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THE MYTH OF A LOST LIBRARY. REFLECTIONS ON VANESSA DE SENARCLENS' *LA BIBLIOTHÈQUE RETROUVÉE. UNE ENQUÊTE*, GENEVA: ZOÉ, 2025

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In August 2025, the Geneva-based publishing house ZOÉ published *La bibliothèque retrouvée. Une enquête* (*The Library Rediscovered. An Investigation*). Its author, Vanessa de Senarclens, is a specialist in French literature of the Enlightenment and teaches as a Privatdozentin at the Humboldt University of Berlin. For more than a decade, she has also published on the history of the book collection of the Bismarck-Osten family, once kept at the castle in Płoty on the River Rega (Plathe an der Rega). It is this collection that is the "rediscovered library" of the title.

Senarclens will be known to Polish readers from her essay "Wywiezione, przechowane, zapomniane", published in 2021 in the monthly *Znak*.[1] This text also concerns the Bismarck-Osten family library, whose history the author seeks to place in the broader context of the fate of German cultural heritage in the Polish lands after the Second World War. In it, she expresses the view that while the problem of the losses suffered by public libraries was

1 V. de Senarclens, *Wywiezione, przechowane, zapomniane*, "Znak", 791 (April 2021), pp. 97–103. The text was originally published in German as *Verlegt, verwahrt und vergessen. Die Bücher aus den ehemaligen deutschen Bibliotheken in Polen*, "Merkur", 74 (2020), 857, pp. 77–84.

present to some extent in post-war discourse, the question of private book collections "was first passed over in silence, then forgotten and repressed" (p. 98). On both sides of the Oder, the focus did indeed fall on lost collections held in state and university libraries, although by no means exclusively.[2] It is also worth recalling here that studies of the history of the library in Płoty and its founder were already being published in the 1960s.[3]

In the article, the author advances the thesis that private libraries, created by families rooted for generations in the territories incorporated into Poland after the Second World War, were condemned there to oblivion and remain to this day eloquent testimony to lost family histories. With regard to their post-war fate, she indicates that, in the places where they were temporarily stored, these book collections were deliberately deprived of their original internal order, after which they were distributed among university libraries throughout the country. There, she points out – albeit

2 It is not true that after 1945 the question of German family libraries in Poland was forgotten; it is enough to point to the numerous publications devoted to the Schaffgotsch family library, of which the following is a selection: S. Bernatt, *Prawie milion książek w bibliotekach Ziemi Jeleniogórskiej*, "Rocznik Jeleniogórski", 8 (1970), pp. 49–79; S. Firszt, *Losy zbiorów, kolekcji i muzealiów jeleniogórskich w latach 1939–1967*, "Rocznik Jeleniogórski", 34 (2002), pp. 125–146; idem, *Nieszczęsne losy zbiorów Schaffgotschów na tle odradzającego się muzealnictwa polskiego po 1945 roku*, "Rocznik Jeleniogórski", 42 (2010), pp. 193–226; idem, *Pierwsza powojenna relacja prasowa o zabezpieczaniu polskich dzieł sztuki na terenie Kotliny Jeleniogórskiej w 1945 r.*, "Rocznik Jeleniogórski", 54 (2022), pp. 185–190; W. Giermaziak, *Exlibrisy i grafika z księgozbioru Biblioteki Majorackiej Schaffgotschów w zbiorach Głównej Biblioteki Lekarskiej w Warszawie*, "Rocznik Jeleniogórski", 49 (2017), pp. 217–232; J. Gołaszewski, *Spuścizna kartograficzna Schaffgotschów w zasobie Archiwum Państwowego we Wrocławiu*, "Rocznik Jeleniogórski", 37 (2005), pp. 127–145; M. Iwanek, *Biblioteka Schaffgotschów*, "Rocznik Jeleniogórski", 24 (1986), pp. 43–57; W. Pawłowicz, *Z księgozbioru Schaffgotschów w Bibliotece Śląskiej*, "Książnica Śląska", 30 (2018), pp. 32–65; J. Ptaszyński, *Zbiory Schaffgotschów*, Jelenia Góra–Cieplice 2009; R. Werszler, *Dolnośląska biblioteka Schaffgotschów. Lokalizacja, księgozbiór, wnętrza, meble*, "Perspectiva. Legnickie Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne", 9 (2010), 2, pp. 232–256; Z. Żmigrodzki, *Biblioteka majoratu Schaffgotschów w Cieplicach (Warmbrunn)*, "Biuletyn Głównej Biblioteki Lekarskiej", 362 (2000), pp. 65–69.

