

PROFESSOR WAŁAW ŻENCZYKOWSKI AND UNDONE REFORM OF POLAND'S HOUSING INDUSTRY

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The American home building program launched after the World War II, resulted with 10 million homes built in 10 years. That enormous success attracted considerable attention from foreign engineers and politicians from all over the world. Even those from Soviet block shared that admiration for American housing program in spite officially lauded claims as to the superiority of communist ideology and technology. In late 1956, taking an advantage of the recent political thaw, a delegation of Polish engineers, led by vice minister Czesław Bąbiński, and celebrated engineer, Professor Waław Żencykowski, arrived to the US by invitation from the National Association of Home Builders. During the four weeks long tour, they visited several construction sites and exhibitions learning from the American experience. Although they seemed to be impressed by what they had seen, the visit passed unnoticed in Poland, and eventually produced no results. The paper brings out some facts related to that visit, and reveals surprisingly honest opinions expressed by Polish delegates; the opinions which were overstepping any limits of imaginary "freedom of speech" laid out by the political thaw of 1956.

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1. INTRODUCTION

On November 18th, 1956, a group of four Polish engineers arrived to New York. The most important figure among them was Czesław Bąbiński, the vice minister of construction in Poland's communist government, but the informal leader of the group was engineer Waław Żencykowski, a professor of Warsaw Technical University and renowned expert, who gained his education and practice before the World War II. The engineers were invited by American National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), and welcomed at the airport

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by a member of Department of State. The purpose of the visit was to learn from American experience in housing industry. It took place during the short period of liberalization in Poland, so called political thaw.

When Joseph Stalin died in Soviet Russia in 1953, and after the death of the president Bolesław Bierut, the fraction of 'Stalinists' in Polish communist party significantly weakened. The protests and street fights that took place in Poznań in June 1956, initiated a change in a hard line of communist power. The new government gave a promise of some kind of liberalization, and before this promise turned out to be just another communist's lie, professor Waclaw Żencykowski and his colleagues landed in New York. They were eager to learn how Americans turned recent housing crisis into a spectacular success.



Fig. 1. Exhibit of the model houses at the National Housing Center in Washington. From the right to left: Władysław Podwapiński, Waclaw Żencykowski, Walery Iwanowski, and Czesław Bąbiński. The Director of the Centre, Bernard E. Loshbough provides the explanations.

At the end of the World War II the number of houses built in America felt down to the level of 150 thousand yearly; only slightly more than during 1930, the worse year of the great crisis. Veteran's houses became out of reach not only

for veterans returning from war, but also for many other Americans. That was mainly because of rising prices of building materials – for instance between 1937 and 1947 the prices of lumber price tripled.

To help those who were dreaming about owning a new house, the national program of house building was launched in 1945. In spite of rising prices of materials and labour, the program produced 10 million houses in the next ten years. This astonished housing experts in other countries, mostly in Europe struggling with post war reconstruction. Even Soviets, although still claiming the superiority of state controlled economy and technology, came to the United States to learn how to build houses more efficiently. In 1955, a group of ten Russian engineers arrived to America and spent there a month touring across the country.

After Soviets, Poland decided to send her own engineers to learn directly from the source. No surprise that Polish engineers wanted to know what new was going on in the main stream of world's housing technology, from which they have been disconnected for more than fifteen years. After the war, and when Poland became a part of communist block, the only source of inspiration for Poles in any domain – also in architecture and building industry – was clearly defined by ideologists: Soviet Union. However, for many engineers, educated mostly in pre-war Poland, in many cases the alumnus of technical universities in France, Great Britain and United States, that obligatory change must have been a tough one. The engineers, probably as no other members of captive society, having analytical minds and good sense of sanity, they were able to see and comprehend a lack of cohesion between lauded superiority of communist ideology, also in science and technology, and its inability to cope with a crisis in as important field as housing industry.

2. ENGINEERS ON TOUR

The Poles planned to visit 14 cities in four weeks, and like Russians did a year before, they began from Washington DC. The permanent exposition of building technology displayed at National Housing Center was definitively must-see for all foreign architects and engineers visiting US, who usually appreciated the newest trends, materials and building, techniques presented there. However, for those from behind the iron curtain almost everything there was “crazy and wonderful”, as one of Polish visitors put it. They did not hesitate to laud pink-yellow design of modern kitchen, plastic furniture or just everyday-use electrical equipment.

