


Destruction of a state symbol

During the last days of August 1939 there was a widespread belief among Poles that there would not be a war. Great importance was attached to the talks being conducted by the Polish Government with England and France. This may have been why no decisive action was taken to safeguard the art collections. The plan to protect cultural possessions, which had been drawn up in April 1939 by the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment, had not been universally implemented. The plan foresaw the categorization of moveable objects into two groups: works of art of exceptional value, which were to be evacuated from areas that were under threat, and historic buildings and monuments which had to be safeguarded in their actual permanent location. At the Royal Castle in Warsaw, despite having a plan which had been drawn up much earlier by the custodian, Kazimierz Brokl – the collections were not removed in time, and the administrative board of the building did not



We wrested everything we could from the Germans – from the plundered and devastated Royal Castle which we defended tirelessly while the enemy destroyed it. The enemy trampled everything, while we salvaged it with great care, shook off the dust and hid it carefully – over and over again, for as long as was possible.

Stanisław Lorentz



safeguard the most valuable exhibits. As a result of the chaotic measures undertaken just after the outbreak of war by the Civil Chancellery of the President of Poland, very few works of art were moved to a safe place: the paintings of Jan Matejko *Stefan Balthory at Pskov*, *Rejtan*, *The Fall of Poland*; the coronation insignia of Stanislaw August – the sceptre, sword and chain of the Order of the White Eagle – as well as the tapestries. After the civil and military personnel in the President's Office and the members of the Castle's management who lived on site had vacated the premises, only Kazimierz Brokl, several workers responsible for managing the Castle works, as well as some employees of a small fire-fighting and anti-aircraft defence unit (which included civilian administrative officers at the Castle) were responsible for the care of the collections. After inspecting the Castle, the commander-in-chief of the Voluntary Citizens' Guard decided to increase the number of security posts and on the night of 6/7 September he sent a special unit there under the command of Lieutenant Stefan Kotkowski.

Stefan Zakrzewski, who participated in these events, wrote: 'We were given accommodation in the northern part of the Castle, we familiarized ourselves with the rather modest fire-fighting equipment located in the building, and we were also able to start up the pump and sprinkler device. We did not anticipate that we would be expected to use this equipment so soon. Around mid-September, when I visited the rooms in

the Castle once again with Mr Kazimierz Brokl, the sixty-two-year-old custodian – the only damage I saw was a cracked window in the Castle's chapel.'

German aircraft bombed Warsaw from the very first day of the war. A week later heavy artillery began shelling the city. Despite the frequent raids on Warsaw, the Royal Castle did not suffer any losses initially; the first shell hit the building on 8 September, but it did not cause much damage. That day the custodian, Brokl, moved the urn containing Tadeusz Kościuszko's heart to the crypt of St John's Cathedral nearby.

BLACK SUNDAY

17 September 1939, so-called *Black Sunday*, marked the beginning of the Royal Castle in Warsaw's most tragic period in its wartime history. That morning the Germans opened fire on the city, shelling it with heavy artillery combined with aerial bombardment. The Castle went up in flames, which enveloped the domes of the Clock and Władysław towers, the roof above the Senators' Chamber and the wing facing the Vistula river. At first, three units of fire-fighters began extinguishing the fire; over the next few hours they were joined by another five units. Alongside the fire-fighters, railway workers, scouts, employees of the Technical Department of the Municipal Authorities and the National Museum in Warsaw, members of the anti-aircraft security units, and also the residents of the Old Town all helped to fight the flames and save the building and its collections, having been called to

action by the Mayor of Warsaw, Stefan Starzyński. While the fire engulfed the Castle, it became apparent that proper precautions had not been taken to safeguard it in the event of a fire; the equipment for extinguishing fires was inadequate, thus significantly hindering rescue operations (**Fig. 1**).

Report of the fire service: 'the first three units of fire-fighters were immediately sent to the scene of the fire. Upon arrival they entered the main courtyard through the Senators' Gate, where they took-up their positions and set to work extinguishing the flames, using water drawn from the fire hydrant located in the Castle's courtyard. They then attempted to locate the fire and block its further advance to the east and west wings of the Castle. At around 11 a.m. when it seemed that the fire was under control, another outbreak was sparked-off by incendiary devices.'

The blaze could not be contained until the early evening after a huge effort and it took the whole of the following day to extinguish it completely. On that day, while the former royal residence was buried under a hail of missile fire and incendiary bombs, and St John's Cathedral was also engulfed in flames, Hitler personally observed the siege of Warsaw from a church tower in the Praga district on the other side of the river. At the same time as the fire being put out, action was immediately taken to save the cultural treasures amassed in the Royal Castle, initially led by Kazimierz Brokl, who personally carried out the collections from the rooms that were at risk (**Figs. 2, 2a**).