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Serendipity in the Archives

Abstract: Archives have a rather dull reputation. Boxes of dusty papers guarded by rigid access rules are unappealing to many people. However, there are exceptions to that preconception, notably the Hoover Institution Library and Archives. Hoover Archives has been a place of serendipity for me personally since 2009 when I was a graduate student. What began as a class project became a master's thesis and launched a career as an independent historian. An astonishing collection of virtually unknown records combined with a wonderful array of people led the way to many adventures and publications. This is the story of how books and public histories are born – one person and one discovery at a time.

Keywords: Gibson Hugh S. (1883–1954), Gibson Michael Francis (1929–2017), Hoover Herbert C. (1874–1964), Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Hoover Presidential Library, Drexel Biddle Anthony, Jr. (1897–1961), Poland, Argentina, Belgium, Famine Emergency Committee, World War I – World War II

Słowa kluczowe: Gibson Hugh S. (1883–1954), Gibson Michael Francis (1929–2017), Hoover Herbert C. (1874–1964), Biblioteka i Archiwum Instytutu Hoovera, Biblioteka Prezydencka Hoovera, Drexel Biddle Anthony, Jr. (1897–1961), Polska, Argentyna, Belgia, komitet kryzysowy do walki z głodem, I wojna światowa, II wojna światowa

Archives have a rather dull reputation. Boxes of dusty papers guarded by rigid access rules are unappealing to many people. However, there are exceptions to that preconception. The main repository for collections pertinent to my research is Hoover Institution Library and Archives (HIA). A few notable additions include the Hoover Presidential Library, the Philadelphia Historical Society and the University of Wyoming Archives.

Just after World War I, Herbert C. Hoover¹ created a unique repository for the “documentary history of the war” with a 50,000 USD donation to his alma mater, Stanford University, in 1919. His “firsthand experience administering relief operations in World War I”, provided powerful impetus and a great many contacts from which to start. The goal was to collect as many perspectives as possible on war, revolution and peace in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Hoover set about gathering documents pertaining to “the causes and consequences of political conflict with the ultimate goal of promoting peace”. The mission statement he created is electrifying: “to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace...”. Today HIA “boast nearly one million volumes and more than six thousand archival collections – in sixty-nine languages from more than one hundred fifty countries”. A highly trained staff of over seventy-five scholars and technicians manage, protect and make these documents available for scholars². Much to its credit, HIA has become an amazing conduit of ideas and people, connecting scholars with each other and pairing needs with resources.

HIA has been a place of serendipity for me personally since 2009 when I was a graduate student. What began as a class project became a master’s thesis³ as well as a couple of published books, several articles and an exhibition – mostly due to that serendipity (as well as the positive responses from others and thousands of hours of work). The initial topic was Juan Peron⁴ and Argentina after World War II. A mystifying article popped up placing H.C. Hoover in Buenos Aires about the time of Peron’s inauguration in June 1946. It turned out to be the tip of an iceberg. Despite his mixed reviews as president, Hoover was undeniably one of the greatest humanitarians of the twentieth century⁵.

1 H.C. Hoover (1874–1964) was a mining engineer, extraordinary humanitarian, and the thirty-first president of the US (1929–1933).

2 *About Us*, [online] <https://www.hoover.org/library-archives/about> [accessed 01.02.2024].

3 V. Reed, *Beneath the Surface: Argentine-US Relations as Perón Assumed the Presidency*, completed in 2009 under the guidance of Professor John Rector, [online] https://wou.edu/history/files/2015/08/VivianReed_MA_paper2009.pdf [accessed 01.02.2024].

4 J. Perón (1895–1974), President of Argentina 1946–52, 1952–55 and 1973–74.

5 Hoover was recruited to help feed Belgians starving after the German invasion of 1914. He recruited an extraordinary group of young men (including Hugh S. Gibson) to serve in the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), forming life-long friendships and a passion for humanitarian work.

This was my introduction to the Famine Emergency Committee (FEC), created by President Truman in February 1946. Hoover was commissioned to take stock of post-WWII famine risk to nations around the world. In addition, he was tasked to find supplies, facilitate transportation, and ease diplomatic entanglements. He set out in March with a team of 10 experts in various related fields aboard the Faithfull Cow. They covered 35 countries in 90 days, meeting with heads of state and top officials everywhere. The tale of that trip still needs to be told (working on it!) but it led me directly to my main character.

