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**THE HISTORY OF THE AFRICAN COLLECTION  
OF THE CITY MUSEUM IN BYDGOSZCZ**

**ABSTRACT** The article was created as part of research on wartime losses of the Leon Wyczółkowski District Museum in Bydgoszcz. It describes the history of the African collection belonging to the Historical Society of the Noteć Oblast, which from 1923 belonged to the City Museum. In 1944, the collection, along with other collections of the Museum, was taken to Dębowo for protection. According to people involved in the return of the objects to Bydgoszcz, the manor house was burned down and the exhibits hidden there were destroyed. The collection was considered a wartime loss. However, it turned out that this was false information, and the collection was transferred in 1950 to the Folk Cultures Museum in Warsaw. The text analyzes documents describing the history of the collection, compares preserved inventories and lists, and attempts to trace the post-war fate of the collection.

**Key words:** Bydgoszcz, City Museum, wartime losses, African collections, Leon Wyczółkowski District Museum in Bydgoszcz, National Ethnographic Museum

**ABSTRAKT** Artykuł powstał w ramach badań nad stratami wojennymi Muzeum Okręgowego im. Leona Wyczółkowskiego w Bydgoszczy. Opisuje historię zbioru afrykańskiego należącego do Towarzystwa Historycznego Obwodu Nadnoteckiego, a od 1923 r. do Muzeum Miejskiego. W 1944 r. kolekcja, wraz z innymi zbiorami Muzeum, została wywieziona w celu ochrony do Dębowa. Dworek, wg relacji osób zaangażowanych w powrót obiektów do Bydgoszczy, został spalony, a ukryte tam eksponaty uległy zniszczeniu. Kolekcja została uznana za stratę wojenną. Okazało się jednak, że była to nieprawdziwa informacja, a zbiór został przekazany w 1950 r. do Muzeum Kultur Ludowych w Warszawie. W tekście dokonano analizy dokumentów opisujących dzieje zbioru, porównania zachowanych inwentarzy i spisów oraz podjęto próbę prześledzenia powojennych losów kolekcji.

The collection of African souvenirs does not have a clearly defined provenance. There are different versions of its origin: it was allegedly given to the Noteć Oblast Historical Society by a German colonial official in 1894,<sup>1</sup> or soldiers stationed in German colonies in southwestern Africa,<sup>2</sup> or by Polish travelers.<sup>3</sup> In the Society's inventory book, under the number 1475 (September 1895), the following information is recorded: *Sammlung Schöne (...Kammerun)*, without further details:



*Sammlung Schöne (in Kammerun).*

The donation was confirmed in the Society's yearbook of 1896. The donation report included the following entry:

IV.

1. Von Herrn Zollassistenten Georg Schöne, Kamerun: Sammlung von ethnographischen Gegenständen (74 Nummern) aus Kamerun. — 2. Von Herrn cand. theol. Dug, hier: indianischer Pfeil.

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*From Mr. Georg Schöne, Customs Officer, Cameroon: collection of ethnographic objects (74 items) from Cameroon....*<sup>4</sup> In the 1899 yearbook there was information that Schöne again donated more souvenirs to the collection:

<sup>1</sup> Baranowska-Malewska, 1934: 93.

<sup>2</sup> National Archives in Bydgoszcz, 3003/175: 15. (further in the footnotes: APB).

<sup>3</sup> "Dziennik Bydgoski", 20.09.1923.

<sup>4</sup> "Jahrbuch der Historischen Gesellschaft für den Netzedistrikt zu Bromberg, Bromberg", 1896: 77.

— 13. Von dem Kaiserlichen Zollassistenten Herrn Schöne, Kamerun: eine Kiste ethnographischer Gegenstände aus Kamerun, die erst in dem neu gemietheten Raume zur Aufstellung gelangen werden.

*From Mr. Schöne, Customs Officer, Cameroon: One box of ethnographic objects from Cameroon to be displayed in a newly rented room.*<sup>5</sup> However, there is no such entry in the Society's inventory for this period.

