

“Ełk - a history driven by trains” - Exhibition Scenario

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Historical Museum in Ełk, ul. Wąski Tor 1

1. “Long Middle Ages”

The settlement, out of which Ełk developed, was founded in 1425 near a guardhouse built around 1398 - later to become a castle. The inhabitants lived according to the rhythm of the changing seasons. People of the Middle Ages were dependent on nature. Existence was conditioned by favourable (or not) natural factors such as good harvest or famine, floods, fires, and severe winters. People lived in constant fear of potential epidemics or diseases resulting from malnutrition or poor hygiene. No machines existed to improve tillage. The economy depended on the strength of human and animal muscles. Faith in miracles and supernatural powers was widespread.

The end of the Middle Ages is traditionally marked in the second half of the 15th century. The events that would give rise to a new era included the invention of printing in 1452 and the fall of Constantinople in 1453. However, did these factors influence the life of the inhabitants of Ełk and Prussia (in which the town was located at the time)? People kept using the same tools and animals in farming. The population was constantly at risk of hunger and diseases, about which almost nothing was known and for which practically no medicines existed. Historic turning points, such as the invention of printing, only impacted the lives of the few elite of society in those times. The average person lived the same way in the year 1400 as in 1700. The way of human life was determined by consistent circumstances. Changes were only going to appear in the 19th century. So did the Middle Ages last until the middle of the 19th century? It seems so in many ways, and historians describe this era as "the long Middle Ages" or pre-modernity.

2. Time and Space

2.1. The space of pre-modern people

Since the Middle Ages, the area where Ełk was founded has been called *Wielka Puszcza* (the Great Primeval Forest), or *die große Wildniß* in German. It was an area that corresponds to the present-day eastern part of Warmia – Masuria Voivodeship (Polish name for Province), depopulated due to lengthy Teutonic and Jatvingian battles, bordering with Lithuanian primeval forests and Biebrza marshes. The space occupied by the inhabitants of pre-modern Ełk was the wild forest. And it was the forest that determined the lives of people settling here. It acted as protection against invasions of foreign troops, a source of building material and food, and as a workplace.

The space of pre-modern people was dominated by the world of nature. Masuria was a sparsely populated area. Human settlements were not as numerous as in later times. Life in the settlements was based on the principle of self-sufficiency (*autarky*) which, combined with a low level of transport development, meant that contact between individual villages was very rare. Pre-modern Ełk was mainly an agricultural settlement. People of that time, living close to nature, perceived themselves as a part of it.

2.2. When was Ełk established?

The colonization of the so-called *Wielka Puszcza* (the Great Primeval Forest) began with the signing of the Polish-Teutonic peace treaty in Melno in 1422. The Polish-Teutonic wars that lasted throughout the 15th century resulted in a slow advance of human settlement in the area of today's Ełk. At that time, the castle was besieged several times by Polish troops, which had an impact on the development process of the surrounding lands. The granting of town rights in 1435 was also unsuccessful, and Ełk rather remained a village until 1669, when Elector Frederick William I renewed the town privileges granted over two centuries earlier. The settlement of lands in south-eastern Masuria gained greater impetus only after the last Polish-Teutonic war (1519-1521), which ended in 1525 with the Krakow

Treaty and the secularization of the Teutonic Order in Prussia. Since then, the Teutonic state in Prussia became a fief of Polish kings and was called the Duchy of Prussia. The duchy was ruled by Albrecht Hohenzollern, who had also adopted the teachings of Martin Luther, becoming the first Protestant ruler in Europe.

2.3.What were the occupations of Ełk inhabitants?

Bartosz Bratomil is considered to have been the *lokator* of Ełk. The first inhabitants were probably settlers from Mazovia, descendants of the Prussians and Jatvingians, as well as German officials and the garrison of the castle. The foundation charter from 1425 defined the rights and obligations of the inhabitants of Ełk. They were hunters, beekeepers and fishermen. They were permitted the use of meadows on both sides of the Ełk River and Sunowo Lake. The settlement was granted 48 *voloks* of land, which was equal to 806.4 hectares.

2.4.Transportation and travels

Pre-modern Ełk was located on the outskirts of contemporary Europe. Its peripheral state was exemplified, among other ways, in the area of accessibility. The castle and the settlement of Ełk were built in areas depopulated by wars, overgrown with dense forests and surrounded by countless lakes and wetlands. It was difficult to establish permanent transportation routes through such areas. The quickest form of transportation in these ancient times was water transport, predominantly determined by the nature of the waterways present in the area. In the case of Ełk, as it was the case with the rest of Masuria, water transport took place on the Ełk river in a north-south direction.

Land passageways were few in number and their condition depended on natural and climatic factors. Roads were usually unhardened and often overgrown in wooded areas with a low population density. The journey along such roads were additionally hindered by the weather. Heavy rainfall or snowmelt caused disastrous road conditions. Drought, on the other hand, caused vehicles to get stuck on sandy roads. People were dependent on nature. In the pre-modern era, transport was characterised by considerable primitiveness.

Riding in a wagon was very uncomfortable due to the lack of springs. The first springs were created in the 17th and 18th centuries, and they were used in the carriages and coaches of monarchs and important aristocrats. Primitive means of transportation would often fail. On poor quality roads, the wheels and wooden axles of wagons broke very often.

Travelling in the pre-modern era was a costly and lengthy undertaking. There were many dangers awaiting the traveller during the journey. Travels through the Masurian primeval forest were marked by danger from wildlife, and long expeditions in unfavourable weather conditions could lead to serious infections. The time of travel depended, of course, on the means of transportation. The quickest was horseback riding; the longest— travelling on foot. Somewhere in the middle, there were carts pulled by oxen. So how long did it take a pre-modern inhabitant of Ełk to reach the capital of the Duchy of Prussia, Königsberg? The distance of about 190 km separating both cities could be travelled on foot in about 10 days, in a cart in 7-8 days, and on horseback in 5-6 days.

