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A forgotten celebration: The inauguration ceremony for the construction of the Galician Canal in Brzeźnica in December 1911

Abstract

The grand communications projects launched in the Habsburg Monarchy in the early twentieth century also encompassed Galicia. In 1911 in the small village of Brzeźnica, a ceremony took place to mark the inauguration of the construction of the Galician canal that was to form part of these projects. The author describes and analyses the components of this celebration, which the Polish Club or the Krakow economic local authority were responsible for planning. The individual parts of the celebrations variously emphasised the contribution of politicians and the project's civilisational importance. The focus of the article is the question to what extent these contents, as well as the ultimate abandonment of the project, led to the ceremony and the canal itself being forgotten.

Keywords: Galicia, early 20th century, communications infrastructure, Polish Club, economic policy, ceremonial culture

The ceremony analysed in this article ended a “battle for canals for Galicia” that had lasted over a decade. The idea to build a waterway was put forward in 1901 in the so-called “canal law” (*Wasserstrassengesetz*).¹ This promised to link the crown lands with the centre of the Habsburg Monarchy, either by rail

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¹ Matakiewicz, M., *Projekt noweli kanałowej*, “Czasopismo techniczne,” 3 (1912), pp. 29–32; Binder, H., *Die Wasserstraßenvorlage und die wirtschaftlich-politische Lage Österreichs im Jahre 1901*, “Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften,” 1 (1992), pp. 43–62. The plans to build the Danube-Oder canal are mentioned in vague terms in all works on the economy of the Habsburg Monarchy.

or by waterways, which were seen as cheap and efficient communication routes. The idea thus emerged to build an additional distributary of the Danube-Oder canal, linking the Oder (Odra) with the Vistula, and later with the Dniester, thereby connecting the Black Sea with the Baltic.² Despite the sizeable public interest and the efforts of Galician politicians, for ten years, the government did not commence building, limiting itself to theoretical work and studies. Finally, in 1910, it concluded that the state's poor financial condition made the commencement of construction impossible, and the following year it issued an amendment to the canal law. This postponed the building of the Danube-Oder-Vistula canal indefinitely, but undertook to construct the Galician Canal, joining the Krakow Coal Basin with Krakow, and in the future, with Eastern Galicia.

According to their own testimonies, the actions of activists in Krakow – the local city authorities and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) – contributed to the implementation of the Galician Canal project.³ Both institutions sent delegations to the Polish Club as well as to various ministries, especially those for Galicia, trade and labour, and later public works. The chamber's activists took part in congresses organised by the Danube Navigation Association, in which the subject of the canal was discussed, lobbying intensively for its construction. They also participated in joint initiatives organised by municipalities interested in the canal, for example, Vienna and Prague. The local authorities invited high-ranking specialists who evaluated the construction of the canal and its optimal course, including the engineer Leo Sympher from Berlin, an eminent waterways expert. These unstinting local government interventions aimed to ensure that the Polish Club would not neglect the issue, bringing it to a positive conclusion by 1911.⁴

From the outset, the Krakow local authority and the chamber discussed the optimum course of the canal and the location of the ports planned in Krakow and Podgórze, as well as organising propaganda campaigns. The Krakow municipality was very interested in the port being built, seeing it as a new

² I have broadly analysed the discussions and engagement of Cracovian activists in separate article: Kozińska-Witt, H. 2022, '[...] *gdy stary Wawel otoczą wody kanału*'. *Niezrealizowana droga wodna łącząca Dunaj, Wisłę i Dniestr*, in *Galicja. Studia i Materiały* 8, pp. 356–396. See also for additional literature. <https://repozytorium.ur.edu.pl/items/55ebae7a-e824-4f35-941d-db2dee32879f> (access 27.03.2023)

³ The Krakow Chamber of Commerce “has always stood in the first line of those fighting for the canals,” *Sprawozdanie prezydium*, in *Sprawozdanie z publicznego posiedzenia Izby Handlowej i Przemysłowej w Krakowie z dnia 6 lutego 1912*, Kraków 1913, s. 17; *Budowa kanałów*, in *Sprawozdanie z publicznego posiedzenia Izby Handlowej i Przemysłowej w Krakowie z dnia 15. Czerwca 1910 roku*, Sesja IV, Kraków 1910, s. 92n.

⁴ The Polish Club in Vienna assembled representatives in the House of Deputies of the Parliament in Vienna, along with members of the House of Lords of the Austrian Imperial Council who collaborated with them. For a long time, it was an important ally of the government, and its opinion also counted in the Monarchy. Binder H. 2005, *Galizien in Wien. Parteien, Wahlen, Fraktionen und Abgeordnete im Übergang zur Massenpolitik*, Wien, pp. 321–336, 351–492; Schwarz, M. W. 2014: *Galicja w Wiedniu*, in *Mit Galicji*, eds Jacek Purchla et al., Krakow, p. 177f. For the Club's interventions on canals in 1910 see Binder; *Galizien in Wien*, pp. 430 and 458.

opportunity for the city's industrial development. Arnold Rapaport, a Polish Club deputy from Krakow, even thought that the city's future depended on the project's success.