The most information about the collection is provided by the entry in the "Jahrbuch der Historischen Gesellschaft für den Netzedistrikt zu Bromberg"<sup>6</sup> and in the "Historische Monatsblätter für die Provinz Posen" (they sound very similar):

*...In 1895, an extremely valuable and extensive donation was added to the collection, a collection of very ethnologically and culturally important elements of weapons, fragments of clothing and jewelry, vessels, idols, etc. [coming] from our West African protectorate, which an old resident of Bydgoszcz, the imperial customs official Schoene – from Cameroon, kindly donated it to the museum. The Society accepted this great gift with heartfelt thanks, [with the intention of] keeping it for the city of Bydgoszcz. Of course, the lack of space was then felt more acutely than ever; but the city of Bydgoszcz was unable to provide [us, the Society] with any assistance – which is quite understandable, considering the problems it faced at that time. It has remained so to this day...<sup>7</sup>*

The report from 1898 outlined the battle for a new rooms to display the collection. It was probably this room that was mentioned in the entry about the second donation. It was most likely a room rented from one of the owners of the Meckel tile factory at today's Jagiellońska Street (Wilhelmstraße). The ethnographic collections, including, one assumes, the African items, were moved there, along with coins, paintings and a library.<sup>8</sup>

Michał F. Woźniak hypothesized that part of the collection originally came from the collections of the Natural Sciences Society (Naturwissenschaftlicher Verein) or Wiktor Jasiak, a teacher at the High School in Bydgoszcz, and purchased by the city for the museum in 1904.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1890s, a printed guide was published entitled *Führer durch das ethnographische und naturwissenschaftliche Museum* by Wiktor Jasiak. The publication was divided into two parts, the first of which contains a list of 184 items (there were more objects): weapons, cult objects, fabrics, musical instruments, jewelry, ornaments and items of clothing, as well as photographs. They came from Africa, Asia and Oceania. The second part contains a list of 300 zoological and botanical specimens.<sup>10</sup>

On May 26, 1919, Dr. K. Kothe took the most valuable artifacts to the Museum für Völkerkunde (Ethnological Museum) in Berlin,<sup>11</sup> but the African collections were not included on the list.<sup>12</sup> In 1944, the City Museum managed to recover 2 chests, which constituted only part of the collection lost after the end of World War I. The exact contents of the recovered crates are also unknown.<sup>13</sup>

Residual information about the expansion of the collection comes from press reports from the 1920s:

*...At the entrance, in the entrance hall, a whole range of strange exotic objects were hung... – These are curiosities from Cameroon and Dahomey, collected by Polish travelers – explained Fr. Klein. – Look at these scepters of the Negro Caciques, at these strange hunting devices and even more strange amulets that protect against injury or bring good luck. You won't see more interesting things even in the most sensational film. Or this letter, carved by a wild man with a knife on a stick...<sup>14</sup>*

*...Ethnography. (African collections from the Herero and Owambo tribes). On the second floor. (...) it looks quite poor because we only have collections of weapons, household items and cult objects from the Owambo and Herero tribes. These collections are of little value because they lack appropriate documents...<sup>15</sup>*

*...The last two small rooms finally house natural and ethnographic collections. The latter refer to two African tribes, Owambo and Herero. In addition to the weapons used by these tribes, attention is drawn to a pirogue, parts of robes, and finally religious objects...<sup>16</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> "Jahrbuch der Historischen Gesellschaft für den Netzedistrikt zu Bromberg", 1899: 65.

<sup>6</sup> "Jahrbuch der Historischen Gesellschaft für den Netzedistrikt zu Bromberg", 1899: 70.

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt, 1905: 196.

<sup>8</sup> "Jahrbuch der Historischen Gesellschaft für den Netzedistrikt zu Bromberg", 1898: 51-52.

<sup>9</sup> Perlińska, 1995: 199; Historia Bydgoszczy, 1991: t. I, 597.

<sup>10</sup> Woźniak, 2019: 315-316.

<sup>11</sup> APB, 3003/135: 1.

<sup>12</sup> APB, 3003/134: 80-83.

<sup>13</sup> APB, 3003/158: 57-58. Information from Kamil Ściesiński, MOB History Department.

<sup>14</sup> "Dziennik Bydgoski", 20.09.1923.

<sup>15</sup> "Gazeta Bydgoska", 3.08.1924.

<sup>16</sup> "Dziennik Bydgoski", 3.10.1925.

