

The first monographic exhibition about Stanisława Walasiewicz at the Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw

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Stanisława Walasiewicz (1911–1980), or Stella Walsh, as she was known in the United States, was one of the greatest stars of women's track and field in the world in the inter-war period. She was a one-woman team, capable of competing single-handedly taking on national teams of more than one country. Since her debut on Polish soil, she won over the hearts of the fans, showing a class superior to anything seen before in Poland, be it in short distance running, jumps, and even throws. Although she grew up and lived in faraway Cleveland, Ohio, she represented Poland all her life, bringing much splendour to her homeland. Olympic gold and silver medallist – Los Angeles (1932) and Berlin (1936), international champion of many events organized in many countries of Europe as well as America and Japan, she had over 5,000 victories during her long and remarkable career. She excelled in all athletic disciplines, although sprinting was her domain and it was in this discipline that she set most of her 37 world records (not all of them official). The inspiration for the exhibition entitled **“Stanisława Walasiewicz 1911–1980. A Photographic Tale of the World's Fastest Woman”** was her private photo album. It is one of the most valuable photographic collections in the Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw. It includes over two thousand photographs, mainly from the 1928–1939 period. This unique archival material documents not only the sports career of the outstanding athlete but also a unique period in women's athletics in the world.

Restoration works

The album was found by pure chance, in the basement of a Polish library in Los Angeles, during the renovation works, and by a happy coincidence, in 2012 it found its way to the Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw. Due to the poor state of preservation, it was impossible to undertake any actions (digitisation, process, and making the collection available to the public) without first conducting conservation works to secure the photographs against further deterioration and prepare them for proper storage and exhibition. Carrying out such works became possible at the end of 2019, when the restoration project was implemented, thanks to a targeted grant from the Office of the Marshal of the Mazovia Voivodeship. The restoration works were carried out by Pracownia “Versum” Anna Szlasa-Byczek (the “Versum” Studio Anna Szlasa-Byczek).

The photo album measuring: 32.5 cm length x 25.5 cm width x 11 cm thickness consists of 279 cards (pages), glued to which are 2,252 photos and 2 negatives. Approximately 270 cards have photographs on both sides and the remaining 29 are not glued to the cards. Due to the poor state of the item, the album cards no longer serve their original function of supporting and protecting the photographs and the chemical properties of the degraded paper of the pads contributed to the acceleration of further deterioration of the photographs. In the process of the disassembly of the photographs from the pads, the restoration experts found that the majority of the photographs had already been pasted over multiple times. They have also made some interesting discoveries, including handwritten notes on the verso of the photographs such as dedications made by Polish and foreign sportsmen and eminent personalities from the world of politics, culture, and sport of that time. A great value of the collection is its homogeneity and personal character. Particularly valuable are the handwritten notes made by the album's owner. Through their work, the experts managed to restore the original look of the photographs, at the same time giving them a high aesthetic value and making it possible to carry out research, including identification of the photographs, which posed a great challenge. The album found by the staff of the Polish Millennium Library in Los Angeles, California, was saved not only from oblivion but also from destruction. Apart from photographs previously unknown in Poland, from various sports competitions in which Walasiewicz participated as an athlete, not only in Europe but also in the USA, the album also contains many photos from her private life. Particularly valuable are the previously unpublished photographs, including her visits to Poland, with her family in Pomerania, with Eugeniusz Bodo on board the "MS Batory" ship, with the sculptor Olga Niewska at the World Exhibition in New York in 1939, or during her stay in the fashionable pre-war spa town of Truskawiec. Photographs from her trips to Asia and Africa are undoubtedly a great discovery. The effort of the restoration experts made it possible to start a thorough scientific research project in the year 2020, including, in its first stage, digitisation and identification of photographs, and the presentation of the results at the first monographic exhibition devoted to the sportswoman.

Arrangement of the exhibition

The multimedia exhibition was set up in the intimate surroundings of temporary exhibitions, located in the permanent display room on the second floor of the Museum. The arrangement is the work of Arkadiusz Śliwowski, who is a visual artist. An important element of the exhibition is the colour scheme, limited to a minimum, dominated by dark browns, whites, and greys. This refers to the pages of the album on which the photographs are pasted, and to the style of interiors from the 1930s. Presented against this backdrop are selected photographs (in the number of over 300), both as prints of whole album pages and as reproductions of individual photographs. The central part of the exhibition relates to Stanisława Walasiewicz's greatest sporting triumph, which is winning the gold medal in Los Angeles (1932). This is why her photograph taken at the decoration ceremony