Just as my research began, Linda Bernard⁶, then deputy archivist of HIA, posted a blog on the mission in October 2009⁷. Timing was the first serendipity. Discovering Hugh S. Gibson was the second⁸. It quickly became apparent that Gibson had kept the most detailed (and the most entertaining) account of the FEC's mission. Armed with his diary and Hoover's, my research soon developed surprising results which turned the research paper into a scholarly article⁹. Nick Siekierski¹⁰, a young archival assistant at Hoover at that time, kindly copied and sent me dozens of documents.

All the participants of the FEC journey kept diaries, but HIA did not hold all the collections. Although many were there, others were located in the Hoover

For example, see: G.H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover*. Vol. 2: *The Humanitarian*, 1914–1917, New York, NY 1988. By the end of WWI, Hoover (with Gibson as his diplomatic advisor) undertook to feed most of Europe, earning much gratitude and many awards in the process. When war broke out again in 1939, Hoover was again recruited to provide aid. He created the Commission for Relief in Poland, the National Committee on Food for the Small Democracies, and reactivated much of the CRB as well as many of the CRB men, including Gibson. After the war, President Truman asked Hoover to make a famine survey of the world. Hoover recruited such men as H.S. Gibson, NBC vice-president Frank Mason, and future UNICEF chief Maurice Pate to accompany him. Together, they toured thirty-five countries in ninety days aboard the unpressurized Faithfull Cow (sister to the Sacred Cow, Truman's AirForce One). Everywhere they met key leaders, assessed needs and resources, and untangled problems to the movement of food and supplies.

6 L. Bernard joined the staff of HIA in 1978 where she became an archivist. She oversaw many of the digital finding aids researchers enjoy today, processed the Hugh Gibson Collection and was Deputy Director of the Archives at the time of her recent retirement, see: *Linda M. Bernard*, [online] <https://web.stanford.edu/~lbernard/> [accessed 14.02.2024].

7 L. Bernard, *Hoover's Archivists' Musings*, Blog of the Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Tuesday, October 9, 2009, [online] <http://hooverinstitutionla.blogspot.com/2009/> [accessed 10.13.2009].

8 H.S. Gibson (1883–1954) was an American career diplomat who served from 1908–1938. He was Ambassador to Poland 1919–1924, Switzerland 1924–1927, Belgium 1927–1933 and again 1937–1938. He was involved with disarmament conferences between the wars and active in Hoover's humanitarian programs throughout his career.

9 V. Reed, *Uncommon Diplomacy: Hoover's Quiet Impact on US-Argentine Relations*, "Academia" 2017, [online] https://www.academia.edu/31545511/Uncommon_Diplomacy_Academia_Feb_2017 [accessed 14.02.2024].

10 N. Siekierski is a PhD historian and translator from Northern California, based in Warsaw, Poland. See his blog on history, politics, culture and current affairs, see: [online] <https://researchteacher.com> [accessed 14.02.2024].

Presidential Library (HPL) in Iowa. Fortunately, a travel grant from the Friends of HPL allowed me to go visit in 2010. Another friendly staff¹¹ facilitated my work and earnestly encouraged me to continue with my work on the FEC. That story remains in progress.

Once the importance of the FEC's interlude in Argentina became evident, Linda introduced me to Hoover biographer, George H. Nash¹² and put me in touch with Gibson's heir for permissions to publish. Meanwhile, I devoured Gibson's entire diary with relish. Every page was a delight, containing detailed political and economic analysis as well as personal assessments of the statesmen, royalty, and celebrities of each country visited. It comprises a perfect snapshot of the world in 1946, with historical background and future projections for each nation visited as well as their leaders. It was education in a diary. And all of it was written with a warmth and humor I found irresistible.

But I was often puzzled. Gibson frequently described the people he met. But who was who? When there was a clear emotional reaction, what was the context? When Gibson's son and heir, Michael Francis Gibson¹³, responded with permission to publish, he also agreed to "answer a few questions". So began the most intense education of my life. The first tentative questions quickly turned into hundreds of questions. Each answer led to ten more questions, and so our friendship grew. Michael Francis was a fascinating and well-connected man in his own right. His accomplishments in both music and art history were legendary. He was 82 and in poor health when I met him in 2009 but thrilled that someone was interested in his father. Michael Francis was 17 in 1946, and so remembered many of the stories personally. His stories not only directed my research, but also connected the dots, verified identities, and added the power

11 Matthew Shaefer, Craig Wright, Spencer Howard, and Lynn Smith of Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa – thank you!