The ceremony described here was, therefore, a festival, triumphantly crowning years of fruitless struggles. Given its positive significance, the question arises of why it has been forgotten. It should have remained in the memory simply because Galicia was regarded as a backward and exclusively rural land, and it was rare to be able to celebrate infrastructural enterprises there.⁵ This amnesia is especially intriguing given that the ceremony was attended by Krakow institutions that were seasoned "celebrators" interested in doing so as a foundation of promotion of the city as a "spiritual capital."⁶ However, when one takes a closer look at the social composition of the parades that were organised during celebrations in Krakow, one is struck by the fact that new institutions representing even those economic initiatives close to the conservatives were absent among the participating traditional corporations and guilds. Thus, for example, the celebration of the anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald in 1910 saw no participation from representatives of the Industrial Aid League (*Liga Pomocy Przemysłowej*), which was committed to supporting home industry and crafts.⁷ This is noteworthy because representatives of new circles such as the Sokół, social democratic workers, Christian Democrats and the People's School Society (*Towarzystwo Szkoły Ludowej*) participated in the same parade.

We may also note that the chairman of the League was an industrialist and representative of the aristocracy, Count Andrzej Lubomirski. Meanwhile, the organising committee of the First Industrial Congress in Krakow in 1901, which saw the setting up of the Central Union of Galician Industry (*Centralny Związek Galicyjskiego Przemysłu*),⁸ representing the interests of this milieu to the state and workers' unions, was chaired by Count Andrzej Potocki.⁹ In the Galician Sejm itself, the industrial curia consisted of "as many as" three people representing the Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Krakow, Lviv and Brody (among more than 200 deputies). In view of this, it can be assumed that the new circles associated with industry and technical development were traditionally

⁵ Davies, N. 1991: *Boże igrzysko. Historia Polski*, Kraków, vol. 2, pp. 182, 184; Kaps, K. 2014, *Przytułek ubogich w spirali czasu. Perspektywy rozwoju Galicji między imperialnymi interesami a narodowymi aspiracjami*, in *Mit Galicji*. eds. Jacek Purchla et al, Krakow, pp. 171–174.

⁶ Lawrence O., *The Formation of Modern Cracow, 1866–1914*, "Austrian History Yearbook" 19–20 (1983–84), pp. 105–17; Dabrowski, P. 2004, *Commemorations and the Shaping of Modern Poland*, Bloomington.

⁷ *Pochód uroczysty*, "Dodatek nadzwyczajny Czas" 320, 17.07. 1910, s. 1. The Industrial Aid League, founded in 1904, was an organisation supporting national industry and protecting it from competition from outside the region; see Kozakevych, O. 2013: *Działalność Ligi Pomocy Przemysłowej na terenach Galicji Wschodniej w pierwszym trzydziestolecu XX stulecia*, in *Staż badań nad wielokulturowym dziedzictwem dawnej Rzeczypospolitej*, eds Waldemar Walczak and Karol Łopatecki, vol. 6, Białystok, pp. 391–413.

⁸ Przemysławiec (Pseudonim) 1906, *O przemyśle fabrycznym w Galicji*, Brody, s. 1; Landau Z./Tomaszewski J. 1986, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte Polens im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, s. 73

⁹ *I. Zjazd przemysłowy*, "Nowa Reforma" 215, 19.09.1901, s. 2.

weakly present in the public sphere in Galicia, and that a way of visualising their presence and importance had probably not been developed.¹⁰

How does the Brzeźnica celebration fit into this context of indifference to technical progress? Might the ceremony have been forgotten tactically because it was awkward for some reason; or was the forgetting unintentional, caused, for example, by the unchecked pressure of successive events, including the outbreak of the Great War? Was the amnesia the result of specific blindness or “cancel culture” for technical progress and its actors? To answer these questions, I will examine the ceremony itself and its broader context. My analysis is based on press reports, especially from the conservative Cracovian periodical *Czas* and the democratic-liberal *Nowa Reforma*.¹¹

1. The inauguration ceremony for the construction of the canal in Brzeźnica, 27.12.1911

A note by Ignacy Daszyński mentioned that the idea for the ceremony came from the president of the Polish Club, Leon Biliński.¹² The ceremony consisted of three elements: 1) the Krakow celebration, 2) the inauguration of the canal's construction in Brzeźnica, and 3) the dinner at the Stary Theatre. The most important part was the event in Brzeźnica, for which the two Krakow ceremonies merely provided a framework.

1. The time and place

As *Nowa Reforma* described it, 27 December was “a truly historic [day] for our country.”¹³ On that day, there began an epochal work of great economic importance for Galicia, the construction of the Galician Canal. The ceremony was held in Brzeźnica – “A small village in the Wadowice County, situated on the Skawina-Oświęcim railway line, a quiet village which scarcely anyone knew about before.”¹⁴ This site was selected because there was a railway station there and Brzeźnica lay halfway along the first section of the planned route.

¹⁰ The latter conclusion comes to mind when analysing Emperor Franz Joseph's visit to Krakow in 1880, when Ludwik Zieleniewski, the owner of a factory that manufactured agricultural machinery, welcomed the emperor, as a landowner would have done for those employed on a farm, *Podróż Najjaśniejszego Pana*, part 1., “Czas” 202, 3.09. 1880, s. 1.

