

# PROFESSOR JANUSZ DURKO (1915–2017)

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Warsaw

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**Abstract:** Professor Dr hab. Janusz Durko was a historian, an archivist, and a distinguished museum curator. Born in Warsaw, he studied history at Warsaw University and graduated in 1938; spent the German occupation and the whole period of the Second World War in Warsaw. After the liberation Janusz Durko worked in the Capital City Reconstruction Office and then in the Institute of National Remembrance, which conducted research on con-temporary history. Doctoral degree in 1948, awarded a habilitation in 1955, and assigned the title of professor in 1964.

In 1951 Janusz Durko was appointed director of the Central Historical Museum, which two years later became the Historical Museum of Warsaw. The permanent exhibition he opened in 1955 was the first extensive and complete attempt at a synthetic presentation of Warsaw in the past; the Museum – at the time an institution of greatest importance among historical museums in Poland – exerted an impact on the development of historical museum exhibitions also in other countries. This fact enhanced Professor Durko's professional position: he was invited to join numerous committees, boards (including museum ones), and associations, and became member of many editorial boards, i.a. of "Muzealnictwo".

In 1951–2003, when Janusz Durko was head of the Historical Museum of Warsaw it was one of the main centres of research

on the history of Warsaw and the site of multiple conferences, sessions, and temporary exhibitions. The Museum maintained many international contacts, intensively created its collections, and offered an attractive and wide educational program. The number of its branches grew steadily.

Undoubtedly the greatest among the Professor's assorted publications (a total of ca. 140) is the monumental *Bibliografia Warszawy* (1958–2006) edited by him – eight volumes registering all, or almost all, publications about Warsaw issued in 1795–1970.

In recognition of his achievements Professor Durko was awarded numerous distinctions, i.a. the Minister of Culture and Arts Award of 1st degree for Protection of Cultural Heritage, the Award of Capital City of Warsaw (twice), the title of Homo Varsoviensis, the Order of Polonia Restituta First Class – the Grand Cross with Star, and the Gold Medal for Merit to Culture "Gloria Artis".

After retiring in 2003 Janusz Durko still maintained close contacts with the Museum as a member of its Board (2004–2008). In 2015 he appeared for the last time at the institution, whose director he had been for 52 years, to take part in celebrations of his hundredth birthday. Professor Durko died a year after and was buried in the Powązki Military Cemetery.

**Keywords:** Professor Janusz Durko (1915–2017), historian, museologist, the Historical Museum of Warsaw, director, editor, author of publications.

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Professor Dr hab. Janusz Durko – for years director of the Historical Museum of Warsaw and honorary member the Association of Polish Museum Curators – died in September 2017 after a long and active life.

Born in Warsaw, he was the son of Jan Durko and Janina née Żyszkowska. Graduated from a Warsaw secondary school (1934) and the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Warsaw (1938) – M.A. in history. Spent the German

occupation and almost the entire war in the district of Żoliborz where he resided and worked. Initially employed in the Social Self-help Committee of the Capital City of Warsaw, then in the Social Construction Enterprise and, finally, in the clandestine Architectural-Town Planning Studio, part of the above Enterprise, which conducted theoretical studies aimed at the post-war reconstruction of Warsaw. At the time of the Warsaw Uprising forcibly deported; returned



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to Warsaw in February 1945. After several months spent working in the Capital City Reconstruction Office Janusz Durko left for the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), involved in research on most recent history, and worked there for almost five years as, i.a. secretary of the editorial board of the "Dzieje Najnowsze" quarterly. In the course of his employment at IPN wrote a dissertation on the beginnings of the socialist movement in the Kingdom of Poland; in 1948 the thesis served as a basis for a Ph.D. degree at the University of Warsaw. The topic was not chosen by accident but was the consequence of historical interests inherited from the family home. Janusz Durko's father, who as a young man was associated with the socialist movement and participated in the Revolution of 1905–1907, devoted years to collecting material on the history of the workers' movement. Fortunately, these collections survived the war and were entrusted to Janusz Durko, who upon numerous occasions used them in his subsequent scientific activity.