...4. *Ethnography (African collections from the Herero and Owambo tribes; the department was expanded by the company F. Jaworski and K. Nitecki from ul. Dworcowa, donating a rare example of an armadillo)...<sup>17</sup> (no such object in the inventory);*

*Thank (...) to L. Sosnowski for the African straw hat... (item 118 in the MOB inventory);<sup>18</sup> gift of prof. Ferdynand Ossendowski – ...The Bydgoszcz Museum received, first of all, a rich collection of Negro weapons of the Uhu tribe, (...) a collection of idols and fetishes from the Gao-Gao temple in Nigeria, household utensils and utensils, (...) several very interesting specimens of lizards and snakes, as well as a dozen or so crocodile eggs (...) The museum intends to give these last gifts, as non-museum items, to one of the school zoological offices...<sup>19</sup> (according to information from Dziennik Bydgoski of April 1, 1927, two eggs hatched into crocodiles). There is no information about this in the inventories.*

It is clear that the collection was constantly expanding, but there are no entries in the inventories to that effect. In 1923, the collections became the property of the newly established Municipal Museum in Bydgoszcz, which took over the Society's inventory. It is true that some items were added then, but the dates show that this was not done on an ongoing basis, and that not all acquisitions were taken into account. At the same time, a new inventory was established, dated April 18, 1931, in which the entries start from 1923 and partly contain objects taken over from the Society's collections. This inventory also fails to mention any exotic acquisitions.

It is not known when exactly the African collections were removed from the permanent exhibition. In "Przegląd Bydgoski" from 1934, volume 2, issues 1-2, an article by Zofia Baranowska-Malewska entitled *Exotic collection in the City Museum in Bydgoszcz*, which includes a description of the collection: *...As evidenced by the catalog prepared by a teacher Jasiak, this collection included over 200 specimens and was divided into ethnographic and natural history parts. The latter has survived more or less in its entirety to this day (it includes beautiful specimens of coral), but of the numerous products of African culture, such a small fragment remains that it is no longer of scientific value in itself. Apparently, these things*

*were seized during the war [during World War I]. Beautiful specimens of Negro and Polynesian weapons, African idols, various ornaments and parts of clothing, musical instruments, braids and patterned tapas disappeared. What remains corresponds to only a few items in the catalogue. It is a chaotic collection of broken spears, a few gourd and clay vessels, and a few objects relating to ritual life....* The objects were to be stored in poor conditions in the museum's "attic toilet". The author proposed giving the collection to an institution specializing in non-European culture.<sup>20</sup> The fact that W. Jasiak's guide was mentioned may indicate the origin of part of the collection.

In 1944, the African collections along with military items, paintings, drawings, graphics and archaeological objects were taken to the manor house in Dębowo. The collection was placed in five chests, but no detailed report of their contents was written. After the end of hostilities, the manor was burned down by Soviet troops, and the collections stored there were considered lost. In the years 2019-2021, the District Prosecutor's Office in Bydgoszcz, in cooperation with the Provincial Police Headquarters in Bydgoszcz, the MOB, and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, conducted a case regarding war losses of the City Museum. Some of the works deposited in August 1939 by Franciszka Wyczółkowska, also previously considered lost, were returned to the Museum. Therefore, the statement of the person inspecting the manor house that the collections were burned should be considered untrue.

At the National Ethnographic Conference in 1947, it was decided to centralize all ethnographic objects, including non-European ones, in the Museum of Folk Cultures in Warsaw. In 1949, the Supreme Directorate of Museums issued a decision to consolidate non-European collections, thus confirming the resolution of the Conference.<sup>21</sup> In 1950, during a course for museum guides in Nieborów, representatives of the Bydgoszcz and Warsaw museums met. On October 6, 1950, a letter was sent on behalf of the director of the museum in Warsaw, Wanda Jostowa, to the Bydgoszcz museum reminding about the *oral agreement on taking over the exotic collections* and asking to receive a delegation to settle the matter.<sup>22</sup> The delegation arrived in Bydgoszcz on November 20, 1950, and already

<sup>17</sup> "Gazeta Bydgoska", 14.06.1925.

<sup>18</sup> "Dziennik Bydgoski", 12.12.1925.