¹¹ A report from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry mentioned only a year-round representation fund and publication costs of 4,000 crowns, *Sprawozdanie z publicznego posiedzenia Izby Handlowej i przemysłowej w Krakowie z dnia 6 lutego 1912*, Kraków 1913, s. 48. The press reports mention the organiser of the ceremony as being engineer Romuald Rosłowski, who worked at the Krakow Waterways Directorate; see Kleczkowski, A. *Romuald Rosłowski (1880–1954)*, in *Rocznik Polskiego Towarzystwa Geologicznego* 26 (1956), pp. 353–360. The decorator of the pavilions was Stefan Iglicki, an upholsterer and the owner of a Krakow furniture salon.

¹² Daszyński, I. 1957, *Pamiętniki*, vol. 1, Warszawa, p. 207. Leon Biliński (1846–1923), a conservative and president of the Polish Club in 1911–1912 and 1915–1918.

¹³ *Rozpoczęcie budowy kanałów*, “Nowa Reforma” 590, 28.11.1911, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

2. The actors

The most important participants in the ceremony were not locals. They were transported to Brzeźnica: a special train arrived in Krakow, consisting of around 10 saloon carriages and first- and second-class cars.¹⁵ Some 180–200 distinguished guests were crammed in, including the ministers for Galicia (Wacław Długosz), finance (Wacław Zalewski), and public works (Ottokar Trnka); representatives of the Polish Club (including its leader, Leon Biliński) and the Regional Department (including Władysław Jahl); and county, local authority and military personages – dignitaries in uniforms with gold patches and gloves.¹⁶ The guests arriving at Brzeźnica after an hour's ride were a carefully chosen and very select group.

Fig. 1. "Nowości ilustrowane," 1, 06.01.1912, p. 2.



¹⁵ *Inauguracja budowy kanału*, "Czas" 589, 28.12.1911, p. 1.

¹⁶ Władysław Długosz (1864–1937), an oil entrepreneur associated with the peasant movement; Wacław Zalewski (1868–1913), a landowner and conservative; Ottokar Trnka (1871–1919), a technician and representative of moderate Czechs; and Władysław Jahl (1837–1925), a lawyer and liberal democrat. The Regional Diet/Sejm Krajowy was the supreme local government body, with the Regional Department/Wydział Krajowy as its executive.

The station building was “extraordinarily cleansed and freshly varnished,” decorated with spruce garlands and flags in state and national colours. This equivalent interspersing of imperial and national emblems characterised the entire backdrop of the festivity. In the middle of the station, an enormous sculpted (Habsburg) eagle had been raised. Along the red carpet, the guests were preceded by girls dressed in white, bearing “with grace” a huge wreath of spruces decorated with artificial flowers, this time crowned with the Jagiellonian eagle. They passed through the station, through the first triumphant gate decked in greenery with a golden crown. They followed a sand-strewn path towards the second welcome gate (“Brzeźnica Community – Welcome”), adorned with greenery and flags, where a fireman played a general march. The dignitaries marched on through a specially raised bridge surrounded by a forest of spruces. Along the path, crowds of local peasants in their Sunday best had gathered specially for the occasion: the press estimated that there were 1,000 people in attendance. Order was kept by the military police.

At the end of the path, in a muddy field, two tented pavilions had been erected: a large one for dignitaries and a small one with an altar and an image of the Virgin Mary for the clergy. The large marquee, “richly” decorated with enormous flags, contained a bust of the emperor in the middle; plans of the canal were hung on the walls. Between the pavilions stood a rostrum covered with a white canvas; behind it, the canal’s route was marked with makeshift white-and-red and state banners. Here too, there were working tools decorated with fir wood and coloured ribbons: rails, wagons for transporting soil, pickaxes, spades, and so on. Girls carrying bouquets of artificial flowers encircled the symbolic building site.

Fig. 2. “Nowości Illustrowane” 1, 06.01.1912, p. 7.



Rozpoczęcie wielkiego dzieła: Łańcuch dziewcząt, które z wieńcami powitały dygnitarzy i gości przybyłych na uroczystość rozpoczęcia budowy kanału w Brzeźnicy.

3. The action

The parade to the place of action was only a prelude. The ceremony itself was “spoken,” with the crowd of peasants not playing an active role, but acting as a backdrop to demonstrate the interest and support of the local people; there were no representatives of other regions among the peasantry. Since almost all the speakers emphasised the importance of the construction of the canal for reducing economic migration, the patriarchs were showing their concern for the “victims of emigration,” meaning the people.

The ceremony began with prayers and a blessing of the site where the construction of the canal was due to start, as well as a speech by Bishop Anatol Nowak.

Fig. 3. “Nowości ilustrowane,” 1, 06.01.1912, p. 2.



