

# PATRONAGE OF THE MINISTRY OF POSTS AND TELEGRAPHS OVER THE MUSEUM OF POST AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS IN WARSAW IN 1921–1939

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Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Wrocław

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The Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs was established with the Decree of Poland's Chief of State Józef Piłsudski dated 5 February 1919 on the establishment of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry's scope of responsibilities included posts, telegraphs, and telephones. The first Ministry operated in 1919–23, under extremely challenging organizational conditions; what lacked first of all were qualified administrative and professional staff, previously appointed from the citizens of the partitioning powers. After 1918, the majority of them left their positions and the task of replacing them with competent employees was extremely difficult. What proved hard to overcome in the first years of the Second Polish Republic were additionally different postal regulations of the partitioning powers which under the new circumstances needed to be consolidated and adjusted to the current realities. The Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs continuously struggled with underfinancing of its activity, although the need for a separate ministry to handle posts and telegraphs was unquestionable. However, due to national budget shortages, the Ministry was dissolved with the Act of 5 December 1923.<sup>2</sup>

Questions related to post entered the competence of the Ministry of Industry and Trade within which the General

Authority of Posts and Telegraphs<sup>3</sup> was founded, whereas six months later the new Act on Posts and Telegraphs entered into force, superseding the previous 1919 one.<sup>4</sup> The operations of the mail department within a different ministry and lack of an independent post deputation on a ministerial level had a substantial negative impact of which the most important was the halt of the development of the postal network throughout the country. Finally, in 1927, the decision was made to reactivate the previous *status quo*, and a separate Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs was established, while the General Authority of Posts and Telegraphs was wound down.<sup>5</sup> Bogusław Miedziński (1891–1972) became the new Minister of Posts and Telegraphs; in 1929, he was succeeded by Ignacy Boerner (1875–1933). Following Boerner's death, in 1933–39, the Ministry was headed by Emil Kaliński (1890–1973). It was particularly the latter two Ministers who contributed to the development of the Museum of Posts and Telecommunications, providing it with their care and substantial support.

Founded in Warsaw in 1921, during the first national postage stamp exhibition, the postal museum was established as inspired by the Warsaw-based Polish Philatelic Society, yet also on the initiative and commitment of the Ministry of Posts



1. Permanent display of post office signboards at the Museum of Post and Telecommunications, 1928.

and Telegraphs which founded the Museum under its auspices and provided it with multiple forms of support until 1950. It was actually thanks to the Ministry that in 1919 the social action to collect historical objects from the past of the Polish post, telegraphs, and telecommunications started; with the new Museum in mind, it continued for a number of years. The collecting proved to be an important event, preceding the initiative to establish the Polish postal museum as such, and served as an impulse that determined further actions. The appeal of the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs of February 1919 addressed to post employees and society announced a future foundation of a postal museum and proclaimed a nation-wide collection of artefacts connected with the history of Polish post. It met with an appropriate response, and throughout the next years most varied donations thematically connected with the project were sent into the Ministry from around Poland. The success of the first Minister's appeal and other ones that followed in subsequent years was first mentioned in the Ministry's activity record for 1920–21, emphasizing that over the period reported on, the Ministry issued a number of appeals to employees of posts, telegraphs, and telephones to send in all the possible objects related to postal services.

The growth of the Museum collection in 1921–39 was impressive. Although the first year of the Museum's activity (1921) concluded with merely 114 inventoried items, in 1939, there were over 22.000 of them, not counting the stamp collection. Such numerous donations transferred to the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs in the first years following the declaration that the Museum would be established, provided real

chances to create a unique museum institution on the Polish territory.