12 G.H. Nash is a historian, lecturer, and authority on the life of Herbert Hoover. His publications include three volumes of a definitive, scholarly biography of Hoover and the monograph *Herbert Hoover and Stanford University* (Stanford, CA 2015), as well as numerous articles in scholarly and popular journals. A specialist in twentieth-century political and intellectual history, Nash is also the author of *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (Wilmington, Del., 1996), *The Crusade Years, 1933–1955* (Chicago 2013), *Freedom Betrayed* (Stanford, CA 2013), and *Reappraising the Right* (Wilmington, Del. 2009). A graduate of Amherst College and holder of a PhD in history from Harvard University, he received the Richard M. Weaver Prize for Scholarly Letters in 2008.

13 M.F. Gibson (1929–2017) was the son of H.S. Gibson and Ynes Reyntiens of Belgium, an American born in Brussels during his father's tenure as US Ambassador. He was highly educated, fluent in several languages, accomplished in music, art, and exploring the history of both. Between 1969 and 2004, he was the resident art critic for the "International Herald Tribune". In 2001, he published *The Mill and the Cross* (Lausanne 2001), analyzing Peter Bruegel's *The Way to Calvary*. A full-length feature film of the same title premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2011 starring Charlotte Rampling, Michael York and Rutger Hauer. Producer Lech Majewski combined traditional film techniques with some cutting-edge technology to take the viewers inside Bruegel's painting.

of first-person memory. He spent the last several years of his life tutoring me in all things Gibson. We emailed daily, spoke on the phone several times a week, and I spent a lovely ten days visiting the Gibson home in Paris in 2013. At that time, there were still quite a few archival documents at his home. He mentioned that he needed to do something with them for storage purposes, and I suggested adding them to his father's collection in HIA. He did that, and further increments arrived in 2013, 2014, and 2015.

Serendipity struck again when I came to the FEC's visit to Poland in March 1946. Gibson's emotions ran high, as did my own. My mother and her family escaped from Nazi controlled Warsaw on July 31, 1944 – the very day before the Warsaw Uprising began¹⁴. Mom was fourteen. I was aware of the Sovietization Poland would undergo over the next few years. That explained the cloak and dagger aspects of Gibson's diary entries. But how to account for the many friends and landmarks he mourned? Or his knowledge of how things worked in Poland? Or his procurement of papers for the Hoover Institution Library¹⁵? I posed my question to Michael Francis. His answers changed my life.

H.S. Gibson had been assigned as the first US Minister to Poland after World War I. He served in Warsaw from 1919–1924, during the pivotal years of the establishment and defense of a modern, independent Poland. It was also the time when my grandparents and their parents were politically active. Fortunately for me, Gibson kept detailed diaries of events and wrote voluminous letters – and Michael Francis had donated them all to the Hoover Archives in 1956¹⁶. My attention shifted from the FEC in 1946 to Gibson's years as Minister to Poland. Gibson's writings from this time were as descriptive and enlightening (not to mention entertaining!) as those of 1946. He painted colorful descriptions of primary politicians and diplomats as well as keeping detailed notes on the Polish Sejm debates over the new constitution and early elections.

14 My grandfather, Hugo Scheiermann, was a Pole of German heritage and Lutheran religion. My grandmother was pure Polish. It was the first such marriage in a small German community just outside Warsaw. All was well until 1939 and the Nazi invasion of Poland. Throughout the war, the family survived by virtue of their Volksdeutsch status. As the summer of 1944 unfolded, there were often strange scenes at the family dinner table with Grandpa, a 'German,' and my Polish great-grandmother, a courier for the Polish underground. When the family decided to flee in July 1944, she stayed behind to fight and died in the conflagration. My mother and her immediate family boarded a train on July 31, were bombed in the station on the morning of August 1 and made their way to Vienna. There they waited for seven years while making arrangement to immigrate to the US. They arrived in Los Angeles in 1951.

15 These questions were addressed in a recently presented paper at the Polish American Historical Association Conference, January 6, 2024, see: V. Reed, *The Faithfull Cow Goes to Warsaw* in: *Program 2024*, [online] <https://polishamericanstudies.org/text/18/program2024.html> [accessed 14.02.2024].

16 *Gibson (Hugh S.) papers*, [online] <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf0d5n978g/> [accessed 14.02.2024].

Conversations with various archivists and scholars continued during my research trips to HIA¹⁷. Oddly enough, Wikipedia provided the next bit of serendipity. Michael Francis authored the Wikipedia page devoted to his father, updated it regularly, and conversed with scholars who made comments. German scholar Jochen Böhrer¹⁸ read that someone was doing research into Gibson's activities in Poland, knew the material was at HIA, and wrote to them for contact information. The staff kindly referred Jochen to me. A new friendship and collaboration was born. During his own research trip to Paris, Jochen had an opportunity to meet M.F. Gibson and was captivated.