Expressing his gratitude for the invitation, the bishop developed the biblical motif “subdue the earth,” saying:

May God’s blessing accompany this work we are beginning today, may God’s blessing accompany and place in His care those who designed these routes and those who will perform this arduous work... May God ensure that these navigable channels, these waterways which will cross our country from here will contribute not only to the material good of our population, not only to the development of trade, industry and agriculture, but also to the greatest possible degree to the spiritual good of our population and to halting this emigration, so harmful in every respect, caused by the lack of work, at least such work that would suffice for all, and dealing untold harm to our country, not only in economic terms, but in religious ones too.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Inauguracja.*

The politicians spoke next; first, the treasury minister, Waclaw Zalewski. In line with the intentions of the former prime minister Ernst Koerber, who conceived the waterways and wanted to use economic projects to neutralise the growing ethnic hostilities, Zalewski saw the canal as a symbolic link between Western and Eastern Galicia that could alleviate the conflict between Ruthenians and Poles.

Particularly telling was the speech by Leon Biliński (president of the Polish Club), who stressed that the emperor was well-disposed towards the project as it offered new work opportunities in the country; he stressed the importance of regulation of rivers for agriculture and developing new industries. Anticipating the criticisms of the political opposition, who remembered his recent opposition to the construction plans, he also emphasised the solidarity of the Club's efforts:

[Nobody] can accuse the Polish Club of failing to attempt to fulfil the objective the country wished for, whatever the political relations may have been. I think that, if anything, in this case, the Polish Club always manifested the country's will and wishes.¹⁸

Władysław Jahl spoke on behalf of the Regional Department, also emphasising the emperor's support and expressing the hope that the canal would revive the economy and curb emigration. He was the only speaker to wish the "gentlemen contractors" luck, and yet to foresee the potential for failure:

Even if you do not achieve material successes, may the very thought that your name will always be associated with this historic deed suffice, this desire and incentive to accomplish this task with glory for yourselves and benefit for the country, I wish you luck once again. And to this elegant work commenced here today, in the name of the country – Godspeed to you!¹⁹

The next point in the programme was the reading of a memorial deed that was to be set in the axis of the canal, the signing of it by the guests, and the simultaneous striking of the first spade or pickaxe. This took place in a strict hierarchical order, beginning with Bishop Anatol Nowak and concluding with the postmaster Markowski from Chrzanów waving the spade in the name of Brzeźnica. There then followed the setting of the memorial deed, which only at the very end featured the names of the engineers and contractors leading the construction:

When in the Holy See sat His Holiness Pope Pius X, ruling as the Serene Emperor of Austria, King of Galicia and Lodomeria, the Grand Duke of Krakow was Franz Joseph I, when the Minister-President was His Excellency Karl Graf von Stürgkh, the Minister of the Treasury His Excellency Waclaw Zalewski, the Minister of Trade His Excellency Dr Maurycy Roesaler, of Public Works His Excellency Otokar Trnka, the Minister for the Kingdom of Galicia Władysław Długosz, and government in this

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

kingdom lay in the hands of the Imperial Governor, His Excellency Dr Michał Bobrzyński and the National Marshal, His Excellency Count Stanisław Badeni – when the ducal Capital of the Krakow bishops was assumed by the Most Honourable duke – Bishop Adam, Duke Sapieha, and the Suffragan bishop was the Most Reverend Anatol Nowak, bishop of Irenopolis: – here, in this place of the kingdom of Galicia in Brzeźnica in the Wadowice county, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eleven, on Wednesday after the feast of the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is 27 December, the construction of navigable canals in Galicia did commence. This historic act, resolved by the law of 11 June 1901, was entrusted in the area of the municipalities of Kossów-Zelczyna to the national engineers Z. Rodakowski J. Sosnowski & A. Zachariowicz under the supreme management of the imperial-rule Direction of construction of waterways in Vienna and its branch office in the city of Krakow. May Almighty God bless the commenced work, that its product might, for centuries to come, bring great fortune to this country and human life. This took place in Brzeźnica in the year of our Lord 1911 on the day of 27 December in the presence of the undersigned.²⁰

A tributary dispatch was then sent to the emperor.

The ceremony in Brzeźnica was staged modestly, impressing only through the participation of such high-ranking guests. Reports suggest that during the ceremony, the official/diplomatic element, particularly the politicians associated with the Polish Club, mainly feted themselves, attributing the auspicious turn of events solely to their own efforts. This theme was continued by the press, which painstakingly listed all the participants according to the correct hierarchy, with the result that the articles in *Czas* and *Nowa Reforma*, for example, consisted of long lists of the names of figures in attendance and their functions. The ceremony reverberated around the empire.²¹ All periodicals pointed to the attendance of crowds of local peasants and mentioned the “girls.” Although the ceremony began with prayers and a blessing, the reporters’ attention was piqued by the politicians’ speeches and the symbolic ground-breaking (“erster Spatenstich”). In keeping with the content of Biliński’s speech, the ceremony was interpreted as political.

It was characteristic that the ceremony paid such scant attention to the participation of those who would be carrying out this historical work – the technicians, engineers and, in passing, the entrepreneurs, who, by taking advantage of the new opportunities afforded by the canal, were to contribute to the main objective of the investment, the country’s increased prosperity. The topos of “work” was denoted only in the form of the ceremonially decorated tools: wagons, and so on. The technical and engineering elements were not the only ones to be marginalised in Brzeźnica: local authority politicians, Chamber of Commerce and Industry activists and officials from the Krakow waterways branch were also overlooked.²²

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ They were reported not only by the Vienna press, but also by provincial publications in such locations as Czerniowce (Chernivtsi), Prague, Znojmo, Linz, Graz and Budapest.

