

Zeitschrift: Traverse : Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue d'histoire
Herausgeber: [s.n.]
Band: 32 (2025)
Heft: 1: Zu Fuss = À pied

Artikel: The Global Bonie : a small history of watchmaking in Poland and its great fame (1953-1970)
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1082066>

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The Global Błonie

A Small History of Watchmaking in Poland and its Great Frame (1953–1970)

Błażej Brzostek

“According to information relayed by the Polish press, the precision industry factory in Błonie decided to start production of ‘Błonie’ brand wristwatches at the end of October 1959,” reported the newspaper *La Suisse libérale*, published in La Chaux-de-Fonds on November 7 of that year.¹ It was a small note and hardly likely to excite the readers, but its appearance was significant. The Swiss were closely following trends in the watch industry and trade. Accustomed to reckoning with France, Germany, and, from the late 19th century, the USA as their competitors, they were now confronted with new developments on the map of global watchmaking after the Second World War. The war itself obviously had a huge impact on production – consumer markets collapsed, but military production ramped up. Soon after the war, the Iron Curtain was drawn across Europe, and the countries under the domination of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), including Poland, were cut off from closer economic cooperation with the West. Hence, after overcoming the post-war depression, new phenomena appeared: first and foremost, new centres of production and the emerging large markets.

In the same November 1959 issue of *La Suisse libérale*, two other pieces of information appeared just below the note about Błonie. According to the first, Soviet watches, previously unpopular in “non-communist countries” because of their unattractive look, suddenly appeared on the markets in an appealing form. It turns out that they had been set in French-made cases. The second note was about India, where the Ministry of Industry had decided to build a state-owned watch factory in Bangalore in collaboration with the Japanese watch giant Citizen. This factory would be capable of churning out half a million watches a year. There was a great deal of similar information in the Swiss press at the time, and for the contemporary reader it formed a picture of a world where new economic links were constantly being created. In a global market “communist” and post-colonial states were beginning to play an important role.

In 1950, global watch production reached 47.7 million pieces, a figure similar to the final years before World War II. Switzerland led the industry, producing 25 million pieces, or 52.4% of the total, while the United States made 20.5% and

the two German states together accounted for 10.9%. Compared to the pre-war period, Switzerland retained its position, the United States lost slightly, Germany maintained a similar rate, France, fourth on the list, strengthened slightly. The most spectacular change was the rise of the Soviet Union to the position of the fifth global manufacturer: in 1950, it produced 2.1 million watches in 1950, or 4.5% of world production, three times as many as in 1937. No other major manufacturer achieved similar success. By the mid-1950s USRR was already in second place, producing 10 million watches a year.² When production started in Błonie at the end of that decade, “Made in USSR” watches were flooding European markets. Therefore, the significance of the note in *La Suisse libérale* was contained in the information that the watches from Błonie were based on mechanisms “of Russian origin”.

The Soviet watch industry was of interest to the Swiss public not because of its innovation, but because of its scale. It was on mass production, not technical product changes, that the watch boom of the 1950s was based. Markets were flooded with cheap watches with simple movements.³ This era saw the adoption of the notion, first voiced (1952) by French demographer Alfred Sauvy, of the “Third World” – the vast, fertile, and hungry areas of former and current colonies. In both the Third and the Second World (the “communist” states) watchmaking industries built from scratch and under the auspices of the state were emerging. This type of development, based on the assumption of the possibility of a great leap in production, was an encouraging model for the previously under-industrialised countries dependent on exports of agricultural commodities and raw materials. Preparations for the mass production of watches were evident in China and India. This industry was to facilitate access for billions of people to modernity, symbolised by punctuality and rhythmicity at work enabled by watches. Given the influential belief at the time in the causal role of the state and the advantages of central planning, the small personal watch became an attribute of great change. As the Polish press envoy from Moscow reported in 1995: “We will get to the point where our watches will be the best in the world!”⁴