Another player also entered the picture about this time, Jan-Roman Potocki¹⁹. After discovering Gibson's name entered in the guestbook at his family's estate, Potocki also contacted HIA to find out more. We met in the reading room in early 2016, finding shared delight at Gibson's descriptions of Poland and various members of the Potocki family. He also met M.F. Gibson shortly thereafter. By the end of the year, the University of Rochester Press had agreed to publish H.S. Gibson's papers during his time as US Minister to Poland, 1919–1924.

During the long working years of 2017 and early 2018, Potocki added to the content and veracity of the text. Böhrer also contributed substantially. An introduction was prepared by Mieczysław B. Biskupski²⁰. A series of negotiations by Potocki and a generous grant from the Lanckoroński Foundation²¹ made possible a concurrent publication of Gibson's record in Polish, translated by Andrzej Ehrlich²².

17 Thank you L. Bernard, Carol Leadenham, G.H. Nash, Irena Czernichowska, Maciej Siekierski, N. Siekierski, Mieczysław B. Biskupski, Bert Patenaude, Timothy Synder, Anna Mazurkiewicz and many others.

18 J. Böhrer (Boehler) is currently the director of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies. He has published widely on the topic of violence in central and eastern Europe during the twentieth century, as well as co-editing two volumes of Gibson material with me. Before moving to Vienna in 2022, Böhrer was acting Chair for Eastern European History at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena (2019–2022) where he had been Senior Research Fellow from 2010–2019.

19 J.-R. Potocki was an investment banker in London until 2000 when he decided to revive his family's vodka-producing business in Warsaw. Potocki Vodka is sold around the world in bottles bearing the Potocki family crest. His interest in history was rekindled when he found Gibson's name in his family guestbook and recognized him as the US Minister. That led to our meeting and collaboration on both the book, *An American in Warsaw*, published in 2018, and the exhibition, *Americans in Poland 1919–1947* in 2019.

20 M.B. Biskupski is a Polish-American historian and political scientist who has focused on Central European (especially Polish) history and international relations. He has a long list of publications on the subject and is currently the Endowed Chair in Polish and Polish-American Studies at Central Connecticut State University.

21 Fundacja Lanckorońskich / Lanckoroński Foundation, see: [online] <https://fundacjаланckorońskich.org/en/> [accessed 14.02.2024].

22 H.S. Gibson, *Amerykanin w Warszawie 1919–1924. Niepodległa Rzeczpospolita oczami pierwszego ambasadora Stanów Zjednoczonych*, eds. V.H. Reed with M.B.B. Biskupski, J. Böhrer, and J.-R. Potocki, transl. A. Ehrlich, Warszawa 2018.

So, with Michael's help, H.S. Gibson's records were published in 2018 as *An American in Warsaw*²³. Although he did not live to hold the book in his hands, Michael Francis was able to enjoy knowing that publication was secured, and the story would finally be told. What none of us realized before publication was that Gibson's record filled a historical gap in Poland history. Almost all Polish records of foundational events in Poland had been destroyed by either Nazi or Soviet invaders. Although we did not plan this either, our publication date in fall 2018 coincided with the 100-year anniversary of Polish independence and US-Polish relations.

This happy coincidence led to several amazing events. The US Embassy and the Polish publisher, "Znak" arranged for the book to be launched by the incoming US Ambassador, Georgette Mosbacher²⁴, on the occasion of her first public statement in Warsaw on September 14, 2018²⁵. Both Böhler and Potocki attended the event in the Mosbacher residence with me. Radio and TV interviews followed. Given the importance of this historical record to Poland, book sales of the Polish version were brisk.

In the afterglow of such a spectacular launch, Potocki approached me with another idea, one that just had to happen. He proposed an exhibition of Americans who had helped Poland between her rebirth in 1918 and the final stages of Sovietization in 1947. He arranged the venue, History Meeting House (Dom Spotkań z Historią or DSH)²⁶ in downtown Warsaw and collaborated with the US Embassy for funding. I was asked to find and curate the photos and displays, and well as tracking down descendants of our 'heroes'.

During the same period, Maciej Siekierski²⁷ (then Curator for European Collections and N. Siekierski's father) was approached by "Karta" (Wydawnictwo Ośrodek Karta), a historical publisher in Warsaw, about the Gibson material. He referred them to me. Although they had hoped for the material contained within the now copyrighted book, they accepted my proposal for a chapter on Gibson's

23 H.S. Gibson, *An American in Warsaw: Selected Writings of Hugh S. Gibson, US Minister to Poland 1919–1924*, eds. V.H. Reed with M.B.B. Biskupski, J. Böhler, and J.-R. Potocki, Rochester, NY 2018.

