libraries connected with it at that time, and to buy various valuable works. In addition, various Polish publishing houses acquired publications from antiquarians or directly from people in need. When Abb was leaving, bills for these books were presented to his German deputies to be signed [...]. However, this only lasted until Abb realised that too many items came from Polish publishers and he banned anyone from buying anything without his signature. He himself recommended purchasing, first of all, new German books, and then mainly medical and science books, which was justified by the fact that the need for the existence of the Library and its importance as a *kriegswichtig* had to be demonstrated in Berlin. Otherwise, German employees would be in danger of being sent to the front', H. Lipska, 'Biblioteka Jagiellońska w czasie okupacji 1939–1945,' *Bulletyn Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej* 29 (1979), 1/2, p. 136. Kuntze, pre- and post-war director Jagiellonian Library, noted in his memoirs: 'Abb completely neglected legal deposits, because they were mostly Polish publications', E. Kuntze, 'Dzieje Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej pod okupacją niemiecką w okresie od 1 września 1939 do 18 stycznia 1945', *Bulletyn Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej* 25 (1975), 1/2, s. 30.

49 Ibidem.

merely an archival institution, to be able to complement the collection (the legal deposit from the territory of the General Government). Grycz also managed to talk Witte into purchasing Polonica and foreign works essential for current operations: as seen against the genuine plan to turn the National Library into an institution which is exclusively archival, not utilitarian, this was not really an impressive success.<sup>50</sup>

It is worth adding the unofficial information on building a new ceiling over the place where the collection was stored at the university library. This project was implemented only with Polish contributions. The architect, Tadeusz Miazek, an engineer active in the underground urban-architectural unit, was responsible for designing the original plan for the rebuilding and historical reconstruction of the cities and towns destroyed during the September 1939 campaign. He contacted Marian Toporowski, a literary critic, bibliographer, and librarian working at the University Library. When working on the model of an experimental study, he illegally resorted to the University Library's collection. When taken through the Library's storage area, Miazek suggested having the concrete ceiling raised to protect the collections against bombing and shelling.<sup>51</sup> However, Toporowski was certain that the 'German Commissioner of the *Staatsbibliothek* would never be interested in such a project. The invaders' regulations strictly prohibited the use of building materials for non-military facilities, while the library budget could not feature any sums of money allocated to building the ceiling'. The Director of the University Library, Adam Lewak, voiced the same doubts: 'Witte will never agree to that'.<sup>52</sup> Finally, Lewak, who, as recalled by Toporowski, had 'many rounds with Commissioner Witte', 'managed to neutralise him. Maybe the German did not believe that the Polish improvisation would work,

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50 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 210.

51 M. Toporowski, 'Strop. Wspomnienie warszawskie', in: *Walka*, vol. 1, pp. 342–348.

52 Ibidem, p. 346.

still, he promised to connive at the construction of the ceiling'.<sup>53</sup> As judged by Toporowski, Witte 'after all was a librarian himself, a Slavist on top of it'.<sup>54</sup> It could be doubted whether these aspects had a positive impact, but he certainly did not support the Polish librarians in accumulating the building materials. The success of the project has to be exclusively attributed to Tadeusz Miazek. Toporowski noted: 'Thanks to Tadeusz Miazek, a strong protective ceiling was built over the storage area of the Library, protecting the collections against incendiary bombs and lighter missiles'.<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, Gustav Abb, and occasionally Witte, were sometimes positively mentioned in the context of certain facilitations in the current work. Abb would issue certificates permitting business trips, e.g., in late autumn 1944, such a certificate was granted to Stanisław Herbst, a researcher in modern history and highly esteemed after the war, to travel to Krakow.<sup>56</sup> Some dozen months before, Herbst was granted a permit to travel to Krements, where, in 1939, before the outbreak of the war, printed materials and mementoes had been sent to be used in an exhibition dedicated to Juliusz Słowacki. In Herbst's opinion, 'there were fears that the approaching warfare could destroy those materials',<sup>57</sup> and the trip was made 'with the support of the Library Directorate GG (Abb)'.<sup>58</sup> This was hardly worth anything since, on the way, Herbst did not get any real assistance from him. He had to communicate with the Polish railway men in Brody, and while in Krements, he was obliged to count on the goodwill of Alexandr Cynkalovsky, the Ukrainian director of the local museum. Not only was Herbst arrested on his way back, and spent two weeks in jail in Dubno, but also when he was already in Warsaw, 'Witte, as he recalled, possibly as demanded by the Krakow authorities, requested an expla-

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53 Ibidem, p. 347.