The Ph.D. dissertation enabled to establish co-operation with the Academy of Political Studies, reactivated after the war, where Janusz Durko was entrusted with lecturing and conducting a seminar on nineteenth-century Poland. When in July of that year the Institute of National Remembrance – deemed as reactionary and untrustworthy – was closed, Janusz Durko, deprived of both occupations, was compelled to urgently seek a new workplace, which, at the same time, would make it possible to continue pursuing his research interests. Having worked for several months at the Chief Directory of State Archives, in 1951 he ultimately opted

for the Institute of History at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (CC PUWP), where he stayed for the next twenty years, first as head of the archive and then as vice-director of the Institute (1956–1971). There he was awarded a habilitation (1955), assigned the title of professor (1964), and once again promoted – for the next ten years Janusz Durko was director of the Central Archive of CC PUWP. The outcome of his scientific activity at that time included editing and publishing the diaries of Bolesław Limanowski (vol. II–IV, 1958–1973) and a collection of reminiscences of Warsaw workers from the turn of the nineteenth century (1970).

The history of the working-class movement in Poland was for many years a significant domain of Janusz Durko's interests and professional undertakings, but in time he became increasingly absorbed in museology. Already in 1951, after he began working at the Institute of Party History, he accepted the offer of a parallel post of director of the Central Historical Museum – an institution established a year earlier after a fusion of the Museum of Warsaw, reactivated after the war (and previously known as the Museum of Old Warsaw), and the Museum of Work and Social Progress, at the time being organised. The seat of the new museum institution was to be composed of 11 town houses in the Old Town, destroyed during the war. When Durko accepted the function of director only a single house, surrounded by rubble, had been rebuilt. Neither the concept nor the range of the museum, which he was to head, had been established. As reconstruction progressed the conviction that the heart of the Old Town and the historical town houses restored with such reverence should become the seat of an institution documenting and presenting predominantly the history of the capital continued to grow. This concept finally triumphed in the spring of 1953, and when the rebuilt town houses were presented to Museum curators the scope of the permanent exposition to be arranged within had been already resolved. The established character of the institution was ultimately sanctioned by changing its name to the Historical Museum of Warsaw.

The permanent exhibition opened by Janusz Durko in 1955, and arranged at an impressive rate, was the first such vast (60 showrooms with a space of about 3250 sq. m.) and complete attempt at a monographic presentation of Warsaw's past. At the same time, it was totally original – an exhibition of the history of a single town on such a great scale and set up in an entirely modern manner became an event inspiring museology not only in Poland. In 1960, a large group of experts from all over the world, gathered at a seminar on history museums held in Warsaw by the International Council of Museums ICOM, acknowledged the exposition about the history of Warsaw to be exemplary in its category. Thirty years later this complimentary assessment was confirmed in *Museums of Influence* (Cambridge 1987), a publication by Kenneth Hudson, a UNESCO museum plenipotentiary, who included the Historical Museum of Warsaw among those institutions, which due to their style, approved by the wide public, influenced the shape assumed by historical museology also in other countries.

For long the rank of the Historical Museum of Warsaw as an institution of greatest importance in Polish historical museology furthered also the professional status of

Professor Janusz Durko. From 1953 he was member of the Museum-Conservation Board of the Minister of Culture and Art, two years later he was appointed member of a ministerial team concerned with the verification of museum conservation services employees and, subsequently joined the editorial committee of "Muzealnictwo" (1956). From 1954 Prof. Durko combined those duties with work in ICOM National Committee Poland, where for more than a decade he fulfilled the function of secretary (1954–1970). In this capacity he took part in ICOM congresses in Zurich, Stockholm, and Amsterdam, a congress held by the Yugoslavia National Committee in Skopje, and an ICOM seminar conducted in Warsaw and Cracow in September 1966; upon that occasion he was one of the speakers and was elected Secretary of the ICOM International Committee for Museums and Collections of Archaeology.