24 Georgette Mosbacher is an American business executive, political activist and served as US Ambassador to Poland 2019–2021. She is currently co-chair of the Three Seas Programing project of the Atlantic Council, see: *Georgette Mosbacher*, [online] <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/expert/georgette-mosbacher/> [accessed 14.02.2024].

25 *Can't-Miss Exhibit at History Meeting House: "Americans in Poland 1919–1947"*, [online] https://pl.usembassy.gov/us_ambassadors/ [accessed 6.30.2019].

26 Dom Spotkań z Historią (History Meeting House) is a Warsaw municipal museum founded in 2006 in cooperation with KARTA. It focuses on the testimonies of twentieth century history and presents material in an engaging form.

27 M. Siekierski served as Curator of European Collections at HIA from 1992 until his retirement. He authored among other publications *Helena Paderewska: Memoirs, 1919–1920*, Stanford, CA 2015.

work on behalf of Poland before his time as Minister. When HIA announced their plans to close for a year for remodeling, I asked if there were any other materials I could gather for them on my last trip to the archives. There was one set – the papers of Anson C. Goodyear²⁸. His story and Gibson’s overlapped slightly, and both were tied to Hoover, so it was a good fit. Both articles were published in 2021²⁹.

Serendipity struck again while I was researching the Goodyear material at HIA. HIA staff member Irena Czernichowska³⁰ introduced me to Anna Mazurkiewicz³¹. A quick coffee at the end of our last workday together resulted in an invitation to come to the Polish American Historical Association (PAHA) conference in Chicago in January 2019. It turns out that Mazurkiewicz was the president of that group. In due course, I submitted a proposal to discuss the development and content of *An American in Warsaw*. It was accepted, and I was on my way to Chicago.

The PAHA event was wonderful. During the final banquet, I visited with the only other person who did not know many people. It turned out she worked for a German publisher. Once she heard what I had been working on, she asked what was next. I told her about Gibson’s important role during the final six months of WWI and the first months of the Versailles peace. Her immediate response was “We want to publish that”. I hadn’t realized she was the Acquisitions Editor for DeGruyter Oldenburg until that moment. It was a rather miraculous moment of serendipity! With the collaboration of Böhler, *An American in Europe at War and Peace* was duly published in 2020 during the first horrible fall of the Covid 19 pandemic³².

Between the first meeting with DeGruyter and the publication of the second book, Potocki’s exhibition was prepared and presented. Hoover’s work, and that of Gibson, were central. But this exhibition chose to highlight the work of many other individual Americans whose contributions had previously gone

28 A.C. Goodyear (1877–1964) was an American businessman and served as a colonel during WWI. Hoover and the Supreme Economic Council appointed Goodyear president of the crucial coal commission in charge of coal distribution in Austria, Hungary and Poland in 1919. As such, he resolved several potentially dangerous confrontations between Germany and Poland in Silesia.

29 V. Reed, *Hugh S. Gibson and Anson Goodyear*, [in:] *Lobbyści. Zachodni rzecznicy polskiej niepodległości* [Lobbyists: Western Spokesmen of Polish Independence]. Vol. 2: *Raporty z Polski* [Reports from Poland], ed. A. Turkowski, Warszawa 2021, non-counted pages.

30 I. Czernichowska is a long-standing employee at HIA. She was born and educated in Gdańsk, Poland.

31 A. Mazurkiewicz, a professor of history at the University of Gdańsk, served as president of the Polish American Historical Association from 2017–2018. Her areas of specialty include US-Polish relations, US policy toward East Central Europe, and political emigration between 1945 and 1989.

32 *An American in Europe at War and Peace: Hugh S. Gibson’s Chronicles 1918–1919*, eds. V.H. Reed, J. Böhler, Munich 2020.

unnoticed. Various of their descendants were tracked down, and those that responded were delighted to have their ancestors honored. These included the families of H.C. Hoover, H.S. Gibson, Dr. Boris Bogen³³ (representing the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee), and Anthony Drexel Biddle, Jr.³⁴ (US Ambassador to Poland 1937–1943).