The main goal of the Museum of Post was, as emphasized in the afore-mentioned 1919 Minister's appeal, to collect all possible exhibits and object models, as well as postal, telegraphic, and telephone devices, both old and contemporary that were of historical or scientific value: uniforms, vehicles, postcards and cards, maps and magazines, also philatelic, and all the possible literature on the topic. Structure-wise, the Museum was a Ministry institution reporting to the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs. It formed part of its internal structure, which was reflected if only in the first Museum's name: Position to Deal with the Museum of Posts and Telegraphs at the Postal Materials Section of the Administrative Department of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs (Museum of Post for short). However, the fact that the Museum formed part of the state administration structure made it impossible for the collection to be made available to the general public. The initial intention of the organizers for the newly established Museum was to create an academic and didactic base for current post employees as well as future ones enabling them to become acquainted with the past and contemporary history of post and telecommunications. The need to extract the Museum from the Ministry's structure emerged only later. From 1930, following the decision to make the institution an independent museum-status organization, the name was changed to Postal and Telegraphic Museum in Warsaw, whereas the subsequent 1932 restructuring gave it its final name of the Museum of Post and Telecommunications, used to this very day.



2. Permanent display of stamp collecting and history of post at the Museum of Post of Telecommunications in Warsaw, 1928.

The fact that the Museum was created under the auspices of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs, a central organ of state administration, brought many benefits and created favourable conditions for its operations; it was possible thanks to the attitude of openness of the Post's administration and the employment of the first museum staff within the Ministry, since the team was recruited from among the Ministry's employees. It goes without saying that had it not been for the Ministry's support, it would have been impossible to establish the Museum in the first years following the end of WW I and Poland regaining independence. The efforts to establish the Museum within the Ministry's structure cannot be overestimated; neither can the fact that it was included within it. These initiatives and efforts allowed almost a cost-free establishment of the Museum in the facilities that the new institution had no need to pay for. This, in turn, had a great impact on the development potential for the Museum's future in the near years to come.

As of 1921, the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs made efforts to provide the Museum with the necessary equipment and furnishing, such as cabinets, display cases, furniture, foolscap, cardboard, and other objects essential for its operations. It also tried hard to financially support Museum's basic operations, in proportion to its own financial potential. For quite substantial time there were no possibilities to create a separate Ministry fund allocated to the Museum, and its costs were included in the overall preliminary cost estimates of the Administrative Department. Therefore, the

financing allocated to the Museum's operation depended on the overall financial standing of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs, and its capacity to allocate budget resources. Thus in 1921, the Museum was allocated a modest budget of 2.000 zlotys annually for its basic organization activity as well as for the purchase of Museum's essential furnishing: cabinets and display cases, subsequently increased in 1925 to 25.000 zlotys annually. The financing increase allowed to purchase necessary furnishing and the still missing devices.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, the allocated budget was not sufficient versus the Museum's increasing needs and the number of the collected exhibits. Neither did there exist prospects that it might increase to a satisfactory level. In view of this, the Ministry was also looking for some acceptable ways to improve the situation. As decided by Minister Bogusław Miedziński, the Ministry gave the Museum postage stamps: 10.000 copies of each emission in circulation, as well as any stamps withdrawn from circulation. They were meant to serve as barter for museum exhibits and cover the expenses connected with purchasing private collections and historical objects from private individuals. The idea proved effective, and the system operated effectively until the outbreak of WW II. Bartering postage stamps in the 1920s and 1930s allowed to acquire many valuable museum exhibits and large philatelic and historical collections, to mention only that of Alfons Bogdan Piaskowski in 1925 (he actually donated the majority of his collection to the Museum); a set of copies from the genuine plate of the first Polish stamp from Włodzimierz

Polański in 1926; or Arkadiusz Pachoński's collection in 1937. In 1932, the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs held the first public sale for philatelists of stamps that came from the Museum's resources regularly transferred from the Ministry. In due course, collectors began to demand from the Ministry the possibility to acquire stamps withdrawn from circulation and kept by the Museum of Post and Telecommunications. The sale of such stamps was conducted in 1932–39 at the Main Post Office in Warsaw within the philatelic department created for the purpose.