The watch epic of Błonie lasted ten years. Between 1959 and 1969, 1.2 million watches were manufactured at the state-owned Mechanical and Precision Works (*Zakłady Mechaniczno-Precyzyjne*, ZM-P). It was merely a drop in the ocean of world production, which exceeded 100 million units in 1961 alone. Thus, it is not the factory’s significance in scale that we are talking about, but certain features of its operation in the system of the local and global watchmaking industry. Of course, on a “national” level, the production of watches was important, locally being “the pride of the inhabitants, as the watches of the ‘Błonie’ brand became known all over Poland.”⁵ It was, it should be noted, the first and to this day, the only mechanical wristwatch factory on Polish soil. Its products had names steeped

in national pride: “Polan” after the tribe regarded as the protoplast of the Polish nation, “Lech” after the mythical founder of this nation, or “Wars” after the mythical co-founder of its capital city, Warsaw. All these watches used movements imported from the Moscow watch factory, while the envelopes, dials, hands, and crowns were made according to local designs in Błonie. A thousand in-house mechanisms were also produced under a (slightly modified) Soviet licence.

The ZM-P plant has so far not been described in the context of wider phenomena. Its history writing, as reconstructed by the factory’s veterans and enthusiasts, is of a “national” nature: it refers to the Polish drive for modernisation and its entanglement in an involuntary alliance with the USSR.⁶ This article, drawing not only on existing monographs but also on archival documents produced by both the Błonie plant as well as by central administrative units and companies involved in the distribution of Polish watches, is an attempt to go beyond the “national” narrative of Błonie watchmaking history. I argue that the production of watches in Błonie is a notable example of local development in the mid-20th century and its historical reappraisal contributes to the history of post-war industrialisation in Poland. However, contributions to the latter usually mention the most spectacular investments, consisting of the construction of large factories or entire cities, led by the “ideal city” of Stalinism, i.e. Nowa Huta near Cracow.⁷ Similarly, most of the literature on social changes, especially migrations, which changed the social shape of the industry⁸ and the professional activation of women,⁹ merely focuses on the first post-war decade. As a contribution to the study of Poland’s industrialisation, this article goes beyond that era and while it is concerned with a small plant, each of the aforementioned aspects of social change appears in it. As such, the article illustrates a model of planned industrialisation that had the character of a top-down “industrial revolution” and was dependent in nature.¹⁰ The plant relied on government administration; the decisions of this administration depended on the dispositions of the wider structure – the political-economic bloc under Moscow’s control.

The Birth of Błonie Watches

“We must set ourselves the task of achieving our own mass production of wrist-watches and photo cameras as soon as possible.”¹¹ This modest phrase, delivered by Bolesław Bierut, the leader of Poland’s ruling communist party, could have easily gone unnoticed in the dozens of dozens of newspaper columns the policy paper on economic issues filled.

The paper contained a summary of the achievements of the Six-Year Plan (1950–1955), a project designed to industrialise Poland along Stalinist lines. According

to Bierut, this task had been accomplished by 1953, thanks to Poland being freed from its status as an economic “appendage” to the countries of developed capitalism. At that time, industrialisation seemed to be the path to emancipation, so the theses of the paper would have been resonated not only with left-wing economists, but also with the elites of societies under colonial subordination. According to Bierut, capitalism condemned such nations to a dependence on powerful markets, lashing colonial societies with the “whip of hunger.” Poland had been freed from all this, yet the paper did not so much celebrate the success as emphasise the need for further change. “In order to master the effects of the destruction and the ruins of the post-war period, in order to build [...] the lasting foundations of a new life and a new social system—it was necessary to have an enormous strain of work and the fervent generosity of the working masses,” read Bierut, and in such sentences was hidden the confirmation of the glaringly low standard of living.¹²

One of the reasons for this, mentioned in the paper in passing, was the need to provide “essential elements of national defence.” According to the original plan, the value of armaments production was to increase sixfold. This was part of Stalin’s consolidation of the bloc, with Poland assigned an important role in the production of war equipment. However, the real breakthrough came after the outbreak of the Korean War when a volley of resolutions ordered the intensification of armaments production. Outlays for military tasks were multiplied threefold by 1955 in relation to the original plan.¹³ The effects of the militarisation of the economy manifested themselves in a growing monetary overhang. At the same time, there was very little legal supply of durable goods and equally little confidence in the “circulating currency,” as the zloty was called. The result was the rise of black markets, including the hoarding of money in bullion and US dollars, in which smuggled Swiss watches played a certain role. The authorities severely repressed black-market practices, while at the same time looking for ways to reduce the monetary overhang. One way was to develop production “for the population,” especially household goods, the purchase of which would reduce the hoarding of money.¹⁴