54 Ibidem.

55 Ibidem.

56 P. Herbst, 'Relacja', in: *Walka*, vol. 1, p. 141.

57 Ibidem, p. 132.

58 Ibidem, p. 134.

nation as to under what circumstances the Dubno incident had happened'. Although, as noted by Herbst, 'he calmly accepted my laconic report',<sup>59</sup> Witte had not even once provided assistance to the Polish researcher on his Krements mission. In this context, however, let us mention that Witte authorised a course for librarians attended by over 40 individuals.<sup>60</sup>

The passive attitude of the German supervisors in late 1943 and the first half of 1944 was negatively assessed. In view of the substantial success of the Soviet troops, the Polish librarians expected some actions meant to protect the libraries and their collections. When they turned to Witte with the request, as recalled by Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'to have the most precious collections, particularly the Załuski Library, taken out of Warsaw and placed in a smaller town potentially less exposed to warfare',<sup>61</sup> the Head of the Warsaw *Staatsbibliothek* 'remained deaf to any proposal'.<sup>62</sup>

Since the evacuation plans failed, the Polish librarians were planning to place the major historic pieces in safe facilities within Warsaw. As recalled by Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'the best conditions could be secured by the Ostrogski Palace; alas, it served as the storage for army wine!' This plan could not be implemented. 'It was in vain that Dr. Grycz pressed Witte to empty those cellars. The Commissioner proved entirely helpless: he either did not want to or was unable to intervene where it was necessary ...'.<sup>63</sup> Witte left Warsaw on 23 July. Wanda Sokołowska considered his departure to have been an escape.<sup>64</sup>

Let us remember that Gustav Abb expected Witte to place the collections kept in the Okólnik building at three different locations. On that occasion, 'he would also criticise Witte's unfortunate amassing of all the manuscripts and precious printed ma-

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59 Ibidem, p. 134.

60 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 206.

61 Ibidem, p. 214.

62 Ibidem.

63 Ibidem.

64 W. Sokołowska, 'W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej', p. 274.

terials at one location, meaning that one bomb would suffice to destroy the whole collection'. Kawecka-Gryczowa judged that 'Abb manifested much more common sense and skills as well as librarian experience than his unfortunate subordinate. Regrettably, he left the latter too much freedom in action'.<sup>65</sup>

Unfortunately, Abb, too, remained deaf to the requests of the Polish librarians, and when, in July 1944, he decided to evacuate selected collection fragments to Gorbitsch (Polish Garbicz, presently in the Lubusz Voivodeship), this decision was opposed by the Poles, e.g., Józef Grycz who expected the collections to be placed in Polish territories. 'On 18 August 1944, Abb pointed to the urgency to send cimelia manuscripts to Gorbitsch, adding that "protests of the Polish party were not to be taken into account".<sup>66</sup> The action was interrupted by the evacuation of the German officials.

### THE PRUSZKÓW ACTION

Polish librarians were also negative about the attitude of the German professionals in the course of the so-called Pruszków Action, which was an attempt to secure and transport the surviving books and manuscripts from Warsaw, which was to be completely destroyed on Adolf Hitler's orders.. Gustav Abb was particularly criticised. It was clear that he did not intend to rush when the Action details were being lengthily discussed among the Polish and German experts. This was reported by Bohdan Korzeniowski, one of the participants in the event, and an outstanding historian of theatre and writer, who said, the Germans 'were not too prompt'.<sup>67</sup>

When the works were started, not only did Abb give priority to less important and valuable collections in German, but he also hindered the evacuation of the Polish collections, even robbing them. Czesław Gutry justly pointed to the conflict of interests of

65 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', pp. 214–215.

