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LIBRARY LOSSES AND THE LANDSCAPE OF MEMORY: THE URN CONTAINING THE ASHES OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY'S BURNED TREASURES AND THE BOOK MONUMENT IN KALISZ

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ABSTRACT

The article examines how the loss of libraries is remembered in collective memory and commemorated in public space. It focuses on two memorial objects commemorating libraries destroyed during the Second World War: the monument to books in Kalisz, erected on the site of a canal where the German occupation authorities dumped books before filling it in, and the glass urn containing the ashes of manuscripts, early printed books, and other valuable holdings from the National Library of Poland and other Warsaw libraries, burned after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising. The article reconstructs the circumstances of the libraries' destruction, traces the origins and subsequent histories of these commemorative objects, and examines how the material traces of loss came to acquire symbolic meaning.

KEYWORDS: Second World War; library losses; destruction of libraries; Warsaw; National Library of Poland; Kalisz

The devastation wrought by the Second World War is deeply embedded in Polish memory. It is commemorated in public space by numerous museums, memorial rooms, monuments and plaques on the sites of former death camps, prisons and detention centres, and at places of mass execution and in cemeteries. A similar role is played by the discreet markers set into the paving stones tracing the former boundaries of the Warsaw Ghetto. Yet the losses sustained by Polish libraries remain almost entirely absent from this landscape.

In the present article I address the question of how the significance of lost book collections is symbolically articulated in public space. Specifically, I discuss two examples of commemorations of libraries destroyed during the Second World War: the book monument in the Planty park in Kalisz and the urn containing the ashes of manuscripts, early printed books and other rare works from the National Library of Poland and other Warsaw libraries, burned after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising. Drawing on contemporary theories of memory, loss and wartime trauma, I seek to explain why forms of commemoration of this kind remain so rare in Poland.

The Book Monument in Kalisz

A monument to books destroyed during the Second World War was unveiled in the Planty in Kalisz in 1978. To understand the scale of the city's losses, it is worth tracing the development of Kalisz's book collections during the half-century before they were destroyed as a result of the German occupation authorities' policies.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Kalisz was an important administrative and cultural centre on the western fringes of the Russian Empire. Despite the restrictions imposed by the anti-Polish policies of the Tsarist authorities following the January Uprising, the city's cultural life developed rapidly, supported by numerous educational institutions and associations that together formed a local intellectual milieu. This process was abruptly interrupted in the first days of August 1914 when German troops bombarded the city and burned its historic centre almost to the ground. In the interwar period, the rebuilt city of Kalisz became one of the

symbols of the rebirth of Polish statehood. As the physical fabric of the city was restored, so too was its intellectual life – with libraries among its central pillars.

During the interwar period, Kalisz was home to numerous ecclesiastical, monastic, public, private and school libraries.[1] These included the Chapter library, which had existed since the fourteenth century, and the library of the Monastery of the Canons Regular of the Lateran, who had settled at the Church of St Nicholas in the mid-fourteenth century. Two municipal libraries were particularly important: the Adam Mickiewicz Public Library and Reading Room, and the Adam Asnyk Municipal Library. Their collections grew steadily thanks to major private donations and purchases: the former received from Leopold Kronenberg a collection of around 10,000 volumes, comprising works on history, Polish and foreign literature, linguistics, heraldry and numismatics, while the latter's holdings were enlarged by the addition, among other items, of books that had belonged to the distinguished lawyer, social activist and bibliophile Alfons Parczewski, a former rector of Stefan Batory University in Vilnius.

Other cultural institutions in Kalisz also held book collections: the valuable landed-gentry library of Józef Leopold of Rzepiszew was transferred to the Museum of the Kalisz Region, for example. Collections were also held by cultural associations, social and professional organisations, political parties and private individuals. The Jewish population likewise built up an extensive network of educational, religious and community libraries. Smaller book collections were held by the German and Ukrainian communities.

All this came to an end with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. Poland's northern and western territories, including Kalisz, were incorporated directly into the German Reich. The *Reichsgau Posen* (Reich District of Posen) was established in

1 This reconstruction of Kalisz's library landscape is based on Krzysztof Walczak, *Biblioteki Kalisza i ich miejsce w życiu kulturalnym miasta 1793–1945*, Kalisz 1996. The earlier period is described in Danuta Wańka, *Świat kaliskiej książki pod zaborem rosyjskim (1815–1914)*, Kalisz 2002.

Wielkopolska and part of the Łódź Voivodeship, renamed the *Reichsgau Wartheland* in January 1940. These territories were to be subjected in their entirety to a process of Germanisation, carried out through the physical elimination of the Polish population and the systematic destruction of its cultural, social and religious life. The planned extermination of people who had rendered service to the Polish state and society began as early as September 1939, based on the *Sonderfahndungsbuch Polen* – a list containing more than 61,000 names. Landed estates, industrial enterprises and craft workshops were seized. Around one million people were expelled from Silesia, Wielkopolska and Pomerania to the General Government, while Germans, including some from the Baltic states, were settled in their place. Universities and schools were closed, and cultural institutions and societies were dissolved. Polish cultural monuments and heritage objects were looted and destroyed on a mass scale, both in public and private collections.[2]

On 13 December 1939, Arthur Greiser, governor of the *Reichsgau Posen*, issued an order requiring all public and private book collections to be reported so that they could be "secured" (*"zum Zwecke ihrer Sicherstellung"*).[3] In reality, these measures were intended to concentrate the collections in one place and block access to Polish literature. Responsibility for implementing the order was entrusted to Jürgen von Hehn, a former associate of the Herder Institute in Riga.[4]

2 On the persecution of the Polish population in the Wartheland, see, for example, Stanisław Nawrocki, *Terror policyjny w Kraju Warty, 1939–1945*, Poznań 1973; *Położenie ludności polskiej w Kraju Warty, 1939–1945. Dokumenty niemieckie*, ed. Czesław Łuczak, Poznań 1987; Maria Rutowska, *Wysiedlenia ludności polskiej z Kraju Warty do Generalnego Gubernatorstwa, 1939–1941*, Poznań 2003; Bogumił Rudawski, *Kradzież mienia w Kraju Warty, 1939–1945. Działalność Urzędu Powierniczego w Poznaniu*, Poznań 2018; Czesław Madajczyk, *Polityka III Rzeszy w okupowanej Polsce*, vols 1–2, 2nd edition, Warszawa 2019.

