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THE DECLINE OF THE CLOTH INDUSTRY IN BIRNBAUM (MIĘDZYCHÓD) AFTER THE NAPOLEONIC WARS

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When, at the turn of the year 1832/33, the town of Birnbaum (Międzychód) applied to King Frederick William III for the award of the revised town ordinance, a civil servant of the Ministry of the Interior praised the town's conditions and recommended the award without reservation. Birnbaum, as he emphasized in his letter to Interior Minister von Brenn, differed positively from other small towns in the province, and it had a "decent, well-meaning population" of 2,453 inhabitants, consisting mainly of Germans. The financial situation of the municipality was well ordered and it was expected that the introduction of the town order (Städteordnung) would have a positive effect on the development of the urban situation.¹

In his administrative report for the year 1832, which he had submitted together with the application of the magistrate, Mayor Wiczorowski described the circumstances somewhat more differentiated²: the town was free of debt and the main streets were almost all newly paved. They also had an orderly fire-fighting system and public safety, which was the concern of four gendarmes and four night watchmen, was guaranteed. The economic and social conditions, however, caused the mayor sorrow. In recent years – since the export of cloths to Russia had come to a standstill – Birnbaum had lost, with a few exceptions, its clothiers, who had so far

¹ Letter to Minister of the Interior von Brenn, Berlin 10. February 1833, GhStA PK, I. HA, Rep. 77, Tit. 1605, no. 2: Die Stadt Birnbaum. Die Verwaltung der Communal-Angelegenheiten und die Anstellung der Communal-Beamten in der Stadt Birnbaum 1833-1902.

² For the following: Der Bürgermeister erstattet den Haupt-Bericht über die Verwaltung des Polizey- und Communal-Wesens pro 1832, Birnbaum 12. January 1833, *ibid.*

been the town's most important branch of industry. The members of their profession mostly emigrated to the Kingdom of Poland in order to continue their trade there. The few cloth makers who remained would have a more bad than right livelihood: They brought their products to the fair in Frankfurt (Oder), but achieved such low prices there that it was hardly worth the effort for the expensive and tedious journey (the Chaussee Poznań -Berlin, which ran not far from Birnbaum and led across the fair-ground Frankfurt (Oder), was not opened until 1834/35) [Dohnalowa T 1976: 12]. Thus, many small cloth workshops had closed; some clothiers, as the mayor complained, even had to hire themselves out as day labourers. The four tanneries and the linen weavers, who were also trying to sell their products at the Frankfurt fair and the local markets, were hardly doing better; the weavers made canvas and tableware for wages as well as coarse cloths for the local farmers. In view of the number of factory owners and the fact that the farmers usually wove the cloth they needed themselves, it was no longer possible to make a lucrative business with linen weaving either. The trade with the products of the urban trades was mostly in the hands of Jews, who made up almost a third of the population and "travelled with their wares on their back to the fairs of neighbouring and more distant towns". They did not fare much better than their Christian fellow citizens: among the Jews of Birnbaum there were only a few merchants who had good incomes. Most of them were smaller merchants who lived a meagre existence.

The economic and social costs of Birnbaum's 'trade misery' were considerable: The clothiers had to dismiss assistants and apprentices because they could no longer offer them any work, and the spinning mills suffered from the low demand for yarns. The inhabitants of Birnbaum consumed much less than before, which in turn affected the other trades. As a result, the municipal care for the poor with a hospital and orphanage was so overburdened that the mayor announced that a poor fund would be set up by means of a surcharge on the class tax, because the costs could no longer be covered by the finance department as before. Finally, the mayor lamented the bad tax morality, which had spread so far that the collection of the taxes for state, school, church, finance and dominion could often only be guaranteed by seizures, which in turn could be carried out less and less.³

³ Der Bürgermeister erstattet den Haupt-Bericht, GhStA PK, I. HA, Rep. 77, Tit. 1605, no. 2, see note 1.

Birnbaum was obviously in a sad situation. Still ten years earlier, the town had been looking forward to a promising future: The cloth trade, with its almost 100 master clothiers, was unchallengedly the most important trade in the town and was largely responsible for its attractiveness for immigrants and prosperity. The influx of cloth makers was unbroken in the first two decades of the 19th century – apart from fluctuations – and – unlike in South Prussian times – the government was even inclined, in view of the increasing mechanisation of production, to strongly support the local trade: In December 1815, the cloth manufacturer Benjamin Aschheim from Birnbaum visited the workshops of the Cockerill brothers, who had recently come to Berlin from Liège, to find out about their latest machines for cloth production and finishing. When Aschheim decided to improve its cloth production by installing Cockerill machines, he applied to the government for a subsidy of 320 Reichstalers for one roughing machine and four shearing machines. Aschheim found an open ear for Chief President Joseph Zerboni di Sposetti, who not only ordered 320 Reichstalers to pay half of the investment costs to the cloth manufacturer. He even agreed to assume 50 percent of the costs of a Cockerill full spinning machine if Aschheim installed it in his workshops within a year. Zerboni justified his decision not only with the very good reputation that the cloth manufacturer Aschheim enjoyed and with his diligence. Rather, the Chief President wanted to make Birnbaum, which was suitable for this because of the already existing businesses, into a modern and exemplary production plant for cloth in the Grand Duchy of Poznan, which would radiate to the entire province.⁴

So, what happened in the few years between the state's promise of financing, which seemed to open up such excellent prospects for the future of Birnbaum's cloth trade, and the mayor's depressing administrative report on local trade? Wiczorowski looked at the situation soberly and without the impetus of many contemporaries: in his opinion, the crisis of the Birnbaum cloth industry with all its unpleasant consequences for the town came from the fact that "the machines manufacture more cloth than is consumed, and export to foreign countries is not possible".⁵ So he definitely blamed the increasing mechanization of production, be-

⁴ Mulird to Oberpräsident Zerboni di Sposetti, Unterstützung des Benjamin Aschheim aus Birnbaum betreffend, Berlin 28.12.1815, APP, OPP 5081.

⁵ Der Bürgermeister erstattet den Haupt-Bericht, GhStA PK, I. HA, Rep. 77, Tit. 1605, no. 2, see note 1.

cause now a lot of fabrics flooded the market, which was also suffering from the poor income situation of consumers. However, as the mayor also recognised, the industrialisation policy in the Kingdom of Poland since the beginning of the 1820's had a more direct effect on the Birnbaum trade than mechanisation, because the majority of Birnbaum cloth makers followed their markets, which were now behind the high Russian customs walls.

In the course of the modern development of their trade, the clothiers of Birnbaum had – like their colleagues from Meseritz (Międzyrzecz) – found their markets within the borders of the state to which their town belonged – the Polish Rzeczpospolita, which in the 18th century still extended far into the Ukraine and ended a few kilometres west of Birnbaum. After the second partition in 1793, when Birnbaum fell to Prussia, this did not change much at first, because the inner Prussian markets were not accessible, the Birnbaum fabric was hardly competitive compared with the finer Silesian and Brandenburg brands, and at the same time the Birnbaum clothier's markets had remained due to the large Prussian acquisitions of territory. Even the geopolitical changes from the founding of the Duchy of Warsaw to the Congress of Vienna and its aftermath did not bring about a fundamental change at the beginning: At the Congress, the powers of the Holy Alliance, whose *raison d'être* consisted in the rule over the Polish lands, decided to maintain economic exchange between the Prussian and the Russian partition and to impose duties of up to 10 per cent of the value on goods at the most [Schermer J. 2001: 154; Breyer A. 1941].

A fundamental change took place only at the beginnings of the 1820's with a change in Russian customs policy and attempts to initiate industrialisation in Congress Poland, which would not least benefit the Russian markets. To this end, Russia introduced a free trade regime for almost all goods in 1822 in comparison with Congress Poland, while the government of the Kingdom of Poland, at the initiative of Finance Minister Ksawery Drucki-Lubecki, established a prohibitive regime on its western border at the beginning of 1823, which among other things prohibited the import of wool fabrics and yarns and imposed high import duties on cotton fabrics [Jedlicki J. 1964; Scherner J. 2001: note 7: 156; Skodlarski J. 2000: 100; Wegener L. 1903: 63]. This policy was flanked by the recruitment of craftsmen and tradesmen, who were lured into the country with favourable settlement conditions, which assured them, for example, exemption from military service, initial tax exemptions and the duty-free import of their looms, and financed investments in indus-

trial buildings, residential buildings, etc. from a specially established state fund.⁶

The mass exodus of clothiers and related professionals to Congress Poland, which has now begun, proves once again that migrants did not think in terms of “nationality”, “ethnicity” or language. For them, their economic interest was paramount, and they were prepared to overcome possible linguistic difficulties. Thus countless cloth makers left their homeland *Wielkopolska* for their traditional markets and went to the emerging centres of the textile industry in Congress Poland such as Łódź, Zgierz and Pabianice. In 1816, the brothers Johann Balthasar and Benjamin Repphan, two members of a well-known dynasty of cloth makers from Birnbaum, went to Kalisz on the other side of the border. In 1817 they opened a cloth factory there, which seven years later employed almost 400 workers.⁷ Other people from Birnbaum went to Ozorków, again others to the “Polish Manchester”, to Łódź [Topolski J. 1999: 167-168; Kossmann O. 1966; Hensel J. (ed.) 1999]. Similar to the entire province – only 27 of the 1,586 cloth makers counted in 1816 had remained in the administrative district of Poznań in 1866 – the migration of the Birnbaum cloth makers was extensive and took place within a few years: In his administrative report, the mayor reported that “the emigration to Poland [...] had now completely ceased”.⁸

⁶ Postanowienie Namiestnika z 2 III 1816, in: Kieniewicz, Stefan, Mencil, Tadeusz, Rostocki, Władysław (eds.): *Wybór tekstów źródłowych z historii Polski w latach 1795-1864*, Warszawa 1956, pp. 361-364; Scherner, note 7, p. 156; Wegener, note 8, pp. 63-64, Bartyś J., *The Grand Duchy of Poznań under Prussian Rule. Changes in the Economic Position of the Jewish Population 1815-1848* [in:] Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook 17 (1972), pp. 191-204, here: pp. 195-196.

⁷ *Sekcja fabryczna: Ogólny raport roczny o postępie zakładów fabrycznych w ciągu 1824 r., Kalisz, dnia 26 lutego 1825 r.*, [in:] Badziak K., Woźniak K. (eds.), *Materiały do dziejów uprzemysłowienia Królestwa Polskiego. Raporty Komisji Województwa Kaliskiego z lat 1823-1832*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersyteckie, Łódź (1998), pp. 38-59, here: pp. 42-43. The commission, which was already trying to recruit industrial producers at that time, recruited the Repphan brothers in 1815 and concluded a contract with them on 24.9.1816 in which the settlement conditions were laid down. The Repphans had been among the most respected Birnbaum bourgeois families and had appointed magistrate members. At the beginning of 1870, a descendant of the family established a foundation in Dresden, from whose funds Protestant Birnbaumers in need were supported, APP, AMM 92: Die durch den Rentier Joh. Repphan begründete Wilhelminen-Stiftung.

⁸ Der Bürgermeister erstattet den Haupt-Bericht, GhStA PK, I. HA, Rep. 77, Tit. 1605, Nr. 2, note 1. On the exact number of emigrants and the social structure of this population the sources do not tell anything. Numbers from: Dzieje Wielkopolski, vol. 2, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie 1971, p. 98.

The mayor of Birnbaum had already indicated that the loss of this most important branch of the town's trade had not been complete when he reported on the sales problems of the Birnbaum manufacturers at the Frankfurt (Oder) trade fair and the local markets in the surrounding area. But the decreasing new admissions of cloth makers by the citizens testify to the loss of importance of this trade, too. The years after the Napoleonic Wars, from 1813 to 1815, had brought the town an enormous influx of clothiers for the last time, who represented between 86 percent and 56 percent of the new citizens in those years. Many of the new citizens came from the cloth-producing towns of *Wielkopolska* and the neighbouring Prussian provinces, two came from Bohemia, and one even came from Transylvania.⁹ While Birnbaum's cloth production had proved its innovative ability and cosmopolitanism in the years of the reconstruction after the Napoleonic Wars, afterwards there was the decline to a normal level and finally the emigration. Since 1818, the number of new clothiers who were granted citizenship fell to just a few, and they also came exclusively from Birnbaum.¹⁰

If one disregards the simultaneous emigration of the cloth industry, the new admissions of citizens dating back to the middle of the second decade of the 19th century speak of a normalization that followed the recovery phase after the Napoleonic Wars. But "normality" also meant that the town began to make its own way into modernity: If, with a few exceptions, the new citizens of Birnbaum recruited themselves again from their own population, this may well have meant less potential for innovation. As the case of Benjamin Aschheim shows, it was supplemented by state and entrepreneurial initiative in the course of the formation of the state and the consolidation of power. But it also meant that the Birnbaum trade had reached such a level of development that it was able to renew itself.

⁹ Kenéz C. J. (ed.) (1982), *Das Bürgerbuch von Birnbaum*, Herder-Institut, Marburg, pp. 139-144, and the data for the years 1808-1853, in: *ibid.*, pp. 135-176. They are the basis for the following narration.

¹⁰ The empirical data for Birnbaum conflicts with the more general conclusion of Jan Wąsicki, in: *Dzieje Wielkopolski*, note 12, pp. 58-59, and Łuczak, *ibid.*, pp. 96-98 for the cloth industry of *Wielkopolska*. Wąsicki notes on the basis of the increase in sheep breeding for the first years of the Duchy of Warsaw until 1811 a boom for cloth (military need!), which in that year, however, had stopped due to a general Russian import stop against the Duchy of Warsaw. Łuczak diagnoses a complete lack of financial commitment on the part of the state (Zerboni's intentions for Birnbaum contradict this) and attributes the decline of the cloth production directly to the divisions, but this is only partially true, because the borders created by the Congress of Vienna only began to seal off the traditional Russian market at the moment when customs policy changed.

ABBREVIATIONS

AMM: Akta Miasta Międzychód

APP: Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu

GhStA PK: Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz

OPP: Oberpräsidium Posen

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