66 Ibidem, p. 215.

67 W. Borowy, 'Okres Powstania 1944 r. 'W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej' w Warszawie. Relacja Bohdana Korzeniewskiego spisana przez Waclawa Borowego', in: *Walka*, vol. 1, p. 363.

the Polish and German librarians: ‘they were focused on early-printed books, among which there were many German books, and generally books in Western languages. We mostly cared about all Polish books’.<sup>68</sup>

The historian of literature, Waclaw Borowy, recalled: ‘At the University Library ... the whole action was biased by Abb who showed up already on the first days, and began to throw his weight around’.<sup>69</sup> The German librarian intended, first of all, to evacuate newer German literature: ‘to evacuate first the German reference library, special German periodicals, and German scientific literature from after 1930. And Parteigenosse Prof. Dr Abb had such an extensive concept of scientific literature that it even encompassed volumes of *Sammlung Göschen* [school editions of German classical writers: JK], he personally packed them in a chest, expressing his regret that the Library did not have the full edition of *Reclam*. What could one do? Tycoon’s orders had to be obeyed.’<sup>70</sup> Borowy concluded that Abb was ‘a stupid careerist who played on the primacy of German interests’.<sup>71</sup>

In turn, Tadeusz Makowiecki, a literary critic, historian of literature and art, and working at the University Library, noted: Abb ‘instructed me to first of all pack in the chests the following publications: Reclambibliothek, Goschenbibliothek, and Aus Natur und Geisteswelt. I was dumbstruck. I obeyed his order for an hour, and then turned to Director Grycz to intervene since Grycz (being

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68 C. Gutry, ‘Pamiętnik’, in: *Walka*, vol. 2, p. 26. In Gutry’s view, Abb, and other German supervisors ‘were interested in the evacuation, and made sure we prepared such books which the Nazis cared about’ (*ibidem*, p. 20). Interestingly, however, the attention of the uniformed Germans could be diverted to other tracks: ‘More and more often, wrote Gutry, different Gestapo soldiers hanged around who were interested in the book transportation and were breathing down our necks. Actually, typical scrimshankers of different ranks... . Not very discrete, they would poke their nose where not needed. [Ksawery] Świerkowski found an infallible method against them. He would draw out pornographic books, and would interest the Krauts in this instructive literature to the extent that we would be left in more peace’, (*ibidem*, pp. 20-21).

69 W. Borowy, ‘Z zapisek Borowego’, comp. Z. Stefanowska, in: *Walka*, vol. 2, p. 188. At another place the scholar wrote down: ‘Abb showed up again at the Library, and hampered the work, poking his nose into everything’, *ibidem*, p. 197.

70 *Ibidem*, p. 188.

71 *Ibidem*.

an author known in Europe) was the only person Abb respected the most, and to Himpel, a German, whom I actually straightforwardly told that nobody would eagerly work under shelling on the frontline, in frost and hunger, to evacuate worthless German waste paper which could easily be collected in tons through the reading rooms of all primary schools in Germany, while the publications at risk of perishing were the priceless records of Polish culture and history spanning four centuries, as well as exquisite 16<sup>th</sup>-century editions from Venice, Florence, Basel, the Hague, Nuremberg, French 18<sup>th</sup>-century album volumes with prints by the most exquisite authors, and, finally, tens of thousands of Russian printed materials not available anywhere in Central Europe outside Warsaw.<sup>72</sup> In other words: ‘Saving worthless popularising brochures for the half-educated released in hundreds of thousands of copies was the first genuine concept of the representative and “head” of the German academic librarians’.<sup>73</sup>

Although, finally, Abb was persuaded to also save the Polish collections,<sup>74</sup> he systematically torpedoed such efforts: ‘He thrashes around feverishly,’ wrote Waclaw Borowy, ‘on and on criticising the selection of books from the *numerus currens* section (at the same time proving to be a fool and a brute); he would grab, e.g., the brochure *Warsaw of the Future* related to the exhibition of urban design at the National Museum, and casting it on the floor he would contemptuously shout *Reisepropaganda*).’<sup>75</sup> The Polish librarian nurtured no doubt that the German supervisor did not care for the protection of the Polish collection; ‘He would personally add

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72 T. Makowiecki, ‘W obronie zbiorów bibliotecznych. Wspomnienie z 1944 r.’, in: *Walka*, vol. 2, pp. 258–259.

73 Ibidem, p. 259.

74 ‘After a long conference, and long-lasting resistance, Director Abb reluctantly decided that three streams would go parallelly: a) 19<sup>th</sup>-century scientific German printed materials, mainly periodicals (under his guidance); b) 19<sup>th</sup>-century most important and representative printed Russian materials (under Himpel’s guidance), and c) Polish printed materials at our discretion. Marginally only, merely as exceptions, it was permitted to pack the most precious French, Italian, or English materials’, ibidem, p. 259.

