

“Everything we find will be interesting for the museum”

We talk with Magdalena Bis (PhD) and Wojciech Bis of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology PAS about archaeological works at the Bersohn and Bauman Children’s Hospital, contemporary archaeology and two decades of studying castles and material culture

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What is your role – as archaeologists – in the progress of works at the Bersohn and Bauman Children’s Hospital?

Wojciech Bis: *The works carried out at the hospital involve cooperation between two institutions – the Warsaw Ghetto Museum and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology PAS. Our participation is determined by the fact that the hospital is a building entered in the National Inventory of Historical Monuments. We are present on its site in order to record any found objects of historical value as well as any exposed remains of old buildings.*

Do you think it is possible that you can find something so unique hidden within the hospital area that it would halt investment works?

Magdalena Bis: It is difficult to speculate.

W.B. *Archaeology is a science exploring things that were undiscovered or hardly known before. There are three wells on the hospital premises marked on Lindley’s plan (the so called Lindley’s plan was created at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in connection with the construction of Warsaw Water Filters – editor’s note). It is possible that they may hold some interesting*

historic objects – interesting for us – but for those who lived at the time it was rubbish thrown into the well as people wanted to get rid of them.

M.B. *Archaeologists look for objects of historical value, and not necessarily of material value. The public opinion associates our work with searching for treasures – items made of precious metals, mainly gold and silver. However, we also value much less precious things, even those that are cheap, commonly used and worn out, for example ceramics, items made of other metals and organic raw materials.*

W.B. *Everything we can find on the hospital premises falls into the category of contemporary archaeology being rather new historic items, only from the 19th century. Whatever we find will be interesting for the museum, as it will be related to this very facility.*

When did you commence the works at 60 Sienna Street?

W.B. *In the spring, we conducted invasive tests to check if there is anything hidden underground. Last week, demolition works of the porter's lodge started. It was not a historic building. Formerly, there was a building functionally linked to the hospital in this place, called a morgue (a mortuary – editor's note). There was a wooden shed next to it. Upon the consent of the Provincial Conservator of Monuments, the buildings have been demolished, since the investment works will be carried out in their place. We supervised the demolition because there was a possibility of finding some items of historic value under the floors. We only discovered small items, such as fragments of post-war metal bed frames, pieces of glass bottles, porcelain cups, parts of stove tiles. Those have been secured. They may be included in the museum's collection.*

Do you think that you may come across objects of great historical significance?

W.B. *There could be everything and there could be nothing out there. The workers are unable to distinguish between a common object and a historic item, thus archaeological supervision is*

needed. The task of the specialists is to assess the finds, secure them and possibly cease further works.

When is your supervision over the works at the hospital premises going to finish?

W.B. *It has already ended. When further demolition works are carried out in the buildings marked on Lindley's plan, we will also participate in them.*

As I understand it correctly, the archaeological supervision of the demolition works at the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital is not the first project of this type that you took part in?

W.B. *We have been in this profession for twenty years. As an example, we worked on unveiling the remains of the 19th century buildings and structures in Płock. We specialise in archaeology of the period from the late Middle Ages to the present day. I am engaged in exploring castles, and my wife is interested in material culture. For example, we have explored the castle in Żelechów near Garwolin.*

M.B. *We also worked at other castles: the Castle of the Teutonic Order in Malbork as well as the castles in Tykocin, Waniewo in Podlachia, and in Puck in Pomerania. We have extensive experience in fieldwork.*

W.B. *In Warsaw, we participated in archaeological works preceding the reconstruction of the Jabłonowski Palace at the National Theatre, as well as the construction of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN, where we were involved in the unveiling of the foundations of the former Crown Artillery Barracks. We also conducted excavations at the Brühl Palace in Młociny.*

Interview conducted by Anna Kilian

Photo Warsaw Ghetto Museum