3. The centre of the settlement – the castle and Ełk Lake

In its beginnings, Ełk was an agricultural settlement. This was not changed by the unsuccessful granting of town rights in 1435 nor by the subsequent confirmation of this privilege in 1669. Although from the legal point of view Ełk was a town, the majority of its inhabitants were involved in agriculture.

In the pre-modern era, the backbone of Ełk was the main street leading along the eastern shore of the lake. It was a typical linear settlement with buildings stretching along the main street. The castle stood as if apart from the settlement, isolated from the life of the rural community by the waters of Ełk Lake. It played its proper role quite briefly: only a little over a century. In 1525, after the secularization of the Teutonic Order, it lost its military significance, and since then performed various administrative functions by being the seat of the ducal *starosts*, the building of the court, and the prison.

From the beginning of the 15th century until the middle of the 19th century, Ełk continued to be a small agricultural town. It was dominated by wooden buildings and therefore was often struck by fires, the biggest of which occurred in 1688 and 1695. The inhabitants lived in their own micro world, isolated from the mainstream narrative of

history which would only sometimes remind them of itself, such as during the Tatar invasion of the Duchy of Prussia in 1656. This was later sung about by local poets as the most tragic event in the history of Masuria.

4. The railway reaches Ełk

The creation of the railway is connected with humans mastering the forces of nature. The dynamic development of railways in Europe took place in the 19th century, which is why this century is often referred to as the age of steam. The first trains began to operate in Great Britain and slowly spread throughout Europe. In the Prussian state, the development of railways began in the second half of the 1830s. The first railway lines were built in the western provinces of the country such as the Rhineland and Silesia. Gradually, they also included areas further to the east. The first trains reached Masuria only in the second half of the 19th century.

In 1868, the first railway line connecting Ełk with Giżycko was built. This line was a branch of the main East-Prussian railway line running from the capital of the province of Königsberg via Elbląg and Tczew to Berlin. By the turn of the century, all East Prussian county towns had been connected by rail. Ełk became an important railway hub on the eastern outskirts of the Second German Reich. In 1871, the railway line from Giżycko to Ełk was extended to Prostki, where soon one of three railway border crossings was established. From there, it was possible to continue through Grajewo to Białystok, Warsaw, Moscow and St. Petersburg. By the outbreak of World War I, Ełk was connected by rail with Wystruć (Insterburg, nowadays Chernyakhovsk) through Olecko and Gołdap (1879); with Olsztyn through Pisz and Szczytno (1885); and with Orzysz (1915). This was truly the beginning of a new era in the history of the city.

5. Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway: connecting the peripheries to the world

19th century Ełk was located on the outskirts of German territories. Its position at the peripheral was evident in the long distance it lay from Königsberg, the capital of the province, not to mention the capital of the country, Berlin; also, from the vicinity of the German-Russian border being 25 km away from Ełk. The areas located to the east and south-east of the town were excluded in terms of transport, so the divide between the

dynamically developing Ełk and the settlements located on the route of the railway line deepened.

A means of preventing further marginalisation of the contemporary East Prussian borderlands was the construction of narrow-gauge railways, ensuring access to the network of principal, normal-gauge railway lines. One such line was the Lycker Kleinbahn, which is called the Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway today. Its origins date back to 1905, when the *starost* of Ełk, Dr. Suermondts commissioned a preliminary project to build a narrow-gauge railway. On 9 January 1911, the Ełk's *Kreistag* decided to build a railway. The plans were approved by the East German Railway Company in Königsberg and by the military authorities in 1912, so on 31st August that year, the *Lycker Kleinbahn Aktiengesellschaft* (Ełk Society of Local Railways) was founded. The company's shareholders were the Prussian state, the Provincial Union of the Province of East Prussia, the Ełk *poviat* (county) and the company Lenz & Co. GmbH, which was also the main contractor for the investment. The Management Board consisted of two members: judiciary counsellor Paul Siebert and Eugen Gerlach. Dr. Max Peters, an official from Ełk *poviat*; Hugo von Batocki from Olsztyn; Hermann Reck from Maleczewo; Paul Lenz from Berlin; Friedrich von Berg, Adalbert Michaelis and Franz Stahl from Königsberg - they became members of the company's Supervisory Board. The cost of building the railways was estimated at 2.59 million marks (MK). On 23 October 1913, just before the outbreak of World War I, the Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway sections from Ełk to Laski Małe were officially opened, where the line branched to Borzymy and Zawady. Already in April 1914 the German specialist press reported that the passenger and freight traffic on the Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway was very busy and that further investments in the development of the line were needed. The plan for an extended section from Borzymy to Turów was not completed before the outbreak of the war in 1914.

The First World War brought about enormous damage in Masuria. In East Prussia, the material losses after the battles of 1914-1915 in many towns were much greater than the losses caused by the battles of the Second World War. The war did not bypass the Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway either, as its installations were devastated and its locomotives and wagons were taken deep into Russia. The Ełk Association of Local Railways did not wait until the end of the war for reconstruction to take place. East Prussia was the agricultural backbone of Germany, and the war efforts required regular supplies of food which could

be provided by the railway. Already in 1916, the sections existing before the war and the Borzomy - Kalinowo line were put into service. In 1918, the construction of the Kalinowo-Turowo section was finished, thus completing the construction of the Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway, and all war damages were removed which restored normal train traffic along the entire route.