75 W. Borowy, ‘Z zapisek Borowego’, p. 201.

foreign multi-volume publications, such as, e.g., *Historia de España*, presented by the Spanish government, or reports from the 1929 international librarian congress'.<sup>76</sup>

Abb also hindered the work of the Polish librarians by resorting to other means. He instructed the staff to have several thousand sacks originally meant to secure periodicals from the University Library filled with fiction. 'The German government, observed Borowy ironically, decided to demonstrate how much they cared for the *spiritual needs* of the labourers forcefully employed in the Reich's war industry (this care is manifested in recruitment proclamations!). Therefore, in all the libraries, 'light fiction was to be selected for the purpose'.<sup>77</sup> However, when asked by Stanisław Lorentz, he claimed that the sacks, in compliance with the plan, were to be packed with Polish periodicals. Borowy also emphasised that Abb turned out to be 'on top of it all, an insolent liar'.<sup>78</sup> This was said because it was found out that not only did he hinder the action of saving the Polish collections, but he was also a thief. It was certainly of lesser relevance that he had taken a bottle with ink from the ruined building of the Krasiński Library. The following can be read in Tadeusz Makowiecki's memoirs: 'One day two workers say to me quietly:

'Doctor Makowiecki, one of those Germans steals things.'

'What?'

'He took two large bottles of coloured ink from the shed, he looked around to see if anybody was watching, and hid them under his military coat.'

'Which one? (I obviously thought it would be a military policeman or guard).'

'That black one.'

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76 Ibidem.

77 Ibidem. Czesław Gutry was tricked into it, thinking that the goal was truly to save books: 'I selected books for labourers in Germany from among doublets and from the collections at the branches. They were good books, popular, however, we did not undermine the core possessions of the Library. About 12,000 books were prepared which were dispatched from the cargo station, today housing the Main Railway Station', C. Gutry, *Pamiętnik*, p. 25.

78 W. Borowy, 'Z zapisek Borowego', p. 201

I couldn't believe it, but when a moment later I was talking to him, the unbuttoned coat was rigidly bulked on Director Abb's chest: the director of the largest library of Nazi Germany, President of the Association of Librarians.'<sup>79</sup>

The theft of the bottle of ink made the Polish librarians begin to examine Abb's activity more carefully. It soon turned out that the Germans did not only appropriate writing utensils, but also some collections. Tadeusz Makowiecki noticed that one of the chests meant for transportation was addressed to a Berlin Library. The Polish librarian wrote: 'Meanwhile, Abb began to search through catalogues, ordered to have one person assigned as his assistant, and he collected German cimelia from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century in a chest; the first editions of poetry by Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Schlegel, the first editions of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel. Up to this point, this was all understandable. However, when the chest was nailed up, he ordered to have the sequence number and the inscription *Staatsbibliothek Warschau* (as all the remaining ones featured) crossed out, personally writing instead: Dir. G. Abb — Berlin.'<sup>80</sup> Polish librarians took duty shifts successfully, trying to prevent the collection's dispersion. Makowiecki wrote as follows: 'The first chest, yes, did go with the transportation. But not the next ones. We would come earlier and stay in the storage for longer than the Director, who, together with the military policeman, would be staying in a warm cellar drinking mulled wine from a flask. Therefore, the content of two further chests was moved from under private signs to regular ones of our subsequent chests.'<sup>81</sup> However, they were not completely successful at doing this. As noted by Makowiecki: 'On the last day of his stay in Warsaw (20 December), [Abb] packed in his briefcase two manuscript fascicles: they were a score, compositions by Elsner, Chopin's teacher.'<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> T. Makowiecki, 'W obronie zbiorów', p. 258

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>82</sup> Ibidem.