In June 2019, just before the opening of *Americans in Poland*, I attended the Polish Institute of Arts and Science in America [PIASA] conference in Gdańsk. After presenting a paper about H.S. Gibson, Hoover and the *Americans in Poland* exhibition, a new serendipity happened. Barbara Krupa³⁵, of Stanford University Libraries, introduced herself. We only visited briefly before discovering a connection between our families. A reunion followed the next weekend in Warsaw at the exhibition.

On June 18, 2019, *Amerykanie w Polsce/Americans in Poland 1919–1947* opened at History Meeting House in Warsaw³⁶. Over 100 dignitaries attended along with US Embassy staff and the press. The highlight of the display and the opening event was provided by A. Drexel Biddle III (Tony)³⁷, son of the Ambassador. Tony gave a stirring speech to open the exhibition, delighting the audience with anecdotes about his father’s work in Poland and with the Poles. The catalog of the exhibition was published and ready for opening night³⁸.

One piece from the Biddle’s collection made quite a hit at the exhibition. It was the official seal of the US that Ambassador Biddle had used in 1939 and the early war years. During his harrowing escape from Poland during the Nazi invasion that fateful September, he carried it with him. It returned to Warsaw with Tony in 2019 for the first time since 1939. It was the centerpiece of the exhibition.

33 Dr. B. Bogen (1869–1929) was a Russian-born Jewish-American educator and social worker. He directed the Joint Distribution Committee during WWI and spent time in Poland in 1919–1920. Gibson estimated that he fed up to 40,000 children per day.

34 A. Joseph Drexel Biddle, Jr. (1897–1961) was the US Ambassador to Poland 1937–1943. During WWII, he also represented the US to Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Yugoslavia. Sensing President Roosevelt’s intentions going into the Yalta Conference (February 1945), Biddle resigned from the State Department and joined the US Army to serve under General Eisenhower until 1955. His duties included intelligence needed for Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of France. In 1961, Biddle returned to diplomacy to serve as Ambassador to Spain until his death in November.

35 Barbara Krupa is Newspaper Digitization Project Manager with Stanford University Libraries, a researcher specializing on works of a Polish American writer, Zygmunt Haupt and activities of Roy Publishers.

36 See: *Can’t-Miss Exhibit...*

37 A. Joseph Drexel Biddle III (Tony) is an American banker and entrepreneur. Both Tony and his father, the Ambassador, are part of a prominent Philadelphia family.

38 Exhibit in *Dom Spotkań z Historią*, see J.-R. Potocki, V.H. Reed, *Amerykanie w Polsce. Americans in Poland, 1919–1947*, transl. J. Dąbrowska-Resiak, Warszawa 2019.

In June of 2019, apparently, I signed an innocuous little piece of paper authorizing the entry of *Amerikanin w Warszawie* into a contest. It was promptly forgotten – until December. On 11.12.2019, it was announced that the book was awarded the Oskar Halecki for the “best source publication devoted to the history of Poland” book of the year award!³⁹ Although I was unable to attend the ceremony on short notice, J.-R Potocki received the award on our behalf.

2020 began with another research trip to HIA. In fact, my sister, Mira Kiick⁴⁰, and I were among the last researchers before Covid-19 shut down almost everything. The next couple of years held very little opportunity to mingle with colleagues but did allow for lots of work. One thing that continued to thrive and grow exponentially during the pandemic was virtual presentations. Through J. Böehler, I was contacted by a YouTube channel Real Time History⁴¹. They produced a series that followed the Great War on a day-by-day basis from 1914–1918 one hundred years later. They did such a wonderful (and popular) job that they continued with the conflicts in Eastern Europe over the next few years. Gibson’s record of events while he was US Minister to Poland held new information. I completed an interview with Jesse Alexander⁴² on July 8, 2020, which aired on August 3, 2020⁴³.

The pandemic itself provided my next topic. During the last six months of the Great War and the first six months of the Versailles peace, Gibson lived through the Spanish Flu epidemic. He did so while serving as one of the highest ranked US diplomats in Europe. His story is the topic of *An American in Europe at War and Peace: Hugh S. Gibson’s Chronicles, 1918–1919*⁴⁴. Because there were no opportunities to speak about this amazing record at the height of the pandemic, I created a series of Facebook posts unpacking each of episode where Gibson described an encounter with the Flu. This resulted in a request from the University of Gdańsk to submit the material in academic form as *Chronicle of the Pandemic: Hugh Gibson’s Notes on the Spanish Flu of 1918*⁴⁵.

39 *Książka Historyczna Roku, Nagroda im. Oskara Haleckiego*, TVP/Polskie Radio/Instytut Pamięci Narodowej/Narodowe Centrum Kultury, [online] <https://rynek-ksiazki.pl/aktualnosci/ksiazka-historyczna-roku-jednak-bedzie-przyznana/> [accessed 01.12.2023].