3 Including, among others, K. Graf von Bismarck-Osten, *Friedrich-Wilhelm von der Osten (1721–1786)*, in: *Pommersche Lebensbilder*, vol. 4, ed. W. Menn, Köln 1966, pp. 142–152; idem, *Die Bücherei zu Schloss Plathe*, in: *Plathe in Pommern*, Hamburg 1966, pp. 94–100; F. Graf von Bismarck-Osten, *Die Sammlung zu Schloss Plathe und ihr Begründer Friedrich-Wilhelm von der Osten (1721–1786)*, "Baltische Studien. Neue Folge", 62 (1976), pp. 63–72.

without specifying what exactly she has in mind – "[they] found themselves in an entirely different cultural context" (p. 99). She concludes her reflections by stating that, yes, the books survived, but the work and dedication of those who created them had been in vain: the collections were dispersed, the books catalogued incorrectly or incompletely. Although they were not destroyed, they were, and remain, difficult to access (p. 99).

As proof, she cites one of the volumes formerly held in the library in Płoty, Voltaire's *La philosophie de l'histoire*, found in the collections of the University of Łódź Library. She writes: "For more than seventy years, Voltaire's volume has been in the university library. How often has it been borrowed? The head of the department does not have precise information. [...] In the last two years, I ordered it twice. I was probably the only person to do so" (p. 100). At the same time, she notes that the book has been incorrectly catalogued, as the librarian failed to recognise that behind the pseudonym *Abbé Bazin* stood Voltaire himself, the "patriarch of Ferney". She also complains that the book is made available only in the early printed books reading room, which has limited opening hours (p. 100). One may, of course, ask on what basis the author assumes that she was the only reader of this volume. Even if that were indeed the case, the frequency of use cannot be a measure of the value of a book collection or the work of librarians. Moreover, as an academic teacher and researcher, she should be perfectly well aware that, both in teaching practice and in scholarly work, it is scholarly and critical editions of works that are used, not originals. Characteristically, Senarclens does not consider the question of how often other copies of the same work have been consulted in German libraries in recent years.

The weakness of this charge becomes still clearer in another context. The author, a specialist in Enlightenment literature, knows perfectly well that Voltaire's *La philosophie de l'histoire* was incorporated in 1769, as a preliminary discourse, into a revised edition of the *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, which the philosopher continued to revise until the final years of his life.

His views can therefore also be studied in the later, revised version of the better-known *Essai*. The example of the Voltaire volume is meant rather as a rhetorical figure: Senarclens contrasts Płoty, a place where books breathed in the rhythm of successive generations of readers, with Łódź, reduced to the role of a lifeless repository of books – a comparison she develops further in her book. Thus, she argues that Charlotte Henriette von der Osten, née von Liebeherr (1734–1791), wife of Friedrich Wilhelm (1721–1786), who read the book in the eighteenth century, knew perfectly well that the pseudonym *Abbé Bazin* in fact concealed Voltaire: she herself added his name to the title page. The notes she made in the margins testify, in Senarclens' view, to a careful and informed reading. In Płoty, not only did people know who had written the work, they also consulted it often. Yet this argument cuts both ways: one might equally ask whether the library's owner, if he was indeed such a discerning bibliophile, had also acquired a later edition of Voltaire's better-known Essai containing the same text.

The contrast between Płoty and Łódź emerges most clearly in another study by Senarclens, where she evokes the image of the library in Płoty. Here, it is worth quoting a longer passage:

> The saying, attributed to the French poet and novelist Victor Hugo, mocks a certain type of individual from bourgeois circles, proud to possess a library of his own, towards which he has the same attitude as eunuchs have towards their harems. For such people, a library is a kind of trophy: they care for its appearance and guard its collections, but neither know nor love it. The library of the castle in Płoty was never like this. Even a cursory examination of the early printed books held in the University of Łódź Library shows that the opposite was true. From the moment the collection was created in the mid-eighteenth century until 1945, the library served many generations of readers, each of whom left their mark on the books, and this was by no means limited to a stamp attesting to ownership, as with *ex libris* marks. Numerous handwritten notes in the margins demonstrate the readers' intensive engagement with individual works. In many of them, for example, we find notes testifying to

both positive and negative reactions on the part of readers, as well as extensive references of a scholarly and bibliographical nature.[4]

Senarclens implies that, after the Second World War, German collections fell into the hands of Poles who were unprepared to make proper use of them. This framing recalls the entrenched stereotype of cultural inferiority long present in Prussian, Bismarck-era and Nazi propaganda against Poland.[5]

But let us turn to Senarclens' book itself. The work presents, among other things, the fate of the family in the years 1933–45, the story of their flight from the Red Army in the first days of March 1945 and their post-war history in the Federal Republic of Germany. The author examines the wartime and post-war fate of the library in Płoty and recounts the search for the dispersed book collection and the attempt to reconstruct it. She describes her research as "a kind of investigation", based on objects that summon up memories: a card catalogue, a snuffbox, *ex libris* marks and individual volumes rediscovered decades later. These objects serve as vehicles of memory, eliciting one story after another.

