The Saxon Palace was once the seat of power for Poland's kings. Today, it is the site of a massive archaeological excavation.

Warsaw Remembers

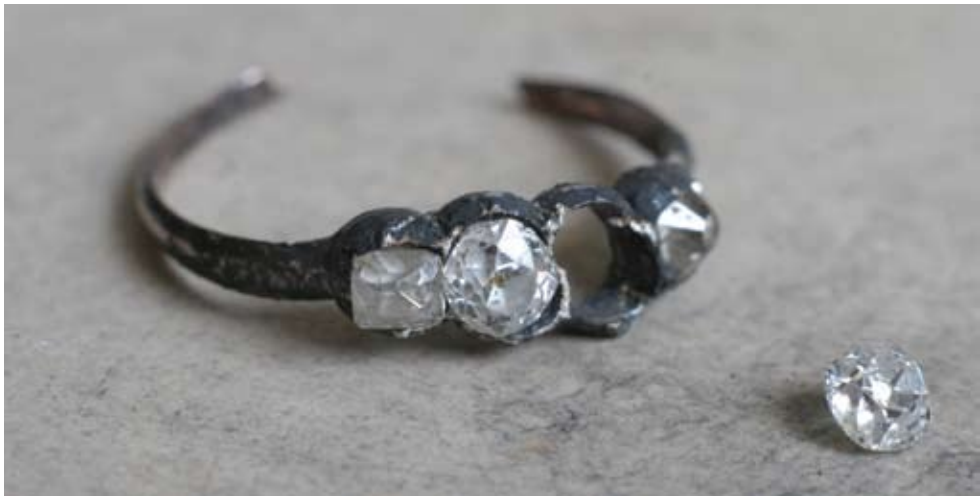
Excavations at the Saxon Palace recapture the city's ravaged history

by Jennifer Pinkowski

As I turn the corner toward the Saxon Palace, I realize I am standing in the spot where Stanisław Zielinski painted the palace bathed in butter-yellow light on a sunny day in 1938. At the time of Zielinski's painting, which hangs in the Warsaw historical museum, the building served as headquarters to the Polish military. Before it was destroyed, the U-shaped palace would have stretched before me, its two wings running the length of several city blocks on either side of an enormous courtyard. In the 1830s the wings were joined by a three-story colonnade, beyond which grew tall chestnut trees. Today in place of the palace are two open excavation pits shrouded by fences wrapped in white fabric. Between the fences lies the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the only part of the palace that is still standing.

A year after Zielinski's sunny day, the Nazis invaded Poland, beginning what would turn into a 50-year period of brutal cultural suppression. The Saxon Palace became the occupation headquarters of the German military. The square in front of the palace, which had been named in honor of Jozef Piłsudski—the general who led Poland to independence in 1918 and served as the nation's first president—was renamed Adolf Hitler Platz. From here the Germans launched attacks to quell the 1943 Ghetto and 1944 Warsaw uprisings. Hundreds of thousands died in the streets, and a roughly equal number perished in concentration and prison camps.

In the face of advancing Soviet forces, Hitler ordered the city destroyed. By late 1944, the retreating



Excavations at the Saxon Palace have uncovered some spectacular artifacts including this diamond ring that was apparently dropped or thrown into a toilet during the 19th century.

German army set explosives in buildings across the abandoned city and blew them up. Shortly after Christmas the Saxon Palace was leveled, leaving a hole in Poland's national identity that remains to this day. When residents began to return to the city a few weeks after the Nazis retreated, they found a wasteland: 85 percent of the city had been obliterated.

After the war, the Soviet-backed government cleared the palace rubble and transported it across the Vistula River, where it was used to reconstruct parts of the city. The Soviets renamed Piłsudski Square "Victory Square," a moniker it held until 1979, when native son Pope John Paul II led a mass here that is often credited with galvanizing the challenge to Communist rule. Since then, the square has appeared much as it does on this overcast November day: vast, gray, and empty.