was placed on the podium. Presented in the showcases are all her sports trophies, including medals, tokens, distinctions, and badges, as well as the footwear in which she competed in the inter-war period as well as selected archival materials. In a specially arranged screening room, the visitors can watch archival footage from the 1931–1936 period, obtained from the resources of the Sherman Grinberg Library (Getty Images). It shows Walasiewiczówna during her run at the Jersey City Athletics Championships (1931), during training while she performs stretching exercises (1931), during an interview (1931), and during her final run at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles (1932) and in Berlin (1936). The sound material is supplemented by archival recordings obtained from the Polish Radio and own resources of the Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw. In these recordings talking about Stanisława Walasiewicz are: Kazimiera Muszałówna, an interwar sports journalist, in a 1978 broadcast entitled “Chwila sportowych wspomnień – Olimpijczycy” (“Cherished Sports Memories – The Olympians”) and Maria Kwaśniewska-Maleszewska. The visitors will also be able to hear Stanisława Walasiewicz-Olson herself from the 1962 programme “Przeżyjmy to jeszcze raz” (“Let’s experience it again”). The soundtrack, which forms the background for the entire exhibition space, is complemented by a musical recording arranged by Grzegorz Toporowski and Piotr Sawicki, which consists of popular hits from the inter-war years.

The scenario of the exhibition

Placed on the wall opening the exhibition is a reproduced photograph from the album taken in 1931 when Walasiewicz became an international star. At that time she already held the title of the world’s fastest woman. The photomontage shows the athlete running in front of a locomotive. Her growing fame as the queen of sprinting prompted the Cleveland railway office, where she worked as a clerk, to use her image to promote a fleet of the then state-of-the-art trains. Before the entrance to the main exhibition space, where the story of the life of this outstanding sportswoman is presented, visitors see her in the role of a donor to the Museum. Stanisława Walasiewicz-Olson came to Cracow in 1977 as the honorary guest of the III Polish Olympics. There she took part in the senior women’s 60-metre run at the Cracovia Stadium and... won. When she visited the Museum, which was then located at 5 Wawelska Street, in July of that year, she donated a large part of her sports memorabilia. In this space, in addition to photographs from her stay at the Museum, also presented are the photos documenting the album’s restoration process. The photographs have been reproduced in their original formats on an illuminated display. This is a great solution, as, on the one hand, it makes one aware of just how vast the collection is, and on the other hand, it illustrates the nature of the entire collection, and above all its thematic diversity. Then we step into the main narrative of the exhibition which presents key moments of the athlete’s rich biography. The timeline is marked by consecutive dates. We meet her as a teenager, a high school student who is a part of the school team and competes in local competitions in Cleveland. At that time she had already drawn attention

to herself with her excellent results. She came to Poland for the first time with a group of American "Falcons" in 1929 to take part in competitions accompanying the General National Exhibition in Poznań. She was noticed by Polish activists and invited to participate in a falconer's instructor course organized in the Zamoyski estate in Kozłówka. In July of that year, she debuted as a contestant for Poland in an athletics match against Austria in Królewska Huta. She did exceptionally well, winning in four competitions: the 60-metre, 100-metre, and 200-metre races as well as in the long jump. She captured the hearts of her fellow countrymen and from that point on, her adventure with sport began for good. Her performance in Prague in 1930 at the III Women's World Games promoted her to the elite of world athletes. She won 3 gold medals in the 60-metre, 100-metre, and 200-metre races and a bronze medal in the 4 x 100-metre relay. Along with Halina Konopacka, she became the star of the event. Her growing fame as a sprint queen prompted the Cleveland railway office to offer her a job with one of the largest railway companies in the country, the New York Central Railroad. In the photos from that time, one can see her in the office sorting mail and in the kitchen while cooking, with a bit of flour on her face. All this to show that she was not only a great contestant and a hard worker, but was also capable of running a household. Some photos which are part of the exhibition might be considered quite a peculiarity, especially those taken during a race with her greyhound "Eastor Boy" running alongside her, chasing an artificial hare. In some photographs, she is accompanied by Dr. Dan Griffin, who was important in her life as her long-time trainer and the "architect" of her sporting successes. He is shown in the photographs during Walasiewiczówna's training with her younger sister Clara, in May 1932. It was at this time that Stasia made an important decision, the consequences of which would stay with her for the rest of her life: "Just before the Olympic Games in 1932 they tried to persuade me in various ways to become a US citizen. I was promised that all formalities would be handled in Congress within 24 hours! But I knew what I was doing. In the Los Angeles stadium, I won a gold medal for Poland. (...) I was promised a great job there, with a great salary, if I competed in 'stars and stripes'. But because I refused, I was left with nothing". Apart from photos from the Olympic Games in Los Angeles and Berlin, particularly valuable are those from her journey to Japan in 1934. She accepted the invitation of the local Japanese sports authorities, and she went on a tour, competing and setting new records in Osaka, Kyoto, Nagoya, and Tokyo. It was a huge PR success for Poland, all the more so because she was the first "white woman" and the first Polish athlete competing in the Land of the Rising Sun. The photos also chronicle her private life. She emigrated to the USA on one of the ocean liners and crossed the Atlantic many times. Numerous photos were taken on board: "SS Piłsudski", "SS Kościuszko", "SS Pułaski" and "MS Batory", with the crew and passengers, including the famous Polish singer Eugeniusz Bodo or the legendary captain Eustasy Borkowski, who was her great fan. She was a true star and celebrity of the day, willing to give interviews, and was often hosted in private estates, including that of the co-owner of one of the most famous spas of the Second Republic, in the spa town of Truskawiec. Her portrait was created by a renowned Polish sculptor Olga Niewska. Both ladies can be seen posing next to the sculpture exhibited in the Polish Pavilion