3 *Bekanntmachung betreffend Anmeldepflicht und Sicherstellung von Bibliotheken und Bücherbeständen vom 13. Dezember 1939*, "Verordnungsblatt des Reichsstatthalters im Reichsgau Wartheland", 2 (1940), p. 27. On German library policy in the Wartheland, see Jacek Kordel, *NS-Bibliothekspolitik im besetzten Polen*, in: *Verboten, beschlagnahmt, geraubt NS-Bibliothekspolitik und -praxis in Europa*, eds Claude D. Conter, Jean-Marie Reding (*Bibliothek und Wissenschaft*, 56), Wiesbaden 2024, pp. 214–217.

4 Jan Baumgart, *Biblioteki wielkopolskie w okresie okupacji niemieckiej (1939–1945)*, in: idem, *Bibliotekarstwo, biblioteki i bibliotekarze. Wybór prac*, Warszawa 1983, pp. 113–169.

The work carried out by the German authorities proceeded in three stages: first, the registration of manuscripts and books held in libraries, bookshops and antiquarian bookshops; then their confiscation and transfer to book depots; and finally the ordering and sorting of the assembled collections. The intention was to preserve only those publications deemed useful for German scholarship, including for the library of the newly established Reich University in Poznań. The nature of these measures is illustrated in detail by von Hehn's report of October 1940: "In the province, essentially only the valuable holdings were taken over and transferred to the book collection depot, while all printed material deemed to have only the value of waste paper was consigned to destruction. It was stipulated, however, that this was to take place under German supervision [...]. Here too, every possibility was to be prevented of Polish literature being used without supervision or coming back into circulation."[5]

In accordance with the order of 13 December 1939, Kalisz's book collections were also taken over by the German authorities. The oldest and most valuable written artefacts from church libraries were confiscated and transported to storage facilities in Poznań, where the majority were destroyed. Other library materials, seized from institutions or found in private homes, were taken to a storehouse in the building of the Kalisz district office. The collections gathered there, including the holdings of the libraries mentioned above, were thrown into the Babinka Canal, part of the city's former system of fortifications outside the defensive walls. As early as the 1930s, the Polish authorities had planned to fill it in, regarding

5 "Es wurden in der Provinz im Wesentlichen nur die wertvollen Bestände übernommen und in die Buchsammelstelle übergeführt, während alles das Schrifttum, das lediglich Altpapierwert hatte, zur Vernichtung preisgegeben wurde. Doch wurde bestimmt, dass diese unter deutscher Aufsicht zu erfolgen hatte [...]. Auch hier sollte jede Möglichkeit unterbunden werden, dass polnisches Schrifttum ohne Aufsicht genutzt werden oder wieder in Vertrieb kommen könnte", Jürgen von Hehn, *Bericht über die Sammlung und Sicherstellung von Bibliotheken und Bücherbeständen aus nichtdeutschem Besitz im Reichsgau Wartheland*, 29 October 1940, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu, Biblioteka Uniwersytecka, catalogue no. 21, p. 61.

the canal as a redundant and troublesome relic of defensive infrastructure that created hygiene and sanitation problems.[6]

It is not known when the decision was taken to dispose of the assembled collections, but surviving accounts make it possible to reconstruct what happened. Books were tipped directly from lorries and carts into the bed of the canal along a stretch of around four hundred metres, then covered with rubble, earth and refuse to level the ground. Peasants from surrounding villages and Jews from Kalisz were forced to carry out this work.[7] Eligiusz Kor-Walczak, a Kalisz writer and poet, remembered and described the scene: "The filling-in of the canal bed had already begun and was advancing from the Jewish mikveh (ritual bath) towards the park. It looked as though some filthy lava had entered the canal and congealed halfway along. At the head of the cataclysm lay scattered papers, official folders and books – many books, whole, torn apart or carelessly opened, among which the Jewish prayer books stood out for their size and their distinctive, ungainly little letters, visible even from a distance. The invader's filthy hands had thrown the word of God into the mud of the city sewers and were covering it with sand, ash and rubbish."[8] In a similar way, the German authorities used matzevot (Jewish tombstones) from the old Jewish cemetery in Kalisz to reinforce the banks of another branch of the Prosna, the Rypinkowski Canal.

The events surrounding the destruction of Kalisz's book collections are today commemorated by a monument located on the site of the filled-in canal, a symbolic "tomb" for the books. It was conceived and designed by the Kalisz graphic artist Władysław

6 In the files relating to the works carried out, no information has survived about books or religious objects from the synagogue being thrown into the canal as it was filled in: Archiwum Państwowe w Kaliszu, Akta miasta Kalisza, catalogue no. 284 (Regulacje rzeki Prosny i Warty).

7 Przemysław Pawlak, *Zagłada księgozbiorów przyczyną i miarą kryzysu inteligencji. Ogólnopolskie wnioski z doświadczeń Kalisza*, "Kultura Współczesna. Teoria. Interpretacje. Praktyka" 95 (2017), 2, pp. 229–240.

