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The Mausoleum of Marshal Józef Piłsudski at Wawel (1935-1989) - summary

The first Marshal of Poland Józef Piłsudski died on 12 May 1935 in Warsaw Belweder. Representatives of the highest state authorities with the Polish President Ignacy Mościcki and the Prime Minister Walery Sławek paid tribute to the memory of the Marshal and organised his funeral ceremony. According to his last will, the Marshal was to be buried in the Wawel Cathedral undergrounds, which meant prompt preparations of the funeral ceremony in Warsaw and Cracow.

Uncertain of the host of the Cathedral archbishop Adam Sapieha's attitude to the Marshal's place of rest, the authorities decided to undertake any actions aiming at forcing him to give consent even with the help of bishops and the Apostolic See. The diplomatic action was not necessary as on 13 May in the evening, archbishop Sapieha agreed for burring the Marshal in the Cathedral. Pompous funeral ceremony commenced on 17 May and continued until 18 May when the body of the deceased was placed in the St Leonard's crypt on 18 May 1935.

Commemorating of Józef Piłsudski was the objective for the Executive Committee Commemorating Marshal Józef Piłsudski, which was set up on 6 June 1935. The Committee's activities in the form of the expanded central structure and numerous units throughout Poland were financed through social contributions. It aimed at focusing all initiatives for commemorating the late Marshal, leaving control and supervision in the hands of the Committee's presidency who were the authorities of the state.

Among the number of tasks of the Executive Committee were projects of guardianship over historical sites connected with Józef Piłsudski, including restoration of his family estate in Zułów, monument construction or even building a district in Warsaw named after the late Marshal, running of the scholarship foundation started by Piłsudski and patronage over the institutions named after him.

One of the main objectives of the Executive Committee was to create a mausoleum of Marshal Józef Piłsudski at the Wawel Cathedral undergrounds. The place of burial in St Leonard's crypt was considered temporary from the very beginning. The form of the tomb as well as the condition of the crypt required prompt construction works on the final place of rest of the marshal.

After analysing different locations it was decided to build a mausoleum in the crypt under the Silver Bell Tower. The place, accepted by church authorities, offered an opportunity to create a sanctuary which would be a venue for tribute paid by the whole Nation to the person of Marshal.

The main designer and later the site engineer of the works in the crypt was prof. Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz. He created the requested by the Executive Committee concept of adaptation and enlargement of the Romanesque crypt, aiming at exposing the historical character of the place and adjusting it to the function of the Marshal's sanctuary.

Numerous changes of the conception and lack of approval from the church authorities resulted in delay in the crypt construction. Only the sixth version of the project received a compromise acceptance. Its realisation began in February 1936 and finished in March 1937.

After completing the works, prof. Szyszko-Bohusz was accused of conducting some parts of the works without consent of the Committee and the works were not authorised. The site manager was accused of devaluing the Marshal's dignity and what is more, of collusion with church authorities aiming at reducing the impact of the Executive Committee on building and functioning of the mausoleum.

Eventually, acceptance and authorisation of the works in the crypt were given on 31 May 1939.

Meanwhile, on the request of archbishop Sapieha, on 23 June 1937 the coffin with late Piłsudski was transferred to the completed crypt. Lack of consent from the Executive Committee and the state authorities had led to escalation of the allegations at a political level and through the press against archbishop Sapieha. The conflict, called the Wawel conflict, was eased by the archbishop himself, who apologised the authorities officially for not respecting their will and explained the reasons for his decisions.

Since the burial, first to St Leonard's Crypt and then to the Crypt under the Silver Bell Tower were coming numerous representatives of the state authorities, foreign delegations, members of military organisations, civil and young groups of people wanting to pay tribute to the Marshal.

Large-scale visits to the Piłsudski's tomb were of national character but they ceased when the II world war began.

During the German occupation the Wawel hill and its cathedral were inaccessible for the Polish people. The Piłsudski's crypt was occasionally visited by German dignitaries wanting to see the Marshal's tomb. Even Hitler respected the Marshal.

After the German occupation, despite the fact that the Wawel castle and cathedral were open, the Piłsudski's crypt remained closed. New communist authorities wanting to devalue the Marshal's merits and slowly erase him from the national memory, did not allow for visiting this place of worship.

The situation changed after 1956. On the wave of political thaw and easing of historical politics, it was possible to open the Piłsudski's crypt for public. It was possible due to efforts made by ex-legionnaires among whom major Józef Herzog and general Mieczysław Boruta-Spiechowicz were especially active.

It was their initiative to clean the interior and supplement it with many plaques and monuments commemorating the Marshal and his soldiers.

Such activities attracted the authorities' attention, who questioned and conducted audits, willing to gain evidence for "anti-Polish" activity of the guardians of the Wawel crypt. The allegations were withdrawn due to the legionnaires' unshaken attitude and lack of any evidence.

The repressions and Herzog's intransigent stand received wide coverage in the patriotic environment connected with the Piłsudski's crypt. Herzog became a hero of the underground resistance and he remained a permanent participant of the celebrations commemorating the Marshal.

Since re-opening of the crypt, despite lack of consent or even when the authorities disagreed, there were regular celebrations held, commemorating Piłsudski and important patriotic anniversaries. The Marshal's followers gathered annually on his name days or on the anniversary of marching out of the I Cadre Company, the Independence Day.

These unofficial, though celebrated anniversaries were always occasions for expressing concern about the remembrance of Independent Poland and the author of the independence – Józef Piłsudski. Owing to those people in the underground patriotic societies the historical truth had remained which was made official in the Independent Poland after 1989.