Evidence of appreciation for the skills and experience won by Janusz Durko while creating a celebrated museum institution almost from scratch was his participation in efforts aimed at the development of regional museology in Poland. From 1958 he took part, together with directors of other Warsaw museums, in work performed by the so-called Coordination Commission established for devising program directives for the museums of Warmia and Masuria; in time its activity was expanded so as to encompass also other voivodeships. These were by no means the sole duties and occupations entrusted to Janusz Durko in the course of his long professional career; although it is impossible to mention all, let us recall that he was, i.a. member of the Committee for the Celebrations of the Millennium of the Polish State in the Capital City of Warsaw (1958–1965) and the Board of the Society of the Friends of Warsaw (from 1963), chairman of the Historical Commission of the Civic Committee of the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Monuments of the Capital City of Warsaw (1963–1970), Vice-Chairman of the Board for the Protection of Cultural Property at the Warsaw Reconstruction Office (1964–1970), member of the Scientific Council of the Jewish Historical Institute (1969–1994), Chairman of the Polish National Committee of the International Association for the History of Glass (1969–2003), member of the Civic Committee for the Reconstruction of the Royal Castle in Warsaw (1971–1980), Vice-chairman of the Social Committee for the Preservation of Old Powązki (1973–2008), Chairman of the Main Board of the Society for the Preservation of Historical Monuments (1982–1989), Chairman of the Counsel for Protection of Cultural Heritage at the National Council for Culture (1983–1989), Chairman of the Scientific Council of the Archive of Polish Academy of Sciences (1984–1992) and member of the Organising Committee of the Celebrations of the 400th Anniversary of Warsaw as a Capital (1991–1996). It must be added that Janusz Durko was also a member of more than ten museum and editorial boards, i.a. "Rocznik Warszawski" (1960–2012), *Encyklopedia Warszawy* (1969–1994), "Kroniki Warszawy" (1985–2015) and "Almanach Muzealny" (1997–2003).

Numerous duties did not prevent Janusz Durko from running the institution entrusted to him. During his term of office, the Warsaw History Museum became one of the main centres of research on the history of the capital. From the very onset these studies were based on widely conceived surveys encompassing domestic collections and, if possible,

foreign ones. The enormous work performed at the time is testified to this day by various folios with records of sources and files containing documentation of the archival, library, and museums sets examined at the time. Excellent occasions for presenting the contribution made by the History Museum to research on the history of Warsaw were, alongside the increasingly numerous publications by its staff members, also co-organised or organised scientific conferences. One of the first was a session on "The role of Warsaw in the life of the nation and state", held at the Staszic Palace in 1965; initiators and chief lecturers included Janusz Durko, nominated professor a year earlier. Upon his initiative many scientific meetings of importance for research connected with Warsaw took place in subsequent years at the Museum. In 1972 the Museum was the site of sessions dedicated to studies on the Royal Castle ("Seven centuries of the Royal Castle in Warsaw") and Warsaw during the Middle Ages ("Mediaeval Warsaw"), in 1978 – a session organised upon the 25th anniversary of rebuilding the Old Town, in 1985 – a session recalling the activity of the Capital City Reconstruction Office, in 2000 – a session held upon the occasion of the 20th anniversary of entering the Old Town into the UNESCO World Heritage List, and in 2011 – a session summing up archaeological-architectural research conducted in Warsaw from the end of World War II. The Historical Museum also made a prominent contribution to the preparation of one of the first syntheses of the town's history published after the war. This was a copious monograph on the history and culture of Warsaw co-edited by Alexander Gieysztor and Janusz Durko (1980). The eight-volume *Bibliografia Warszawy* (1958–2006), edited by the Museum director and registering everything, or almost everything, that had been written about Warsaw, remains up to this day the greatest and outright "monumental" work amidst the accomplishments of the Museum. Each volume, published at intervals of several years, inspired new studies often penetrating ignored domains of the social, economic, and cultural life of the Polish capital.

The documentary-research work conducted at the Warsaw Historical Museum was reflected in the contents and forms of the permanent exhibition, systemically verified and enhanced, as well as in parallel temporary exhibitions. The latter, apart from meeting current needs created by popularisation, embarked upon topics frequently neglected in the historiography of Warsaw and revealed material – documents, iconographic and cartographic sources, relics of material culture, historical souvenirs, etc. – heretofore little-known or completely unheard of.