²² The waterways branch office was set up in Krakow in 1905 under the jurisdiction initially of the Ministry of Commerce, and later the Ministry of Public Works, to attend to the technical regulations of Galician rivers and the construction of the canal.

These groups were honoured, however, during the Krakow ceremony, which followed the event in Brzeźnica, although this received much less attention in the non-local media.

2. The celebration in Krakow

The city of Krakow would be the first to benefit from the canal. The work was planned to protect it from floods, with a port being built from which the municipality would make large profits. With this in mind, the Krakow politicians took advantage of the presence of the esteemed guests, holding their own modest event on the morning of 27 December 1911, before the party set off for Brzeźnica. This ceremony was a local celebration of technological progress, highlighting the contributions of economic politicians and the technical element, meaning engineers, in the endeavour. The *Neue Freie Presse* correspondent described the ceremony as “a farewell by the Poles, with their new, technically innovative canal, to the old, primitive and natural waterway.”²³

Fig. 4. “Nowości Ilustrowane” 1, 06.01.1912, p. 4.



²³ “Es war gleichsam eine Abschiedsvisite, welche die Polen des neuen mit dem Raffinement der modernen Technik ausgestatteten Wasserweges dem alten, primitiven natürlichen Wege abstatteten,” [Merwin B.?], *Der erste Spatenstich für den Bau des galizischen Kanals*, “Neue Freie Presse” 17008, 28.12.1911, p. 4.

The distinguished guests were taken by carriage to the third Emperor Franz Joseph bridge, which was nearing completion; there, they were greeted by the CCI chairman, Maurycy Dattner. They then climbed makeshift steps decorated with spruce onto the bridge, where the industrialist (Edmund?) Zieleniewski informed them about the construction. The head engineer on the canal work, Zygmunt Rodakowski, along with his partners, explained the ground and stone works; senior consultant Jan Czerwiński, head of the waterways branch office, and construction consultant Ludwik Regiec from the district office detailed the planned works next to the Vistula sewage system. The event lasted an hour and a half. It was more an inspection than a “Krakow festivity.” Presumably, they did not want to tire the guests out before the main ceremony that lay ahead of them. Afterwards, the dignitaries were taken to the Stary Theatre, where the Chamber of Commerce and Industry treated them with breakfast (without speeches!), accompanied by the Harmonia orchestra. After breakfast, they set off for Brzeźnica.

3. Dinner in the Stary Theatre

Late in the afternoon of 27 December 1911, the dignitaries returned to Krakow, where the City Council hosted them for dinner at the Stary Theatre. Around 300 people were in attendance, so the cost of the banquet must have been considerable. The event was mentioned in vague terms by *Czas*, but covered in more depth by *Nowa Reforma*, which was associated with the democrats and represented circles interested in the region’s economic development. The guests heard speeches from the mayor and president of the Krakow CCI, Maurycy Dattner. He emphasised the chamber’s persistent efforts to improve water transport in Galicia, “seeing it as the only way out considering the configuration of the country and the natural conditions of its production.” He asserted optimistically that:

We were worried that this issue would fall on our society unexpectedly; that expert elements, suitably organised experts, would not respond to the call. The facts proved these suppositions wrong, and the technicians who carried out the work merit spirited appreciation. Our industry can compete with foreign industries not only in terms of expertise but also of conditions.²⁴

In this particular respect, Dattner’s arguments can easily be exposed as wishful thinking: the lack of professional expertise and the competition of the industrialised crown lands beating out local production had been much bemoaned in Galicia. The “politically correct” arguments of the next speech were equally false. The speaker unequivocally attributed the success of the moves to build the canal solely to the [at the time highly questionable] solidarity of the Polish Club, toasting President Biliński:

²⁴ *Uroczyste rozpoczęcie robót kanałowych*, “*Nowa Reforma*” 591, 28.11.1911, p. 1.

If the matter has stood well in recent times, this also happened because both in parliament and in the Imperial Council, we have people who defend it from the dangers of itself ... If, as a result, our endeavours have been crowned with success, by no means do we take credit for this. The sole and truly deserving recipient of gratitude and recognition from our entire society is the Polish Club. The result of the canal campaign also gave an example to the country of what it is for the country, what can be done for the country, despite all seemingly discrepant forces and political moments, by a Polish Club acting in solidarity. The speaker [Maurycy Dattner] raises a toast in honour of the Club to President Biliński.²⁵

At this point, the reply to the tributary dispatch sent to the emperor from Brzeźnica was read out, after which a toast to the emperor was raised, and the national anthem played. Biliński accepted the “merited” homage from Dattner with certainty, saying:

They accuse us of ... devoting ourselves excessively to material interests. And yet, if any more ideal national questions were on the agenda, the Polish Club always occupied itself with them. ... only in 1910 did the Polish Club understand that canals may not be treated as a purely economic issue, but as a political issue; it was also at this moment, when the canals were made into a political issue, that prospects of success opened up to it.²⁶