In the interwar period, the Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway faced similar problems to those of the whole of East Prussia and Germany. In 1919, there were four locomotives (from the Arnold Jung company of Jungenthal) and 42 passenger, post and freight wagons in use. Another locomotive was acquired in 1920, which the board of directors approved a maximum loan amount of 75,000 MK to purchase. In the first years after the end of World War I, the number of transported passengers and goods continued to grow, but the railway still did not achieve the intended economic results. A favourable economic climate ended in 1921. East Prussia was increasingly affected by the post-war economic crisis and the cut-off from German and Russian markets. The number of trains running on the route was limited, but in 1922, the Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway still generated losses. The company was subsidized throughout the 1920s by the Ełk *poviat* with state aid funds dedicated to narrow-gauge railways as well as from the *Osthilfe* programme. Attempts to preserve the East Prussian narrow-gauge railways led to the merger of the local narrow-gauge railways into one company under the name of *Ostpreußische Kleinbahnen-Aktiengesellschaft* with its seat in Königsberg. The narrow-gauge railway from Wystruć, Olecko, Heydekrug (Szyłokarczma, [currently Šilutė]), Szczytno, Tylża and the *Wehlau–Friedländer Kreisbahnen* railway were also incorporated into the company. Particularly difficult times came with the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929, when train transportation was almost suspended. During the interwar period, the Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway carried approx. 50,000 people per year.

In January of 1945, the Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway was used for the forced evacuation of civilians from the south-eastern border of the Ełk county. During the war, the narrow-gauge railway infrastructure did not suffer as much damage as the standard-gauge railway network in East Prussia, which was subjected to planned disassembly and transportation deep into the USSR. There remained still-operational locomotives and a part of the rolling stock. As early as 1945, steps were undertaken to incorporate the Ełk Narrow-Gauge

Railway into the Polish railway system. In 1951, the route was transformed into a 750 mm gauge track. For the next 40 years, the Ełk Narrow-Gauge Railway served its purpose and constituted a window to the world for the inhabitants of the south-eastern part of Ełk county.

6. World Transformation, Change of Lifestyle and Mindset

6.1. New quality of life in Ełk

Until the middle of the 19th century, Ełk - like most Masurian *poviat* towns [county capital towns] - was dominated by wooden buildings, and the only brick buildings were essentially the Teutonic castle and the church. In 1858, Ełk had 4,390 inhabitants. If Ełk had been located in Western Europe in those times, it would have been referred to as a larger village rather than a *poviat* town, with the seat of the local authorities.

Revolutionary changes took place after Masuria entered the railway era. Changes in the appearance of Ełk and in the everyday life of its inhabitants took place over the course of one generation. Between 1868 and the beginning of the First World War, Ełk obtained a dense network of railway connections, a sewage system, waterworks, gas network, and access to electricity. In 1837, for the last time in the history of Ełk, a cholera epidemic broke out, during which 80 people died. Although the number of victims was not too high, if we compare it to the great epidemics haunting Ełk in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it is hard to imagine that at the beginning of the twentieth century, an epidemic on a similar scale could have erupted. The standard of living and hygiene of the inhabitants was much higher. Access to medical care had improved significantly. In 1861, there were 3 physicians working in Ełk; by 1900, there were already 7 of them.

6.2. The railway opens Ełk up to the world

The railway changed the perception of time and space. The constructed railroads created a network of new connections, dependencies, and influences. Pre-modern Masuria was a peculiar micro-world, isolated from the mainstream events of history. Only in moments of powerful, historical storms did the outside world enter this land where *God was supposed*

to be asleep. The railway introduced Ełk into national, European, and even global networks. When you boarded a train in Ełk at the beginning of the 20th century, you could possibly travel to the Middle or even Far East.

Of course, the inhabitants of Ełk did not usually plan to travel so far; these destinations remained beyond the financial reach of most of them. However, the rapprochement of rural areas and centres became a fact. In the 1880s, travelling by train from Ełk to Königsberg lasted about 4 hours; a multi-day journey to the capital of Germany — Berlin — at a distance of over 700 km, depending largely on weather conditions, lasted only 15 hours. The railway was the beginning of a gradual melding of the previously closed Masurian micro-world into the world of German culture.

6.3. Masurians leave Masuria – *Ostflucht*

Masuria was an area dominated by agriculture. However, local agriculture was poorly developed due to poor soils and a backwardness in civilizational and technical skill. At the same time, Masuria was a region with a high population growth rate, and a rising surplus of people at working age, unable to find sources of income in their homeland. The railway opened the way for Masuria to the West, to the industrialized regions of Germany, where work was awaiting them.

The Ruhr region was undergoing a period of deep industrialization. A particularly rapid development of industry took place in the second half of the 19th century. The developing mines, steelworks and factories needed more and more hands to work. It was in Masuria that the large industrial corporations found their workforce. Between 1870 and the beginning of World War I, about 1/3 of Masurians left the region. It is estimated that in Westphalia in 1914, there lived about 180,000 Masurians. Almost every Masurian family had relatives in western Germany. The scale of this phenomenon can be imagined another way: during the 5 years between 1895 and 1900, Masurian poviats lost 5% of their population. Although Masuria had a very high birth rate, it was gradually depopulating.

Working conditions in the big industry of west of Germany were very difficult, but offered the possibility to obtain a different material status. An inhabitant of Masuria returning from Westphalia to his homeland could buy a new farm and equip it with modern

agricultural machinery. Not without significance was also the fact that he came into contact with a new reality so different from the one he had left in Masuria. Large industrial cities, dominated by factory chimneys, constituted social, cultural and ideological melting pots. People from different parts of Germany would meet there, which was beneficial for the creation of the German national community, and would encounter modern political ideologies such as nationalism, socialism, or communism. All these experiences permeated through Masurian migrants to small towns such as Ełk.

6.4.The beginnings of modern economy in Ełk

The railway brought another revolutionary aspect to the life of small towns such as Ełk. Rail transport was not dependent on climatic and geographical factors. There was no risk that a train would get stuck on the road during snowmelts or in deep, Masurian sand during drought. Railway lines in Masuria had become part of the existing transport routes due to the need to avoid natural obstacles such as lakes, marshes, or substantial altitude differences. Trains running on iron rails, powered by coal and steam, proved to be a means of transportation independent of external factors. Confidence and consistency of transport was thus guaranteed. The supply of foodstuffs, industrial goods and, above all, technological ingenuity enabled the development of modern economy in also in Ełk.