Bierut’s “wristwatch” paper was an expression of this new policy. A week later, press reports provided evidence of its impressive potency. Here was the Warsaw-based Communication Equipment Works (*Wytwórnia Sprzętu Komunikacyjnego*), a company specialising in light aircraft, “embarking on the production of high-quality wristwatches. The technical documentation for these watches is being developed by the engineering brigade under the direction of M.Sc. Bielawski.”¹⁵ The news was symptomatic of propaganda: anticipated events were presented as accomplished. Another intention was being pursued to make the watch directive a reality, albeit ultimately after Bierut’s death (1956) and in a

changed political situation. A match factory in Błonie was being liquidated in order to embed in its facilities the Mechanical-Precision Works, which was to carry out, among other things, “non-catalogue” (N) production, that is, armaments. This decision can, therefore, be seen as a continuation of the course set by Stalin, although things were to turn out differently.

Błonie is a town located 35 km west of Warsaw, with medieval origins and slow development. Today, it has a population of around 12 000, roughly the same size as in the mid-20th century, and its economy is determined by distribution for global retail brands. Until the 20th century, the town was a brewing and shoe-making centre with a Jewish population dominant in trade and services. It was surrounded by poorer agricultural areas specialising in vegetable crops, especially cucumbers and onions. Industry gained opportunities for development after the construction of a railway line connecting the town with Warsaw in 1903, but before World War II it was reduced to brickyards, a tile manufacture, and the match factory. The war had devastating consequences for Błonie, particularly the annihilation of the Jewish population by the Holocaust. And after the war, the regime introduced extreme statist policy from 1947 onward that undercut the roots of a resurgent private trade and craft. From then on, like many similar towns, Błonie vegetated on the outskirts of the industrialised city. External impulses, in this case the decisions of the central power apparatus, were crucial to its development. One such impulse was the decision to establish the ZM-P plant.

By a decree of the Minister of Machine Industry dated January 15, 1953, the plant was established and by autumn production started, not yet of “N” type, but of simple measuring tools and dies. The workforce numbered around 360, boosted by employees of Warsaw’s Radio Works, who were employed there on “N” projects. The object was to create the potential to produce “clockwork fuses for anti-aircraft missiles” according to documentation sent from the Soviet Union. Their production was scheduled to begin in 1955, but the project was abruptly halted by a decision of the authorities. The employees then “started looking on their own for a new product that could be manufactured in Błonie.” They proposed the motorbike speedometer, a product based on a model from East Germany.¹⁶ If this information is accurate, this account reveals how the manufacturer sat tempted to retune the “clockwork” projects from military to civilian. It also reveals the bottom-up strategy of sustaining the plant under conditions of changing decisions or uncertainty at the centre of power.

Such phenomena characterised the era of thaw. The economic and moral crisis of the regime led to a social uprising in 1956: in June, workers in Poznań launched a protest which the authorities suppressed by force. Dozens of people were killed. In the months that followed, political tensions grew, and social slogans were underpinned by liberty and national sovereignty. This cumulated in the autumn of

the same year in a shift in the Communist Party and the election of Władysław Gomułka, a leader who coined the “Polish road to socialism.” In his inaugural speech he criticised the lack of modernity of the industry built up during the Stalinist years. At this time, factory crews, wishing to gain influence over fundamental decisions affecting them, formed Workers’ Councils, which the consolidating Gomułka regime would then try to deprive of agency. Simultaneously, as a result of attempts to rationalise employment, thousands of people found themselves without work. In smaller towns, there was growing women’s unemployment.¹⁷ This was a threat to the legitimacy of the authorities, which was based, among other things, on the promise of full employment. All these developments were the backdrop for actions that were trivial when juxtaposed with the upheavals of the year 1956, but obviously implicated in it: the planning of wristwatch production in Błonie.

