The history of the State Archive in Warsaw

The History of the Warsaw archive is inseparably connected with the history of our town and its authorities. Latest researches show that presumably on the turn of XIII and XIV c., in the neighborhood of the ducal residence in Jazdow, the city of Warsaw was established. Unfortunately, the original document of Warsaw location has not been preserved up to date, however, without any doubts this document had been created and initiated the beginning of the capital archive. The oldest document preserved to date is a privilege of the Mazovia Duke Janusz Starszy from July 26, 1376, for building a public bath.

Supposably, in the beginning, according to medieval practices, most precious records were stored in solid chests or leather boxes.
The oldest inscription of archives’ stores come from the first versed-guiding book of Warsaw, named “Gosciniec po Warszawie”, published in 1643. Its author, Adam Jarzębski, making a description of the town hall, mentioned also this archive and he called it a treasury, which was a common custom.

As the result of the adoption of the new regulation known as an Act on Our Free Royal Cities in the States of the Commonwealth from April 1791 – founding in the third article of May 3rd Constitution – Warsaw and its archive were granted a new role. In April 1792 Archiwum Generalne Miasta Warszawy (General Archive of the city of Warsaw) was founded. The newly created institute was designated to gather all records of administrative units of the Great Warsaw. The main archivist – Hipolit Lemański – was in charge. The process of records’ gathering was stopped after leaders of Targowica Confederation brought the fall of the May 3rd Constitution. In the half of September 1792, the former private towns known as Jurydyki recovered back their documents. Both The General Archive of the city of Warsaw and the general archivist office stopped their existence.

By the decree of Warsaw Duke, in 1810 a part of the oldest records were transferred to Archiwum Ogólne Krajowe w Warszawie (about 1800 units). Other records were transported in 1817 to the new Town Hall, located in former Jablonowski palace on Theater Square (after old Town Hall in Old Town market square was dismantled).

In October 1863 a group of insurgents put a fire in the Town Hall hoping that this would be allowed them to avoid Russian repressions in a case of destroying the stored records. Although the whole building was burnt as well as most of the records inside, but some of them preserved being thrown off the window. During the reconstruction in 1864-1869, the archive was moved to Governor Palace. The restored Town Hall had a separate room for the archive seat of the total area of 300 square meters. In 1893 it stored about 40000 volumes.

In 1917 The Main Archive of Warsaw Magistrate (Archiwum Główne magistratu m. st. Warszawy) was established according to new municipal council rules. In 1925 new special commission was founded with vice-president Konrad Ilski in charge. The new commission was given its direction to reform the archive activity, however, it didn’t bring any progress at the beginning. With a rising interest to XIX c. records from the various scientist, this finally allowed the Archive to hire a historian Emilian Szwankowski. With his co-worker Adam Słomczyński he maintained a general sorting of all files, which contained at that time about 300 000 units from the period 1780-1934.

In the decisive year, 1935 major Adam W. Englert from the Military Historical Office (Wojskowe Biuro Historyczne) was promoted as “organization chief of city archives”. The new director, with the support of the President of Warsaw – Stefan Starzyński – took over and adapted for archival purposes the building of the former Arsenal in Dluga 52. The new seat was officially opened on November 29, 1938, and the City Archive finally had a representative house, where all Warsaw historical records could be merged.
Unfortunately, the beginning of World War II held this process. Archival sources survived the town’s siege and years of German occupation, but the worst moments came during the Warsaw Uprising. Despite heavy struggle many of archival collection survived, but not for so long. After ceasefire, on November 4, 1944, designed German troops started to burn all gathered in Arsenal records with premeditation and systematically.

After liberation, in April 1945, due to the decision of the President of Warsaw, the City Archive was re-established. At the beginning, it was located in a few rooms in Marszałkowska 8. In 1955 the Archive was given three old townhouses that had been reconstructed from war destruction. These houses were located in streets Krzywe Kolo 7, 9 and Nowomiejska 12 become main seat from above half of century. In June 1951, due to the ordinance of the Prime Minister, the City Archive was subordinate to Wojewódzkie Archiwum Państwowe in Warsaw. At the same time, Archive changed its territorial scoop, having under control not only the capital town of Warsaw but the whole capital voivodeship. In 1975 as a result of a general change of territorial division of the country, it was changed into Archiwum Państwowe m.st. Warszawy (the State Archive of the Capital City of Warsaw).

After October 7, 2013, Archiwum Państwowe m.st. Warszawy was changed into Archiwum Państwowe w Warszawie. It has several branches: in Grodzisk Mazowiecki, Mława, Otwock, Pultusk, Archive of Personal and Payroll Records in Milanowek. For a few years working a branch office in Nidzica in 2017 was liquidated.