

## Port of Gdynia's centenary

by Przemysław Myszk

**The world in 1922 looked a lot different from today. Four years earlier, Poland regained independence after being off Europe's map for 123 years. The country first lost a considerable chunk of its connection to the Baltic Sea in 1772 (Elbląg) and 1793 (Gdańsk) when Prussia seized these lands, and then entirely in 1795 when what's nowadays western Latvia and Lithuania was annexed by the Russians. In 1919, the Bolshevik regime attacked (so perhaps the early 20<sup>th</sup> century wasn't all that different from now...), a blow that was successfully driven off the following year. In 1920, the newly born state had just a tiny stretch of coast (75 kilometres), with no genuine seaports since Gdańsk was declared a free city and unwilling to let Poland use its quays. Against this background of war and stitching together a state of different legal & cultural patches, the idea of turning a small fishing village into (in modern terms) a greenfield port was born. Fast forward 100 years, and in 2022 we are celebrating the centenary of what is today one of Baltic's biggest universal seaports.**

**O**n 23 September 1922, the Polish parliament decided that a brand-new seaport was to be set up – for commercial as well as naval use. The latter was critical, as in July 1920, Gdańsk's Senate red-lighted the handling of ships with weapons and ammunition for Poland's fight against the Red Army. In response, the country's representative in Gdańsk, Mieczysław Jałowiecki, rolled up his sleeves and bought a few tugs and barges, meaning that cargoes could be reloaded at the barge quay, bypassing Gdańsk's dockers and railwaymen, and farther floated up the Vistula to the Polish Tczew. Villagers from Gdynia also partook in this operation, helping with their cutters and boats.

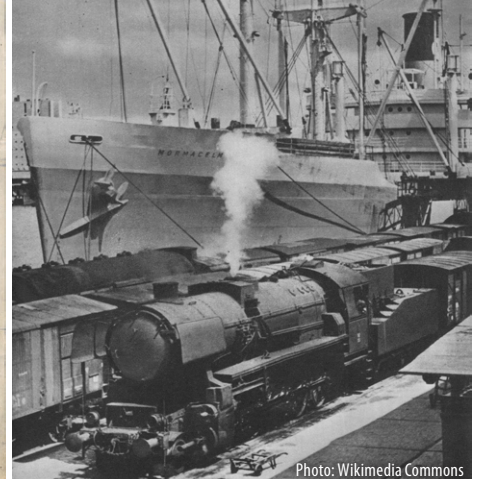
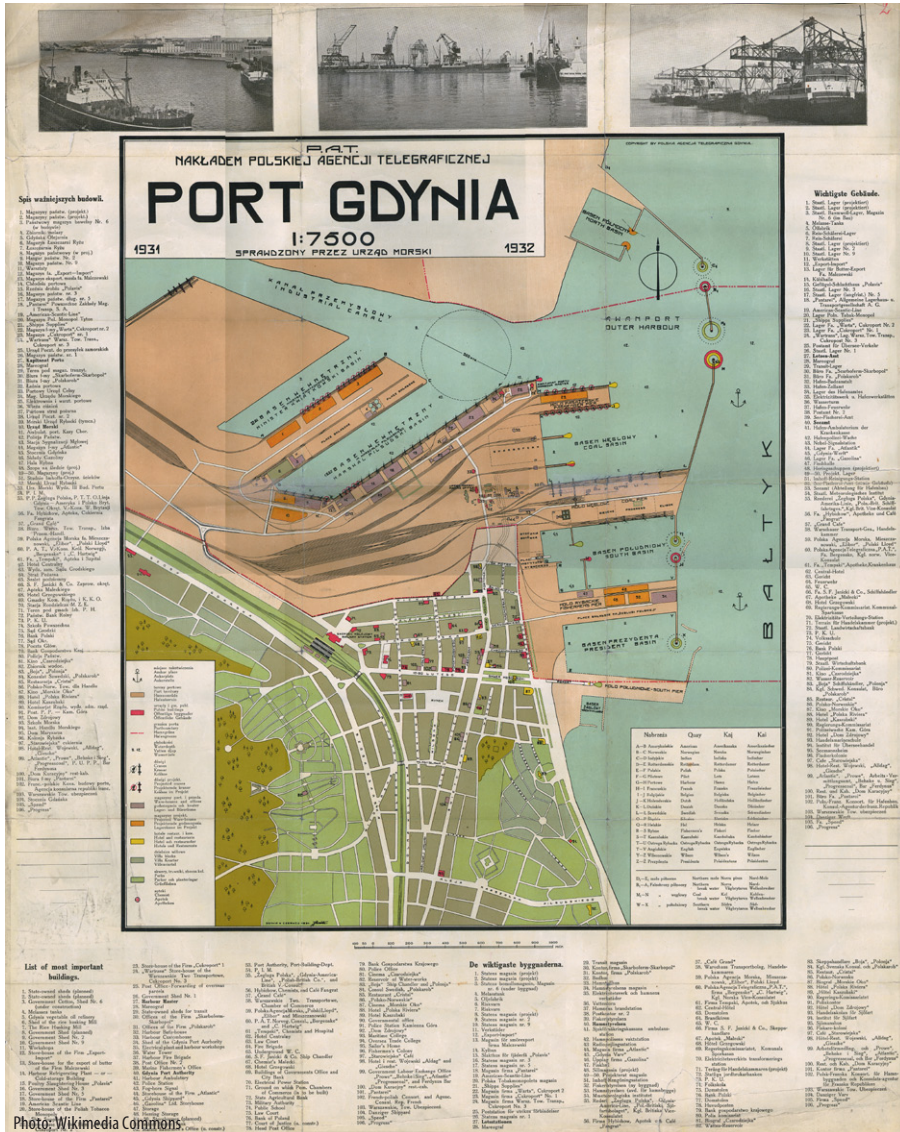
The engineer Tadeusz Wenda chose the location, designed the port, and then was in charge of building it (till 1932, when he started heading the Technical

and Construction Department of Gdynia's Maritime Office). At first, however, the speed of construction works wasn't breathtaking: some groundwork and erecting a temporary shelter for naval vessels and fishing boats. In August 1923, the French *Kentucky* was the first foreign-flagged ship to call to Gdynia's wooden pier. It wasn't a trouble-free visit, though. The vessel transported horses to Gdańsk and was meant to take on her board emigrants to the US. The authorities declined because of sanitary reasons, i.e., manure knocked around. They were allowed to get onto the ship in Gdynia. However, the holds were still foul, so they bolted outside, only to get forced by the police to get back...

In 1924, a French-Polish consortium was commissioned by the Ministry of Industry and Trade to further develop Gdynia: the goal was for the port to handle up to 2.5 million tonnes per year by 31 December 1931,

among others, by accommodating 25-30 vessels simultaneously. The Ministry began buying cargo handling equipment: portal cranes for coal and ore, a coal tippler, and mobile harbour cranes. The Treasury added four electric cranes. The port took care of 10kt in 1924, welcoming 54 ships. Half a decade later, some 2.92mt went through Gdynia's quays (on board 3,106 vessels), surpassing Gdańsk's pre-war (1912) volume of 2.45mt.

Earlier, at the beginning of 1927, the flag was hoisted on Poland's first large cargo steamship, the acquired in France *Wilno* (later joined by *Kraków*, *Poznań*, *Katowice*, and *Toruń*, all of them also born in France in Chantiers Navals Français). In June of the same year, the Gdańsk-constructed *Gdańsk* and *Gdynia* passenger-lounge ships entered the Polish seaport. Together with smaller units, they provided excursions across the Gdańsk Bay (occasionally international cruises, e.g., to



Copenhagen). On 11 March 1930, the Gdynia-New York City line of the Polish Transatlantic Shipping Company was set up. Its successor (1934), Gdynia America Line, added a link to South America as well as the Constantinople-Istanbul-Jaffa-Haifa-Pireus itinerary.

World War II brought nothing but misery to the port. Renamed by Nazi Germany as Gotenhafen, it was turned into a Kriegsmarine base. Bombed by the Royal Air Force in December 1944 and then captured by the Soviets in March 1945, Gdynia was ruined. That said, the seaport was relaunched in June 1945 and on 16 July, the Finnish steamship *Suomen Neito* came for coal. On 21 September 1945, *Kraków* returned to her homeport as the first vessel.

Interestingly, the end of WWII reshuffled Poland's port market anew. Whereas post the Great War, the country had to scramble to get at least one seaport, now it had (well, on paper, given the war devastation) Gdynia,

Gdańsk, Świnoujście, Szczecin, and a handful of smaller harbours like Elbląg or Kołobrzeg (when on 18 March 1945, Poland's marriage with the sea took place). Notwithstanding the communist regime and the peculiarities of the planned economy (including handicapped trade with the "allied" USSR), Gdynia could once more start transshipping cargo. The world moved forward, and so did Gdynia, among others, beginning to build a container terminal in 1976.

The passing of Communist rulership in 1989 brought about a new wave of challenges: getting the port fit for the market economy, restructuring the entire administration towards a landlord port authority model (Gdynia was the first port in Poland to complete the privatisation process), increasingly getting to know the Baltic's trademark (wheeled cargo on board ferries and ro-ros), becoming the country's prime cruise port (plus welcoming thousands of

Stena Line's travellers to and from Karlskrona, nowadays from the brand-new Public Ferry Terminal), and what is the bread & butter of every port at any point in time: investing, investing, and investing (especially, if one's port sits in the middle of a 244k citizen-big city). As such, Gdynia eyes moving outside its current premises into the open sea with the Outer Harbour project – primarily for handling containers but also serving the much-awaited offshore wind farms. The investment is meant to safeguard Gdynia's prosperity during another centenary.

On 23 September 2022, precisely one hundred years after the Polish parliament gave its go-ahead, the port authority celebrated the date by presenting The Constructors of Gdynia Port commemorative bench next to the Harbour Master's Office. It shows the mentioned Tadeusz Wenda as well as Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski, the initiator of building the port in Gdynia. Happy anniversary!