But, as archaeologists have recently revealed, parts of the palace survive underground. In 2006, contract archaeologists Ryzsard Cedrowski and Joannae Borowska found an extensive array of architectural remains dating back to the seventeenth century and tens of thousands of artifacts. These discoveries were made during an excavation triggered by a looming building project—the reconstruction of the Saxon Palace.

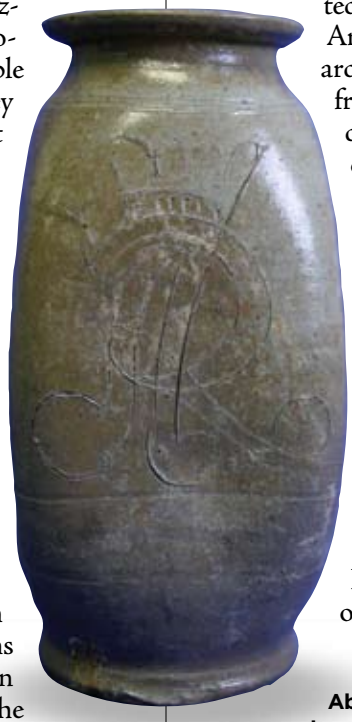
The idea is to restore Piłsudski Square to what it looked liked in 1939 before the Nazi occupation. "Warsaw was so totally destroyed that for the citizens of the city, this form of the palace is in their memories, and they want to see it the way they remember it," says art historian Tadeusz Bernatowicz, a consultant on the dig who has researched the palace for two decades. When completed, the rebuilt Saxon Palace will be the new home of the city government. A section of the archaeological site will be on display inside.

The Saxon Palace is actually the remains of three palaces, each one expanding on its predecessor. In fact, the Saxon king wasn't the first to build here; it was Jan Andrzej Morsztyn, a prominent poet and court official. Archaeologists found the cellars of his seventeenth-century baroque palace next to a moat-lined bastion that once marked the city's southwest border. In Morsztyn's time, Warsaw was the capital of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which included much of what is today Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Dominated by farms and estates, Warsaw was smaller and less grand than the former capital, Krakow, and the other major urban hub, Vilnius (now the Lithuanian capital). But the elected kings of Poland, governed along

with the Sejm, or Parliament.

One of these kings, Frederick Augustus of Saxony—known in Poland as Augustus II the Strong—bought and expanded the Morsztyn estate. When archaeologists cleared out the rubble from one deep well, they found some of the most striking artifacts from the early eighteenth century, including the king's official pottery, colorful decorative tiles, and porcelain sculptures from the queen's garden. They also found remains of a royal chapel. By Polish law, Augustus had to convert to Catholicism to be king. His Protestant queen and Saxon subjects were none too pleased.

By the late eighteenth century, Poland's monarchs were losing their hold on power, and by 1795, the country had succumbed to the imperial ambitions of its aggressive neighbors. Russia, Austria, and Prussia carved up the country between them. Warsaw remained in Russian hands throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1830s, a wealthy Russian merchant commissioned a Polish architect to enlarge the palace. Among the signs of wealth archaeologists discovered from this period are porcelain furnace tiles and a diamond ring that had been tossed into a toilet. Archaeologists also found an epaulet from a Russian uniform that probably belonged to a soldier stationed at the Saxon Palace in mid-century. In 1863, an ultimately unsuccessful nationwide revolt began against the Russians, and the Saxon Palace's gardens were one of Warsaw's battlefields.



Above, 18th century pottery bearing the mark of its owner AR, for "Augustus Rex," better known as King Augustus II the Strong. Below, fragments of decorated tile dating to the 19th century.