In the opinion of the Polish librarians, the Germans did not care about saving the collections which had survived. When at the University Library, the Polish staff began to implement the plan to transfer secretly from the Germans a part of the collection to the cellars and brick them in, there was a fear that the German supervisors would find out. Borowy was concerned: ‘by too much talking this may reach Himpel or Abb, who might oppose it, while bricking in may clash with technical difficulties’.<sup>83</sup> He was not wrong. The minute Abb found out about the project, he first threw a tantrum, and subsequently banned carrying any more books downstairs.<sup>84</sup> However, the work was continued, obviously, when the German librarians were absent.<sup>85</sup>

Marian Łodyński, as the inter-war period Director of the Central Military Library, judged that many intended actions could be finally implemented only because the German librarians ‘could not follow the course of works in detail, they followed false facts and our organisation operating effectively, in many a case, took them by surprise’.<sup>86</sup> Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa, in her writing, was very negative about Abb: ‘During the evacuation, he compromised himself both with the overall idea of *preserving*, and his personal moves ... Abb’s personal behaviour was not in keeping with his position in the library world, either: the fact that he took German books for his private use could have been accepted under the circumstances of the day. What is worse, the taking out of flasks of ink repeated ... They were comprising, though small gaffes.’<sup>87</sup>

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83 W. Borowy, ‘Z zapisek Borowego’, p. 191.

84 Ibidem, p. 203. The following is what Tadeusz Makowiecki wrote about the issue: ‘Obviously, I didn’t stop taking the books down to the cellar. However, a change of tactics was needed: the strict ban issued by the nominal supervisor of a high Party dignitary after all on the frontline couldn’t be violated’. T. Makowiecki, ‘W obronie zbiorów’, pp. 253–254.

85 W. Borowy, ‘Z zapisek Borowego’, p. 207.

86 M. Łodyński, ‘Pruszkowska akcja zabezpieczania warszawskich zbiorów bibliotecznych. Wspomnienia uczestnika akcji’, in: *Walka*, vol. 2, p. 281

87 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, ‘Ochrona zbiorów’, p. 228.

The accusation of the lack of care for the evacuated collections is of a totally different category. Let us quote Borowy again: 'Three last transportation batches for the lack of transportation means were unloaded at a railway station, awaiting further developments... . Instead of taking care of how things can be solved there, Abb is hanging around here ... most likely trying to win the iron cross, collecting frontline daily allowance'.<sup>88</sup> All the Polish librarians agreed that Abb exposed the Polish collections to the danger of destruction and dispersion by making the decision to evacuate them to Gorbitsch. At the TON Congress in May 1946, Józef Grycz remarked: 'The one to be blamed for those losses is Dr. Abb, who, despite the insistence on the part of the Polish librarians, did not agree to place the evacuated collections in Polish territories. Only a fraction of the collections was successfully and secretly located in Poland'.<sup>89</sup> A similar judgement can be found in the recollections of Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa: 'It is Abb who has to be most strongly accused: it was his responsibility that the collections were taken to Gorbitsch where, following the end of the war, they were found in a deplorable state, plundered, and destroyed'.<sup>90</sup>

Two more records illustrating Abb's attitude and that of the Polish librarians towards him are worth mentioning. Elżbieta Skierkowska, who worked at the Public Library of the City of Warsaw, wrote in her memoirs how the German librarian visited the library building in Koszykowa Street: 'We were visited ... by Abb who seeing the cemetery at the other part of the library courtyard made an effort to be funny, suggesting that our team should be writing a novel titled *The Last Seven in Warsaw*, and predicted that we would be buried in that cemetery. There was some truth in those callous jokes, addressed, after all, to the defeated'.<sup>91</sup> The disrespect to the Polish li-

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88 W. Borowy, 'Z zapisek Borowego', pp. 202–203

89 J. Grycz, 'Biblioteki podczas wojny', after: A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 228.

90 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 228.

91 E. Skierkowska, 'Warszawska Biblioteka Publiczna na tle wydarzeń ostatniej wojny (1939–1944)', in: *Walka*, vol. 1, p. 417.

brarians was not only manifested by Gustav Abb, but also by Czesław Gutry, who recorded that: ‘By the end of our stay also higher officials of the German government began to arrive. One of them, Dr Schellenberg, could not understand how we managed to survive in the library for so long, and while looking at the graves in the garden. He even made an effort to joke in a truly German manner: *Jetzt sollen Sie für sich selbst Graben schicken*. Although later, he even complimented us: *Sollen Sie einen Roman schreiben: Die letzten Sieben.*’<sup>92</sup>

Stanisław Herbst, in his writing, recalled that when visiting the National Library, Gustav Abb asked why ‘the catalogues were packed as first, thus allowing to lose orientation in the collections... and he heard in reply: *So that at least the catalogue would survive the library!*’<sup>93</sup>

The need to communicate with Gustav Abb and stay in his company was judged as something very unpleasant. Stanisław Herbst remarked that the German boss, having found out that the Poles participating in the Pruszków Action received bigger food rations ('we're rich in vodka and sausage'), made efforts to get some food from them. Herbst claimed, with satisfaction, that 'I managed to avoid' sharing meals with Abb.<sup>94</sup> A similar undertone can be found in the recollections of Wacław Borowy, who wrote that some colleagues 'had to accompany Mr Abb during breakfast. Thank the Lord, I was released from that duty!'.<sup>95</sup> Herbst remarked at the same time that when Abb was hearing the report of the Polish librarians in one of the Pruszków restaurants, he did not bring himself to share the meal with them ('obviously, we got nothing to eat there'<sup>96</sup>).

The librarian much more positively recalled by the Polish librarians was the Baltic German Alexander Himpel, although importantly, he was also feared in case he found out that the collections of the University Library were being taken to the cellars. Himpel, as recorded by Makowiecki, was 'a slim, slight German, looking

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92 C. Gutry, *Pamiętnik*, pp. 20-21.

93 P. Herbst, 'Relacja', pp. 139-140.

94 Ibidem.

95 W. Borowy, 'Z zapisek Borowego', vol. 2, p. 189.

96 P. Herbst, 'Relacja', pp. 139-140.

like a fourteen-year-old boy, only thoroughly grey ... had the kindness of a good boy in his eyes. Only he, raised in the east of Europe, was a European. He would take into consideration someone else's opinion, he would consider every decision from many aspects, he truly cared for the book and all the cultural goods, he felt sorry for us, never imposing himself on us. He was well-read, discrete, composed.<sup>97</sup> Had it not been for his assistance, it would have been impossible to save a set of the Uprising Press collected by Czesław Gutry. Makowiecki recalled that Himpel, 'after a moment joined with his pass. When Gutry was filling in two suitcases with dangerous printed materials in the cellar, Himpel took both of them, and personally carried them so as not to expose the Pole to the danger of being searched by street patrols. In the library, he handed them to him with a smile.'<sup>98</sup>

#### JUDGMENTS

Already after the first months of his presence in the General Government, Gustav Abb became the object of cruel jokes. Tadeusz Jaroszewski, working for the University Library, dedicated several verses to him. Having introduced minor changes to the poem, it was soon disseminated among the National Library staff and read:

'Once a Kraut arrived  
His name being Abb  
And he said: bitte,  
Here's your Commissioner Witte.  
Now the Kraut says that  
the Staatsbibliothek Abteilung Zwei  
Will be with us for years to come  
Zu Befehl of the conqueror of the world.  
Working from now on herab  
To please Abb.'<sup>99</sup>

97 T. Makowiecki, 'W obronie zbiorów', p. 260.

98 Ibidem. See C. Gutry, *Pamiętnik*, p. 27.

99 A. Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów', p. 203. See Witold Stankiewicz, 'Urzęduwy wykaz druków', Dzieło życia Jadwigi Dąbrowskiej', in: *Bibliotekarze polscy we wspomnieniach współczesnych*, vol. 1: *Z warsztatu bibliografa*, Warszawa 1991, p. 36. (English transl. Magdalena Iwińska)

Tadeusz Makowiecki remembered Gustav Abb as ‘a tall well-built man in a black uniform of a party dignitary, in long boots, with a red swastika on his left arm, handsome, elegant with the elegance of a Prussian major’. He added that ‘Abb usually had a polite smile on his face, with understanding kindness of a staff officer towards non-commissioned officers’.<sup>100</sup>

When it came to Witte, in Makowiecki’s eyes, he was ‘neither good, nor bad, neither clever, nor stupid and even ... neither honest nor dishonest: typically mediocre, even in height. We called him a small library corporal, actually not metaphorically: he was small in every aspect, and a corporal in every aspect. This library non-commissioned officer was in Warsaw promoted to the rank of a general.’<sup>101</sup> Makowiecki also added that ‘He would often be moved, although always in secrecy, sometimes he would help in privacy, in privacy he bridled at Hitlerism, however, in his addresses and instructions he was severe, and this severity was not merely externally apparent, since he scrupulously, strictly, and over-zealously implemented all the plans. He had no scruples about the books, tradition, principles, and the people he felt prejudiced against; then he persecuted them, had them followed by a caretaker, he would secretly search their drawers. Apart from that, he would mock everybody around him, the world, the war, and himself.’<sup>102</sup>

When comparing Abb and Witte, Makowiecki wrote: ‘Doctor Witte was a grey official, whose promotion was not a very responsible decision. Director Abb was a flagship individual of the Hitler regime, representing its ideals – *superiority* ethics. He could command; he was an authority. When dealing with people, he was, let’s admit it, smooth and not as mean-mindedly biting as Witte. In librarianship, he knew the organisational aspect. He would have made an equally outstanding director of a huge brewery or a tyre factory.’<sup>103</sup>

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100 T. Makowiecki, p. 258.

101 Ibidem, p. 257.

102 Ibidem, p. 258.

103 Ibidem, p. 260.

In view of the above-quoted records, it is hard to agree with what Johansson stated that the goals of the German library policy harmonised with the Polish intentions and that the Poles willingly worked under German supervision and were not conflicted in their own consciousness'.<sup>104</sup> Working under Witte's supervision was, as observed by Wanda Sokołowska, an unpleasant necessity: 'Over the four years of the German occupation, the responsibility towards the institution caused the Polish staff to suffer numerous humiliations and dilemmas, when forced by the Commissioner's instructions, moving more and more towards the library's Germanization and the destruction of the protected libraries' structure. They had to consistently shift from the tracks of normal library work to the struggle for the inviolability of the Polish libraries'.<sup>105</sup> The vision and goals of the German librarians almost clashed entirely with the expectations of the Polish party. That is why it was necessary 'to continue the second track of works done on the margin of Witte's instructions in harmony with the Polish understanding of a librarian's obligations. They consisted in the hidden opposition against the Commissioner's policy, which they were forced to contribute to'.<sup>106</sup> Marian Toporowski, in her writing, judged 'that subordinated mainly to Polish supervisors, depending on the circumstances, we would either act at a snail pace or resort to sabotage, defending the inviolability of the collections'.<sup>107</sup>

The challenges faced by Polish librarians working under German supervision are also well illustrated by the above-mentioned Czesław Gutry: 'The balance of work at the Public Library during the occupation, undertaken under very peculiar circumstances

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104 'Direktor Abb setzte nur Fachbibliothekare ein. Sie haben gerne unter ihm gearbeitet und sind nie mit ihrem Gewissen in Konflikt gekommen. Die angeführte Zielsetzung entsprach aber ebenso dem Wunsche der polnischen Bibliothekare, die sich - sie mochten zu Deutschland stehen, wie sie wollten - zur deutschen Bibliotheksverwaltung stets loyal verhalten haben', U. Johanssen, *Hauptverwaltung*, p. 360.

105 W. Sokołowska, 'W Bibliotece Uniwersyteckie', p. 289.

106 Ibidem, pp. 295–296.

107 M. Toporowski, 'Strop', p. 338.

may often suggest that we acted in harmony with the invaders. Apparently, we did, as a different form of work was unthinkable, yet we did everything we could to act for the benefit of the Polish culture, and essentially, it was work that did not depend on the aggressors. We first of all saved Polish books, and the most precious ones among them.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, on the part of the Polish librarians, it was by no means cooperation, but merely necessary actions essential for securing the collections of which they were guardians.

Meanwhile, Ryszard Przelaskowski, who headed the Public Library of the City of Warsaw, not subjected to the Main Library Directorate, judged Abb' and Witte's intentions as follows: 'Despite struggling with the professional ignorance of my supervisors, I did everything I could to avoid the assistance of the German professional librarians, mainly Abb from Krakow, managing all the library matters in the General Government, and Witte as the Warsaw officer. Simply because I doubted that their librarian predilections would oppose the *cultural* tendencies of Hitlerism, and I feared that as *professionals*, they would be carrying out their *library projects* more effectively than others. Therefore, their merely fleeting visits to the library and lack of interest in it on their part didn't worry me.'<sup>109</sup>

In view of all the above remarks, what is astounding is the statement by Andrzej Mężyński, a researcher in the history of libraries and book collections. This historian was of the opinion that the Nazi authorities preserved the Polish libraries, and protected them, because the 'ethos of the German librarian would not have allowed them to destroy them'.<sup>110</sup> By thus describing the intentions and

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108 C. Gutry, *Pamiętnik*, p. 32

109 R. Przelaskowski, 'Wspomnienia o pracy w Bibliotece Publicznej m. st. Warszawy w okresie drugiej wojny światowej', in: *Walka*, vol. 1, p. 380.

110 Andrzej Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy w latach 1939–1945*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 110–111. In 2022, the historian wrote: 'we must not forget the actions of Abb and his several-individual team on a macro scale: they organized four State Libraries in which scientific books from four districts of the General Government and "cemented in such a way" they lasted until the end of the occupation', idem,

motivations of the German authorities, he questioned the credibility of the judgment of the Polish librarians, taking at face value the evaluation presented by the Germans.<sup>111</sup> This must have been so for him to reach the following conclusion: ‘I have noticed that over the discussed period, the German librarians complied with the professional criteria of librarians and acted ... decently’.<sup>112</sup> A critical analysis of the judgments submitted by Andrzej Mężyński should become the subject of a separate study.

Neither does it seem appropriate to try to observe the compliance with the librarian’s ethos in the attitude of the German librarians during WWII in the light of international law. The invaders of Poland were also obliged to preserve cultural goods in view of the convention ratified by Germany. As from after the September 1939 campaign, no peace treaty was concluded, and so, in the light of international law, Polish territories were occupied territories. The Second Hague Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 1899 stated that: ‘The occupying State shall only be regarded as administrator and usufructuary of the public buildings... . It must protect the capital of these properties and administer it according to the rules of usufruct.’ (Art. 55).<sup>113</sup> This is further

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‘Na marginesie pracy Tadeusza Zadrożnego’, *Buletyn Historii Sztuki* 84, 2022, 2, p. 397. In the text printed that very year, he presented the view that although ‘German librarians ... were emissaries of the Third Reich to the Polish territory, thus of the aggressor ... they tried to remain faithful to the ethos of the librarian, thus defenders of books’. Idem, ‘Dwa oblicza niemieckich bibliotekarzy w Polsce podczas okupacji 1939–1945’, *Z badań nad książką i księgozbiarami historycznymi*, 16, 2022, 3, p. 405.

111 E.g., ‘Edward Assbury made an erroneous diagnosis’ (Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy*, p. 109), ‘the opinion of Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa was not substantiated’ (Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy*, p. 110). Although having admitted that ‘Witte in his memoirs falsified the facts that were not to his advantage in any possible way’ (A. Mężyński, *Dwa oblicza*, p. 403), the historian, while recalling the statements of the German librarians, failed to conduct a thorough analysis of his source. Worth mentioning at this point is that the analysis of the elucidation of the German librarians is a worthy topic for a separate study. In their writings the war realities were greatly falsified.

112 A. Mężyński, *Dwa oblicza*, p. 403.

113 <https://ihl-databasep.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/hague-conv-ii-1899/regulations-art-55> [accessed: 2 December 2023].

extended in the following Article, which states that ‘The property of ... educational institutions, and those of arts and science, even when State property, shall be treated as private property. All seizure of and destruction, or intentional damage done to such institutions, to historical monuments, works of art or science, is prohibited, and should be made the subject of proceedings.’ (Art. 56).<sup>114</sup> These provisions were reiterated in the Fourth Hague Convention of 1907.

The German library policy in the case versus Ludwig Fisher was referred to in the sentence by the Supreme National Tribunal (*Najwyższy Trybunał Narodowy*). It was justly observed in it that the stripping of the Polish libraries of the most precious collections and closing them down, the introduction of the ban on printing books and other publications apart from those of a propagandistic character; the removing of books regarded as not in line with the Nazi ideology from libraries and bookshops, and most importantly, the restructuring of the Warsaw library network carried out under Wilhelm Witte were actions conducted to the detriment of the Polish state and civil population.<sup>115</sup>

*Translated by Magdalena Iwińska*

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<sup>114</sup> <https://ihl-databasep.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/hague-conv-ii-1899/regulations-art-56> [accessed: 2 December 2023].

<sup>115</sup> ‘Z sentencji i uzasadnienia wyroku Najwyższego Trybunału Narodowego w sprawie przeciwko Ludwigowi Fischerowi i in.’, in: *Walka*, vol. 2, pp. 565–566.