The Difficulties of Growth

The efforts of the 1953 Warsaw aircraft factory team, led by M.Sc. Bielawski, to start watch production from scratch can be considered one of the socialist fairy tales. The launch of serial production of such a complex device requires a intricate organisation, one that typically emerges either as a result of long-term local development or via technology transfer. This transfer can take various forms, including the creation of a subsidiary, foreign capital investment, the relocation of a entire plant, or the purchase of a factory.

The chain of technological transfers takes us from Błonie back in time by one hundred years and almost seven thousand kilometres across the globe to Ansonia, a city on the east coast of the United States. In 1851, a watch factory was established there, which, a quarter of a century later, was relocated to New York, where it in turn operated for half a century, only to find itself bankrupt. It was then in 1929 that the Soviet foreign trade corporation Amtorg too an interest in the Ansonia Clock Co. and purchased it in its entirety. The previously private enterprise thus became part of the USSR’s state economy, which was rapidly becoming modernised through technological transfers. Amtorg also purchased another bankrupt watch factory: Dueber-Hampden from the city of Canton, Ohio. Both factories were dismantled and transported by ship to the USSR, along with groups of American professionals who helped with the reassembly of the plant.¹⁸ As a result, the First Moscow Watch Factory was established in 1930, thereafter bearing the name of “Kirov.” During the Second World War, it was temporarily evacuated and switched to military production. In 1946, it then presented the “Pobieda” (*Victory*) watch with a movement based on a licence from the French

Lip company. This model was initially intended as the prototype for the Polish watches, but in the end the more modern “Kirovskiye” watch was chosen. In this way, “Kirov” became the mother factory for Błonie.

As it seems, no other options were available to Poland in 1956. Admittedly, the extremely strict Stalinist planning regime was criticised, and a “Polish way” was sought, one that tolerated a private sector in production, which was, however, too small to, for example, invest in watch assembly plants. Investment by a capitalist company was impossible for geopolitical reasons, while the purchase of an entire industrial base was unfeasible for economic reasons. The only solution was to develop production based on supplied raw mechanisms (*ébauches*), a practice used by most factories in Switzerland. The Soviet Union, rising to become the world’s second-largest watch manufacturer, seemed an obvious partner. Soviet watches were already being imported into Poland on a large scale. The decision to start the national production was not due to inadequate imports but rather to the development programme that envisaged gradual independence from *ébauches*, the training of local specialists, and the production for export. In this direction the industrial lobby influenced the decisions of the political apparatus.

Discussions about obtaining a licence took place without involvement of the Błonie staff. The crew was informed of the implementation of production in the spring of 1958. In July, it was reported that apprenticeships had started in Moscow.¹⁹ The assembly of the first watches took place in 1959, as portrayed in an episode of *Polska Kronika Filmowa* (1959/45a), a cinema newsweekly. “It’s hard to believe that truly world-class timepieces are being made in the town of Błonie near Warsaw,” read the voiceover, while the footage showed a row of women assembling watches under the supervision of a male technician, with the camera focused on the legs of one of the workers. Then a scene of collective gymnastics was shown: the employees were asked to periodically stop their sedentary activities and perform some simple exercises. The launch of watch assembly lines required creating a team, initially primarily to organise the startup, that was experienced in precision mechanics. However, Poland had little tradition of this type of manufacturing, and the war had devastated both equipment and personnel. Therefore, in the first post-war period, the personal activity of a few technicians was of great importance. Such a figure was the engineer Żelazkiewicz, whose experience was used to start up various precision mechanics plants. According to his memoirs, the success of the Błonie project was questionable from the start, primarily because of personnel conditions.²⁰ Large numbers of very young people, many of them women, flowed into the factory. By the end of 1960, juveniles (16 to 18 years of age) accounted for 34% of the crew. This work was seen by many as a seasonal occupation, a way of making extra money for the peasant farm. This was nothing new in the history of watchmaking. However, what con-

tributed to the development of outwork production was a disastrous phenomenon for the factory: at the plant some of the crew were disappearing during harvest and other field work. Despite these challenges, it was possible, not only under the pressure of directives but also the ambition of some of the staff, to implement the production of the envelope, dial, and hands, so that “we eliminated supplies from the Soviet Union.”²¹

