

Summary

AN ARCHITECT AND AN OFFICIAL IN THE RUSSIAN SERVICE. ANTONI JABŁOŃSKI JASIEŃCZYK (1854–1918)

Antoni Jabłoński (1854–1918), educated at the Russian Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg, was a Polish architect, who held state official positions in the Russian political system throughout his entire professional career. For more than thirty years, he was employed as a builder of the Tsarist University of Warsaw, responsible for nearly all construction projects undertaken by this institution; he also worked as an architect for several other state institutions: the Warsaw Scientific District, the Alexandria-Mari Institute for Parenting and the Post and Telegraph Administration. What is equally important, for twenty five years he was employed by the building inspection services, controlled by the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs. He was, therefore, a Pole working for the Russian state services.

The participation of Russian state officials in state building authorities of the Polish Kingdom was marginal and, until the end of the empire, the Poles constituted the core of the officials. Architects working for the Russian state authorities did not cause as much resentment as more “political” professions of teachers or lawyers. Nevertheless, such positions enabled their holders to use them in unethical or corruptive ways.

Being an architect for a particular state institution offered not only many privileges, but also an access to lucrative contracts. As a university architect Jabłoński built the Library and the Anatomopathological Institute, modernized the historic Kazimierzowski Palace and designed several large buildings, which were not erected. In co-operation with the Warsaw Scientific District he designed some school buildings: a grammar school for girls in Kapucyńska Street in Warsaw, a grammar school for girls in Piotrków Trybunalski and a vocational school in Sosnowiec. Commissioned by the Post and Telegraph Administration, he designed and erected a large Main Post Office building in Warsaw. He also erected a panorama building for a private contractor. His two grand urban projects: main market halls and abattoirs were not executed, but the subsequent versions of the project were handsomely paid by the city. A part of this publication is devoted to his activities as a freelance architect and highlights his commissions from the city; his activities as a theorist and educator are also explored.

In the case of Polish architects-officials we can see their positivist attitudes and willingness to modernize the city; on the other hand, they want to ensure their families and

themselves a stable financial and professional position, which is not subject to economic fluctuations of the building free market. Therefore, they are tempted by steady salaries, clerical benefits, an easier access to public commissions and, last but not least, the prospect of additional income on the side. This additional income was the basis for the most serious allegations made against “the architects-officials” by the professional environment. This can be clearly illustrated by the fact that, for ethical reasons, none of the architects-officials was admitted to the Architectural Delegation, a professional organisation created in 1899 and transformed into Architectural Association in 1904.

The lives of Antoni Jabłoński and other Warsaw architects show that the mere fact of being an architect employed by a Russian state organisation was not a cause for shame and social ostracism. This was also the case of a much broader group of engineering staff engaged in great building projects aimed to modernise the city. Designing buildings, which were then erected from Russian public funds, was socially accepted among architects and rated in terms of merit and artistic quality: a good or bad building, or in functional categories: needed or not by the people of Warsaw. Even work for the building inspection services did not mean social exclusion: it is worth mentioning that several known and revered architects, such as Bronisław Rogóyski and Stefan Szyller acted as regional builders. Nevertheless, the knowledge which officials accepted bribes spread quickly.

Jabłoński undoubtedly used his official functions to a large extent. Apart from his salaries and bonuses, he earned considerable money preparing projects and cost estimates as well as overseeing the buildings erected from public funds and raised through his employment as a construction worker. His extra income from bogus supervision was undoubtedly an important item in his budget.

Free market activities were only peripheral to his main professional activity. The posts he held determined his achievements as a designer. As a result, he did not design a single church, and his only sacral building was a home orthodox church in the grammar school for girls, in the former building of the palace of the Treasury Minister at 3, Rymarska Street. Despite numerous private contacts with the landed gentry, he took part in only one residential building enterprise: he helped Jan Mańkowski to rebuild the manor house in Sahinka. He certainly designed many townhouses, but as the Warsaw building archives did not survive and most buildings from that period were destroyed, his activities in the field are shrouded in mystery.

The lack of certain types of buildings in Jabłoński’s portfolio seems quite puzzling. He only had one sacred, orthodox realization and no sepulchral ones. It is impossible to determine whether it was due to the personal lack of interest in such commissions or the Catholic Church prevented such projects because Jabłoński closely co-operated with Russian authorities. I am convinced that it was not accidental, as such a renowned architect was able to contact Church contractors on numerous occasions, especially when we consider his family relations and associations with the landed gentry, for which he designed very little.

Even more striking is Jabłoński’s complete lack of involvement in the activities of the Society for the Care of the Monuments of the Past, to which almost all Warsaw

architects belonged. I did not come across any information on the restrictions on admission to this Society; nevertheless, there may have been an unwritten rule to reject the applications of the builders considered corrupt, similar to the one enforced by the Architectural Delegation or the Architectural Association. For Polish architects, community work aimed at protecting Polish monuments was an important part of their professional activity and a declaration of patriotism. Jabłoński was never involved in any such work. Several of his publications concerned the problem of creating a Polish style in architecture – he seems to have considered the Zakopane Style a possibility – but none of his projects followed the trend.

The buildings erected by Jabłoński generally enjoyed a good reputation among Warsaw artistic critics; they were neither outstanding nor avant-garde, but they matched social expectations and tastes quite precisely. In fact, all buildings he designed followed the latest trends: until the beginning of the 20th century – Academic Historicism, in the first decades of the 20th century – Modernism, and around 1910 – The Second Empire and Regionalism.

He was a graduate of probably the most conservative artistic school in Europe, so it is hardly surprising that he distanced himself from the changes occurring in architecture at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. He did support the Zakopane Style and Regionalism and was not indifferent to the influence of Modernism; he was faithful to Historicism and the 19th century views on the role of style, moods and content in architecture. His works and opinions were characteristic of a large group of architects, graduates of Saint Petersburg Academy, such as Stefan Szyller, Mikołaj Tołwiński, Władysław Marconi and others.

It is a cliché, but it is worth remembering that Warsaw architecture of the last period of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century is not only the result of creative abilities of Polish architects working in the city at that time, but also other conditions: urban, military, technical, social, financial, administrative and legal, which determined its shape at the beginning of independence, and which is unfortunately known mainly from photographs. The story of Jabłoński is not only the story of styles, forms and structures, but the story of a man who co-created the city thanks to his skills, organisational capability and the ability to build an understanding with the Russians with whom he worked all his life.

Translated by Bożena Lesiuk