at the 1939 World Exhibition in New York. Unfortunately, the outbreak of World War II ruined her next medal chances. The Olympic Games in 1940 and 1944 did not take place, nor did the European Championships in 1942. She spent the war years in Cleveland. After the war, at the official Amateur Athletic Union regional championships held in Cleveland on August 24, 1945, she ran the 100-meter race in a sensational time of 11.1 seconds. This result outclassed the official world record of the day, and was ahead of time, but remained only an unofficial result. Although the result was achieved under proper conditions, the AAU board of directors at the time did not send the competition protocol for official approval. It was put away in a drawer somewhere and it stayed there for decades. In 1946 Stanisława Walasiewicz came to her homeland once more and took part in the National Championships with seven wins, and in the European Championships in Oslo – without any major successes due to an injury. This was the last time she represented Poland in a sports event. She officially ended her career in 1956. Around that time she married Harry Neil Olson, a former American boxer. In 1975 she was inducted into the US Track and Field Hall of Fame as Stella Walsh-Olson. A recreation centre in her hometown of Cleveland was named after her. She died a sudden death on December 4, 1980.

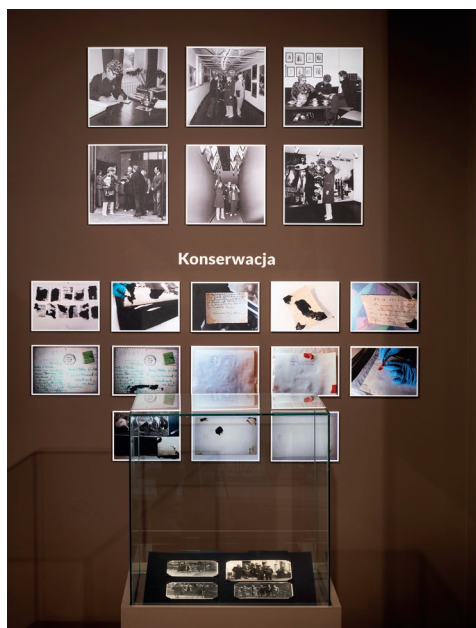
The first monographic exhibition devoted to an outstanding Polish sportswoman of the interwar period was the culmination of the first stage of a research project involving the development and presentation to the public of the effects of the extensive work on a rich archival collection of photographs. The next stage involved obtaining information on the location of sports trophies and memorabilia (over 1,000!), which Stanisława Walasiewicz wanted to donate to the Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw, which sadly did not happen due to her sudden and tragic death. According to current knowledge, they can be found, among others, in the Museum of Polish Sports in Orchard Lake, the Polish Museum of America in Chicago, and private institutions in Los Angeles. Regardless of further research on this extraordinary athlete, due to the great interest in the subject, the Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw has prepared 20 large-format boards richly illustrated, which describe the history of her life and sporting career. The board exhibition will first be presented in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship. From 11 March until April 8, 2022, it will be displayed at Anna Wazówna's Palace in Brodnica, and then in such cities as Grudziądz, Toruń, Bydgoszcz, and Górzno. At the end of August this year, it will be shown in Wierzchownia – Walasiewiczówna's hometown, not far from the house where she was born. The exhibition will also be presented during the **1st Memorial of Stanisława Walasiewiczówna – Wierzchownia 2022**, taking place on 26–28 August. More information about the sporting event itself is available at www.memorialwalasiewiczowny.pl.

All the above-mentioned activities are intended to be a part of the commemoration of Stanisława Walasiewicz as the year 2022 marks 90 years since she won the gold medal at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles and the 111th anniversary of her birthday.

All presented photos, by Mr. Radek Jaworski, come from the exhibition in the Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw, entitled "Stanisława Walasiewicz 1911–1980. A Photographic Tale of the World's Fastest Woman".







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