All the phenomena mentioned here were characteristic of the “jump” model of industrialisation introduced in Poland. Based on state control and guidance, this model was associated with autarchic tendencies. It took place in a country that pursued a policy of tight borders, where it was difficult to legally leave for work and to emigrate.²² The workforce therefore circulated within the country, looking for a place to live. In turn, the policy of “full employment,” which was supposed to guarantee no unemployment (but also low wages), created a sense of social security among young residents, which also made it easier to decide to leave work, a phenomenon known as “crew fluidity.” An indirect effect of the “jump” model was the constantly low quality of production.

Since the state-owned company distributing the watches, “Jubiler” had signalled to the Błonie works that potential buyers were not enthusiastic and more attractive models needed to be designed. In response, the “youth” models were launched, linked to the demand for watches as communion gifts. Additionally, “waterproofing” was introduced, intended to appeal to the members of the post-war generation, who were characterised by holiday and sporting activity. However, the success was limited. The domestic watches at the time accounted for about 5% of those sold by “Jubiler,” when Soviet watches accounted for about 75%, and the rest were budget-friendly Ruhla from the GDR.²³ Watches from outside the “communist” countries were not imported. Of course, the monopoly of “Jubiler” was being broken by private legal and illegal imports of Swiss watches, which were prestigious accessories. This is why the press advertising campaign referred to the supposedly “Swiss” quality of products from Błonie.

Export Trials and Trouble at Home

In 1961, global production of watches and mechanisms reached 102 million pieces. Among these were also the 90 000 watches assembled in Błonie and the 1000 pieces with an in-house mechanism. The latter constitute a collector’s rarity today, and forgeries, where a bridge with a Polish mark is attached to a Soviet mechanism, proliferate.

The manufacture of Błonie’s own mechanisms was the result of a government resolution from January 1961. To this end, a new factory hall was erected, and

equipment was imported, including precision lathes, milling machines, and diamond cutters from the GDR, Switzerland, and Belgium. Although the raw materials received were not up to standard, the authorities did not allow the deadline for the first batch of mechanisms, set for December 15, 1961, to be postponed. The task was even completed ahead of schedule, in line with the custom inherited from the Stalinist labour race: on the 30th of November.²⁴ The production of a 1000 in-house watches in Błonie was noticed by the Swiss press. Within two years, reported *Gazette de Lausanne*, the factory would be independent of the Moscow plant.²⁵ This was the economic goal, as set out in the ZM-P documents, and the moral one, stemming from the professional (and patriotic) ambitions of the Błonie engineers. Independence required the creation of their own production base, which was the paradigm of economic development in the People's Republic of Poland. It also meant training a skilled workforce that could then spread to other plants with a similar profile and create potential export opportunities. However, on November 17, 1962, exactly a year after the release of Błonie's first series of in-house mechanisms, the director of the Unit of the Precision Industry issued an order to stop the production.²⁶ The broader context consisted of decision of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), based in Moscow, to insert the Polish economy into a system of dependency. We can probably rightly link this move to the concept of the so-called socialist division of labour, pushed by Nikita Khrushchev from 1962 onwards. According to this concept, individual countries were to specialise, concentrating on those sectors of the economy in which they could achieve real success and extinguishing those which were duplicative of other Comecon countries. This project aimed at making the bloc more competitive in world trade. While the elites of heavily industrialised countries, such as Czechoslovakia and the GDR, seemed to support Khrushchev's policy because it confirmed the direction of their development, in Romania, the division of labour provoked open resistance. The Romanian authorities sought industrial expansion and did not accept the role of a "tomato basin" to which the division of labour seemed to condemn it.²⁷ This example points to two important contexts of the Comecon's policy: a sense of domination by an external power and the pursuit of economic self-sufficiency (Romania's continuation of Stalinist-type autarkic policies) linked to the creation of emotions around local (national) creative capacities. The example of the Błonie factory seems to show similar issues on a micro scale: dependency, the quest for self-sufficiency, and emotion. The latter was expressed in memories and in the mythology growing with the decades around the cessation of in-house watch production. According to this mythology it was the USSR who ordered the cessation of production, the Polish mechanisms being allegedly of better quality than the Soviet ones.

