

PAN's project to digitize an early 20th century photo collection

# Turning Silver into Gold

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**Early 20th century Polish social movements took great pains to preserve Poland's cultural heritage during the times when the Polish lands were under foreign partition. One such organization, known as the Polish Society for Preserving Relics of the Past, gathered together an impressive collection of photographs of historical objects. To mark the 100th year anniversary of these outstanding efforts, the Polish Academy of Sciences has launched a project to digitize the collection**

On 28 July 1906, in the small provincial town of Opatów 180 km to the south of Warsaw, we can imagine the following conversation having taken place between photographer Kazimierz Broniewski, out on a field trip, and a young local:

"Boy, come hold up this stone cartouche bearing the bishop's coat of arms for me, so that I can capture it well."

"But sir, how can you turn a stone into a picture?"

Bent over his camera, the traveler from Warsaw searched for the right words. "It's a kind of complicated process; light rays play upon the physical properties of chemicals called silver oxides. Inside this wooden case here is a glass plate coated with solutions of silver, which is right now recoding an image of both you and that cartouche from the church walls."

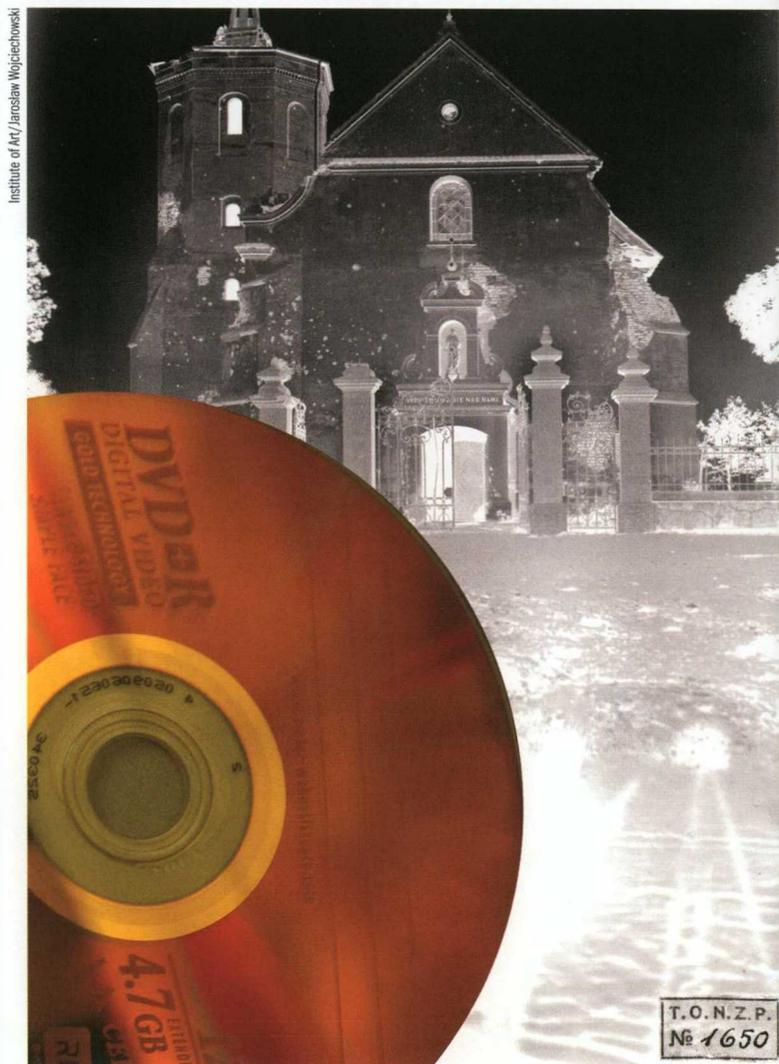
"What do you mean, silver? How could you go wasting silver just for this old stone from the pile behind the church?!"

"Because our Polish history and art, young man, are more valuable than silver, and even more precious than gold."

## The "Fourth Uprising"

Kazimierz Broniewski was one of the members of a group that had been formed in Warsaw that very year, as the "Society for the Preservation of Historical Monuments and Relics of Polish Art and Culture," later renamed the "Society for Preserving Relics of the Past." The time had

only just become ripe for such an organization, when the Russian Empire's waning international position had led to an easing of its oppressive policies in the Polish lands that had been incorporated into Russia as a result of the partitions. In order to pacify the social situation in the empire's vast expanses, Tsar Nicholas II had signed what was called the tolerance law, which among other things granted citizens the relatively free right of association. The social movements which then emerged in partitioned Poland were so diverse, so intense and of such wide scope,



One of the photos from the collection of 20,000 negatives and positives gathered by the Polish Society for Preserving Relics of the Past

that some Polish historians call the period the “fourth uprising” – after the three (unsuccessful) insurrections that by then had been staged in the Polish lands to attempt to resurrect the Polish state.

The Society for Preserving Relics of the Past is an excellent example of this flourishing of social movements. Founded by a group of Polish scientists, aristocrats, architects and bankers, its purpose was to draw society’s attention to the relics of Polish culture and the need to preserve them. In the absence of any Polish state, this initiative was one of the first that dealt with Polish cultural heritage, urging research and preservation. Headquartered in Warsaw, the Society’s activities encompassed the Polish lands then under Russian partition, with branches in Wilno (Vilnius) and Minsk, although branches were also set up even in Russian cities with large Polish populations, such as Petersburg, Kiev, and Moscow.