40 M. Kiick is my little sister and research mate at Hoover Archives and beyond.

41 See: Real Time History, [online] <https://realtimelibrary.net/> [accessed 14.02.2024].

42 J. Alexander is a Canadian public historian working with Real Time History from Vienna. He is also a hands-on humanitarian on behalf of Ukrainians suffering from the ongoing war.

43 Podcast: *Vivian Reed on American*, [online] <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/realtimelibrary/episodes/TGW023---Vivian-Reed-on-American-Diplomat-Hugh-Gibson-And-The-Creation-Of-The-New-Order-in-Europe-1919-eh4lkf> [accessed 09.29.2023].

44 *An American in Europe at War and Peace: Hugh S. Gibson’s Chronicles 1918–1919*, eds. V.H. Reed, J. Böehler, Berlin 2021.

45 V. Reed, *Chronicle of the Pandemic: Hugh Gibson’s Notes on the Spanish Flu of 1918*, “Studia Historica Gedanensia” 2021, vol. 12, pp. 341–366.

After the working on *Americans in Poland* in 2019, I became fascinated by the activities of both Gibson and Biddle during WWII. They both offered real and moral support to the Poles – in Poland and in exile. While visiting Tony and Karen Biddle before the exhibition, I was made aware of the archival records available at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Although I was unable to visit in person, the archive staff was very helpful. K. Biddle⁴⁶ made the connections and personally captured hundreds of documents for me at their facility. This material was utilized in 2023.

By 2022 the world was on the move again. PIASA 2022 was held in Białystok, Poland, in June. I jumped at the chance to travel to Warsaw again. Sadly, Russia invaded Ukraine in February sending millions of refugees into Poland. Poland made a magnificent response. When I visited in June, I was able to see the results firsthand. My cousins showed me how Ukrainians were greeted at the train station and described near miraculous accounts of multiple families arriving to find housing arranged for them. Jobs and school placements were quickly forthcoming. We visited a school where the children decorated the walls with colorful art depicting various words with their Polish and Ukrainian equivalents in writing for both sets of children to learn. I was so impressed and proud! Although I did not venture to the border, I did head east from Warsaw right to the Belarus border. We traveled by car to one kilometer from the border where over 98,000 Ukrainians passed through into Poland since February 2022⁴⁷.

Białystok was beautiful, and it was able to re-establish contact with colleagues⁴⁸. My paper was titled *Uncommon Intelligence: American Espionage in Poland, 1921–1922*. It discussed Gibson’s role, as US Minister to Poland, in gathering information to feed to Washington DC which became the foundation of American policy. His primary “spy” was Hugo Koehler, aka “Our Man in the Crimea”⁴⁹. Koehler is a story in his own right! He and Gibson painted a picture of Russian behavior in 1922. It is shocking, but not surprising, that it was all happening again 100 years later with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The verbiage and subterfuge of today is remarkably like what Gibson recorded a century before.

46 K. Biddle is a mathematician and married to A. Drexel Biddle III.

47 *Over 147 000 Ukrainians enter Belarus since February 24, 2022*, “Interfax International Information Group, January 10, 2024, [online] <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/98258/> [accessed 01.12.2023].

48 Thank you Halina Parafianowicz, Anna Muller, Iwona Flis, and Magdalena Nowak.

49 P.J. Capelotti, *Our Man in the Crimea: Commander Hugo Koehler and the Russian Civil War*, Columbia, South Carolina 1991.

Back in Warsaw, I met a new friend through T. Biddle. Piotr Kościński⁵⁰ was quite interested in the story of Gibson and Koehler's work and offered to publish it through TVP (Polish state broadcaster) in "Tygodnik TVP" where he serves as editor. On August 19, 2022, *Jak Amerykanie szpiegowali Sowietów. Przedwojenny wywiad USA w Polsce in nie tylko* [How the Americans spied on the Soviets. Pre-war US intelligence in Poland and beyond] appeared. It made enough of a splash to be followed by editions in Ukrainian, Russian and English over the next weeks. Although I was a little apprehensive because of the title change, the article (unsurprisingly) did not cause an international incident. To sum up that story, it can be said that as it was in 1918–1922, so it was in 2018–2022 – in eerie detail⁵¹.