However, efforts to modernise the watches were still ongoing. The waterproof cases, introduced in 1961, were assumed by the producer to be for watches that would be exported, since such seals were designed for “tropical” conditions.²⁸ This would probably have meant contracts with Third World countries. Just as important as the “elimination of imports” was the principle of developing exports, especially to the “KK,” as it was abbreviated in the various documents: Capitalist Countries, also known as the “dollar zone.” The Błonie plant was not allowed to conclude any contracts of this kind on its own and was dependent by the nature of the centralised system on the state-controlled foreign trade companies, such as Universal, Polcoop, and Impeko, about whose actions it complained more than once. Thus, the export took place through predetermined intermediaries. It was also indirect in another sense – Błonie produced parts for equipment that were sent abroad to be manufactured by other factories. It produced telephone dials, exported to the Soviet Union, balance attachments, thanks to which imports from Switzerland and France were “eliminated,” parts for water meters exported to Syria, and mechanisms for manometers sent to West Germany and to India. As we can see, the production of Błonie was present in the markets of all three “worlds.” As a report noted, the factory sought to handle over-planned exports, mainly of parts for telephones and unicycles, but also a small quantity of wristwatches. Exceeding plans could translate into bonuses for management and staff, which is what the incentive system of this type of economy was all about. The first attempt at export took place in 1962 and was not very successful: 390 watches were sent to the “KK,” and the low number was explained as being due to the “difficulty of conquering foreign markets.” It is not known which countries accepted these watches, presumably they were part of a trial delivery. However, nothing came of it, as in 1963 the shipment of 12 700 watches was limited to “KS” (Socialist Countries): Bulgaria (8000), Albania (4500), and Hungary (200). According to documents, exports in the following years reached similar proportions. In any case it seems that only small quantities of watches were shipped, and only to “socialist countries.”²⁹

At the end of the 1960s, the company Universal observed in its report to the government that Polish producers were inflexible, and that Third World industry was a growing competition for Poland. As a result, various industrial lobbies in Poland tried to soften Gomułka’s autarchic doctrinarism and sign contracts with the First World, which had the most attractive technologies at its disposal. As a result, among other things, a licence agreement was signed with the Fiat group, leading to the launch of production of the Polski Fiat 125p car in 1967. This approach of leapfrogging modernisation through technology transfer necessitated changes at domestic cooperative plants, including Błonie. As a result, the plant launched the production of indicators and thermostats for Fiats under Italian li-

cence. The production of cars was largely for export, and similar intentions involved the implementation in Błonie of the production of tape-shift mechanisms for recorders under a licence from Siemens. During this period, the interest of Warsaw's decision-makers was directed more towards computer science than precision mechanics. An analysis prepared in 1968 indicated that due to the situation on international markets, it was necessary to "concentrate the entire production potential" of ZM-P on the production of devices to operate "mathematical machines," i.e. computers. These would be tape and card readers and punchers, as well as line printers.³⁰

The future did not seem to bode well for the production of wristwatches, and it came to an end in 1969. In the same year, the first quartz watch for a mass buyer appeared on the "KK" markets – the "Astron" by Seiko. Of course, no one could have predicted the extent of the quartz revolution that was about to destroy most of Switzerland's smaller watchmaking companies. Consequently, the decision of the Warsaw government may seem far-sighted from this point of view, as by 1970, in Błonie the production of line printers for computers under the English ICL license was implemented. The end of the watch manufacturing was apparently not noted in the Swiss press, nor in the Polish. After all, the plant did not develop, what had initially been a decline had, by the late 1960s, become virtually imperceptible. Meanwhile, in 1970, almost 180 million watches were produced in the world, more than three times as many as in 1950. Switzerland's share fell below half of the global production (41%), followed by Japan (13%) and USSR (12%). The Second Moscow Watch Factory alone produced 6 million pieces.³¹

