

# **| Włodzimierz Piwkowski**

(17 October 1932 – 18 July 2016)

Włodzimierz Piwkowski gave 40 years of his life, his entire career, to the National Museum in Warsaw. He was involved in the reconstruction and conservation of three of the museum's divisions, the Royal Łazienki Museum, Królikarnia Palace, and the complex of the Radziwiłł Palace in Nieborów and the Romantic Park in Arkadia.

He was born on 17 October 1932 in Vilnius, and throughout his life he enjoyed returning to its environs, which remained his beloved place on earth. His last book, which he did not see to publication, told the history of the Vilnius region and his childhood memories.

The Piwkowski family arrived in Poland in March 1946 with the last transport of Poles out of Lithuania, and settled in Ostróda in north-east Poland. Włodzimierz Piwkowski finished secondary school there and moved to Warsaw to read art history at the University of Warsaw. He studied with prominent lecturers, who included Władysław Tatarkiewicz and Stanisław Lorentz, the latter becoming his thesis supervisor. "Lorentz held his seminars in an attractive setting, in his second-story study in the rightmost wing of Warsaw's National Museum (close to Nowy Świat Street), which was spacious and filled with antiques and old paintings [...]. It was then, I imagine, that our inimitable, distinct master-student relationship was born. [...] I experienced the Professor's friendship, even fondness, which he expressed through his idiosyncratic, generous sense of humour, which trumped the official mood of the meetings."<sup>1</sup>

Włodzimierz Piwkowski began to work in the National Museum, with the Professor keeping an eye on him, while he was still a student. His first task was to give a guided tour of a new exhibition of treasures from Wawel Castle, which had only just returned from Canada after wandering the world for years during the war. After he completed his studies in 1962, Piwkowski was delegated by Professor Lorentz to the Royal Łazienki Museum, where he joined the new staff headed by curator Marek Kwiatkowski which included Małgorzata Płomińska, Jerzy Lileyko, Izidor Grzeluk and Alina Ryx. It was a period of intensive conservation and restoration, archival research and curating its exhibition. Piwkowski was charged with identifying paintings from the collection of King Stanisław II August to be put on show in the Portrait Gallery and Painting Gallery.

The young museum staffer was captivated by the constant presence of conservators, goldsmiths, wood carvers and upholsterers at work in the Royal Łazienki Museum: "I, too, would climb the scaffolding and learn the complex art of stucco gilding myself. A memento of my work is still there on the palmetto frieze in the Painting Gallery: long stretches of my gilding."<sup>2</sup>

Piwkowski drew significant personal and professional satisfaction from working in the Royal Łazienki Museum. "This first Łazienki group was notable for its youthful idealism and selflessness, but also its naivety and affectation."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Włodzimierz Piwkowski, *Szkice autobiograficzne. Eseje 1955–2005* [Autobiographical outlines. Essays from 1955 to 2005], MS, Archive of the Museum in Nieborów and Arcadia, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

In 1964–66, after the Royal Łazienki Museum had been established, Marek Kwiatkowski's curatorial team was moved and charged with rebuilding the palace called Królikarnia, which was to become the Xawery Dunikowski Museum of Sculpture. Professor Lorentz headed the committee coordinating its reconstruction.

Piwkowski recalled those days in his memoirs: "The remarkably intensive work of rebuilding the former palace and adapting its ruins, which began in early spring of 1964, proceeded at a stunning pace [...]. Within a year, the total ruin was transformed into a beautiful palace. On the first anniversary of Xawery Dunikowski's death, 26 January 1965, a celebration was held to unveil the interior of the restored palace. Standing out in the large crowd at the opening was Antoni Cierplikowski<sup>4</sup>, in an eccentric outfit, sparkles jumping off his diamond rings."<sup>5</sup>

In the autumn of 1970 Stanisław Lorentz named Włodzimierz Piwkowski curator of the Museum in Nieborów and Arkadia. The new curator initially treated his stay in Nieborów as an important new task, not knowing that it would become his second home for the next 24 years.