<sup>19</sup> "Dziennik Bydgoski", 2.03.1927.

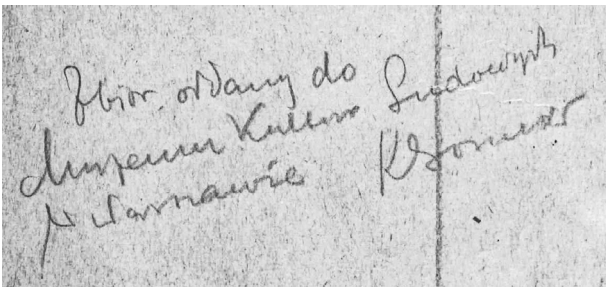
<sup>20</sup> Baranowska-Malewska, 1934: 93-96.

<sup>21</sup> Państwowe Muzeum Etnograficzne w Warszawie. Historia. Zbiory. Ekspozycje, 1973: 22, 35.

<sup>22</sup> APB, 3003/175: 11.

on December 4, the director of the Museum of Folk Cultures, Jan Żoźna-Manugiewicz, asked the director Kazimierz Borucki to quickly transfer the collection *in the field of non-European ethnography*, at the same time asking for information on provenance and a possible list of objects.<sup>23</sup> The answer was provided on December 22. Aurelia Borucka, acting as the director's deputy, gave the following information about the shipment of the collection. She explained the lack of a detailed inventory as being due to *the amount of work and lack of staff*. According to her, the collection was supposed to come from before World War I, from former servicemen serving in the German colonies of Herero and Owambo. At the same time, she declared that *later, there would be even more exhibits, we will be happy to give them away...*<sup>24</sup>

The African collections taken to Dębowo must have survived, since they appeared in the "Act of taking over the management and use of the Ministry of Culture and Art" of December 15, 1949 (information about 131 objects)<sup>25</sup> and were transferred to Warsaw at the end of 1950 (the inventory included the note *Collection donated to the Folk Cultures Museum in Warsaw – K. Borucki*).



It is therefore surprising that other documents claimed that the collections located in Dębowo were destroyed, especially since the document confirming the shipment of the collection to Warsaw dated to December 22, 1950 was signed by Aurelia Borucka, acting as the director's deputy. Meanwhile, she confirmed the claim about the loss of the African collection as a result of war operations in a letter regarding war losses to the Government Plenipotentiary for Polish Cultural Heritage Abroad dated June 10, 1992.<sup>26</sup>

Due to the discovery of the correspondence described above, the National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw (hereinafter referred to as PME) was asked to help identify the collection.<sup>27</sup> On June 26, 2023, we received a reply regarding this matter.<sup>28</sup> The answer contains a list of objects from the PME inventory with marked MOB provenance and a comparison of the 1950 protocol with the PME inventory. Currently, we have four lists of African objects:

1. The MOB inventory,
2. the protocol for packing the collection from MOB (packed by Jakub Nowicki of the museum's staff),
3. the unpacking protocol from PME,
4. the PME inventory.

Unfortunately, all lists differ significantly from each other, both in terms of quantity and type of objects. In the letter dated On December 22, 1950, in a letter addressed to PME there is information about the collection being packed:

*...2 chests containing African exhibits,  
2 tree packages,*

*1 long boat (two long spears in the boat)...*<sup>29</sup>

while in the message from January 3, 1951 addressed to PME from MOB there is information that the P.K.S. Freight Expedition. has a problem with the delivery of *boxes with African collections*,<sup>30</sup> the receipt dated February 5, 1951 also mentions the opening of the boxes by committee, without specifying their number.<sup>31</sup> So what happened to the boat and the packaging is unknown. The dating of the letters is questionable: the protocol from Warsaw is dated December 29, 1950,<sup>32</sup> the information about problems with delivery was written down on January 3, 1951 (perhaps the document was forged), the letter attached to the protocol from Warsaw is dated February 5, 1951. Therefore, it is difficult to be clear about when the cargo was actually delivered and unpacked, and whether it was complete when it arrived.

There is doubt as to whether the inventory of the collection was carried out properly and whether it was updated on an ongoing basis. The preserved inventory of African collections contains 131 items, the packing protocol contains 56 items, where only a small part of the objects was marked with the MOB inventory number. The unpacking

<sup>23</sup> APB, 3003/175: 14.