Once the journalists caught vice minister Czesław Bąbiński in a front of an ordinary phone, they reported: “He was completely gone on tinted telephones. He picked up a red one, put it to his ear, then latched onto a blue one and fondled it. “Fine” he said, “we have phones in Poland, but not colored ones, or

ones with these twisty little covered cords”. Władysław Podwapiński, an architect, allowed himself for more personal confession: “I am jealous. You Americans have all the latest things – you might say you have everything”. Wasn’t that a little too honest? Later it was even more...

During a press conference in New York, the engineers expressed confidence that “the recent political events in Poland would result in more attention to the needs of the common people and especially their housing.” They said that housing in Poland was still under any standards, and that apartments were horribly overcrowded. “To eliminate slum conditions,” they said, “some 300,000 new units should have been constructed every year, compared with 150,000 at that moment.”



Fig. 2. Polish engineers visiting a section of building materials and interior equipment at Washington exhibition.

Polish visitors were impressed particularly by American construction techniques. They considered them safer and more economical than those used in Poland, and so to say, adopted from Soviet Russia not so long before. Adventurous statement, especially when made by someone who had to go back home one day, and report on what they saw, and perhaps, on what they said.

There was another moment embarrassing moment. While visiting Connecticut, the delegates from communist Poland were allowed to visit a labourer's settlement there, populated mostly by worker's families of Polish origins. Here, they could compare the living standard of Polish workers living in "capitalism hell," using the official language of communist propaganda, to what they knew from their own country ruled by working class.



Fig. 3. In Minneapolis, the Poles were welcomed by chairman of the city council, Mr. Stokowski (left) and the president of local branch of NAHB, Carl E. Bennett.

During the press conference ending the entire tour, which was held in Polish embassy in Washington DC, the vice minister was even more open, than the day he was caught playing with twisty cords of a kitchen telephone. He openly criticized the 6-years economic plan, which ended in 1955. Minister Bąbiński told the journalist about a "widespread disappointment over the results of Soviet-dictated plan, which stressed development of heavy industries, rather than consumer goods." He outlined the new, 5-years plan and said that from that year the resources could be used for housing needs. Installations and home finishing goods, he added, would be imported, but he did not specify from where. He did not specify, which country he meant, but assuming from the enthusiasm expressed by all members of the group, it must have been America. Władysław Podwapiński lauded American architecture, as "the most human, the most functional". Adding that he had toured Western Europe before, he said, that America "can not be surpassed."

3. BACK IN POLAND

Interviewed by American journalists, Podwapiński joked, that it would be difficult back home, “if Polish wives saw the kitchens you provided for your wives.” Out of sight, out of mind, it seemed to be a motto not only of miserly husbands, but also of communist regime.



Fig. 4. On construction site in Minneapolis.

One may be surprised by the critic of communist system, so openly and clearly expressed by members of official Polish delegation, with a member of the government among them. The political thaw, which took place after June 1956 caused some changes in Poland, but they were rather proverbial ones. The new government accommodated most of dismissed ministers of the former one. They were just switching between offices and departments. Polish delegates, and especially Bąbiński, the second person in the new ministry of construction, should have known that very well. He was called to accept this position in July, but before that date, he served as the minister of industrial construction. So, the

one, who was criticizing former government for paying too much attention to development of heavy industries, should have been blamed the most. When Bąbiński was declaring, that his new ministry would be strongly supporting the introduction of American construction techniques and work organization in Poland, he forgot to mention about his boss, the minister of construction, Eugeniusz Szyr. Before Szyr was promoted for his new position, he lost his office in the Committee of Economical Planning, because of his tendency to centralization and bureaucratic practices. They were too vigorous, even as for a member of communist regime. It is hard to imagine that particular person as a promoter of anything adopted from the free world.

The four weeks long visit of Polish engineers in America was extensively reported by daily press in the United States, including "The New York Times" and "Washington Post." In Poland it was hardly noticed by press. "Trybuna Ludu" (People's Tribune), the official daily newspaper of communist party, has laconically announced the return of the team in December. Nothing was said about the results of this trip, what the engineers saw or learned from Americans.

It was late January 1957, when professor Żenczykowski delivered his report on his American tour at the meeting of Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. He called for adoption of "new techniques, new materials and new, highly perfected, work organization" in Polish housing industry. How it was received by members of the Academy, we do not know, but judging from the next thirty something years of Polish housing industry, his call was not heard widely. Unfortunately, Żenczykowski could not repeat it; he died in February 1957, a month after delivering his speech. His death occurred during a conference in Switzerland. Again, he was seeking for inspiration and he was learning from others in order to improve building industry in his native country. His entire life consisted of learning and teaching. During the World War II he was an active member of underground Technical University of Warsaw. It is still unknown how many engineers, and PhD candidates studying in occupied city went through his hands.