Ełk was a town dominated by agriculture and crafts for meeting the basic needs of the local population. The railway became a catalyst for the development of modern industrial plants. Ełk was home for two dyeworks: Willy Schmidt's plant, located at 97, Kaiser Wilhelm St., and Otto Skibowski's, located at 118, Kaiser Wilhelm St. Another noteworthy plant was Gerhard Triebe's paving and road works company at 217, Prostker Vorstadt St. The company used modern equipment, in 1937 employed 138 people, and was the largest of its kind in eastern Masuria.

Trade was also developing. Thanks to efficient transportation, the inhabitants of Ełk of that time gained access to things previously unheard of in Masuria. Ełk hosted overseas goods shops, drugstores, car dealerships, agricultural machinery and electrotechnical products stores.

6.5.New town, new centre

The railway line had transformed the urban space. The town, which had been previously concentrated on the shores of Ełk Lake, started to grow towards the railway station in the eastern part of the town. From the main street (then *Hauptstraße*, now *Wojska Polskiego Street*) to the station, perpendicular streets branched out. The mainstream of life in Ełk slowly turned away from the lake. The train station became one of the most important buildings in the city, where life, traffic, trade, and services concentrated.

Buildings became increasingly urban in character. Instead of wooden buildings, brick tenement houses were built, and streets gained a hardened, paved surface and gas lighting. New landmarks emerged in town—next to the castle and church, the water towers (water supply and railway) became the distinguishing features of the urban landscape. The town gained new character after the First World War. It was rebuilt on a grand scale. From the town's plan, emphasis was placed on Ełk growing to surpass other Masurian towns. Ełk—the capital of Masuria—was the seat of the municipal and *powiat* authorities, as well as the court.

The creation of a large railway junction in Ełk also contributed to the significant enlargement of the local garrison. In the 1880s, the construction of new barracks started. The army dominated part of the city between the Ełk River and the railway station, significantly affecting the demographic and economic development of the city. In 1884, the 45th Infantry Regiment (8th East Prussian) was moved from Metz in Lorraine to Ełk, and 3 years later, the 8th Graf von Dohn Cavalry Regiment, previously stationed in Elbląg, arrived.

7. World War I

7.1 Ełk in the face of the war

East Prussia was the eastmost part of the II German Reich, and Ełk was its southmost county town. To both the east and south, East Prussia bordered the Russian Empire. Ełk benefited from the border proximity and connection by rail to the Congress Kingdom.

Russian military and clerks from nearby Grajowe frequently visited Ełk stores while villagers came in large numbers to the local marketplace. The inhabitants and people of Masuria were to learn during the first months of the war, however, that the driving force behind Ełk's development during times of peace was to turn into the greatest threat for the town on the verge of a military conflict.

The war broke out on 28th July 1914. On the 1st August, church bells rang in Ełk announcing general mobilisation in Germany. The troops located in Ełk were supposed to defend a ca. 120 km stretch of the German-Russian border from Olecko to Pisz. The first troops from the 147th Infantry Regiment set off for Prostki as early as the 29th July. They fired their first shots during encounters with Cossacks to sow unrest in the villages along the border as they crossed the cordon in small groups.

At the very beginning of World War I, Ełk fell victim to a war doctrine named the Schlieffen's Plan. The German war plan assumed the use of a majority of German forces to attack France which was supposed to be defeated in a quick and mass military campaign, similar to that of 1870. At the same time, East Prussia was supposed to be protected by a small amount of troops, more of a guard-like nature than troops ready for regular battle. These priorities, set by German staff had been driven by the conviction that the Russian Empire would have needed far more time to mobilise its reserves and would have not been capable of a quick offensive attack. The progress of German troops in France forced Russia to commence war operations before having completed its mobilisation.

In August 1914, Russian troops entered East Prussia from two sides. The "Narew" army from the direction of Mława and the "Niemen" army from Gąbin. Fighting broke out, most of which took place in Masuria. The war brought severe damage to the region. Russian troops under the command of General Paul von Rennenkampf, a Baltic German, took Ełk three times. There were no battles fought in the town itself and all damage to the town was caused by artillery shelling in October 1914. In February 1915, the town was freed from Russian occupation.

7.2 The railway and the war

During the war, the railway system of East Prussia demonstrated its military importance. The layout of the railway tracks in Prussia had to be approved by both civil and military administrative authorities. At the beginning of the 20th century, all Prussia was densely covered by a grid of main and local railway tracks. Despite that, the railroads continued to be extended, especially in border areas. That policy proved to be a winner, as the ability to efficiently transport troops to front line positions from the rear as well as between front line sections, helped the Germans win a quick victory over the Russians. The military operations resulted in immense destruction of railway infrastructure in Prussia. In Ełk, the railway station was completely ruined, Russian troops damaged tracks, bridges, and railway viaducts in a planned and effective manner.

7.3. Emperor Wilhelm II's visit to Ełk – Ełk residents return home

On 17th February 1915, when the sounds of distant battle could still be heard in Ełk, the dilapidated town was visited by the German Emperor Wilhelm II. Amongst the ruins of the abandoned town, the monarch appealed to do everything within human power to rebuild the beautiful land of Masuria. The emperor's visit was certainly one of a propaganda nature. East Prussia was the only German province which suffered from battles during World War I. Masurian settlements and towns were destroyed completely. During the conflicts, neither side had paid any attention to the material losses resulting from artillery shelling. 165 buildings were destroyed in Ełk, 21 were severely damaged. In the Ełk county, 133 civilians were killed and 21 wounded. The Russian forces took 871 men, 170 women and 163 children to the depths of Russia.