<sup>24</sup> APB, 3003/175: 15.

<sup>25</sup> MOB Archive, *Zmiany w akcie erekcyjnym zarządzenia Ministerstwa Kultury i Sztuki, statut, notatki, akt przejęcia, protokół zdawczo-odbiorczy, 1951-1958, 1959-1971: 51-53.*

<sup>26</sup> MOB Archive, 19/9: 113.

<sup>27</sup> Message MOB.DEK.PEiLZ.430.12.2023.

<sup>28</sup> Message PME-8502-15/23.

<sup>29</sup> APB, 3003/175: 15.

<sup>30</sup> APB, 3003/175: 20.

<sup>31</sup> APB, 3003/175: 23.

<sup>32</sup> APB, 3003/175: 21-22.

protocol contains 105 items (some numbers were combined, e.g. 6 arrows, etc., PME identified 82 objects). The PME inventory includes 115 objects marked as coming from MOB. The unpacking protocol does not match the PME inventory, PME employees were unable to find some of the objects mentioned in the protocol and due to the lack of documentation, they are unable to determine what happened to them. All this may suggest that:

- items acquired by the growing collection before World War II were not originally recorded,
- the MOB inventory in 1950 was incomplete,
- the entire collection was not transferred to Warsaw,
- some objects were lost or damaged during transport,
- not all objects were correctly entered into the PME inventory.

Looking at the old MOB inventory, it can be concluded that it was written by one hand and probably at one point in time. The last entry is dated November 29, 1934 (which is not included in the oldest inventory book left by the Historical Society), and underneath the value of the collection is summarized in pencil with the date April 1, 1939. So, when was this list created? It is unknown. The fact is that it does not include the donation of prof. Ossendowski (such a large donation should be signed for) means that it does not reflect the original condition of the collection. The packing protocol contains items that are not included in the inventory. For example, the number of lances or spears (15 in the inventory, 24 in the packing report, 21 in the unpacking report). Likewise there are discrepancies between the lists in the numbers of scepters, swords/daggers in scabbards, ostrich eggs, woven shields, a loom, stuffed crocodiles, idols, Japanese masks, bells. The question remains: which of these lists was a more faithful reflection of the condition of the collection?

It is very difficult to match objects from the MOB inventory to the PME inventory – even if the names of the objects potentially match, their dimensions do not match. It will probably never be possible to determine the original state of the collection. The collection began with 76 items plus a chest with an unknown number of exhibits, and was expanded by individual gifts and a larger donation of at least several dozen objects by Prof. Ossendowski, and the collection of the Natural Sciences Society (or Wiktor Jasiak) numbering over 200 pieces. In the meantime, in the years 1914-1918, the collection was reduced by an unknown number of objects. An official inventory of the entire collection after 1919 was never prepared

(or is not known), until the inventory was probably prepared in the years 1939-1950, which did not reflect the actual state. Comparing all the inventories, it can be hypothesized that the transport unpacking protocol and the PME inventory best reflects the condition of the collection in 1950 (and not its original shape).

Comparing the MOB inventory to the packing protocol, it can be assumed that the following items left MOB:

1. E.2 – musical instrument
2. E.3 – drum
3. E.4 – wooden crocodile model
4. E.6 – sculpture/fetish
5. E.10 – face mask (painted ocean)
6. E.13 – scepter
7. E.14 – scepter
8. E.15 – scepter
9. E.17 – scepter
10. E.22 – arch
11. E.25 – African spear blade – Maasai
12. E.38 – scepter
13. E.73 or E.131 – snake skin
14. E.91-92 – tortoise shells
15. E.101 – bamboo goad
16. E.103 – oar
17. E.104 – oar
18. E.105 – oar
19. E.118 – hat/lid
20. E.120 – throwing bat
21. E.130 – Leather quiver without cover and 15 arrows with metal tips
22. E. 23-34, 111 – lances – spears, javelins

Items in the MOB inventory that were not included in the packing protocol:

1. E.11 – bucket
2. E.12 – bucket
3. E.16 – merger
4. E.18 – sword with scabbard
5. E.19 – sword with scabbard
6. E.20 – sword
7. E.21 – sword
8. E.35 – axe
9. E.36 – axe
10. E.37 – axe
11. E.40 – arrow sheath
12. E.48 – cup
13. E.49 – mug
14. E.50 – cup
15. E.51 – mug
16. E.52 – mug
17. E.53 – mug
18. E.54 – cup/jug
19. E.56 – a game with boat-shaped partings
20. E.64 – billy goat (light tree)

21. E.70 – animal skin
22. E.71 – animal skin – nygus
23. E.72 – small crocodile skin
24. E.74 – skin of a small lizard
25. E.80 – 2 grooved balls
26. E.81 – necklace
27. E.82 – axe
28. E.83 – axe
29. E.85 – animal claw
30. E.86 – animal claw
31. E.87 – animal (bird) claw
32. E.88 – animal skull
33. E.89 – animal skull
34. E.90 – animal (dog) skull
35. E.93 – light tusk
36. E.94 – light horn
37. E.95 – dark corner
38. E.96 – root
39. E.99 – decorations (5 hands tied with a rope)
40. E.106 – larger leg rings
41. E.107 – smaller leg rings
42. E.108 – leg rings (loose 5 pieces)
43. E.109 – rings sewn onto the skin
44. E.110 – various decorations 18 parts
45. E.112 – canoe boat
46. E.116 – fishing rod
47. E.117 – fishing rod
48. E.119 – rope (made of reed)
49. E.121 – crocodile skin
50. E.123 – headgear (red feathers)
51. E.124 – headgear (black feathers)
52. E.126 – hypogastrium (light cord)
53. E.127 – hypogastrium (black cord)
54. E.128 – hypogastrium (black cord)
55. E.129 – hypogastrium (black cord)
56. snake skin

These items were included in the unpacking protocol and were not identified by PME (were they damaged and disposed of, or were they entered into the PME inventory without a provenance marking?)

1. stuffed lizard
2. 2 small crocodiles
3. snake skin
4. 4 ostrich eggs
5. pair of Asian slippers
6. 2 knives with horn handles in a crocodile head sheath
7. fruit shell head, painted
8. sinker – a pestle covered with braid decorated with beads
9. coconut shell vessel
10. coconut shell vessel
11. woven shield
12. horn-mounted dagger

13. part of the coconut shell
14. human head in a coconut shell
15. a branch from a breadfruit tree with fruit
16. 14 rower figures, 8 oars, 1 anchor
17. boat model
18. 2 combs damaged
19. mass mask
20. model of a crocodile made of wood, painted
21. 2 boat models
22. 2 oars

The longboat included in the shipping protocol is not in PME's inventory. Two long spears were packed inside, so these 3 objects can be considered missing.

After comparing the MOB inventory with the PME inventory, taking into account dimensions and materials, only the following numbers overlap:

- |       |   |
|-------|---|
| E.59  | – PME 292/E bucket  |
| E.76  | – PME 3693/E bottle   |
| E.92  | – PME 4865/E turtle shell shield  |
| E.120 | – PME 5785/E throwing bat   |
| E.9   | – zoomorphic sculpture – PME 7777/E   |
| E.105 | – PME 8782/E paddle   |
| E.115 | – PME 11501/E boat model  |
| E.47  | – Bells PME 13496/E, PME 13497/E  |
| E.40  | – quiver PME 13863/E (or E.130, there were arrows inside; dimensions speak for E.40)  |
| E.118 | – PME 15272/E cover   |
| E.24  | – PME 7962/E arrow/spear  |
| E.22  | – PME 19874/E arch  |
| E.130 | – PME 13863/E quiver with poisoned arrows PME 8063/E, 8101/E, 8109/E, 8110/E, 8151/E, 8152/E, 8153/E, 8192/E, 8193/E, 13943 /E, 13964/E, 13973/E, 13974/E, 14422/E (based on the identification made by PME, 1 arrow is missing in the identification). |

Even if we assume that PME correctly identified the origin of the objects included in the inventory, some of the exhibits remaining in the MOB inventory and in the transport unpacking report are still missing. These objects should be considered lost. The probability of finding them is low due to the lack of detailed data and images.

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