In 1970, watches were imported to Poland from the Soviet Union and East Germany, with about million pieces planned. The general import plan for that year provided that 90% of deliveries would come from "KS," a measure designed to protect the economy from a currency drain.³² In December 1970, against the background of a gloomy economic situation, protests took place along Poland's the Baltic coast, where the contacts with "KK" were intense: shipyards cooperated with Western recipients, Polish sailors brought various goods (including Swiss watches), Western sailors enjoyed the pubs in Szczecin and Gdynia. The sense of deprivation among Polish workers caused demonstrations, which were brutally suppressed by the army. The political crisis led to Gomułka's removal from power. The new leader, Edward Gierek, announced fundamental change, which manifested itself in opening up to cooperation with the West. Licenses were purchased, mass imports of consumer goods launched, and foreign currency loans taken out to cover import expenses. This policy resulted in a rapid rise in debt over which the authorities lost control in the mid-1970s, but also in a significant increase in the standard of living and the emergence of new aspirations.

“Polan” or “Lech” watches were forgotten, while “Jubiler” was also selling Swiss watches, such as “Omega” or “Atlantic,” next to the dominant Soviet ones.

The global significance of watch production in Błonie was negligible. However, it was developed in the context of global trends, thus providing a case study of a nationalised and centrally managed economy; an example of a development based on foreign licenses and aimed at creating a local technical base; an example of the ambition to establish roots in foreign markets. Both the decision to start watch production and the decision to liquidate it were made “at the top,” in the central economic leadership. Both the decisions had a wider context – especially the second one in 1969 seems to be an example of a kind of premonition of the quartz revolution that was to ruin thousands of Swiss companies in the following years.

The case of Błonie can be linked to two trends in Polish history. The first is the import of innovations from the West. Undoubtedly this trend dated back to the baptism of Poland in the 10th century, when religious and political innovations were transferred from German lands via Bohemia. Over the centuries Poland imported urban planning patterns, painting or cuisine, melding them with local phenomenon on the native ground. Clockmaking also belonged to this broader pattern. The second trend in the history of the Polish economy were the attempts to break free from foreign dependence and establish domestic production capacity. This is a history of state paternalism, probably dating back to the late 18th century and the establishment of royal manufactories and, in the first quarter of the 19th century, so-called government factories. The liberal doctrines prevailing at the time assumed a spontaneous equalisation of the potentials of countries through freedom of trade, but in the Kingdom of Poland (subordinated to Russia) the concept of “nurturing protectionism” prevailed, assuming that the authorities should protect industry from external competition until it reached a stage of development making it capable of meeting competition.³³ As it seems, this doctrine was repeatedly revived in Polish lands. When, as a result of the geopolitical changes after World War II Poland became part of the Second World, the regime pinned its hopes on a model of development – dependent, admittedly, on the disposition and technology of the USSR, but independent, it seemed, of the conjunctures of capitalist markets. However, the state had no intention of relinquishing control over the economy. The notion of “nurturing protectionism,” which basically consists of only temporary control over emerging industries, should therefore be treated rather loosely here. What remained was its “educational” aspect, i.e. the liberation from competition (the market), which is supposed to enable the independent productive activity.

The history of Błonie watches appears to be a failed attempt at such a policy. It took advantage of the demilitarisation of the economy and the possibility of easy

acquisition of technology. Human resources were also used, that is, the population of the agricultural area seeking advancement through industrial employment and the young technical intelligentsia hungry for success. Błonie occupied a borderline position: it was a stage on the path of social advancement between the countryside and the city. On a broader scale, the plant was an example of Poland's situation as a country trying to exploit its borderland location: it could become a staging point for exchange between the three global "worlds." Technology borrowed from the USSR and packaged in a "national" form could have been used to export to the "dollar zone." This clearly failed. This is why computer hardware under English licence became the vocation of Błonie.

Notes

- 1 *La Suisse libérale*, 7. 11. 1959, 2.
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