8 Relacja Eligiusza Kor-Walczaka, in: *Pomnik książki w Kaliszu*, eds Bogumiła Celer et al., Kalisz 2025, pp. 9–10.

Kościelniak and made by the Poznań sculptor Jerzy Sobociński. The monument was erected in 1978 by the Federation of Cultural Societies of the Kalisz Region, using funds raised by the local community. Simple in form, it depicts an open book cast in bronze, with the following inscription on its pages: "Here, in the filled-in bed of the River Prosna, the Nazis destroyed tens of thousands of books from the collections of Kalisz's public libraries" ("Tu w zasypanym korycie rzeki Prosny hitlerowcy zniszczyli dziesiątki tysięcy książek ze zbiorów kaliskich bibliotek publicznych"). Below the inscription is a laurel leaf, a symbol of remembrance and homage to the destroyed book collections. The monument was cast at the Metalworkers' Craft Cooperative (Rzemieślnicza Spółdzielnia Pracy Metalowców) in Poznań.[9]



FIG. 1. The book monument in Kalisz, Wikimedia Commons

9 Designs, correspondence and official documentation relating to the design process and the procedure for obtaining permits for the construction of the monument have survived in the State Archive in Kalisz: Federacja Towarzystw Kulturalnych Ziemi Kaliskiej w Kaliszu, catalogue no. 27, Budowa płyty pomnika Książki Polskiej, pp. 1–13.

The speeches delivered at the unveiling of the monument on 11 May 1978 have survived. They repeatedly emphasised the brutality of the German occupation and the efforts of the authorities of the Third Reich to bring about the systematic destruction of Polish culture. One speech, whose author has not been identified, spoke as follows: "Then came the memorable autumn of 1939. Against the authors, printers, librarians and readers of the Polish word there arose the previously unheard-of ferocity of the brown-shirted invader – a drive towards annihilation. Book collections, books and Polish periodicals were to share the fate of people. Libraries belonging to local authorities, societies, organisations, associations, church bodies, manor houses, private individuals and schools would be looted; they would be sent for pulping, for destruction and oblivion. The persecution of the Polish printed word, which had lasted for decades, reached its apogee in those Nazi years. This was the case in the villages, towns and small towns of what is now the Kalisz region. It was the same in Kalisz itself. The book collections of several dozen libraries were consigned to destruction."[10]

The speeches also placed symbolic emphasis on the fact that the books which could not be saved had been used as material to fill in the canal, becoming the literal foundation of the occupier's policy of cultural destruction: "Some of them the Nazi barbarians consigned to the earth. They used them to fill in the Prosna canal, forcing their victims to do the work. They desecrated them, condemning them to destruction in rubbish and mud. We are all, and forever, impoverished by the loss of these book collections, some of them of unique value. No force can ever restore these losses. That is why our grateful society has resolved to fund a monument [to these books]: persecuted during the years of the Partitions, condemned to destruction in the time of the brown-shirted plague, guide and teacher of Polishness for generations of our forefathers. The monument will stand at the site of the martyrdom of books. For us, the living, it will be a monument to living glory."[11]

10 "Pomnik naszej książce", speech delivered at the unveiling ceremony for the monument to destroyed books in Kalisz, 11 May 1978, ibid., p. 17.

11 Ibid., pp. 17–18.

Eligiusz Kor-Walczak, mentioned above, also spoke at the ceremony: "The finest achievements of human thought, contained in books through the art of writing, were brought in this city to this very street. Here, progressive books were not burned as they had once been in the Reich. In the occupied countries, [this] crime had ceased to have symbolic value. It had become a function, a dull and troublesome task. That is why the practical Germans no longer made burning pyres of books. Here, they used them to fill in the river, a branch of the Prosna [...]. Polish books, too, were an enemy of the Nazis, one that in their own way fought for Polishness, and so they had to be destroyed. I am one of the many witnesses to this criminal operation who are still alive."[12] This rhetoric, with its references to the "brown-shirted plague" and "barbarism", formed part of an established way of speaking about the German occupation, characteristic of post-war memory discourse.[13] The speakers focused on the planned destruction of book collections and on the significance of the printed word as a bearer of national identity. The destruction of books was placed within the logic of total war, waged with particular brutality in the territories incorporated directly into the Reich, including the *Reichsgau Wartheland*, where the aim was the systematic removal of all manifestations of Polishness. The monument was presented as a way of commemorating the losses suffered by Kalisz society and as a lasting sign of this event's presence in the city's public space. It is worth stressing that the speeches did not address the losses suffered by Jewish libraries or other non-Polish book collections.

No traces survive of any discussion around the creation of the monument. Only a few articles appeared in the local and regional press, and these did not prompt a wider response in publications

12 Speech by Eligiusz Kor-Walczak, in: *Pomnik książki w Kaliszu*, p. 41.

13 See Łukasz Polniak, *Patriotyzm wojskowy w PRL w latach 1956–1970*, Warszawa 2011; Joanna Wawrzyniak, *ZBoWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej 1949–1969*, Warszawa 2009; Jerzy Holzer, *Uraz, nacjonalizm, manipulacja. Kwestia niemiecka w komunistycznej Polsce*, "Rocznik Polsko-Niemiecki" 1 (1992), pp. 7–17.

of national reach or in academic scholarship.[14] Nor did the unveiling of the monument itself prompt more detailed research into the fate of Kalisz's book collections during the Second World War. The absence of a local academic centre and the scarcity of archival material, including inventories of the destroyed libraries and German sources documenting the scale of the losses, created a serious obstacle to the development of research on this subject.

The Urn Containing the Ashes of Burned Special Collections from the National Library and Other Warsaw libraries

Since 2024, the Palace of the Commonwealth in Warsaw has displayed some of the most valuable treasures of Polish written heritage. Among the objects on display is an urn containing the ashes of manuscripts, early printed books and other rare works from the National Library of Poland and other Warsaw libraries, burned after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising.

The destruction of Warsaw's libraries in 1939–1945 has been the subject of numerous studies.[15] It is enough here to note that as early as September 1939, the capital's libraries suffered severe losses as a result of bombing and artillery fire: the Central Military Library was almost completely destroyed by fire, together with historic written works from the Rapperswil collections. The libraries of the Zamoyski Family Entail (Biblioteka Ordynacji Zamojskiej) and the Przezdziecki Family Entail (Biblioteka Ordynacji Przezdzieckich) were seriously damaged. Most of the manuscripts and printed works that had survived the fighting of September 1939 were burned by German soldiers during and after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising. Only individual items survived the war.