Biliński, unfortunately, without explaining who had accused the Polish Club politicians of materialism or what this entailed, emphasised the ideal significance of the success, putting the canal question alongside other political actions by the Club. He wrote about the Krakow banquet in his personal diary, but the passage explains little: he mainly relates political intrigues, struggles in the Club, and his own intelligence.²⁷ In his speech at the ceremony, Biliński removed the concrete, economic-technical dimension of the “canal question,” reducing the negotiations to the subject matter he knew best: personnel reshuffles in the Austrian government and political circumstances and actions in the Club itself. Paradoxically, Biliński was an economist and experienced official who, in the past, had dealt with the issues of railways and banking, but had quit his career as an economics professor in favour of political practice.²⁸

Further toasts ensued in honour of absent guests and dignitaries; those present responded with toasts to Krakow and a successful project. Minister Trnka emphasised the project’s importance for Polish technicians, praising their abilities and promising his support. Władysław Jahl offered assurances that society appreciated the need to industrialise the country, pointing to the significant funds that the national government had earmarked for this objective. He toasted the

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Biliński, L. 1924, *Wspomnienia i dokumenty, 1846–1919*, Warszawa, p. 221f.

²⁸ Grzybek, D. 2012, *Polityczne konsekwencje idei ekonomicznych w myśli polskiej, 1869–1939*, Kraków, p. 256.

president of the Industrial Aid League (Andrzej Lubomirski?). Afterwards, the guests returned to Vienna by a special night train.

The cited speeches show that the still-non-existent canal was spoken about in very different ways. While the speech by Biliński, the Club's president and a consummate diplomat, reduced it to political games, other high-ranking politicians linked the construction of the canal with problems of work, economic development and technological progress. If it is true that Biliński was the initiator of the ceremony, he presumably needed it for his own objectives, perhaps to strengthen his own position in the Club and national politics. This was important particularly because not much earlier, while still minister of finance (1909–1911), Biliński was apparently recognised as an opponent of constructing canals, saying that doing so made no sense (“Unsinn”).²⁹ His manifest backing of the project took away the arguments of the increasingly strong national-democratic opposition, which had previously fought him as an opponent of canal construction in Galicia.³⁰ Biliński's statements also illustrate the Polish Club's deeper lack of interest in issues of industrialisation;³¹ this might have been the result of its social makeup and growing questions over its role as the representative of major landowners. It seems that with these social conditions came an ideology of intentionally ignoring material (economic?) interests and concentrating on “pure politics,” meaning diplomacy.

4. Our daily canal: after the ceremonies

After the ceremonies, the press showed scant interest in the construction of the canal. Biliński's memoirs also do not record the subsequent history, referring only to the difficulties of working with Zygmunt Rodakowski's company, which built the first sections of the route.³² The Krakow press, however, described at length Ministers Długosz and Trnka's tour in September 1912, in which they inspected the progress of the building work.³³ Ministerial visits to Krakow were rare events, and there was a desire to make the most of this opportunity. The tours featured numerous meetings, presentations of officials, visits and excursions. Meals constituted an important part of the programme, with the ministers and local politicians giving speeches and toasting each other. The speakers also highlighted the technical merits and great economic importance

²⁹ Bryl, J. *Jak się buduje kanały. W ekspozyturze budowy dróg wodnych w Krakowie*, “Kurier Lwowski” 411, 7.09.1912, p. 1f., here p. 1.

³⁰ Binder, *Galizien in Wien*, p. 458.

³¹ Chwalba, A. 2001, *Historia Polski 1795–1918*, Kraków, p. 512.

³² Biliński, *Wspomnienia*, p. 222. This may have concerned a refusal to accelerate the construction because of the lack of plans; see Bryl, J., *Jak się buduje kanały. Na miejscu budowy kanałów*, “Kurier Lwowski” 409, 06.09.1912, p. 1 n, here p. 1.

³³ *Wizyta ministrów*, in *Sprawozdanie z publicznego posiedzenia Izby handlowej i przemysłowej w Krakowie z dnia 8. Październiaka 1912, Sesja VI*, Kraków 1913, s. 5; *Ministrowie w Krakowie*, “Czas” 438, 25.09.1912, p. 1; “Czas” 439, 26.09.1912, p. 2; “Czas” 240, 27.09.1912, p. 1; *Ostatnią pocztą*, “Kurier Lwowski” 436, 24.09.1912, p. 2; *Ministrowie zwiedzają*, “Kurier Lwowski” 441, 25.09.1912, p. 3; *Wien (Inspektionsreise)*, “Neue Freie Presse” 17274, 25.09.1912, p. 8.

of the enterprise, this time entirely overlooking its political significance and the role of the Polish Club.³⁴ The carefully staged inspection, with its large scope and the participation of many actors, preserved the canal question in the public memory and could theoretically have ushered in ceremonies in praise of technology. Why did this not happen? Perhaps public opinion had a part to play, as the project was not universally popular.