4. ŻENCZYKOWSKI'S PLAN

Professor Żenczykowski did not have time to implement his plan. He had an wide knowledge and wide comprehension of problems distressing Poland's housing industry. In the foreword he said: "In my understanding, in Polish housing industry, there are seven groups of problems we have to cope with:

- constitutional
- building materials
- construction techniques
- installations
- equal rights for private and state owned construction companies

- R&D
- international aid”.

In the group of constitutional problems, Żenczykowski classified the question of building materials' prices. In 1950s and in fact long after, the prices were artificially stabilized at low level and controlled by state. The materials were relatively cheap but hardly available. Professor did not postulate making the prices higher, but relating them to the real costs of their production. That sounds like obvious argument, but it was not so obvious and simple in centrally steered economy. The next idea concerned the wages. Polish construction workers were underpaid, and that was definitively affecting the results of the entire industry.



Fig. 5. Czesław Bąbiński and kitchen telephone.

The third point of Żenczykowski's plan was the most difficult to carry over: "While remaining the basis of socialist system," he said, "we must extend and stabilize property law to allow every man, who has honestly earned his money, to allocate them in a real estate. If such a man was assured, that his realty would not be confiscated or emaciated by administrative factors, he would be more interested in increasing his fortune, which, in total, would increase our national property." Again, quite obvious postulate but not in Poland of 1950s.

Concerning the building materials and construction techniques, Żenczykowski suggested paying more attention on production of insulating materials, much more suitable for frame wood houses, and other light

constructions, the merits of which he observed during the American trip. In addition, he was a strong supporter of prefabrication. He suggested erecting one or two factories of prefabricated one family houses. They were envisaged as complementary to those producing structural panels designated mainly for multifamily blocks.

While talking about problems of research & development, he emphasized the role of international contacts between Polish and foreign engineers. He envisaged the need of further tours as the one he took two months before. "Those teams should consist of civil engineers, architects, the experts on installations, organization and economy," he said. "All of them should speak foreign languages" he added. He spoke English, German, French and Russian himself.

Concerning the last point, the international aid, professor Żencykowski proposed to apply for a loan from the United States, which should be used exclusively for improving Polish industry of building materials and enlarging its capacity. Professor was assured, that the loan could be easily obtained, as he was hoping to have a strong support for this idea from Polish-Americans. After Professor Żencykowski's death not so many remembered about this single attempt to improve Polish housing industry basing on experience different from that coming from the Soviet Union. The "Professor's civic testament," as an editor of "Przegląd Budowlany" (Civil Engineering Review) called Żencykowski's final report, has not been fulfilled. Poland had to wait few decades more for these ideas to come true

One can argue if one man, even of as strong personality and unquestionable authority as Professor Żencykowski, could change anything and reform the housing policy of communist government. In his obituary, which appeared in "Przegląd Budowlany" (Civil Engineering Review), the editor wondered "who knows, if he only could take care of those proposals, it might have brought excellent results!" There was more resignation than irony in this conclusion. As the further fates of Polish housing industry have proved, there was no one else in that field like Professor Waław Żencykowski.

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PROFESOR WAŁAW ŻENCZYKOWSKI
I NIEUDANA REFORMA POLSKIEGO MIESZKALNICTWA

Streszczenie

Wydarzenia Czerwcowe 1956 roku i zmiany w polityce wewnętrznej, jakie po nich nastąpiły, mogły mieć spory wpływ na poprawę sytuacji w polskim budownictwie. Mogły, gdyby w pełni wykorzystano doświadczenia, jakie z pewnej, zapomnianej już dziś wizyty w Stanach Zjednoczonych przywiózł profesor Waław Żencykowski i inni towarzyszący mu inżynierowie. Po powrocie do kraju Żencykowski sformułował założenia reformy, która miała poprawić sytuację mieszkaniową w Polsce. Zakładał konieczność odejścia od wzorców radzieckich i postulował skorzystanie z doświadczeń amerykańskich w zakresie organizacji, finansowania a także zastosowania nowych rozwiązań funkcjonalnych, konstrukcyjnych i materiałowych. Do realizacji postulatów nie doszło. Z jednej strony przemiany 1956 roku okazały się zbyt powierzchowne jak na tak rewolucyjne postulaty. Z drugiej jednak zabrakło samego pomysłodawcy. Profesor Żencykowski odszedł kilka miesięcy po sformułowaniu założeń reformy.