Among those stirring the greatest interest mention can be made, by way of example, of the following exhibitions: "Varsaviana in Dresden collections" (1965), presenting several hundred architectural plans and drawings of Warsaw from the reign of the Wettin dynasty; "Daily items from Castle and Old Town excavations" (1990), rendering available findings originating from archaeological research carried out by the Museum; "Town planning of extermination, town planning of hope. Warsaw 1939–1945" (1995), recalling projects of German town planners aimed at demolishing the Polish capital and efforts of Polish Underground planners preparing the town's post-war reconstruction; finally: "Polonica and Varsaviana in the collections of St. Petersburg" (1997) and two other displays comprising the latter's *sui*

*generis* continuation: “Sankt Petersburg and Warsaw at the turn of the nineteenth century” (1999–2000) and “College of Arms of the Kingdom of Poland” (2002), showing archival sources heretofore unknown to Polish historians. Another of Professor Durko’s accomplishments was opening “The Warsaw Uprising in photographs and mementos” exhibition (1969), the first such post-war event about the Warsaw Uprising based on valuable material made available by the inhabitants of the town and creating a foundation for a separate museum collection documenting the battle waged by Warsaw against the German occupant. Although this is not the place to discuss more than 500 temporary exhibitions organised in 1951–2003, it is worth noting that a considerable part was the outcome of the collaboration of the Historical Museum of Warsaw with museums in other countries. This feat was possible thanks to personal contacts established at the time of Professor Durko’s activity in ICOM. The greatest expositions shown abroad upon his initiative were: “Warsaw and Italians in Warsaw”, displayed in Rome (1967), “Warsaw 1764–1830. From Bellotto to Chopin”, featured in Venice (1986), and “Warsaw – a historical image of the town”, presented in Ferrara (1987).

The Museum of Warsaw owed the planned and systematic increase of its collections to the special involvement of its Director and his passion as a collector. In 1951 the Museum inventory contained barely 169 items, and at the time when Professor Durko retired the collections totalled almost 300 000 museum exhibits, of which as many as one-third were private donations presented by more than 2000 persons. Alongside individual objects Museum resources often received entire collections obtained thanks to the Director’s persistence and skill for dealing with people. One of the largest collections was that of Ludwik Gocel, focused on the November Uprising and the Great Emigration. It was followed by other generous donations, such as those of Remigiusz Stankiewicz, M.D., Janina Kronenbergowa, widow of Leopold, the last of the Kronenberg family, Krzysztof Klinger, journalist and publicist, and, finally, a valuable collection of artworks, arts and crafts, and personal mementos of Barbara and Jan Schiele, descendants of the family of former co-owners of Schiele and Habermusch, the largest Warsaw brewery. The development of the Museum was also demonstrated by the constantly growing number of its branches: the Theatre Museum, the Asia and Pacific Museum, and the Warsaw Uprising Museum, which originated – a fact today forgotten – from a branch of the same name, established by Professor Durko in 1983. Current Museum branches organised or incorporated into the Museum at the time of the Professor’s term of office include the Museum of Wola, the Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom in Palmiry, the Warsaw Museum of Printing, the Antonina Leśniewska Museum of Pharmacy, and the Janusz Korczak Research and Documentation Centre.

The *sui generis* crowning of Janusz Durko’s efforts linked with accumulating collections was the imposing *Album Warszawski. Obraz miasta w zbiorach Muzeum Historycznego m.st. Warszawy* (2000), edited by him and offering a survey of the most valuable exhibits in the Museum collections.