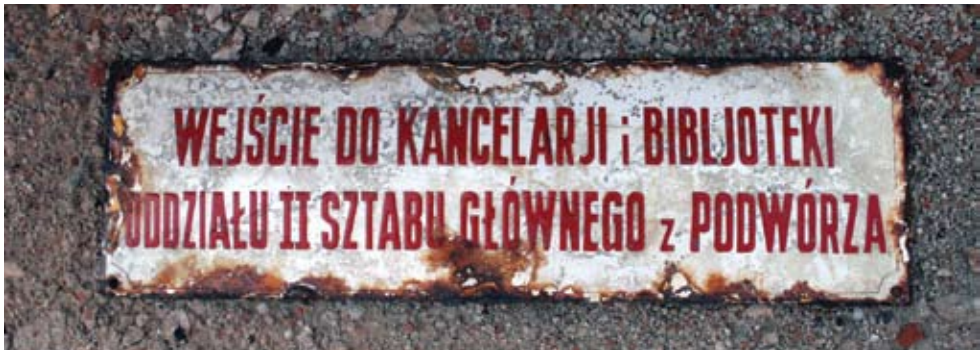
The Treaty of Versailles ended World War I and returned independence to Poland after 125 years. But within a dozen years Poland was once more sandwiched between two aggressive powers, Germany to the west, and the Soviet Union to the east. Archaeologists found many artifacts from this interwar period, when the military was monitoring these threats. The finds include plates from a printing press used for confidential military documents, and a sign for the Cipher Bureau, where mathematicians made significant breakthroughs in cracking the German Enigma code. The most surprising discovery was a secret tunnel dug in 1933 to connect the building's wings. Archaeologists also found evidence of on-site R&R: wine corks, betting slips, and bar receipts in a basement casino.

Though the Germans did not leave much behind when their five-year occupation ended, archaeologists did find helmets and unexploded ordnance in the rubble. The team had a specialist on call to handle its removal.

Scholars are just starting to pore over recently released German archives that might give more details about the last days of the Saxon Palace, but archaeologists have already learned a few things. The palace was blown up in sections, over several days, from the ground floor; the basements were left intact. The steel beams excavators uncovered were twisted like licorice from the force of the explosions. At least one detonation may have happened at 10:15; the archaeologists found a badly damaged clock that stopped at that moment.

These artifacts are important because Warsaw has few objects that predate the Nazi occupation and destruction of the city. Warsaw's museum has only a small collection of medieval pottery and ironwork. And the archaeological collection at the National Museum, which fared slightly better, displays a surprising number of Greek vases and Egyptian mummies, but few Polish artifacts.

The wartime loss of Poland's cultural heritage has been the subject of countless lawsuits and books. Yet the issue still galvanizes public opinion, says Ryszard Cedrowski, lead archaeologist on the dig. "When we found things, there was a huge social action,"



Above, a sign pointing the way to the Cipher Bureau, where intelligence agents worked to crack the Nazi's Enigma code. Right, the archway of a secret tunnel. The Polish eagle and year of construction, 1933, were carved into the wet cement.

An archaeologist documents the remains of a moat that was filled in to make way for the construction of the Morsztyn palace. The brick archway was part of the palace's cellar.

says Cedrowski. "The media started talking about it. Everyone wanted to protect the site, from the right-wing Catholic papers to the Communist papers. People got very emotionally attached."

Journalist Karol Kobus, of the conservative daily *Dziennek*, agrees. "It is one of few things that we—the journalists who write about Warsaw's past and its heritage—truly agree," he says. "If you know Warsaw history, you probably understand why everything older than 60 years is so important for us. We fight for every historical stone."

In early 2007, the sections of the archaeological site flanking the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier—essentially, the remains of Morsztyn's Palace—were placed on the historic register. After full documentation, the rest of the archaeological finds will be removed to make way for the construction.

The Polish attachment to the palace stems as much from the postwar period as the war itself. In the decades following World War II, large sections of Warsaw were rebuilt in order to make the city livable again. Much of it became vast tracts of anonymous, Stalinist-style housing. However, there was another rebuilding trend—reconstructing certain historical buildings to look as they had before the war. Most notable was the Old Town, an area that has been a World Heritage Site since 1980. Other reconstructed wartime casualties included the sixteenth-century Royal Castle, rebuilt in the 1970s and now a major tourist draw.