At this point, I turned my attention back to the World War II era utilizing the material Karen Biddle procured earlier. This time I looked at the service that H.S. Gibson and A. Biddle, Jr., the first and last US representatives to the Second Republic of Poland. Both stories include wartime troubles and hair-raising escapes. Both diplomats went to extraordinary lengths to help Poland and many individual Poles. When WWII began, Biddle was in Warsaw and experienced the Nazi invasion firsthand. Gibson was newly retired and living in Belgium. He had the dubious honor of watching German armies march into Brussels twice in his lifetime. Archival records are plentiful, but outside documentation of these two men was hard to find. But luckily, two female journalists played a role in their adventures – Sonia Tomara⁵² and Claire Boothe Luce⁵³. Luce was a successful journalist and married to media mogul Henry Luce. She was in the car with Gibson during his escape from Brussels on June 10, 1940. She published the story before the year was out⁵⁴.

Tomara was recruited by the "New York Herald Tribune" in 1928 and was on hand in many of the hot spots of the world for the next twenty years. She married in 1947 and immigrated to the United States. After she died in 1982 in New Jersey, her papers mysteriously showed up at the University of Wyoming

50 P. Kościński is a journalist and political scientist. His most recent work is about Ambassador A. Drexel Biddle, Jr.'s escape with the Polish Government in September 1939. See: P. Kościński, *Wrzesień ambasadora*, Warszawa 2022.

51 V. Reed, *Jak Amerykanie szpiegowali Sowietów. Przedwojenny wywiad USA w Polsce in nie tylko* [original title in English: *Uncommon Intelligence: American Espionage in Poland, 1921–1922*], "Tygodnik TVP", Warsaw 19.08. 2022, [online] <https://tygodnik.tvp.pl/61878511/jak-amerykanie-szpiegowali-sowietow-przedwojenny-wywiad-usa-w-polsce-in-nie-tylko> [accessed 01.12.2023].

52 S. Tomara (1897–1982) was a Russian-born journalist who was widely recognized as the first female war correspondent of WWII. She covered the action in China, Burma, North Africa and Europe, including the Nazi invasion of Poland and the Biddle's escape.

53 C. Boothe Luce (1903–1987), American writer, conservative public figure, and US Ambassador to Italy 1953–1956.

54 C. Boothe Luce, *Europe in the Spring*, New York 1940.

Archives. Thanks to a well-run system, a very kind archivist and a couple of zoom sessions, I was able to access the precise article I needed in a place that's hard to get to in non-pandemic days. Strangely enough, the archivist found nothing to explain how the material came to be in Wyoming – a true archival mystery.

The Tomara material was utilized in January 2023 at the PAHA conference in Philadelphia where I presented *A Tale of Two Diplomats: Hugh S. Gibson and Anthony J. Drexel Biddle, Jr. ~ and how they served the Second Polish Republic during WWII*. To my delight, T. Biddle agreed to attend and speak to the group about his father. He was well received, and I think it's safe to say the project was too. Still working on turning into a book. At this moment, my attention is divided between this and the original project of Hoover's FEC committee. Who knows – that might even become a video series production?

Experience has taught me that archives are not dry off-putting places. They are alive with stories, documentations of history, and staffs of highly trained people who recognize and support genuine interest. As each new box is opened, one never knows if there is a treasure to be found. Treasures become stories, which in turn become part of the historical record. No one would have guessed fifteen years ago that H.S. Gibson would have kept such detailed records of Poland's foundational dynamics. Few would have realized that these same records were missing from the public record in Poland after successive invasions by the Nazis and Soviets. But there it was, waiting to be found – in the archives. And it made a palpable difference in Polish historiography. At least in the cases of Gibson and Biddle, there are many stories yet to be told.

For those who still believe archives are dry dusty places where nothing happens, please think again, and jump at a chance to explore! This entire adventure began in the archives, with the help of archivists, and continues to rely on archival material. Many of the archivists mentioned have turned into friends I treasure. Yes, it takes hard work – but yes, it also takes the help of others and a large dose of serendipity. Thank you for following me on this incredible, serendipitous journey.

Illustrations

1. A poster from The Americans in Poland exhibit in Dom Spotkań z Historią in 2019.



Photography: Vivian Reed.

2. Polish and English editions of An American in Warsaw by Vivian Reed.



Photography by Vivian Reed.

3. Hugh S. Gibson, c. 1919.



Photographer unknown.

4. Michael Gibson, the son of Hugh S. Gibson, in his study.



Photography: Vivian Reed.

5. Oscar Halecki award received by Vivian Reed in December of 2019.



Photography: Vivian Reed.

6. Hoover Tower, Stanford, California.



Photography: Jerzy Kochanowski.

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