The appeal by Wilhelm II gave the anticipated results and soon East Prussia was flooded with money. As of 1st October 1916, 625 million marks had been allocated for the reconstruction of the area. The aid for East Prussia (Ostpreußenhilfe) turned institutional. Still more towns, counties and lands from other parts of Germany took patronage over other towns and administrative units destroyed during the war. Patronage over Ełk was extended by the Lower Silesian town of Oppeln which after 1945 was located in the territory of Poland and renamed to Opole, similarly to the way Ełk was renamed. Assistance

came not only from administrative units, but also from various sports clubs, cultural and tourism associations that joined the movement. Carl Stephan visited Ełk on the turn of August and September 1916, as an envoy of a Sports Club for the Support of German Rowing called "Germany". He was supposed to assess the condition of rowing in Masuria 1.5 years after the battle front had been there. From his account of the visit we learn that the number of members of the Ełk Rowing Association grew from 18 to 105 and it received financial support from other German aquatic sports clubs.

Other parts of Germany grew an interest in Masuria because of the 1914/15 crusade. Postcards were published depicting devastated Masurian towns. Income earned from their sales was allocated to the reconstruction of East Prussia. Reports from battles in Masuria and the subsequent recovery hit the front pages of German national papers – the most important media of the time. Masurians served in German armies on all fronts and battlefields of World War I, hand in hand with people of Rheinland, Schlezwik, Bavaria, and Upper Silesia which accelerated the pace of their assimilation and the building of a homogenous German national community.

8. The Plebiscite

The key event in the modern history of Ełk was the plebiscite of 11th July 1920, organised by virtue of the provisions of the Versailles treaty that ended World War I. It was a response to Polish territorial claims to East Prussian land inhabited by Polish-speaking natives. The Warmiaks and Masurians were to decide on their nationality, choosing either Poland or East Prussia. The plebiscite, together with the victorious battle of Tannenberg in 1914, became a cornerstone for the new East Prussian regional identity deeply rooted in Polish-German antagonism.

Pre-plebiscite struggles were led by East-German Fatherland Service (Ostdeutsche Heimatdienst) – on the German side and the Masurian Plebiscite Committee which opted to vote in favour of Poland. In Ełk, many renowned people, such as: Bruno Rathke – vicar, Otto Skibowski – local entrepreneur, Fuhrmann – vice rector of the seminary as well as many clerks, teachers, and merchants got involved in the activities of the East-German

Fatherland Service. Voting rights were granted to every person born in the territory covered by the plebiscite, which gave the right to participate in the vote to many Masurians who at the time resided in western, industrialised regions of Germany. Government authorities organised special railway transportation that brought Masurians entitled to vote by place of birth, and greeted them ceremonially on arrival in their hometowns.

Activities of the Polish party turned out totally ineffective due on the one hand, to the authentic commitment of Masurians to Prussian statehood and the ever growing pace of assimilation of Masurians and on the other hand to real material and staff inefficiencies of Masuria Plebiscite Committee. In June and July 1920, it became clear that Poland faced the reality of losing its recently regained independence under the pressure of Bolsheviks' push on Warsaw. The waging war most strongly resonated on border areas where the memories of the 1914/15 events were still vivid. Fears of the return of Russians and a widespread revolution were emerging.

The plebiscite was overwhelmingly won by the German side. In the voting, the Masurians chose to belong to East Prussia. In Ełk, the plebiscite results were as follows: 8,339 people opted for East Prussia while only 7 individuals for Poland. Results in the Ełk powiat (county) were similar, with 44 votes for Poland and 36,534 votes for East Prussia.

The decision to hold the plebiscite was a spark that ignited nationalistic tendencies in Masuria. The preparatory activities for voting made an excellent opportunity to manifest German identity. The local identity, defined as East Prussian, was defined as the opposition to Polish identity. Poles were presented as a nation on a lower civilizational level, while East Prussia as an outpost of German nationality in the East – the final stronghold of European civilisation. 11th July - the plebiscite victory date - was included in the calendar of official state events and with Ełk as a leader, was pompously celebrated in all Masurian towns, during the era of the Weimar Republic. The celebrations took the form of a folk festival. A key element being the sports contest which promoted fitness and devotion for the fatherland. The municipal landscape gained places of memory related to the plebiscite - so called plebiscite stones placed to commemorate the victory and to give evidence to unquestionable German identity of these lands. In Ełk, three plebiscite stones were placed on a square before the railway station, next to an oak tree planted to commemorate the 1920 events. The Masurian stones and the oak tree which symbolised the German spirit

were to speak to unity of Masuria and Ełk and make the town landmark for those arriving by train. The 1920 plebiscite and events of World War I in Masuria laid foundations for the new period in the history of fully German Ełk, which came to an end in 1945.

9. "Purely German Ełk"

The interwar period in Ełk was a complex time. Masuria, just like Germany, took years to recover from the post-war economic crisis. East Prussia became a German exclave in the East, separated from the rest of Germany by the Polish state which after the partitions, was going through a period of economic recovery. A short period of economic revival in the second half of 1920s quickly came to an end due to the more serious Great Depression. Masuria suffered particularly badly as despite the great civilizational leap brought by the railway lines, it remained an economically retarded region, with no important industry and with the poor agricultural sector still requiring state subsidies for survival.

In Masuria, which was struggling with the economic crisis, a new symbolic sphere arose. It started before the guns of World War I were silenced. The assimilation of Masurians was followed by geographic appropriation. The forthcoming changes were most clearly signified by changes to the names of Ełk streets, the Germanisation of non-German local names in Ełk county and East Prussia, that stretched from Masuria, through Warmia, up to Prussian Lithuania. The new national symbolism referred to the Hohenzollerns' monarchy and the Tannenberg battle. Główna street (Hauptstraße) was renamed to Kaiser-Wilhelm-Straße, Dworcowa street (Bahnhofstraße) to Hindenburgstraße, while Nowa street became Bismarckstraße. The identity politics of the Weimar period also highlighted the commemoration of lands lost by Germany after the Versailles treaty and thus new street names appeared in Ełk: Toruńska street (Thorner Straße), Gdańska street (Danziger Straße), Kłajpedzka street (Memeler Weg), Działdowska street (Soldauer Weg) and Poznańska street (Posener Straße). Some historical local names were occasionally changed during the Weimar republic, but after the Nazis came into power, authorities ordered the changes of all names of Slavic, Lithuanian or Prussian origin. On 16th July 1938, over 80

places had their names changed in Ełk county. Ostrykół (Ostrokollen) was changed to Scharfenrade, Szyba (Sybba) to Walden, and Kalinowo (Kallinowen) to Dreimühlen.