The Saxon Palace was deliberately ignored during this rebuilding phase. "The political decision was made not to rebuild certain buildings because they were connected to other governments before the war," says Arthur Zbiegnini, deputy director of the city's Heritage Preservation Office. The Saxon Palace was one of them. As the prewar military headquarters, "it was like the Pentagon today," says Zbiegnini. According to the postwar Communist party line, the Soviet army had rescued Poland from the Germans, and the Polish army had been ineffective at best and collaborating with the Germans at worst. Much of the Polish army's leadership was executed, jailed, or exiled, and for decades Poles were forbidden to acknowledge their affiliations with their own military. In this political cli-

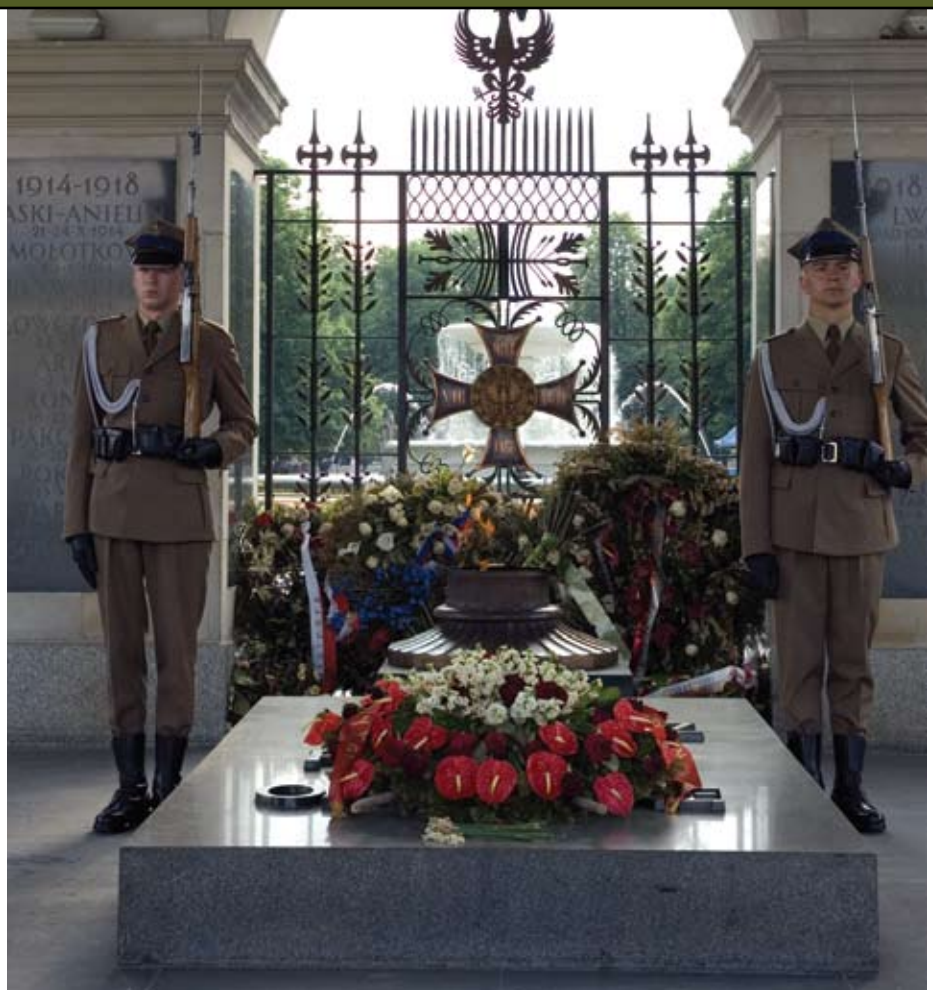
mate, the reconstruction of Piłsudski Square was impossible. Only the end of Communist control in 1989 created the opportunity to rebuild. Still, it wasn't until 2005, when Poland's current president, Lech Kaczynski, was mayor of Warsaw that the project was put in motion.

Today, however, the picture is very different. Poland is seeing a resurgence of national identity, often of a deeply traditional nature. Nationally, right-wing politics dominate, though recent elections have shifted power a bit to the center. Extreme strains of nationalism have sometimes emerged. In Warsaw, one aspect of this reassertion is the public's rallying around the archaeological remains of the Saxon Palace.