14 Krzysztof Walczak, *Książki niezapomniane*, "Ziemia Kaliska" 20 (1978), p. 4; idem, *Nie zapomnieć*, "Południowa Wielkopolska" 5 (1978), p. 2; idem, *Pomnik książki w Kaliszu*, "Poradnik Bibliotekarza" 5 (1980), pp. 110–111.

15 Jacek Kordel, *„Książkobójstwo". W osiemdziesiątą rocznicę zagłady stołecznych bibliotek*, "Rocznik Biblioteki Narodowej" 55 (2024), pp. 35–53. The same work also contains a critical discussion of the literature on the subject.

From the first days of the occupation, selected book collections were confiscated and transported to Berlin. The collections targeted by this operation, carried out by Peter Paulsen on the orders of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Main Security Office), included the Sejm Library, with more than 80,000 volumes; the collections of the French, Danish and Hungarian institutes; the library of the Linguistics Seminar of the Indo-European Institute at the University of Warsaw; part of the collections of the Polish Institute for International Cooperation and the Ukrainian Scientific Institute; and almost the entire Main Judaic Library, the largest Jewish library in Warsaw, with more than 40,000 volumes. At least 150,000 books were removed from Warsaw; after 1945, apart from a few exceptions, they did not return to Poland.

Warsaw's biggest libraries, including the National Library of Poland and the University Library, together with the faculty collections, were closed to readers, while parts of their buildings were assigned for use by German institutions. The collections of the School of Political Science, the Military School of Engineering, the Higher School of Journalism and the Higher War School were destroyed, as was the library of the Polish Free University, which contained more than 100,000 volumes.

The holdings of public, school and educational libraries were reduced on the basis of the *Liste des deutschfeindlichen, schädlichen und unerwünschten polnischen Schrifttums* ("List of Polish writings hostile to Germany, harmful and undesirable"). Around 92 percent of school library collections were destroyed. Libraries, bookshops, antiquarian bookshops, publishing houses and printing works were subjected to searches, while banned publications were confiscated and sent for pulping. To grasp the scale of the destruction, it is worth recalling that in 1939 there were around 185 private libraries in the capital, with a combined total of nearly 390,000 volumes. There were almost 100 libraries run by social organisations, containing around 100,000 volumes.[16] The number of private book

16 Tadeusz Wieroński, *Stan bibliotekarstwa oświatowego w Warszawie*, "Bibliotekarz. Czasopismo poświęcone sprawom bibliotek publicznych" 11 (1939), 3–4, pp. 26–29.

collections destroyed remains entirely unknown. The magnitude of these losses is made clear by the case of Konrad Berezowski, a judge, bibliophile and president of the Warsaw Numismatic Society, who was murdered by the Germans in the first days of the Uprising while trying to save his book collection.[17]

The greatest losses, in terms of the significance and value of the collections, were still to come. The way was paved by the reorganisation of Warsaw's collections ordered by the German library authorities in the spring of 1941. This involved concentrating special collections from across the city in the building of the Krasiński Library on Okólnik Street, which had been damaged during the fighting of September 1939. These included pre-1800 Polonica, manuscripts, prints, drawings, photographs, maps and music and theatre materials, as well as incunabula and early printed books, including the holdings of the Załuski Library returned from the Soviet Union under the Treaty of Riga. When, after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising in October 1944, implementation began of Adolf Hitler's order for the extermination of Warsaw's population and the complete destruction of the city, Wehrmacht sapper units set fire to the lower floors of the Krasiński Library building. The fire destroyed the special collections assembled there, including nearly 50,000 manuscripts. In November, Polish librarians began inspecting the charred remains. Bohdan Korzeniewski, a theatre scholar and translator, later wrote: "When touched, the evenly stacked volumes didn't even fall apart – they vanished. The collections had smouldered in the fire, which must have slowly consumed them for many days [...]. They had grabbed books from under the ceiling,

A study of the losses suffered by school libraries, educational libraries run by cultural societies and private lending libraries remains an important task for future research; given the destruction of the greater part of the collections, however, it may prove impossible to carry out in full.

17 "He died on the ruins of his flat in the judges' cooperative, killed and then burned, having tried until the end to save his beloved book collection – unsuccessfully," *Żałobna karta 1939–1945. Konrad Berezowski*, "Demokratyczny Przegląd Prawniczy. Centralne czasopismo prawnicze poświęcone praktyce i wykładni prawa oraz służbie wymiaru sprawiedliwości" 3–4 (1946), p. 91.

doused them with petrol and set fire to them. With their foot on [Warsaw's] throat, they carried out the sentence of extermination pronounced on a neighbouring nation. Alongside genocide, they committed *libricide* – the mass murder of books. Of that which had been exterminated, not even a trace was to remain in history."[18]

Several months later, Stefan Vrtel-Wierczyński, director of the National Library before the war and again briefly after it, recalled this moment in the pages of *Tygodnik Warszawski*, a Warsaw weekly: "After the fall of the Uprising of 1944, in late autumn, when military operations in the city had finally ceased and the capital lay in ruins, destroyed and depopulated, German arsonists set fire to the special collections of the National Library that had been gathered in the cellars of the Krasiński Library: manuscripts [...], incunabula and early printed books, cartographic, graphic, theatrical and musical collections. The loss of these collections was an almost unprecedented cultural catastrophe, not only for Poland but internationally. Above all, especially in the case of manuscripts, which cannot be replaced by any equivalent, they constituted an invaluable treasury of our history, culture and entire spiritual life, an extraordinarily rich and inexhaustible source for scholarly work and research. [...] There were illuminated parchment codices, Old Polish texts, historical and literary writings, theological, legal and philosophical works, autograph manuscripts, correspondence, and public and private archives. All this fell prey to the flames, was completely destroyed and perished utterly."[19]

The Library of the Krasiński Family Entail shared the fate of other libraries destroyed during and after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising. In August 1944, German soldiers threw incendiary grenades into the building of the Zamoyski Library. The resulting fire consumed the greater part of its collections, including around 100,000 manuscripts, early printed books, maps, atlases, prints, books and

18 Bohdan Korzeniewski, *Książki*, in: *Walka o dobra kultury: Warszawa 1939–1945*, ed. Stanisław Lorentz, vol. 2, Warszawa 1970, p. 293.