As head of the Historical Museum of Warsaw Professor Durko paid great attention to educational activity and assigned importance to the dissemination of knowledge about Warsaw, in particular among children and young

people. The years-long absence on the book market of available publications on the history of the town imposed new forms of educational undertakings, including lessons held in the Museum showrooms, whose program and range were constantly brought up to date. Frequent competitions and tournaments offering prizes also served the popularisation of the history of the Polish capital. Senior citizens were offered Sunday lectures and excursions all over the city as well as a two-year long Study Centre of Knowledge about Warsaw, conducted in 1959–1975 and particularly closely supervised by the Director. In subsequent years these activities were expanded by the regular participation of the History Museum in Radio BIS Science Picnics, Polish Festivals of Science, Museum Nights and the University of the Third Age. An essential part in educational work was played also by the Museum cinema – a film about destroyed and rebuilt Warsaw was watched not only by tourists: official government delegations visiting Poland began their tour of Warsaw by attending a screening. It is worth recalling that during the several decades dedicated by Janusz Durko to performing the duties of director the Historical Museum of Warsaw was also a vital cultural institution, one of the first museums to hold concerts and show theatre spectacles. From the 1960s concerts of ancient music were co-organised with the Warsaw Music Society, followed by performances given by the artists of the Warsaw Chamber Opera directed by Stefan Sutkowski, a friend of the Museum, and in more recent years by open-air theatres and spectacles addressed to children and presented in the Museum courtyard in co-operation with the Old Town Culture Centre.

Numerous awards, medals, and distinctions expressed recognition for the Director’s professional achievements and widespread social activity. Upon several occasions he received badges of merit from assorted towns and voivodeships, was the winner of the Minister of Culture and Arts Award of 1st degree for the Protection of Cultural Heritage and twice of the Award of the Capital City of Warsaw and was granted the honourable title of Homo Varsoviensis (1987). In 1989 the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem awarded Professor Durko and members of his family with the “Righteous Among the Nations” honorary title for helping Poles of Jewish descent during the German occupation; in 2001 – upon the 50th anniversary of holding the post of Director of the Historical Museum – he was conferred the Order of Polonia Restituta First Class – the Grand Cross with Star.

After retirement in 2003 Professor Durko continued to maintain lively contacts with the Museum and as member of the Museum Board (2004–2008) remained interested in its problems. He also wrote his reminiscences: *Muzeum Warszawy i jego współtwórcy w mojej pamięci 1951–2003*, issued in 2008 – the last publication in a total of about 140 titles.

The recognition and respect which the Professor won in the course of long years of officiating were the reason why he was remembered so well. During the last years of his life he was made honorary member of the Society for the Preservation of Historical Monuments and the Association of Polish Museum Curators, received the Gold Medal for Merit to Culture “Gloria Artis”, and the Stanisław August medal presented by the Society of the Friends of Warsaw for outstanding contributions to his hometown. In

2005 his hundredth birthday was celebrated also by the Historical Museum of Warsaw. Numerous guests attended this special event: apart from Museum directors and staff those present included members of municipal authorities, former co-workers and friends as well as representatives of the world of culture and science. This was, however, the last time when the Professor crossed the threshold of the institution in which – as he mentioned at the meeting – he discovered and realised his chance in life. More than ten months later Professor Durko passed away and was buried in the Powązki Military Cemetery.

When years ago Stanisław Lorentz characterised Professor Janusz Durko he wrote: *Presumably, the creator of the Historical Museum must be a person of extraordinary energy seeking an outlet in activity, perhaps even quick-tempered and implementing his decisions in a way befitting a dictator. I am surprised that Janusz Durko possesses none of those traits. He does not act spontaneously but in accordance with a thoroughly devised programme, he is polite but unyielding, kind but extremely demanding, calm and good humoured but not indifferent. This is how those who have worked with the Professor remember Him.*

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### **Andrzej Sołtan**

Graduate of the Historical Institute at the University of Warsaw; (1995–2012) vice-director of the Historical Museum of Warsaw; author of numerous exhibitions and publications about Warsaw, co-editor of “Rocznik Warszawski”, editor of the “Biblioteka Warszawska” series; co-founder of the Association of Polish Museum Curators and its chairman (2005–2011); member of museum boards, currently of the Museum of Romanticism in Opinogóra and the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw, member of the Classification Commission of the State Register of Museums at the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, chairman of a board dealing with street names at the Office of Culture of the Municipal Office of the Capital City of Warsaw.

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