A few days before the November 11 Independence Day ceremonies, I visit Piłsudski Square to see how the event preparations are going. Tanks and cannons occupy the east side. Scaffolding three stories high acts as the metal skeleton for speakers and billboard-size monitors. The fence surrounding the excavation area has been covered with olive-green netting and gauzy material in camouflage hues. My translator, a journalist herself, runs over to a group of five-year-olds marching around the square. One of them is her godson. "Aren't they so cute?" she exclaims. Each is holding a hand-painted Polish flag. They are practicing their routine for Independence Day: they're going to sing the national anthem, "Dąbrowski's Mazurka," at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Later, Tadeusz Bernatowicz and I meet at a café on Krakowskie Przedmiescie, one of Warsaw's most fashionable avenues for hundreds of years. The art historian who consulted on the reconstruction of the Town Hall and the former deputy head of International Council on Monuments and Sites for Poland, Bernatowicz has researched the history of the Saxon Palace for two decades. Since the mid-1990s, he has helped organize public events at the square. "We've never found such valuable archaeological remains," he says, his fingers rustling through a 300-page report on the Saxon Palace he created for the city preservation office. "In Warsaw, we don't have such interiors. When I want to show my students seventeenth-century walls, I have had nowhere to go. But now I can show them how they were built."

Since excavations began, the site has been exposed to the elements while the reconstruction design has gone back to the contractor to incorporate plans for protecting the archaeological remains. Once the site was added to the historic register and therefore required preservation, the projected cost rose from $175 million to $200 million. But the contractor was slow with the plan revisions, and Warsaw's mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz canceled the contract. The city has put out a call for new bids, and the expected completion date for the project has been pushed from 2010 to 2013.



The Tomb of the Unkown Soldier, built in 1926, is all that remains of the original Saxon Palace. It is the site of an annual wreath-laying ceremony comemorating November 11, Independence Day.

That gives archaeologists a lot of time to play a role in the Saxon Palace's reconstruction, which makes it unique among Warsaw's rebuilding efforts, says Cedrowski. The Old Town, for instance, was largely the vision of architects. With the Saxon Palace, the discovery of the building's footprint is essential to a more authentic reconstruction of the way the building looked in 1939. The archaeological features they found correct even the most recent military-era site plans.

Bernatowicz sees Piłsudski Square as symbolically important, but not human-friendly. He hopes the reconstruction project will foster a sense of civil society in Warsaw, one that was first created by Augustus II. When the

Saxon Gardens adjacent to his palace opened to the public in 1727, it was one of Europe's first public parks.

The palace's interior will be used for government offices, so the draw for visitors will be the excavations. The archaeologists hope the site will be the central component of an interactive museum like the hauntingly powerful Warsaw Rising Museum, which opened in 2004 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the 1944 uprising.

In the meantime, the city is funding ongoing excavations this year. The archaeologists would like to investigate the ground between the tunnel and the tomb, where they expect to find more cellars. If the parking lot that was supposed to go where they found the Morsztyn Palace is moved across the square, it will open up the ground where a nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox church once stood, and possibly a new chapter in the history of the once-demolished city.

Independence Day arrives with a raw chill. Thousands have come to the square to watch the annual wreath-laying ceremony at the tomb. Among the attendees are President Kaczynski, Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Lithuanian president Valdas Adamkus, and Warsaw mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz. The day before, Kacyznski led a ceremony at the square in which posthumous "promotions" were given to the 14,000 Polish soldiers and police officers killed in mass executions by Soviet security forces in 1940. All 14,000 names were read aloud.

It is not surprising that this crowd overwhelmingly supports the reconstruction of a symbol of Polish self-determination. I am surprised, however, by the urgency the people I meet in the square feel. "If you can make them reconstruct any faster, if you have any influence," 76-year-old Zenon Sobieszek says to me, "please make them speed up the work." ■

Jennifer Pinkowski *is a freelance journalist and contributing editor to* Archaeology.