Senarclens' book is a combination of memoir and historical-literary essay writing. Its structure is like a mosaic, with individual chapters functioning as autonomous scenes or thematic blocks that can be read almost independently. Within the narrative, the present – the period of the author's research, involving journeys, archival searches and conversations – is interwoven with the past: the eighteenth century, the war years of the 1940s and the post-war decades from the 1950s to the 1990s. Although Senarclens tells the story in the first person, the narrative is polyphonic in character: alongside the voice of the researcher herself, it also contains the testimony of others – family memories, extracts from letters,

4 V. de Senarclens, *Części rozproszonych księgozbiorów XVIII-wiecznych. Biblioteka zamku Plathe i jej użytkownicy*, in: *Nieznane skarby. Germanika XVI-wieczne w zbiorach Biblioteki Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego*, eds. C. Dietl, M. Kubisiak, Łódź 2018, pp. 137–138.

5 See G. Kucharczyk, *Długi kulturkampf. Pruskie i niemieckie wojny kulturowe przeciw Polsce w latach 1795–1918*, Warszawa 2020.

diaries and documents, as well as correspondence with people who came across surviving fragments of the former library.

Senarclens herself, who is Swiss by origin, married into the von Bismarck-Osten family. The absence of any personal experience of expulsion or loss of property allows her, as she sees it, to tell this story with detachment, without the burden of nostalgia and the sense of grievance that accompanied older generations. As she puts it, "through my journeys in time and space, I seek to pick up the thread of an interrupted conversation about books and their readers, going back to the founding of the library in the mid-eighteenth century" (p. 31).

So much, then, for the form of the book and the author's stated intentions. Let us turn to how they are realised in practice. An analysis of longer passages in the book helps us to understand their function in constructing the narrative and, at the same time, to understand the contrast the author presents: family life in Płoty, which unfolded alongside the family library, set against the postwar world and the place the library occupies within it today.

Senarclens reconstructs the experience of the inhabitants of Płoty during the Nazi period, when a climate of fear and suspicion was said to extend into every sphere of life: "[E]veryone feels watched and distrusts everyone else. It is no longer possible to speak openly, for fear of being denounced. Bogus science is brought in to support a crazed ideology. To demonstrate the superiority of the Aryan race, children are made to line up in schools so that their skulls and jaws can be measured" (p. 176). The new ideology also entered the sphere of history and culture. In 1939, the book *Ostpommern: eine deutsche Landschaft* was published, presenting the region as exclusively German, a fortress against the "Slavic threat" (pp. 175–176, 183). The small Jewish community of the town fell victim to terror. The historical society of which Karl Graf von Bismarck-Osten (1874–1952), owner of the estate in Płoty, was a member quickly adapted to the new rules: in 1933, the treasurer of the society, who was of Jewish origin, was removed, and in 1935 an "Aryan paragraph" was introduced, formally excluding Jews from membership (p. 184).

The author goes on to say – although she neither develops nor explains this thread – that the library in Płoty also found itself in the authorities' sights. In 1938, the administration in Szczecin challenged the family's right to possess it. As it was put: "[H]ow can you believe that these books, manuscripts, coins and paintings from the past belong to you? They belong to the Führer, to the new Germany" (p. 191). A few months later, on 6 July 1938, a law abolishing family entails was announced. As a consequence, from January 1939 the library was placed under state protection "for the good of the German nation". Karl found himself, as the author writes, in a situation from which there was no way out. As a lawyer and a man attached to the principles of order, he felt a deep revulsion at the regime's arbitrary actions, but could not openly oppose them. His son Ferdinand later recalled: "My father was far too much a man of law and order not to have felt revulsion at the Nazis' arbitrary actions" (p. 184). Despite pressure from the authorities, Karl did not remove "inconvenient" authors such as Heine, Mendelssohn or Mann from the library (p. 183). The author does not ask whether Karl was in fact monitored in this respect or whether his decision required any heroism. Instead, she claims, without presenting evidence, that this gesture of resistance was significant. Its heroic dimension is reinforced by the recollections, cited by Senarclens, of her mother-in-law, who disliked the Nazis and professed courage, yet is said to have admitted: "You do not know what fear is under such a regime" (p. 187).