New memorial places were built to commemorate battles of World War I and brought the narrative of unity between East Prussia and Germany. In Ełk county, there were 148 graves of German soldiers, Russian soldiers and civilians who died during World War I. They were often individual mounds but larger cemetery complexes were also built. The burial places were often named "graves of heroes" (Helden Gräber) which formed a new bond between Germany and East Prussia. Some of the funeral complexes also served as landmarks. On the Bunelka Hill in Ełk, a 6-metre tall cross was erected to commemorate dead soldiers that stood guard overlooking the town. In Grabnik, there was a stone called the Emperor's Stone on which it is claimed, emperor Wilhelm II sat in February 1915. The swing towards modernisation that was initiated by the arrival of the first train in Ełk, was reflected in the shift of mentality and the building of homogenous German national identity, with no room for Masurians who lived in limbo between Polish and German cultures. As Ełk inhabitants used to say: Ełk is a "purely German town".

10. Modern society - Ełk - the capital town of Masuria

During the pre-modern era, people were focused predominantly on providing themselves with means to survive biologically. Free time was a privilege for the aristocracy who devoted their free time to political activity or to the pursuit of scientific or cultural interests. Modernisation, initiated in Masuria in the second half of the 19th century, brought numerous changes to society. Apart from improving the quality of life, from access to utilities such as water or gas, modernisation also brought issues unknown before. Such an issue was free time for the general public: civil servants, merchants, teachers, industrialists, and even workers.

The existence of the phenomenon of free time resulted in the pursuit to find ways to utilise it. In the 19th century, tourism began to develop, as did organised sports activities. Tourism flourished thanks to the dense railway network in Germany which facilitated quick journeys over long distances, reaching places located on economical outskirts of

remarkably characteristic landscape and nature. Railway stations in Masurian towns, which were windows of opportunity to the world for Masurians, were also gateways from various parts of Germany through which flocks of tourists arrived in the region.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th century, numerous Kurhauses, that is spas or recreation centres, started to spring up in Masuria. The most famous facilities were in the vicinity of Krutyń and Nida villages. Ełk took pride of "Sybba" Kurhause located in nearby Szyba, owned by F. Leimann. At the end of 1920s, the town had a well-developed infrastructure for tourism, comprising of 5 hotels: Königlicher Hof, Kronprinz, Bahnhofshotel, Kaiserhof i Victoriahotel supplemented by a youth hostel at Kaiser-Wilhelm-Straße 20. Masuria slowly turned into a region where economic development focused on tourism. During the interwar period, traditional tourism based on the quality and uniqueness of nature and the landscape was accompanied by what was known as war tourism. Fixed items on the agenda of every trip organised to East Prussia were: the memorial monument of the Tannenberg battle, dozens of smaller and larger cemeteries, as well as monuments commemorating the German-Russian battles from 1914 and 1915. In Ełk area, the most visited places on these agendas were the cross on the Bunelka hill and the war cemetery in Bartosze. These places were recommended to be visited in guidebooks published by towns such as Ełk, with the support of the Tourism Association for Southern East Prussia in Olsztyn (Verkehrsverband für das südliche Ostpreußen in Allenstein).

Free time also allowed for involvement in new, so far unknown, action such as physical activity. The sport idea was initiated as early as in the 19th century, but it only turned into mass and institutionalised forms at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Local sports clubs and associations were being established throughout Europe and were later grouped into national federations and unions. During the interwar period Ełk, with 16,000 inhabitants, hosted such clubs as: rowing, sailing, swimming, gymnastics, tennis, football, boxing, and cycling. Sports activities were backed by the government which saw benefits resulting from the development of physical culture in the form of larger numbers of healthy and fit army recruits. 4 sports halls and a sports ground were built in Ełk with state support.

The modern society were becoming richer and egalitarian. The state intended to control and regulate even more areas of social activities. Legal systems expanded, new offices were set up, dedicated to particular spheres of life. Those processes manifested

themselves in an extreme manner in the totalitarian governance in place by the Nazis who brought Ełk to the disaster of World War II.

11. Ełk in the Third Reich

In 1933, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) won the elections in Germany. The party's electoral result in March 1933 in Ełk county peaked at 80.38%. In East Prussia, NSDAP achieved the best results in all the German provinces. Paradoxically, the Masurian society of so diverse ethnic origin democratically elected a party which represented an extreme form of German nationalism. The national socialists' victory in Masuria also showed the generational and mental shift which had occurred in Masuria. NSDAP was predominantly a party of young people between the ages of 20 and 40 who were born and educated in united Germany, who served in the trenches of World War I, who witnessed the plebiscite victory and who fully associated themselves with the German national identity. The mentality changes are perfectly depicted by language differences between generations of Masurians. In Masurian families, seniors born in mid 19th century spoke almost exclusively Polish, that was the language they communicated with their children who already knew German. The youngest generation brought up in the 1920s and 1930s mainly used German only.

The period from 1933 to 1939 is often remembered by Masuria inhabitants as the happiest time in their lives. The power takeover by the Nazis coincided in time with the end of the economic crisis. Extensive public construction were launched which served as a source of income for people who had been humiliated by unemployment and poverty of the times of the Great Depression. Investment was made into road infrastructure and welfare programmes. Masuria, which was a poor region, flourished under the rule of the Nazis. The usage of artificial drainage extended the Masurian croplands significantly. The average person in Ełk could feel that the humiliation of the period lasting since the end of World War I had come to an end.