As part of its patronage over the pre-war Museum of Post, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications aimed at providing an appropriate facility to house it. The idea and the aspiration of the museologists were to find a comfortable facility to house the Museum of Post and Telecommunications adequate to the institution's operations, guaranteeing the security of its collections, and permitting displaying activity. Reaching that goal would have been extremely difficult without the Ministry's support. Let us remember, however, that as long as the Museum formed part of the Ministry's administration structure, it was impossible to assign a separate venue for its activity. Still, the very original idea of making the collected items available to the general public was not rejected, this implying the need to provide it not only with adequate space for their collecting, but also their display. The results of such efforts were visible only after several years. At first, the Museum was housed in a small facility in the edifice of the Main Post Office where also

the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs was located, namely at 8 Napoleona Square in Warsaw. The Museum was given the mezzanine of one of the administration spaces from where it soon moved to two not excessively spacious interiors inside the Central Repository of Postal Materials. Six years later (January 1927), following Minister's decision, the Museum of Post and Telecommunications was transferred to a new edifice at 11 Wierzbowa Street, Warsaw, where it was given an eight-room facility covering 300 sq m meant for storage and preservation of the Museum collections. The Museum moved again in April 1932. On that occasion the collections were transferred to a new building of the Office for Telecommunications and Telegraphs at the junction of 45 Nowogrodzka Street, 29–33 Poznańska Street, and 2 Św. Barbary Street, a modern edifice and one of the largest public buildings of pre-WW II Warsaw. The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications rented several rooms for the Museum on the fifth and sixth floor, their surface amounting to 622.79 sq m. That was the most spacious seat of the Museums of Post and Telecommunications before the war, and it operated there until 1951. The space was sufficient to freely organize appropriate storage rooms to keep the exhibits, to organize a separate library with a reading room, to separate display spaces from administrative ones, as well as to create display spaces and mount permanent exhibitions presenting the Museum's collections. By then the Museum had not boasted appropriate display rooms, which actually does not mean that it had held no displays.



3. The first advertising poster of the Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Warsaw, 1928.



4. Collection of the Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Warsaw presented at the 'National Universal Exhibition' in Poznan (16 May–3 Sept. 1929).

Furthermore, the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs also supported the Museum by promoting it: as of 1921, the Museum officially represented the Ministry at domestic and international philatelic exhibitions. It would prepare exhibits that were later displayed as 'exhibits of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs'. Let us mention here exhibitions in Geneva (1922), Paris (1925, 1937), Warsaw (1928, 1930, 1938), Antwerp (1930), Toruń (1933), Vienna (1933), Katowice (1934), or Prague (1938). This manner allowed to promote the Museum, and systematically present its collections. The Museum's role was not only to promote history of Polish post from its founding in 1558 up to the contemporary times, but also to represent Poland at international philatelic exhibitions. In the plans for the future, with time, the Museum was to combine the functions of a centre of historical studies and research, the place for collecting mementoes from the post's past and post-related technology, while at the same time running popularizing and display activities.

The breakthrough moment in the early history of the Museum was the 'International Exhibition of Postage Stamps' in Geneva (3–12 September 1922) at which the Exhibition's Golden Medal was awarded to the exhibit prepared for the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs by a Museum's employee duo, this having been the first philatelic exhibition participated in by Poland. Not only was the new Museum noticed and appreciated on the stage of being organized, but the award first of all showed that the exhibits it had collected boasted substantial historical value and presented the highest philatelic quality. The prize that the Museum exhibit received gave the new institution grounds to begin the process of becoming independent in the future. As the subsequent years were to demonstrate, the process was not simple, and could be completed only in the 1930s.

Meanwhile, the new facility of the Museum of Post and Telecommunications in the Telecommunication Office allowed to organize impressive displays of both post- and telecommunication-related collections. The layout and mode of mounting the permanent exhibition in the pre-war Museum is today known from press reports and several preserved photos showing the Museum interiors.

The photos were published in trade press of the time and in a book. The displays presented postal documents, philatelic products, prints and paintings related to post, clerk uniforms, utensils connected with the history of post, as well as telegraphic, telephonic, and radio equipment. A section apart was dedicated to the post of the Polish Legions, the showpiece of both the Museum and the Ministry. Mounting the permanent display was a major event in the operations of the Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Warsaw, and was possible thanks to the personal involvement in the project by the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs of the time Emil Kaliński (1890–1973).<sup>13</sup> The exhibition was also the reaction to the numerous donations of stamps, documents, and mementoes of the Polish Legions as well as of the Legion communication during WW I, flowing to the Museum.