Although the town long remained on the margins of military operations, in the second half of the war it acquired strategic importance. From as early as 1943, inhabitants of the Ruhr who had lost their homes in the bombing were sent there to "recover their health" after the trauma of the air raids. Crates containing collections from Berlin's *Preußische Staatsbibliothek* were also sent to nearby estates in an attempt to save them from destruction. The castle in Płoty was occupied by the army, whose presence left its mark on daily life. "The soldiers' leather boots thunder through the stone corridors on the ground floor. The kitchens are requisitioned,

together with the stores of potatoes, eggs and fruit and vegetables preserved over the summer. All the rooms are occupied by Wehrmacht officers" (p. 34).

The author builds a sense of drama by presenting Karl as a man aware of the approaching catastrophe, yet at the same time paralysed by the fear that any attempt at evacuation would be regarded as sabotage and treason. In these circumstances, saving the legacy became practically impossible (p. 38).

The most dramatic moment in the narrative is 3 March 1945. Soviet tanks were approaching Płoty and flames rising above the surrounding villages could already be seen on the horizon. The town and the castle were in a state of great chaos. Karl, knowing that his world was collapsing, tried to save what he regarded as most precious: the library. He recalled that on the afternoon of 2 March he received word that "a freight wagon would be made available for loading the collection" (p. 39). Alongside the crates of books, there was room in it for seventeen people, mainly women and children. On the morning of 3 March, in the freezing winter half-light, the hastily assembled group reached the station. There was indescribable crowding on the platform: "In Płoty there is utter chaos. Refugees and military convoys everywhere. An air raid has just taken place. The dead and wounded are lying strewn along the roadside" (p. 44). As they departed, Karl understood that most of the library, which they had not managed to pack, would remain behind. "Never mind the books [...] – the Russians will find them anyway" (p. 44).

"When night fell, the train finally set off. The temperature fell to 0°C. No one slept. When little Christoph asked, 'When are we going home?', everyone's eyes filled with tears" (p. 45). The flight saved seventeen people and part of the library, but it also meant the definitive end of the world the family had known for generations. As Karl would later write in a letter: "Nothing could be saved except bare life" (pp. 38–39).

One is struck by the absence of a comparative perspective. The author does not place the family's experiences in a broader histori-

cal context: she entirely omits the realities of the Second World War – not only in German-occupied Poland, where violence, plunder and mass destruction were part of everyday life, but also in the Third Reich itself. She does not ask about the fate of the civilian population, nor does she consider the situation of forced labourers in Płoty, whose presence she does not mention at all.

After the war, the family found itself in western Germany. At first, life unfolded in makeshift conditions, in overcrowded flats, often with distant relatives. Ferdinand, released from a Soviet prisoner-of-war camp only in October 1948, returned to his loved ones after three years of absence. Here the author does not even ask about the reasons for his imprisonment in the Soviet Union. Instead, she stresses that, once in Germany, he lived with his family in cramped temporary accommodation before, in the mid-1950s, they managed to build a small house in Bad Godesberg. Although the author mentions that the town lay on the outskirts of Bonn, she does not add that it was a prestigious residential district known for its villas. There, in the *modest drawing room* [emphasis mine – JK], the remnants of the old world found their place: paintings, tapestries, portraits of ancestors and the library's card catalogue. It is worth noting that the family managed to preserve a considerable part of its former collection. Although elements of the old aristocratic culture were preserved in this setting, silence about the past became a means of survival. Ferdinand and his wife Margarethe rarely mentioned Płoty (p. 18). This observation should be set alongside the author's remarks concerning Ferdinand's active involvement in the life of Pomeranian expellee associations, discussed further below.

In this world, the card-catalogue cabinet became something more than a piece of furniture. For Ferdinand, the catalogue symbolised the life's work of his father, Karl. But for the next generation, the cabinet felt like a burden, a reminder of the fate of refugees: "For Ferdinand's sons, who had not known the library, this catalogue cabinet had something morbid about it. It was like the map of a sunken country" (p. 22).

The author turns to the post-war fate of the Recovered Territories, noting that Soviet brutality was experienced not only by Germans, but also by Poles (p. 202). She invokes the story of Olga Tokarczuk's grandmother, who came to Silesia, where she was allocated a house left behind in haste by a German family. The interior was full of mementoes of its former inhabitants: photograph albums hidden in writing desks, porcelain decorated with unfamiliar patterns and everyday objects bearing the traces of an entirely different culture. The author states that this was a space inhabited by "German ghosts" (p. 202).