National socialism gave Masurians the chance of social promotion. The Nazis proclaimed the abolishment of class and cultural differences stressing unity and equality

within the German national community. It was no longer social origin that opened the door for a professional career, but party membership. Under Nazi rule, Masurians came to believe that they were no longer treated by German officials from position of cultural superiority, but experienced treatment as first category citizens.

The Nazi rules in Ełk imposed full and compulsory Germanisation of the public space. The town streets were filled with new, national-socialist symbols. The representative square before the town hall was renamed Adolf-Hitler-Platz, and former Główna Street, which since WW I had been named Kaiser-Wilhelm-Straße - was in 1940 turned into SA - Straße. On the lake shore, a new town landmark was built - a promenade which was named after Erich Koch, East Prussia Gauleiter.

The Nazi rule brought the previous cultural form of East Prussia and Masuria to a definite end. The fate of East Prussian Jews was only a prelude to the 1945 events. Anti-semitism in Nazi Germany was institutionalised and the repression system was aimed at maximum escalation of anti-Jewish states of mind. In 1933, 137 Jews lived in Ełk. Local SA militants and NSDAP members urged boycotting Jewish stores. Assaults took place on Jewish owned premises. The anti-Semitic acts peaked in the night of the 9th to the 10th November, 1938, referred to as the "Crystal Night". The Ełk synagogue was burned and Jewish inhabitants were forced to leave the town shortly after. Most of them died in Auschwitz and Theresienstadt concentration camps and in mass executions near Minsk and Riga.

Ełk, 1945-1946

Continuity disruption, power vacuum, and post-war chaos

On 24th January 1945, as the Red Army entered Ełk, the inhabitants had fled the city without combat. Soon after their arrival, the Russians began dismantling the industrial plants and the Ełk-Giżycko railway line. Numerous tenement houses in the city centre were burnt down by Soviet soldiers and looters from the former borderlands. The first steps towards building the new structure of the Polish State in East Prussia had commenced during the battles between the Red Army and German units. The initiative for this region was undertaken by the Voivodeship Office (the Provincial Governor's Office) in Białystok,

that established the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Poland for the Masurian District on 3rd February 1945. The function of the head of the latter office was entrusted to Henryk Olejniczak, who was appointed by the Voivode of Białystok. The main task of this Office was to organize the trip of the first operational groups to East Prussia in order to establish a framework for the Polish administration and to coordinate the work of various offices, which were preparing to send their employees to the new regions. The first operational group was sent from Białystok to Ełk on 6th April 1945, only to find the city purged of everything; only buildings and furniture remained.

In Ełk, the powiat (county) authorities were the first governing body to be established: Władysław Niksa was appointed the first starost. On 6th April 1945, the Polish flag was hung on the premises of the former powiat office, and on 28th May 1945 the official transfer of power to the Polish administration from the Soviet commander took place. Subsequently, the Municipal Board was established. On 25th April 1945, the starost appointed the first mayor of Ełk, Fryderyk Jeroma. The Powiat National Council—consisting of 37 members—was established on 18th August 1945, and on 28th September a meeting of the thirteen-member Municipal National Council was held. On 1st July 1945, the number of inhabitants of the city was 1,765 which included 350 Germans.

The period between when the Germans fled Ełk, Ełk being captured by the Red Army, and the departure of the Soviet military commander in 1946 was a time of chaos caused by the void of authority and rule. In the German city of Lyck (annexed to Poland after the Yalta and Potsdam conferences), the subsequent months of the post-war period were dominated by a sense of disorder, anarchy, and uncertainty, as did the rest of the country liberated from the German occupation. Marcin Zaremba, a Warsaw historian, wrote about "rape and looting by millions of Red Army soldiers; the presence of demobilized soldiers; robbery and banditry; and forced migration of the population as factors which caused the described state of affairs."

However, the initial gratitude that Poles often showed to Soviet soldiers for liberating Polish territories from German occupation very quickly gave way to feelings of resentment and terror, even hatred. As the aforementioned Marcin Zaremba rightly points out, The worst situation prevailed on the lands previously belonging to the Reich and on the communication routes leading from west to east. To a certain extent, it resembled what

was happening in the Soviet occupation zone. For Poles, it meant prolonged war chaos and fear of looting, beatings, rape, and often murders.

The Dual Power ruling in the so-called "Recovered Territories", which consisted of the greenhorn Polish administration and the Soviet commanders who were still in control of these areas, had tragic consequences in many cases for the native population that remained in the territory of Ełk powiat or arrived from Białystok Voivodeship and Eastern Borderlands [Kresy] of Poland. (The situation was further complicated by strong nationalistic and religious antagonism between both groups of people.) An extremely valuable source of insight into the life of the inhabitants of Ełk during the first months of the post-war period are the monthly reports, preserved by the IPN (the Institute of National Remembrance) Branch in Białystok. The reports come from the Powiat Citizen's Militia Station in Ełk on the subject of incidents in the area of Ełk powiat and date back to August 1945. Yet the insight is still valuable in spite of these monthly reports only detailing a small portion of all the crimes committed at the time and even though the February 1946 report on the review of the Ełk powiat for the Ministry of Recovered Territories bluntly described the Citizen's Militia as also consisting of unqualified, ethically inferior individuals (AAN, MZO, ref. 1065). A complete catalogue of the criminal acts listed below can be found in the monthly reports. At the forefront of these infamous statistics are assaults, robberies, and looting; accompanied by sexual crimes, arson, and murder. During the first several months after the war, many of these crimes were committed by Red Army soldiers stationed in the city. Attempts of any kind of investigation for justice in the Soviet commanders' office were usually unsuccessful. Among the negative consequences of the post-war period was prostitution and the spread of venereal diseases. For instance, the March 1946 report of the local Citizen's Militia stated that A total of 12 women are involved in prostitution, three of which had symptoms of venereal diseases (State Archive in Suwałki, Ełk Branch, ref. 130/26, file no. 8).