The tone of the longer articles on the construction varied diametrically. Contrary to the positive evaluation of the work carried out by the ministerial inspection, Jan Bryl wrote a very critical report on the venture in 1912 in *Kurjer Lwowski*. He noted uncertainty over whether the government would continue with the construction, citing a highly placed anonymous source from the Krakow waterways branch office: “The canals are politics.”³⁵ The source claimed that the government was issuing orders to accelerate the construction but suspending them by telephone; he also complained about the insufficient technical staff and unbearable atmosphere at the branch office. He pointed to a lack of plans, disorder in purchasing land and a very slow pace of construction. The well-known Krakow engineer and architect/urban planner Tadeusz Niedzielski had a very different view of the building work, writing enthusiastically about it in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* in 1914.³⁶ Niedzielski praised the intensive pace of the work, its progress, the enormous scope and the modern building methods. He claimed that the progress in implementing the project had won over its biggest sceptics. It is unclear whether there was any connection between Bryl and Niedzielski’s articles, or whether the latter (“Cracovian”) article was intended as a polemic against the criticism from the Lwów paper.

Even the outbreak of war initially failed to halt construction of the canal. In 1915, the Austrian industry press still included a note about the building of barracks in Brzeźnica, Zator and Oświęcim, which were to house 7,000 Russian prisoners working on the regulation of the Vistula on the Oświęcim–Krakow section.³⁷ Only in 1918 did Austria officially pull out of construction, citing the war as a *force majeure*.

Conclusion

The ceremonies in Brzeźnica and Krakow were foreseen as complementary elements, with the common denominator being the participants, mainly politicians. Yet this ceremonial continuity of the events was not visible in the media. While the press reported on the Brzeźnica ceremony at length, many non-local

³⁴ The president of the Club in 1912–1915 was the mayor of Krakow, Juliusz Leo (1861–1918), a Democrat.

³⁵ Bryl, *Jak się buduje kanały*, p. 1f; idem: *Jak się buduje kanały. W ekspozyturze budowy dróg wodnych w Krakowie*, “*Kurjer Lwowski*” 411, 7.09.1912, p. 1f. Jan Bryl (1885–1945), a construction engineer working for the National Department, member of the Polish Peasants’ Union.

³⁶ Niedzielski, T. *Budowa kanału galicyjskiego*, “*Tygodnik Ilustrowany*” 24, 1914, pp. 469–471.

³⁷ *Oświęcim*, “*Österreichische Monatsschrift für öffentlichen Baudienst*” 34 (1915), p. II; *Krakau. Barackenbauten*, “*Der Bautechniker*” 25 (1915), p. 276.

periodicals overlooked the Krakow celebration entirely. The public, therefore, learned above all about the political importance of the festivities; their “economic and civilisational” aspect was less well known.

The differences between the celebrations in Brzeźnica and Krakow highlight an interesting paradox: while the Krakow celebration was organised by institutions representing the “economic factor” and provided an opportunity for a “new technical elite”³⁸ (engineers and technicians) to present themselves, the celebration in Brzeźnica almost completely marginalised these circles. Thus, in spite of the traditional nature of the Krakow festivities – which manifested itself, for example, during the national celebration – the presence of the new circles was not only visible at the local level in the “canal celebration.” Their representatives were also even given strategically important representative functions, which were denied to them at higher political levels dominated by conservative officials. The status of technicians, although they were paid less than the clerks, was probably higher in cities: Aleksander Łupienko mentioned that modernisation of Galician cities’ infrastructure had increased the number of engineers among city officials.³⁹ But did this influence the presentation of “technical achievements”? Perhaps these engineers were perceived and perceived themselves more as city officials (clerks) than as technicians?

At the Brzeźnica ceremony, the beginning of construction was seen as demonstrating a successful diplomatic intervention by the Polish Club and its president, Leon Biliński. It is a matter of debate how convincing Biliński’s version was for local politicians and the public, and how much it was accepted out of politeness and in hope of future benefits stemming from this “courtesy.” Galicia ceased to exist a few years later, bringing about the decline of its political elite, represented by Biliński, and raising more questions about the previous priorities and widespread patriarchal image of society. Gone were the “feudal” elements visible in Brzeźnica, which might be conveyed by paraphrasing the words of the Polish Romantic poet Zygmunt Krasiński: “with the Galician officials, often with noble origins, the Polish people.”⁴⁰

Although construction of the canal was later suspended, is this the only reason that the investment has been forgotten? Perhaps it had more to do with the fate of the Polish Club itself. Both the Club and its members gradually left or were removed from politics in the new, democratised reality of the Second Polish Republic. Their departure interrupted the communicative memory and the message about the political significance of the ceremony; it was no longer the done thing to discuss the canal as a success for the politics of the discredited Club. The forgetting of the ceremony had at least a partially tactical basis. It is important to note, however, that even earlier, when Biliński left, the message about the political importance of the project was weakened, as the inspection in September 1912 showed.

³⁸ Łupienko, A. 2022, *W stronę systemu. Infrastruktura techniczna dziewiętnastowiecznego miasta na przykładzie Galicji*, Łódź, p. 39 and 283.

³⁹ Łupienko, *W stronę systemu*, p. 254 and 278.

⁴⁰ “Z polską szlachtą polski lud,” Zygmunt Krasiński, *Psalm miłości (Psalm of Love)*, 1845.