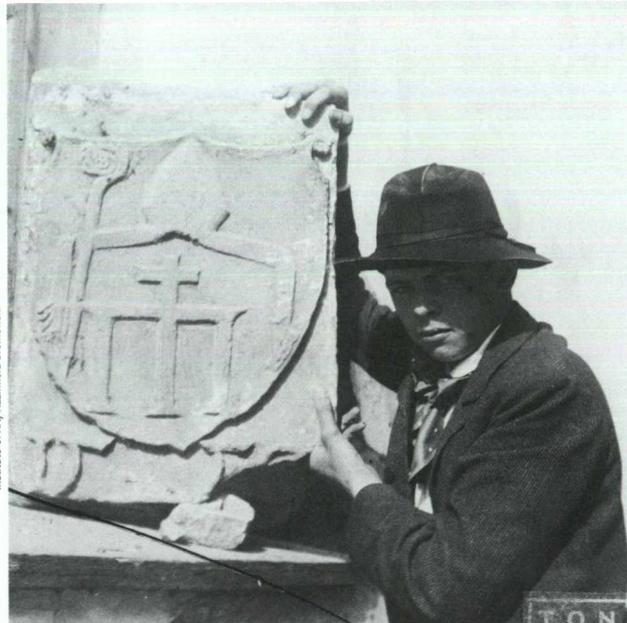
Within a short time the Society came to include more than 3,500 individuals, thus becoming a considerable public institution. Similar initiatives, more or less at the same time, likewise appeared in the Polish lands under Austrian partition – in Galicia, with main centers in Kraków and Lwów (Lvov). From their inception these circles and societies cooperated with one another, forming something along the lines of “cross-border” groups of aficionados and researchers of Polish relics. Their efforts helped develop the first Polish cadre of conservators and art historians who later, after Poland regained its independence in 1918, gave rise to the staff employed by the state conservation bodies, universities, research institutions, and museums of the Second Polish Republic.

### Focus on relics

The achievements of the Society are quite impressive: members not only systematically researched the relics and monuments of Polish culture through archival study and field trips, but also stressed the vast significance of measurement taking and photography. This stemmed from a conviction that Poland’s stormy history might indeed someday lead to the complete physical destruction of its ancestral heritage.

Poland’s recovery of its independence in 1918 opened the way to setting up specialized, official state institutions to handle the work of conserving and cataloging monuments and relics, establishing museums, and publishing journals and other publications devoted to history. Such efforts were for the most part undertaken by members of the Society.

The most precious materials in the Society’s collection have fortunately survived the years since then, and are now preserved almost in full at the PAN Institute of Art, forming part of the largest collection of iconography on Polish national culture. Some 10,000 negatives and a similar quantity of original positives, a considerable number of architectural plans and drawings plus descriptive documentation, all rep-



Institute of Art/Kazimierz Broniewski

**100 years after it was taken, Kazimierz Broniewski’s stone cartouche photo is now one of many encompassed by PAN’s program of conserving and digitizing historical photographs**

resent the outcome of the Society’s conservation and cataloging work performed at several hundred Polish localities.

Jarosław Wojciechowski, a Polish architect, conservator of monuments, and lecturer at the Warsaw Polytechnic University, was already writing as far back as in 1918 about the need to pull together the Society’s cataloging work and to publish it: “This harvest so gathered, as the outcome of the voluntary, selfless work of individuals (...) does not have any real impact since it has not yet been published.” For subsequent decades, the materials remained accessible solely to a narrow group of specialists – and it would take arrival of the modern-day IT revolution before the need voiced nearly 80 years ago could start to be fulfilled.

Hope for its fulfillment within a few years appeared with the formation of a team at the Institute of Art, tasked with studying the Society’s collections, preparing digital image processing equipment, following a comprehensive digitization schedule, and developing a professional database. The PAN Institute of Art has this year prepared an exhibition of photographs to be put on display at several dozen centers in Poland, together with an album of black-and-white photographs drawn from the collection.

The process of digitizing the glass negatives and scanning the historical positives will be completed in the near future, and a multimedia publication will then be developed offering access to thousands of photographs with descriptions. This precious treasure of Polish heritage will thus become digitally preserved and be distributed in various ways, including in the form of gold-coated DVDs. ■

#### Further reading:

Kowalczyk J. (1979). Powołanie i działalność Towarzystwa Opieki nad Zabytkami Przeszłości z perspektywy 70. lat [The Establishment and Activity of the Society for Preserving Relics of the Past from the Perspective of 70 Years]. Warsaw: *Ochrona zabytków*, v. 39 no. 2, pp. 99-102.

Brykowski R. (Ed.). (1985). *Ocalić przeszłość dla przyszłości. Towarzystwo Opieki nad Zabytkami Przeszłości 1906-1944* [Rescuing the Past for the Future - The Society for Preserving Relics of the Past 1906-1944]. Warsaw: *Biblioteka Muzealnictwa i Ochrony Zabytków*, v. LXXXV.