19 Stefan Vrtel-Wierczyński, *Biblioteka Narodowa*, "Tygodnik Warszawski" 2 (1946), 42 (20 October), p. 6.

periodicals, as well as catalogues and card indexes. The library of the Warsaw University of Technology was also completely burned out. In mid-October, its director, Czesław Gutry, found in its rooms "white, powdery ash a metre deep".[20] The final stage in the wartime destruction of the capital's libraries was the burning of the Public Library of the Capital City of Warsaw. On 16 January 1945, the day before the Germans withdrew from the city, Wehrmacht units set fire to the building, almost completely destroying the stacks and reading rooms. It should be added that Warsaw's archives suffered a similar fate. The Archives of Historical Records burned down under artillery fire, together with 40,000 nineteenth-century archival units. The Treasury Archives, partly damaged in the fighting during the Uprising, were ultimately burned by German troops after the Home Army had withdrawn from Warsaw's Old Town. In the Municipal Archives, German incendiary grenades destroyed around 70,000 archival units. The Central Archives of Historical Records, which had survived the fighting of the Uprising, was set on fire on 2 September 1944. More than 1,600,000 archival units were destroyed. On 3 November, German units burned the Central Archives of Modern Records to the ground.

In the burned-out buildings of Warsaw's libraries and archives, in destroyed tenement buildings and private homes, beneath layers of rubble mixed with brick dust, lay the ashes of manuscripts, early printed books and books whose number and form can no longer be reconstructed. In March 1945, after returning to Warsaw, Vrtel-Wierczyński visited the destroyed building of the Krasiński Library and collected the ashes of the burned manuscripts, early printed books and other volumes in two containers. More than a decade later, he recorded the memory of that moment in a letter to Maria Danilewicz-Zielińska, who was looking after Polish émigré collections in London: "Among the ruins of post-Uprising Warsaw, crushed, defenceless and depopulated, they were burned by the cruel invader, the greatest and age-old enemy of the Polish na-

20 Czesław Gutry, *Pamiętnik*, in: *Walka o dobra kultury*, vol. 2, p. 14.

tion, never sated with conquest and the harm done to others. [The invader] did this to his eternal and indelible shame, in order to destroy all traces of centuries-old Polish culture. When I returned to Warsaw in March 1945, I went straight to Okólnik Street, to the building of the Krasiński Library, and there in the cellars, with tears in my eyes, I looked at the ashes of the manuscripts of the Załuski and Rapperswil Libraries. It was a very thick layer. I took a handful, placed it in an urn and gave it to Dir[ector] St[anisław] Lorentz so that he could include it among the exhibits in the exhibition on Nazi atrocities in Warsaw. I kept a tiny handful of the ashes as a sad memento. *Nessun maggior dolore*."[21] The reference to Dante's words underlines the emotional force of the scene: the memory of the libraries' former splendour made the irreversibility of their destruction all the more stark.

Vrtel-Wierczyński did indeed pass the ashes collected on Okólnik Street to Stanisław Lorentz, director of the National Museum, who had held the post before the war, cared for the collections during the occupation and returned to lead the institution after 1945. From the first weeks of January, Lorentz had been working on an exhibition devoted to wartime destruction in the field of culture. Entitled *Warszawa oskarża* (Warsaw Accuses), the exhibition opened at the National Museum on 3 May 1945.[22] In the guide to the exhibition, published in Polish and the main congress languages, its purpose was explained as follows: "The aim of the exhibition was not to become yet another display of national suffering, a panopticon of horrors, preserving in memory the wounds that the city, as a living organism, has spent the past three months cleansing and healing. Our task is to objectify experience, to reveal amid the chaos of

21 Stefan Vrtel-Wierczyński to Maria Danilewicz-Zielińska, Poznań, 28 August 1960, Archiwum Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Warszawie, Oddział w Poznaniu, Materiały Stefana Vrtela-Wierczyńskiego, P.III-32, inventory item 2a, Korespondencja B–G, uczniowie, pp. 2–3. It is worth noting that both the memoirs and the subsequent literature on this subject state that the ashes were collected in January 1945; however, Vrtel-Wierczyński is not mentioned.

22 Stanisław Lorentz, *Wystawy obrazujące zniszczenia Warszawy*, "Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie" 20 (1976), p. 583.

ruins the meaning of the catastrophe and to expose the intentions of the enemy."[23] The exhibition was intended to show the scale of the destruction suffered by cultural institutions: "Before the exhibition halls are filled with works of art recovered from Germany, let today's visitors see the truth about German fury; let them quiet the anxiety that has gnawed at them for almost six years over the fate of the most venerable monuments of the national past. To the vision of Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz is added a new, Grottger-like cycle of visions: of the ruin of the capital, and of the martyrdom and wandering of Polish objects, the products of Polish thought, scholarship and art."[24]

Historic objects and photographs were displayed in five rooms. Among the slashed or otherwise damaged paintings, broken and bent armour, shattered ceramic and glass objects, and mummies that had been cut open and torn apart, there were destroyed manuscripts and books, as well as an urn containing the ashes of burned treasures of Polish and European written heritage. Materials relating to the losses suffered by Warsaw's libraries and archives were arranged in the Room of Destruction. At its centre was a panel with a plan of Warsaw showing the locations of these institutions. The panel bore a plaster medallion with the Warsaw mermaid and the inscription: "Libraries and archives destroyed". In wall niches, against a black background, were the inscriptions: "Ex libris marks from the National Library, University Library, Public Library, Military Library, Krasiński Library and Zamoyski Library"; "250,000 books from the National Library and 400,000 books from the Public Library were burned or carried off. The collections of the Military Library, the Krasiński Library, the Zamoyski Library and many others no longer exist." The urn was placed by the first niche, draped with a red flag bearing a white eagle. The charred leaves retained the outline of codex blocks. A library shelf containing the

23 *"Warszawa oskarża". Przewodnik po wystawie urządzonej przez Biuro Odbudowy Stolicy wespół z Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie*, ibid., p. 651.

24 Ibid., p. 643.

ashes of books was placed by the second niche. On the first table were displayed two photographs of the interior of the Krasiński Library before its destruction, and on the second, 13 photographs of burned-out Warsaw libraries.[25]

The authors of the guide to the exhibition presented the destruction of Warsaw's libraries, archives and private collections as a planned and systematic campaign to annihilate cultural property, one that assumed particular proportions after the fighting of the Uprising had ended. It opened up "a new chapter in the martyrdom of Poland's libraries, museums and archives". They recalled that scores, even hundreds of collections had either fallen prey to soldiers or been destroyed in deliberate acts of arson. A spe-



FIG. 2. Urn containing the ashes of manuscripts from the Krasiński Library, displayed at the Warsaw Accuses exhibition (1945), Zofia Chomętowska, National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. DI 95632/8 MNW (Copyright: Zofia Chomętowska, Chomętowscy / Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii)

25 Dariusz Kaczmarzyk, *Pamiętnik wystawy "Warszawa oskarża", 3 maja 1945–28 stycznia 1946 w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie*, ibid., pp. 604–605. Photographic documentation of the exhibition by Zofia Chomętowska, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, catalogue no. DI 95632/8 MNW (https://cyfrowe.mnw.art.pl/pl/zbiory/126777).

cial place in this campaign against cultural heritage was occupied by the burning of the building of the Krasiński Library, together with the early printed books kept there and the largest collection of manuscripts in Poland – "the main body of source material for Polish history".[26]

In the pages of the Warsaw daily *Życie Warszawy*, the Room of Destruction was presented as a space showing "the destructive methods used against Polish collections by the Germans". The newspaper report drew attention to the ashes of historic written works displayed in the exhibition. As it noted, "a glass vase contained the remains of burned books from the precious Krasiński Library, which incorporated the Załuski collection".[27]

Twenty years later, the urn containing the ashes was displayed in the exhibition *The National Library in the Two Decades of the Polish People's Republic: Its Work and Treasures*. Held in the Krasiński Palace and opened in April 1965, the exhibition showed the efforts undertaken in the post-war decades to rebuild the National Library and its collections. In the main hall of the Palace, enlarged photographs showed scattered catalogue cards and chaotic piles of books. These were juxtaposed with the alphabetical catalogue compiled in the following years and the well-ordered collections. Wartime destruction was symbolised by the urn containing the ashes.

The short guide to the exhibition sets out the scale of the losses suffered by the National Library. Particular attention is paid to collections created in exile and brought back to Poland after the country regained independence, which suffered devastating losses

26 *Przewodnik po wystawie*, pp. 649, 651. It is worth noting that the guide alludes to the conspicuous lack of concern for the fate of Polish collections shown by Gustav Abb, head of the German library administration in the General Government. He was accused of stealing written materials during the so-called Pruszków Operation, when attempts were made to get selected archival, library and museum materials out of Warsaw, which was being burned and systematically destroyed by German troops after the fall of the Uprising (ibid., p. 651). See Jacek Kordel, *"An ethos of a German librarian?" German librarians in the General Government in the light of memories from the Second World War*, "Polish Libraries" 11 (2023), pp. 106–107.

27 "Życie Warszawy" 123, 5 May 1945, *Wystawa "Warszawa oskarża". Notatka prasowa i głosy prasy*, "Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie" 20 (1976), p. 656.

during the war: the collections of the Polish Museum in Rapperswil and of the library at the Polish National School in the Paris district of Batignolles: "In the fires of Warsaw, started by the Nazis, the greater part of these extremely valuable collections perished."[28] Writing of the devastation of the National Library's collections after the fall of the Uprising, the guide also mentions the holdings of the Załuski Library, which had been recovered by Poland under the Treaty of Riga. It stresses that the destruction of the collections was not a consequence of military operations: "Fires were caused by exploding bombs, but the fire that destroyed the irreplaceable documents of our national culture was started in the library rooms with full premeditation by special arson squads."[29] Describing the urn, the guide notes that of the historic written works gathered in Warsaw's libraries, "only ashes remain [...], in which today, 20 years on, the shape of a book can still be recognised". Charred leaves retaining the outline of codex blocks were still clearly visible in the glass vessel, but a comparison of photographs taken just after the war with documentation from 1965 shows that in the intervening years their arrangement had changed and their volume had diminished noticeably. The photograph of the urn reproduced in the guide was accompanied by the caption: "Of the priceless treasures gathered in their thousands before the war, only a handful of ash remains (collected in the cellars of the Library on Okólnik Street in 1945)."[30] However, Vrtel-Wierczyński was not acknowledged as the source of these ashes.

In the decades that followed, the urn containing the ashes was not displayed. It was only put on show again in 2024 with the opening in the Krasiński Palace – one of Warsaw's finest Baroque buildings – of the permanent exhibition "Three Times Opened", presenting treasures from the National Library. It is displayed in

28 *Biblioteka Narodowa w dwudziestoleciu PRL. Jej prace i klejnoty. Wystawa kwiecień–maj 1965,* [Warszawa] 1965, p. 5.

29 Ibid., p. 6.

30 Ibid., p. 8.

a darkened room aligned with the enfilade of the Hall of Caryatids, the largest room in the palace. Closing the sequence of ceremonial interiors, this space evokes the apse of a medieval church and marks the culmination of the whole arrangement. The urn is accompanied by a powerful projection: images of fire are shown on multimedia screens arranged around it, recalling the blaze that consumed the collections, intentionally started by German sappers. This gives the urn a distinctive character: spatially isolated yet inscribed into the axis of the layout, it becomes the focal point of the composition and recalls the way relics are preserved and displayed.[31]

On the 70th anniversary of the destruction of the Krasiński Library, Paweł Bownik photographed the urn containing the ashes of burned manuscripts. He set it against a background of surviving books from the Wilanów collection, creating a contrast with the remains of the destroyed holdings. The photograph was enlarged in relation to the actual object. This makes it possible to examine the fragile remains of the destroyed manuscripts in detail, almost as if under a microscope.[32] Time also plays a decisive role here: the photograph was exposed for 16 minutes. It thus arrests the process of slow material disintegration – the fragile contents of the vessel are gradually crumbling away, while the image attempts to preserve a material trace of the destroyed collections. The photograph does not show the act of the library's destruction itself, but the slow decay of its remains. As the eminent scholar of visual art Ernst van Alphen stresses, three temporal orders meet in Bownik's photograph: the present of looking, the memory of wartime catastrophe, and the past, represented by the surviving books in the

31 See *Pałac Rzeczypospolitej. Trzy razy otwierana. Najcenniejsze zbiory Biblioteki Narodowej w Pałacu Rzeczypospolitej*, ed. Tomasz Makowski, with the assistance of Patryk Sapała, Warszawa 2024, p. 6.

32 Paweł Bownik, *Urna, Biblioteka Narodowa*, catalogue no. F.119428/Sz (https://polona.pl/preview/371b2749-c7db-440f-9624-e13e289162f1); see also Michał Dąbrowski, *Urn – Paweł Bownik*, Culture.pl, 7 November 2018 (https://culture.pl/en/work/urn-pawel-bownik).

background.[33] The photograph has become an important work of Polish visual art and has been shown in many galleries, including the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn and the exhibition *Gewalt ausstellen: Erste Ausstellungen zur NS-Besatzung in Europa, 1945–1948*, held at the Deutsches Historisches Museum from 24 May to 23 November 2025 and devoted to the first post-war exhibitions on the Nazi occupation of Europe.[34] It is worth adding that in 2025 the urn was documented again by the photographer Aleksander Małachowski.

In his letter to Maria Danilewicz-Zielińska, Stefan Vrtel-Wierczyński mentioned the "tiny handful of ashes" which, as he wrote, he had "kept as a sad memento". He stored it in a small glass bottle. We may assume that it was kept in his office and that this was what the writer and book-lover Zuzanna Rabska, daughter of the historian Aleksander Kraushar, saw there when she visited the National Library building as it was being rebuilt after the destruction of the war. The sight of the remains of the burned manuscripts moved her so deeply that she recorded the experience in a sonnet:

> "W tej urnie szary popiół złożono troskliwie
> Ksiąg spalonych w czcigodnej Krasińskich Książnicy,
> Leżą te sypkie szczątki jak w zimnej kostnicy,
> A trupia siność zieje przez mętnych ścian szkliwie."[35]
>
> ("In this urn, grey ash has been carefully laid,
> of books burned in the venerable Krasiński Library;
> these loose remains lie as in a cold mortuary,
> and deathly pallor breathes through the clouded glass.")

33 "The Urn does not freeze or stop the stream as a slice of time, but the image itself is 'an explosive burst of isolated moments'. The viewer should renounce her almost automatic predisposition to link particular sights to familiar historical contexts and narratives. Instead, she should look at the image as an event and reflect on what is going on there instead of understanding it in terms of what came 'before' and 'after' ", Ernst van Alphen, Clashing Time Frames, in: *Bownik. Undercoat*, ed. Magdalena Ziółkowska, Łódź–Berlin 2022, pp. 73–80, quotation on p. 78.

34 See *Gewalt ausstellen. Erste Ausstellungen zur NS-Besatzung in Europa, 1945–1948*, eds. Raphael Gross, Agata Pietrasik, Berlin 2025.

35 Zuzanna Rabska, *Moje życie z książką. Wspomnienia*, vol. 2, Wrocław 1964, p. 433.



FIG. 3. Paweł Bownik, Urna [Urn containing the ashes of manuscripts from the Krasiński Library, displayed in the Palace of the Commonwealth] Large-format 8×10 cm photography, Kodak Portra 160 negative; pigment print on archival paper, 198×140 cm, 2014. National Library of Poland, inv. no. F.119428/Sz. Copyright: Paweł Bownik



FIG. 4. Paweł Bownik, Urna [Urn containing the ashes of manuscripts from the Krasiński Library, displayed in the Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw], 100×80 cm, 2026. Copyright: Paweł Bownik

Vrtel-Wierczyński took the vessel containing the ashes to Poznań in 1946. Twenty years later, following the scholar's death, it was acquired by the Archive of the Polish Academy of Sciences as part of the purchase of his archival estate.[36] The archival materials are held in the Poznań branch, while the glass bottle is kept at the Warsaw headquarters of the Archive of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Commemorating Library Losses

The commemoration of library losses in public space remains rare, and not only in Poland. Only a handful of examples of this kind of commemoration can be identified. The library of the Catholic University of Leuven, destroyed by German troops during the pacification of the city in August 1914 – when around 230,000 to 300,000 volumes were lost in the fire, including several hundred medieval manuscripts and hundreds of incunabula – is commemorated through a permanent exhibition arranged on several levels of the tower of the rebuilt building, as well as by plaques on its façade naming the institutions and countries that helped fund its reconstruction in the interwar period. The charred remains of books, preserved in glass urns, serve as material testimony to the catastrophe. The university archive holds 25 scorched volumes, two of which are displayed in the library building.

A similar problem can be observed in Germany. Although the public burning of books in the spring of 1933 forms an important part of historical discourse, collective memory and school education – often accompanied by the famous quotation from Heinrich Heine's play *Almansor*, originally written in the context of the burning of the Qur'an: "Das war ein Vorspiel nur, dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen" ("That was only a prelude; where they burn books, they will, in the end, burn people too") – the

36 Jarosław Matysiak identifies the contents of the bottle as ashes of books from the Library of the Polish Museum in Rapperswil (Jarosław Matysiak, *Butelka z popiołami spalonych książek z Biblioteki Muzeum Polskiego w Rapperswilu w spuściźnie Stefana Vrtela-Wierczyńskiego (1886–1963) w zbiorach PAN Archiwum w Warszawie, Oddział w Poznaniu*, in: *Tyle zostało. Historia zbiorów raperswilskich w Polsce*, ed. Halina Czubaszek, Warszawa–Rzeszów 2021, pp. 113–119).



FIG. 5. Glass urns containing salvaged books from the library of the Catholic University of Leuven, KU Leuven Libraries Special Collections. Copyright: Imaging Lab

number of permanent markers of memory in public space remains surprisingly small. Although commemorative plaques can be found at sites where books were burned, only three monuments dedicated to these events also commemorate the destruction of library collections.[37] The best known of them is the memorial on Berlin's Bebelplatz, just beside the Unter den Linden boulevard. Designed by Micha Ullman and unveiled in 1995, it takes the form of a chamber set

37 There is a vast body of literature on this problem: *Verbrannte Bücher 1933. Mit Feuer gegen die Freiheit des Geistes. Eine Anthologie*, ed. Werner Treß, Bonn 2009; *Orte der Bücherverbrennungen in Deutschland 1933*, eds Julius H. Schoeps, Werner Treß, Hildesheim 2008.

below the surface of the square, filled with empty shelves for books that no longer exist. Arnold Dreyblatt's work, installed in 2021 on Munich's Königsplatz at the foot of the monumental steps leading to the neoclassical building of the State Collections of Antiquities, is different in character. *The Blacklist / Die Schwarze Liste* refers to the lists of literature deemed undesirable that were published in the spring of 1933. In a stone slab, the artist engraved the titles of 310 publications by authors placed on the blacklist, in each case choosing the last work published before 1933. Together they form a continuous stream of text without punctuation. The third example is the Hamburg monument erected in 1985 on the initiative of the Eimsbüttel district authorities. It takes the form of a semi-circular stone composition made of red marble blocks bearing inscriptions. These include the famous Heine quotation given above, the names of authors associated with Hamburg and a selection of titles of books that were burned.

Why do libraries and book collections so rarely become part of collective memory? The destruction of libraries, as places where cultural capital is accumulated, transmitted and legitimised, represents a violation of the foundations of the symbolic order and a long-term weakening of cultural continuity. Yet the significance of such losses does not in itself ensure their lasting presence in collective memory.[38] The mechanism behind this asymmetry can be explained by reference to Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory, according to which it is above all those experiences that can be linked to people's lives and the functioning of particular communities that become embedded in collective memory. The destruction of libraries is harder to connect with specific biographies, and where such a connection can be shown, memory usually focuses on the individuals rather than on the libraries themselves.[39] As a result, although library losses are remembered, they only ex-

38 Pierre Bourdieu, *The forms of capital*, in: *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, ed. John Richardson, New York 1986, pp. 244–248.

39 See Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory*, Chicago 1992.

ceptionally become part of the canon of cultural memory, remaining instead in the sphere of its archive – as memories that are preserved but not actively renewed.[40]

Destroyed libraries rarely become sites of memory in Pierre Nora's sense. The French scholar argues that, as modern societies lose "environments of memory" (*milieux de mémoire*), they create "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*): forms in which memory is anchored, preserved, ritualised and displayed in public space.[41] A catastrophe affecting a library – whether a fire, looting or deliberate destruction – often annihilates precisely those material and symbolic forms that might have served as vehicles of memory. What is revealed is an absence that can only later be addressed through a monument, museum, ritual, anniversary or narrative. At the same time, the social function of libraries themselves differs from that of monuments: they are not meant to "speak" in public space, but to enable others to speak. In social consciousness, they are above all the working spaces and support structures of intellectual life.

How are these difficulties overcome in the examples discussed above? For something to become a site of memory, it requires not only a material remnant, but also a will to remember and the symbolic and social work needed to give that remnant lasting meaning. The Kalisz monument does this by treating the book symbolically as a victim. This humanisation makes it possible to tell the story of the book collection in the language of public memory. It is no accident that the monument is reminiscent of a grave. In the speeches delivered at its unveiling, violence against books was set alongside repression against people, while the canal into which the collection was thrown was described as a tomb. The location of the monument in the Planty in Kalisz also means that the memory

40 "Archive" is used by Aleida Assmann to mean a store of memory that is dormant at a given moment, does not function in current commemorative practices and is not subject to ritualisation. Aleida Assmann, *Canon and archive*, in: *Cultural memory studies. An international and interdisciplinary handbook*, eds Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, Berlin–New York 2008, pp. 97–108.

41 Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, "Representations" 26 (1989), Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, pp. 7–24.

of the destroyed library is inscribed into the cityscape and the everyday rhythms of its inhabitants.

The urn containing ashes gathered from the burned special collections of the National Library of Poland and other Warsaw libraries gives material form to the memory of destruction. It does not represent the act of destruction itself, but rather its consequences: the traces of texts that were not meant to survive even in this fragmentary form. The ashes in the urn may resemble human ashes after a cremation, while the surviving fragments of manuscripts are almost like relics. Such associations are reinforced by the way the object is displayed – in a small, darkened room, somewhat like a chapel. Thus the urn, like the Kalisz monument, also brings about a symbolic humanisation or even sacralisation of the burned manuscripts, making it easier to incorporate their fate into practices of remembrance.

Placing the urn at the centre of the exhibition and surrounding it with screens and images of fire situates the object within a contemporary mode of staging remembrance. The arrangement makes the loss more visible, while also strengthening its impact on the viewer.

The loss of books and manuscripts occupies a particular place within the economy of memory. One way of making the destruction of libraries part of memory culture is perhaps to translate it into symbolic forms familiar from the commemoration of people. This involves the humanisation of historic written works and the sacralisation of the material remains left by their destruction: the stone dedicated to books takes the form of a grave, while the ashes of manuscripts begin to function like relics. The monument in Kalisz and the urn with the ashes show two different ways of carrying out this symbolic translation. The first inscribes the destruction of book collections into the space of the city and the language of communal memory; the second encloses it in a material trace preserved within an institution of memory. Both, however, draw on the same mechanism: for a library loss to become legible within memory culture, it must be presented in terms proper to the commemoration of human beings.

Translated by Dr. Nick Ukiah