The failure to remember the Brzeźnica ceremony also meant forgetting the gigantic work performed on the construction of the canal, for example, the regulation of Galician rivers.⁴¹ This also applied to the regulation of the Vistula within Krakow itself, where 80% of the work on the canal foreseen by the project was carried out.⁴² The causal connection between the intended construction of canals and the building of flood walls, upon which beautiful riverside paths were then laid out, has been blurred over time. The modern names of these paths (given in 1991) – the Inflanty (Livonia), Podolia, Czerwieński and Kurlandia boulevards – allude to a different historical narrative, as well as distorting their history.

It is barely remembered today that we owe the canal plans to the emergence of Greater Krakow.⁴³ The CCI activists who worked to transform Krakow into a port city are absent from this history. And yet it was the noble desire for profit of the Krakow urban municipality – the desire to secure additional income from the port and the large new industrial plants expected to be built in the area – that led to the wide-ranging scheme to integrate the suburban municipalities and incorporate the industrialised town of Podgórze into Krakow. Perhaps it was this enlargement of the city that overshadowed the memory of the canal and the celebrations associated with it. The integration of city peripheries posed a huge challenge for Krakow, as the integration of the new districts involved a big effort to raise their “level of civilisation.”

A separate issue is the missed opportunity to promote the canal as a great accomplishment of technical ideas and human work. In this sense, the Brzeźnica ceremony in 1911 was a wasted celebration, as the technical achievements were effectively marginalised. Neither the economic activists nor the local technical intelligentsia that emerged were sufficiently appreciated. The lack of emblems promoting technological progress and any kind of “civilisational” imaginarium is glaring. Tadeusz Niedzielski attempted to promote the importance of technology in the article cited above, but it was published at an inopportune time, just before the outbreak of war. Its message might therefore have escaped the reader.

More interestingly, despite the passage of time, little has changed: the Galician Canal project is still mainly analysed in political terms. Harald Binder, for instance, calls the forcing through of the canal project a great success for the Polish Club, while Jiří Janáč sees it as the Monarchy government’s attempt to bring political “order” to the region, noting that in contemporary times the European Union has launched similar infrastructural projects.⁴⁴ The advanced

⁴¹ Wojtkiewicz, M. 1934, *Śródlądowe drogi wodne na tle ewolucji transportu*, Warszawa, p. 437.

⁴² Czerwiński, J. *Informacja. Sztuczne drogi wodne w obrębie Dyrekcji Dróg Wodnych w Krakowie*, 1932, RZGW w Krakowie, Archiwum techniczne 506/98, p. 4.

⁴³ Greater Kraków, an urban municipality encompassing the old centre and suburban municipalities, was ultimately established in 1915, when the industrialised town on the other bank of the Vistula, Podgórze, was incorporated into it. The port serving the canal was planned to be built in Płaszów, adjacent to Podgórze.

⁴⁴ Binder *Galizien in Wien*, p. 386f.; Janáč, J. 2012, *European Coasts of Bohemia. Negotiating the Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal in a Troubled Twentieth Century*, Amsterdam, pp. 11 and 21.

technology represented by the construction is mentioned, however, on the website of the Krakow Museum of Urban Engineering, while Brzeźnica features on several amateur sites.⁴⁵ But can “specialist” local memory compete with the narratives promoted by recognised academic authorities?

The canal lived on in individual memory. Biographies sometimes refer to their subjects’ involvement in its construction, describing the feats of engineers, Chamber of Commerce and Industry activists, and local politicians.⁴⁶ Individual memory, however, is too fragmentary and weak to write or transmit a different, non-political story about a non-existent canal.

From Polish by Ben Koschalka

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⁴⁵ *Bulwary Wiślane, Ogród doświadczeń im. Stanisława Lema*, in <https://www.ogroddoswiadczen.pl/bulwary-wislane>; e.g. *Syfon w Brzeźnicy*, in <https://spichlerzksiazki.pl/index.php/9-gorce/346-odsloniety-syfon-w-brzezniczy>, *Remontują piękną budowlę sprzed stu lat...*, in <https://www.wadowice24.pl/magazyn/3647-remontuja-piekna-budowle-sprzed-stu-lat-wraca-pomysl-budowy-drogi-wodnej-az-do-dunajca.html>; *Żegluga wiślana*, in <https://upadektechnikikrakowa.blogspot.com/2017/09/zezluga-wislana-cz5.html> (accesses 24.11.2021).

⁴⁶ E.g. *Zygmunt Rodakowski*, in *Album inżynierów i techników w Polsce*, vol. 1. part III, *Życiorysy*, [Lwów 1932], p. 17f; Romuald Rosłoński, see: Kleczkowski, *Romuald Rosłoński (1880–1954)*, p. 353; *Czerwiński, Jan*, [in:] *Słownik biograficzny techników polskich*. Vol. 3, ed. T. Skarzyński. Warszawa 1993, p. 79; *Maurycy Dattner*, in http://www.oshkzk.historyczny.uj.edu.pl/kadencja-xv/-/journal_content/56_INSTANCE_HiUcGJK9Zmea/139142148/140718459 (access 21.11.2021).

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