He remembered years later: "To understand the grandeur of the Nieborów Palace at that time, of its secret gardens and the neighbouring Bolimowski Forest frozen in its regal timelessness, it is not enough to pop into Nieborów and visit the museum that exists there now [...] you need to live through all its seasons, from the first flimsy whiffs of pre-spring, as it stirs under winter's snowy duvet, through the exploding spectacle of all kinds of blooms in the spring [...] to the sunny autumn, threads of Indian summer weaving through it."<sup>6</sup>

The activities taking place in Nieborów and Arkadia included, and continue to include, some that are not typical for a museum, such as managing guest rooms and the palace kitchen. Professor Lorentz, whose idea it was, wanted the palace to continue to be inhabited, to fill with life not only during the museum's opening hours.<sup>7</sup> Włodzimierz Piwkowski pursued this vision.

After taking over Nieborów from the curator Jan Wegner, Piwkowski reopened its guest quarters and made the palace reception rooms available for scholarly and official conferences, symposia and seminars. The notables who visited Nieborów in this period included German Chancellor Willy Brandt (1987), US President George Bush (1988) and Queen Sofia of Spain (1990). Nieborów became a place where prominent figures from the worlds of Polish culture and learning liked to spend their time. Regular visitors included Władysław Tatarkiewicz, Jan Białostocki, Stefan Kozakiewicz, Tadeusz Dobrzeński, Jerzy Łoziński, Andrzej Rottermund, Wiesław Juszczak, Jacek Sempoliński, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Aleksander Gieysztor, Jan Parandowski, Stanisław Mrozek, Julia Hartwig, Ryszard Kapuściński, Andrzej Wajda and Jan Rybkowski. Their stays would vary in length, as they enjoyed walks in the forest and around the ponds, as well as Nieborów's excellent cuisine: the cherry soufflé served on special occasions went down in history as something truly exceptional.

Włodzimierz Piwkowski made every effort to cultivate the memory of Nieborów's former owners, and he quickly established a relationship with the Radziwiłł family. He became

<sup>4</sup> Antoni Cierplikowski, born in 1884 in Sieradz, a small town in central Poland, became a world-famous coiffeur. In 1909 he was the first to start giving women short haircuts. As Antoine de Paris, he opened the world's first modern women's salon at 5 rue Cambon in the elegant centre of Paris. See Marta Orzeszyna, *Król fryzjerów, fryzjer królów. Antoine Cierplikowski* [The king of hairdressers, the hairdresser of kings, Antoine Cierplikowski] (Kraków, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 34–35.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 38–39.

<sup>7</sup> As cited in Piotr Parandowski, *Goście Nieborowa* (Warsaw, 2011), p. 14.

especially close to Izabela (Ballala) Radziwiłł and her daughter Krystyna Radziwiłł-Milewska, and was able to invite members of the family to serve on the academic-conservation council of Nieborów and Arkadia, where they could be involved in making decisions about the property's development and conservation.

Piwkowski was a principled and honourable man, exceptionally hard-working, widely appreciated and respected, and wholly devoted to Nieborów. He shepherded many projects from planning to completion, even past the point when he could hand them over to others.

The conception and script of the *Et in Arcadia ego* exhibition in the Temple of Diana crowned his many years of scholarly work. It opened in 2001, and Nieborów and Arkadia was awarded the prestigious Sybilla prize in the category of "archaeological exhibitions" for it. Piwkowski was repeatedly recognized for the body of his museum work, with the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage (Europa-Preis für Denkmalpflege) (1994), the Polish state's Gold Cross of Merit (1987) and the Knight's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta (2002) and other awards.

Włodzimierz Piwkowski spent 24 years as the curator of the Museum in Nieborów and Arkadia. He left behind an impressive body of scholarship, thanks to which Nieborów remains one of the best-preserved and best-documented aristocratic residences in Poland. It is thanks to his initiatives and his energy that the complex has become an institution whose functions and role go far beyond anything done by other museums housed in former residences.

The staffs of the Museum in Nieborów and Arkadia will never forget their legendary curator.

Monika Antczak

Translated by Maja Łatyńska