Stabilization of power and reconstruction of the destroyed city

The town and powiat, destroyed during the months after the war, were gradually resettled. The first settlers came from the pre-war borderland with East Prussia (a total of

26,647 people from the Białystok Voivodeship), and then from the former Eastern Borderlands (a total of 5,240 people mainly from the Vilnius and Grodno regions). A marshalling centre for the State Repatriation Office was established in March 1945 for the care of those arriving, and on 15th September 1945, it was transformed into a powiat division. In 1950, the population of the Ełk powiat was already at 39,069 inhabitants, which included 3,005 people of Masurian origin and 36,081 immigrants. At the end of 1946, Ełk had 6,000 inhabitants, and by 1949—11,468. The population of the town was constantly growing: in 1954, the town had 16,630 inhabitants, and in 1956—21,124.

The years of 1945-1948 were the period in which the foundations of the new communist system of power were laid down in Poland. With the support of the USSR, the remains of legal authorities connected with the emigration government in London were dissolved, which was symbolized by the arrest of sixteen leaders of the Polish Underground State in March 1945, and the later sentencing of them in Moscow on the 16th June. During this time, the remainder of the resistance movement was fought against, and the activists in opposition parties (the Polish People's Party and the Labour Party) that were trying to function openly, were subjected to repression. On 30th April 1946, the People's Referendum was organized in which voters were to answer three questions: 1) are you in favour of abolishing the Senate [the upper house of the Polish Parliament]; 2) do you want to continue social and economic reforms [e.g. the agricultural reform and nationalization of industry]; 3) are you in favour of the consolidation of the western border of Poland on the Oder River and Lusatian Neisse. The results of the referendum were illegally changed. On the day of the vote, the officers of the security department abused their power in polling stations in a fraudulent manner. According to the official results, announced on 12th July, the turnout was 85.3%; 33% of voters answered "no" to the first question, 22% answered "no" to the second question, and 8% answered "no" to the third question. In January 1947, elections—in which the results were also falsified—for the Legislative Sejm [lower chamber of Parliament] were organized in which the communists claimed that they had won 80% of support.

Ełk too suffered the repressions of the first years of "strengthening" communist power in Poland. The Powiat Security Office was promptly organized on 21st June 1945, at

2, Słowackiego Street. The building comprised of 10 rooms and 5 prisoner cells in the basement. The first supervisor of the PUBP (Poviat Security Office—in fact, secret political police) in Ełk was Ensign Henryk Sikorski, who came from Olsztyn. At the turn of 1945 and 1946, the seat of the Security Office was moved to a tenement house at 1, Wojska Polskiego Street. In 1946, the buildings of the Ełk castle housed a Class II Penal and Investigation Prison. In the years 1947-1950, at least five death sentences most probably by hanging, were carried out in a small room in the administrative building in which the remains of tiles and a hook used for executions are concealed to this day. The prison functioned in the castle building until 1976.

Despite difficult times and the oppressive measures of the new regime, life in Ełk slowly stabilised. The Catholic Church played an important role in this process. After 1945, the religious situation changed in the city, since the previous Evangelical majority had left and new settlers were mostly Polish Roman - Catholics. Father Karol Fox (1878-1953), who had performed the duties of the parish priest of the German Catholic parish since 1919, remained in Ełk after 1945. The first Polish clergymen were the priests Stanisław Adamski, Józef Kącki and Jan Tokarz. In addition, the basic structures of education were organized in the city. In October 1946, the Touring Provincial Theatre was established, with its seat in Ełk. Stalin's death (1953) and the October 1956 thaw caused the authorities to let go of the ideological bridle. The time of "small stabilization" came also for Ełk. The symbolic closure of the post-war period of reconstruction of destroyed flats and the restoration of damaged municipal facilities was the construction of the first Polish residential buildings at Toruńska Street and what was then called the Red Army Street.

Railway – the beginning of a new life

In the second half of the 19th century, thanks to the railway lines, Ełk became a part of the modern world. In 1945, the railway brought new life to the destroyed and abandoned city after the front line of battle had been moved. In February, a group of railwaymen travelling from Białystok to Olsztyn arrived in the city to secure the railway

infrastructure. Before World War II, the railway network in the area of East Prussia (incorporated into Poland after 1945) was over 2,000 km long. In the middle of 1945, as a result of warfare and the disassembly of the railway tracks planned and executed by the Red Army, only 892 km were left. On the double-track Ełk-Giżycko line, one track had been disassembled. The percentage of electrotechnical equipment and communication devices destroyed was also very high, exceeding 75% in the Masurian region.

The reconstruction of transportation lines in Masuria and establishing connections with central parts of Poland were a priority task for the new authorities. Therefore, the railwaymen were among the first inhabitants to return to Ełk. Edward Hurcewicz, who was experienced having reconstructed the Grodno–Augustów–Suwałki railway line, came to Ełk in the spring of 1945. Shortly after, Franciszek Hańczak and Mieczysław Wyszczelski from Warsaw also arrived. Józef Radomski, the chairman of the Municipal Board also represented the railway community in the Municipal National Council. The first months of his stay in Ełk were marked by the conservation of the infrastructure that had survived the war. The first train left Ełk in August 1945 for Giżycko. In autumn, a connection to Grajewo was opened, and from there it was possible to travel to Białystok and Warsaw. Soon connections to Olsztyn and Olecko were also restored.

The strategic importance of the railway led to the social life of post-war Ełk to be organized around those involved in restoring the railway. The first shops, a bakery and a sports centre, were all established thanks to the initiative of people associated with the railway. Right after the war, Ełk regained its status as an important railway junction and became the first stop (and often a home as well) for many Poles displaced from the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic.