

Two Centuries of the Museum
of Natural History, University of
Wrocław, and Its Entomological
Collections

Two centuries of insect collections in the Museum of Natural History in Wrocław

In 1814 Johann GRAVENHORST (1777-1857), a renowned entomologist and the first professor in zoology at the University of Wrocław, was appointed as the first director of the newly established natural history museum. Two centuries later, the Museum of Natural History (MNHW) is still a part of the University of Wrocław, and despite its turbulent history and severe war losses, its collections are counted among the largest and most valuable in Poland. The Museum occupies a special place in the history of the University - four out of its five pre-war directors were also rectors of the University of Wrocław. Some of them were pioneers in academic didactic methods - Adolf GRUBE (1857-1880) for the first time introduced practical laboratory courses in animal anatomy, previously taught only in the form of lectures; Anton SCHNEIDER (1881-1890) equipped a Museum teaching room with microscopes that for the first time could be used by a group of students during practical classes; Willy KÜKENTHAL (1898-1917) added field trips to the natural history courses; and Ferdinand PAX jr. (1917-1945) organized short internships at the biological field station in Rovigno (now Croatia).

The Museum's holdings during GRAVENHORST's times included nearly 45 000 insect specimens. Despite the fact that professor GRAVENHORST was the only researcher entomologist working at the Museum until the onset of World War II, the insect collections were steadily growing due to donations and acquisitions, mainly from amateur naturalists. The current number of approximately 2-2.5 million specimens is a result of collecting activities, expeditions, passion and knowledge of several generations of naturalists, who entrusted their collections to the University. This special volume of *The Genus* is intended to provide an overview of selected insect collections deposited in the Museum, carefully curated and made available to scholars. An effort was made to present not only the most valuable historical collections (those of Johann GRAVENHORST, Friedrich Wilhelm NIEPELT, Wilhelm KOLBE, Richard SCHOLZ, Georg POLENTZ) and younger, yet already post-war repositories (Coll. Jan NOSKIEWICZ), but also most recent acquisitions (collections of Jadwiga ZŁOTORZYCKA, Aleksander WRÓBLEWSKI, Janusz PLUCIŃSKI, Paweł STACHOWIAK), all being sources of invaluable taxonomic and faunistic data cited in hundreds of scientific publications, all still in focus of ongoing studies. It should be kept in mind, however, that this selection covers only a fraction of the MNHW insect collections, and scholars mentioned in this series of articles are not the only ones worth remembering. The historical pre-war collections include also, among others, Hemiptera and Diptera of Heinrich SCHOLZ; Lepidoptera of Max WISKOTT, Paul NAGEL, Adolf STRECKFUSS, Alwin GÄRTNER, Alfred BANNIER, Theodor GOETSCHMANN; Hymenoptera of Rudolf DITTRICH and Wilhelm GOETSCH. An example of a recent acquisition is a large Andrzej GRUSZKA collection of Coleoptera entrusted to

the MNHW in 2012. The Museum's holdings comprise also Eocene amber inclusions (approximately 200 amber pieces, provisionally identified by the late Jan KOTEJA), deep-frozen beetle collections suitable for genetic studies (thousands of specimens), countless microscope slides and a rich entomological library.

The Museum (and the University), an important centre of biological studies, was fortunate to employ or closely cooperate with a number of naturalists, who carried out their studies, enlarged and curated the MNHW collections, taught students and participated in multiple academic duties. In the post-war history of the Museum's Entomology Department, several persons contributed to successful development of collections or gained a position of distinguished specialists. Jan KINEL, the first insect curator after World War II, coordinated the rescue operation to retrieve the collections evacuated to various localities, estimate war losses and protect the surviving specimens from further damage. Mieczysław KAK (1928-2008) was a curator for 30 years, until his retirement in 1993 and later for fifteen years as a volunteer; he initiated and almost completed the process of integrating numerous Lepidoptera materials into one organized collection. He was also a *spiritus movens* of the first permanent insect exhibition opened in 1974 and maintained, after modernisation, till today. Wojciech PUŁAWSKI and Jan KLIMASZEWSKI, former researchers at the Museum, became renowned specialists on sphecid Hymenoptera and staphylinid beetles, respectively, both working abroad since early 1980s. PUŁAWSKI, a successor of Jan NOSKIEWICZ, working in the Museum in 1963-1983, had significant influence on systematic entomology in Poland, for years being an editor-in-chief of the *Polskie Pismo Entomologiczne* (Polish Journal of Entomology), a major Polish scientific periodical focused on insects. He was also author or co-author of several volumes of the *Keys for Identification of the Insects of Poland*, covering various families of Aculeata (Hymenoptera).

Current efforts of the present Entomology Department staff are focused on protecting, organizing and data-basing of the existing collections, acquiring new specimens and attracting specialists to explore the Museum's resources. Together with scientists and curators representing other disciplines - ornithologists, ichthyologists, malacologists, botanists and a mycologist - we join forces to fulfil the role museums play in modern scientific studies and popularization of natural history - teaching by exhibitions, workshops, courses and lectures, documenting biodiversity and its changes over centuries (a task especially important in the times of rapid species extinction), conducting cooperative and often interdisciplinary collection-based research, and protecting the legacy of our predecessors.

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