But let us return to the book collection. Senarclens mentions that her father-in-law, after his retirement, attempted to reconstruct the fate of the library left behind in Płoty in 1945. She adds that various versions of events existed: some spoke of the book collection being burned together with the castle, others claimed that although the building had survived, the books had ended up in Warsaw, Lublin or Toruń. Ultimately, there is a breakthrough in the search thanks to Ferdinand's contacts in the Pomeranian expellee associations. Here we find a contradiction: Ferdinand's activity in these associations indicates that the memory of Płoty had by no means been entirely repressed; it was through them that Ferdinand met Bärbel Deeg, secretary to a professor of German studies at the University of Giessen. Through her, he in turn established contact with a doctoral student from the University of Łódź who was in Germany on an exchange. And it was from this doctoral student that he learned that the collection whose traces he had sought for so long was in fact in Łódź. Senarclens stresses that for Ferdinand this was an extremely heartening piece of news. At last he had gained certainty that the books had not only survived the turmoil of war, but could also be found (pp. 213–214).

The author notes that if as many as 13,000 volumes survived in the University of Łódź Library, they must have been properly secured. She observes: "I can therefore say that since 1945 the books have been preserved physically intact [...]. They were not used to light fireplaces. They were not torn up, used for rolling cigarettes,

insulating walls, filling holes in roads or draining ponds. They still exist, scattered over thousands of kilometres between Siberia, Moscow, Łódź, Greifswald and elsewhere. How is that possible?" (p. 203). Does she realise that the forms of destruction she lists echo the means and methods by which, during the Second World War, the Germans dealt with Polish book collections? One need only recall the fate of the Kalisz libraries, tens of thousands of whose volumes were thrown into one of the canals and then covered with mud, rubble and excrement.[6]

The author states that since the book collection survived, someone must have made an effort to save it: "[T]he other question that preoccupies me is this: when everything is collapsing, when hunger, cold and fear prevail, what becomes of books? Who takes an interest in them? On the margins of these apocalyptic events, during which hordes of barbarians raped women and ravaged the land, there were people within the Red Army or the Polish militias who took responsibility for the collection and protected it. It is they who interest me" (p. 203). Recourse to the relevant literature would have enabled her to find answers to the questions that preoccupy her concerning the process by which cultural collections were secured in the Recovered Territories. Abandoned and deserted collections, including the library in Płoty, were placed under protection in Poland. Books were taken to collective repositories, from which they were then sent to scholarly institutions that had lost their own holdings during the war, had been evacuated from the eastern territories lost by Poland or were established only after the war. This was a fundamentally different approach from the practices of the German occupation authorities, which in the war years created similar repositories chiefly in order to facilitate the mass destruction of Polish book collections: during the Second World War, 6.5 million books from libraries in the Wartheland

6 See J. Kordel, *Kalisz als Grab der Bücher. Zur systematischen Zerstörung von Bibliotheken im Wartheland im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, "b.i.t.online. Bibliothek. Information. Technologie", 29 (2026), 2, pp. 166–173.

were gathered in Poznań, of which five million were destroyed.[7] Moreover, it is impossible not to note that Senarclens reduces the saving of book collections undertaken after the Second World War by the Polish state to a story about individual gestures by good militiamen or Red Army soldiers. She fails to see that in a country that was itself struggling to rise from the ruins, and whose capital lay in rubble, a conscious and organised effort was made to save books left behind by German owners. It should be remembered that more than 670,000 volumes passed through the Repository of Secured Book Collections in Szczecin; the library in Płoty therefore represented only a small part of them, around two per cent.[8]

A Polish acquaintance of the author, with whom she shares by email her reflections on good militiamen and Red Army soldiers, writes with some bitterness that this is a sign of the naivety of the Western European bourgeoisie, incapable of understanding the real hardships of life. "When people are dying of hunger and cold, no one has any interest in books," he replies, criticising her idealism and suggesting that the hope she attributes to the anonymous "guardians of the book collection" is in fact an illusion: "People were dying like flies, and we were supposed to concern ourselves with books, the attributes of a privileged class and a pastime for idlers?" (pp. 203–204).

It is characteristic of Senarclens' writing that she places critical remarks about Poland and Poles in the mouths of her interlocutors, while herself appearing in the role of objective reporter. The remark about honest Red Army soldiers and militiamen serves as a prelude to a bitter reflection on how, in the realities of the

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

8 A. Fabiańska, *Akcja zabezpieczania księgozbiorów i bibliotek w latach 1944–1955*, "Z Badań nad Książką i Księgozbiorami Historycznymi", 17 (2023), 4, pp. 771–789; P. Garlicki, *Teki Marii Quirini jako źródło do dziejów poniemieckich księgozbiorów na Pomorzu Zachodnim*, in: *Księgozbiory rozproszone. Losy księgozbiorów historycznych po II wojnie światowej*, ed. A. Siuciak, Malbork 2015, pp. 83–94; R. Nowicki, *Rezultaty działalności Zbiornicy Księgozbiorów Zabezpieczonych w Szczecinie w latach 1947–1950*, "Roczniki Biblioteczne", 51 (2007), pp. 169–188.

Polish People's Republic, cultural property left behind by the German population was treated. She notes that the fate of former collections was often especially dramatic: they were divided among different libraries, thereby being deprived of their integrity and historical value. She does not indicate specific examples – and at the same time appears to forget that the book collection from Płoty was transferred to Łódź almost in its entirety.

The author recounts conversations with a colleague of hers, a professor from Szczecin, whom she says is a medievalist and the author of articles on the library in Płoty published in scholarly journals.[9] "I asked him," she recalls, "what cultural policy had been followed in the allocation of these archival holdings. In the late 1950s, the Poles had, after all, rebuilt the Pomeranian Dukes' Castle in Szczecin, so why had they not laid claim to these collections?" The professor's answer only confirmed the reputation of the new Polish lands as a kind of "Wild West". He explained that people came there mainly to plunder or to take refuge from political persecution. Then, as the author notes, he replied sharply: "Don't talk to me about cultural policy – there was none!" The professor went on: "Everyone came to help themselves" – the Soviets, but also the Poles, who regarded these former German lands with nothing but suspicion. The transfer of the library from Płoty to Łódź formed part of the programme of de-Germanisation: the Recovered Territories were to be Polonised, and for that purpose, the professor stressed, an eighteenth-century German library was not needed (pp. 215–216).

Looting, however, was committed not only by Soviets and Poles. As the author herself admits, some volumes were appropriated by retreating Wehrmacht soldiers. In the 1970s, one sixteenth-century copy was even sent back by post: "The sender was a soldier in the

9 This is presumably Edward Rymar, and the scholarly journal to which she refers is "Bibliotekarz Zachodniopomorski": E. Rymar, *Biblioteka Ostenów w Płotach (1)*, "Bibliotekarz Zachodniopomorski", 45 (2004), 3–4, pp. 36–44; idem, *Biblioteka Ostenów Bismarcków w Płotach*, część 2: *Tajemnice rozproszenia*, "Bibliotekarz Zachodniopomorski", 46 (2005), 4, pp. 41–53; idem, *Biblioteka Ostenów – Bismarcków w Płotach*, część 3: *Stare i nowe tropy rozproszenia zbiorów*, "Bibliotekarz Zachodniopomorski", 50 (2009), 3–4, pp. 32–35.

retreating German army who, in March 1945, had helped himself to a book from the library of the abandoned castle" (p. 114).

Although the greater part of the collection went to Łódź, this did not save it from what the author calls another act of devastation. In the Łódź library, the book collection was ruthlessly divided up. The books "were first stored in an old factory and then, after the library had been built, arranged on the shelves according to size." The author adds: "Moreover, the librarians did not take account of provenance when dividing up the collections, nor of centuries or subjects." She fails to note, however, that this kind of planning of storage space is standard practice in libraries. Without further comment, she goes on to write: "Some reports state that students from Poznań may have been employed to carry out this work during their holidays." She does not consider whether these were student placements or some other form of work. The author mentions that the books were subsequently catalogued "by librarians who spoke Russian and Polish, but rarely the German, French or English of the volumes concerned. As a result, many errors appeared, especially in the case of anonymous eighteenth-century titles" (pp. 214–215). This is, of course, an allusion to the copy of *La philosophie de l'histoire* already discussed, on whose title page Charlotte Henriette added Voltaire's name. Once again, the author draws a loaded contrast: in Płoty, where family tradition and familiarity with the collections were taken for granted, such an inscription would have been recognised without difficulty, whereas in Łódź, in an alien context and without any rootedness in this history, it remained incomprehensible. Senarclens' cavalier approach here is all the more striking given that she does not indicate the extent of the alleged errors. It is worth adding that the cataloguing was probably carried out by librarians educated before the war, who did not necessarily know Russian but for the most part did have a command of Western languages.

The author's observations concerning her dealings with Polish cultural institutions and her assessment of their activities also call for comment. She informs readers of the difficulties encountered

by researchers working in Poland. At the same time, she stresses that, from the perspective of these institutions, even in the 1990s the question of the former owner's "intentions" was supposedly of fundamental importance if any fruitful cooperation was to begin (p. 214).

Senarclens recalls her experience while staying in Warsaw: "Already in 2019, I had been looking for information concerning the first months after the Germans left Płoty. Who had taken charge of the books? Were there any lists, inventories or documents relating to the collection? I even came to Warsaw to pursue this matter, but was not granted permission to conduct research." She does not say so directly, but from this one may infer that the decision was taken by the director of the National Library of Poland. The author adds: "I was asked to formulate my questions in writing and to submit an official request for permission to the director, which I did, making no secret of my family connection with the former owners. That cannot have helped." The author does not conceal her disappointment, stressing that the letter she received was partly incomprehensible to her because of the language barrier. "In his reply, the director described the library of my husband's family as 'an abandoned collection' which the Poles had, after all, had to deal with. According to him, my husband's family had, in short, bolted like rabbits, leaving everything behind and forgetting their responsibilities" (*Pour lui, ma belle-famille avait, en somme, détalé comme des lapins et tout laissé en plan, oublieuse de ses responsabilités*). "He sent me a list of documents in Polish, including, among other things, a report by a certain Dr Henryk Gordziałkowski concerning the typhus epidemic in the town. I took this response, unrelated to the subject of the books, as a way of sending me packing" (p. 204). It is worth noting that Senarclens does not provide a photocopy of the letter she claims to have received from the director of the National Library of Poland.

It should be stressed that the concept of *abandoned* or *deserted property* – the French "une collection abandonnée", which the author places in quotation marks, may be translated in both ways – is

a legal term.[10] At the same time, it reflects the factual situation of the property left behind in Płoty.

Describing Polish–German cooperation on the preparation of a catalogue of German-language early printed books held in Łódź, the author writes: "It is true that, for the Poles, all this is a delicate matter. Seeing German scholars arrive with their German funding to draw up lists of old German books, in the German manner, is bound to cause a certain irritation. That is understandable. Heinrich, one of the participants in the project, explains this mistrust to me, but also complains about it. He lives in Łódź, his wife is Polish, he speaks the language, he loves the country. He would like to be able to move on to something else" (pp. 75–76). Here, the author provides no evidence for her claims. She does not explain why the matter is regarded as "delicate", who resents whom, or how this resentment manifests itself. Nor does she specify what the "something else" might be that Heinrich would like to move on to. Moreover, her framing here echoes arguments from the time of the Second World War: according to the German librarians who exercised supervision over Polish collections, their subordinates supposedly lacked the appropriate cataloguing skills, which in their view justified the need to introduce German models.[11]

Although the greater part of the book collection from Płoty was successfully secured, its post-war fate is viewed by the author with deep distaste. Describing the stack area of the University of Łódź Library, she states: "A repository, like a tomb, cut off from any new production of knowledge. The books arrived after the war and bear its traces. They point back to a vanished context from which they have been torn. Piotr [the stack attendant] shows me an octavo volume in leather, its cover pierced by a bullet hole. The silence

10 Ustawa z dnia 6 maja 1945 r. o majątkach opuszczonych i porzuconych [Act of 6 May 1945 on abandoned and deserted property], "Dziennik Ustaw" 1945, no. 17, item 97.

11 See J. Kordel, *An Ethos of a German Librarian? German Librarians in the General Government in the Light of Contemporary Memories from the Second World War*, "Polish Libraries", 11 (2023), p. 96.

of the room evokes the fearful voices of the past. The books seem trapped in an in-between state, waiting, on the threshold. They belong to German culture, where in catalogues they are listed as absent, lost, unaccounted for, yet in Poland they have not yet truly found their place. They are stuck 'in limbo', as the English say, that is, according to the Collins dictionary, 'in an imagined place for people or things that are lost, forgotten or unwanted'" (p. 77). The question arises of what, then, one should call a true tomb of books and manuscripts – such as the destroyed building of the Krasiński Library, where in the autumn of 1944 the German authorities burned hundreds of thousands of manuscripts, incunabula, early printed books, maps, atlases, prints, catalogues and card indexes?[12]

Writing about the copy of *Extrait du Dictionnaire historique et critique* from Płoty held in Łódź, she notes: "Today, however, it is in very poor condition: its cover is coming away, it is covered with mould stains and has been perforated by paper-eating insects" (p. 81). The strong suggestion is that the book's present condition is the result of poor storage conditions in its tomb in Łódź.

The author's complaints, however, are not limited to the physical condition of the collections. She describes the conditions governing the use of the reading room with equal severity: "Access to the eighteenth-century books that interest me turns out to be rather complicated. The reading room is open every other day in the morning (Mondays and Wednesdays) or afternoon (Tuesdays and Thursdays), for just four hours. Provenance is not indicated in the catalogue, so one essentially orders them blind. If everything goes as planned, a pile of books will be waiting for me on site and the librarian on duty that day will speak English" (p. 76). In fact, it would be hard to find a library whose catalogue of early printed books included provenance information for all volumes. Moreover, the author's comments on the language skills of the Łódź librari-

12 See idem, *Der Büchermord. Die Zerstörung der Bibliotheken in der polnischen Hauptstadt während und nach der Niederschlagung des Aufstands (August 1944 bis Januar 1945)*, in: *Bücher und ihre Wege. Bibliomigration zwischen Deutschland und Polen seit 1939*, ed. V. de Senarclens, Paderborn 2024, pp. 21–44.

ans, like her remarks concerning the response from the director of the National Library of Poland, reveal an almost colonial attitude: she assumes, in effect, that one should not be expected to communicate in Polish in Poland. There is no reflection on her own lack of knowledge of the country's official language.

It is worth noting here that Senarclens cannot quite decide whether she would like the book collection from Płoty to be used or to remain untouched. Presenting Charlotte Henriette's bibliophilic passions, already well known from her earlier texts, she describes the seventeen-volume edition of Voltaire's works from 1756 preserved in Łódź. It was in these very volumes that her protagonist dried flowers: "What is one to do, three centuries later, with these flowers found in a library in central Poland? They are so fragile and their colour has faded. I immediately close the volume, hoping – not without reason – that no one will come poking their nose into this volume for another three centuries" (p. 103). It is the phrase "not without reason" that gives the remark its sting: in Poland no one reads Voltaire, as though the nation had not yet grown mature enough to do so.

Writing of the fact that the archive of the university library preserved, among other things, the notebooks used by her relative Elisabeth to learn English, the author observes that we owe this to "a sympathetic, and at the same time so typically Polish, piety towards documents of the past, which prevented the archivists from throwing this worthless relic into the bin" (p. 162). This sounds rather like the familiar Enlightenment motif of the "good barbarian", who, with simple-hearted zeal, preserves what, in the eyes of the civilised, is an insignificant trifle unworthy of attention.

One also notes, by way of illustration, the carelessness with which the author handles words, and her lack of responsibility for their implications. In characterising Western Pomerania (historically known as Hinterpommern, or Farther Pomerania), the author draws entirely unwarranted conclusions from the name itself, stating that "the very name further intensifies the impression of remoteness, peripherality and oblivion attached to this strip of

land on the Baltic coast" (p. 13). Writing about Łódź, by contrast, she notes that the city, which in the nineteenth century was known as the "Manchester of the East", owed its development to "the Polish, German and Jewish minorities" (p. 75). Are we then to assume that, because Łódź belonged politically to the Russian Empire, Russians constituted the majority?

In the final pages of the book, as if by *deus ex machina*, a seemingly quite different view of the collection's fate appears: "Most of the books from [Karl's] collection are in Łódź, in good hands [...]. At the end of June 2022, I took Matthias [the author's husband, Karl's grandson] there. It was a great moment for him, for the whole family, but also, I think, for our two countries, for the Polish librarians who opened their doors [...]. The librarian was keen to show Karl's grandson the great repository room for old volumes, which is closed to the public. She had made a very thoughtful gesture, which moved us enormously: in the middle of the room she had prominently displayed the photograph of Karl in his library in Płoty in 1944. He was there, among the books" (p. 218).

The author counters these positive images with the bitter reflection that "these German books are a treasure to them, but in reality few readers take an interest in them" (p. 218). With a certain dramatic intensity, she stresses that the dispersed collections have lost not only their thematic coherence, but also the emotional bond and historical context that gave them meaning. In other words, although they are treated as a priceless treasure, in fact they remain forgotten. She also suggests that their fate would have been different had they remained in the place from which they were taken.

Senarclens sets out to present a story of memory, loss and the recovery of heritage; what she has written is a book dominated by family sentimentalism. In attempting to reconstruct the fate of the library, she instead reconstructs the myth of a lost world, in which the Germans, the von Bismarck-Osten family, appear as victims of history, noble guardians of culture whose heritage was destroyed. The author fails to see that, after the Second World War,

Poland, a country devastated and plundered, made an enormous effort to save what had survived of former German collections. This distorts the picture of reality and leads to an inflated reckoning of grievances. The effect is heightened by recourse to stereotypes well known from Prussian propaganda campaigns from the time of Frederick II, Chancellor Bismarck and the Third Reich. The author's statements may be read as implying the cultural superiority of German elites. The book as a whole takes on a patronising tone, at times bearing the marks of a colonial perspective.

Furthermore, the book is marred by unjustified and damaging generalisations. The author accuses Poles of a lack of respect for cultural property and of chaos in the management of the heritage entrusted to them; she formulates accusations concerning the way the collections were processed, obstruction of access to archives and libraries, and mistreatment of researchers. Particularly telling is the way in which she uses the statements of her Polish interlocutors: through them, she creates the appearance of distance, while she herself appears in the role of an objective observer. She puts critical words into the mouths of Poles, thereby seeking to avoid responsibility for the judgements expressed.

The family perspective, though legitimate, in its present form obscures the proper sense of proportion. It is regrettable, then, that a story about a lost library, which was intended as an expression of memory, has become, even if not entirely consciously, a projection of anti-Polish prejudice.

Translated by Dr. Nick Ukiah