Let us emphasize that one more positive aspect of the Museum being under the Ministry's patronage can be observed. This dependence actually provided an unwritten warranty for the idea's success and the institution's credibility. Social trust in the highest ranking institution favoured the widespread and spontaneous collecting of exhibits, not only from private individuals, but also from numerous public institutions and offices of such ministries as: of Treasure, of Posts and Telegraphs, of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment, of Communication, and others, to name State Mint, Security Printing Works, Bank of Poland, trade union headquarters, editorial sections of national and trade journals, industrial plants manufacturing telephone, telegraph, and radio equipment.

As described above, the collections of the Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Warsaw were created with donations of private individuals, as well as public and administrative institutions, enjoying the support of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs. The image rendered by the ensemble of objects given to the Museum in the inter-war period resembles the kind of eighteenth-century cabinets of curiosities, gathering objects that are interesting to know and remain in harmony with the name of the institution, though not always valuable in view of history or documentation. There were no limits set to the exhibit collecting process; items were thus accepted without prior selection. Therefore, the donations included: uniforms of postal employees and postcards; ceremonial swords; photographs of post offices; collections of postmarked stamps, in a great number duplicated; both old and contemporary postal documents; contemporary telephones and army radio stations from WW I; models of telegraph installations and border markers. However, the idea to collect exhibits and accept donations seemed a perfect solution at the time due to the fact that the Museum never had a sufficient budget to finance its operations, while the financing it was allocated fully depended on the financial standing of the Ministry. They actually were, with merely few exceptions, the only cost-free forms of collecting historical monuments in a museum. Plans were made for the amassed items to be made available for public viewing; initially, there was no mention or suggestion of conducting any research. Interestingly, before WW II the Museum collections were not insured.

The care and factual assistance provided by the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs was not limited only to securing the Museum's essential space and material provisions, as well

as to the above-described actions. The Ministry was also the major donor of the Museum, transferring many materials and exhibits to its collections. Quite rare items then reached the Museum, e.g. the old library of the General Authority of Posts and Telegraphs. From among many donations, let us list several:

- 1923 – Minister Ignacy Boerner donated 23 postcards related to post; photographs of post documents from 1863; materials of various content (printed ones, literature, and single documents) to illustrate the history of Yugoslavia's post;
- 1923 – Department I of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs (MPiT) donated the first Polish postage stamps, date stamps, postcards, and two maps;
- 1924 – Minister Władysław Stesłowicz donated a valuable commemorative album;
- 1925 – Department IV of the General Authority of Posts in Warsaw donated a postal telephone;
- 1927 – MPiT's Department IV donated 249 designs from the postage stamp competition and archival materials;
- 1928 – documentation of the Transatlantic Radio Telegraph Transmitter at Boernerowo was donated;
- 1929 – MPiT's Communication Department donated an ample collection of photographs;
- 1931 – MPiT's Central Repository of Postal Materials donated files and account books of the city post office in Warsaw;
- 1933 – MPiT's Technical Supplies Department donated the philatelic material of the post of the Polish Legions;
- 1934 – MPiT's Army Office donated postal documents spanning 1821–48.

Apart from meaningful, spectacular historical objects, also single daily objects: minor items, accidentally collected by private individuals, or serving regularly in post offices as well as in Ministry's administration units, were also given to the Museum. In the early period of the Museum's functioning, they did not create durable and conscious collections.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the Warsaw Museum of Post and Telecommunications was the only such institution in Poland, while the collection it had amassed was unique historically, philatelically, and of exceptional value for material culture, and allowed the Museum to take on a significant position on the cultural map of Warsaw and Poland, particularly in the late 1920s and the 1930s when the collections were made available for public viewing.<sup>15</sup> Another manifestation of how the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs supported the Museum, was the legal and factual care it provided. Upon the Minister's decision, Museum Council was founded; it was to serve as an advisory and consultative organ, since its members were specialists in philately and post history. The Council's scope of authority was broad: it dealt with stamp sales, exchange and acquisition of museum pieces, setting prices and conditions for Museum acquisitions; it decided which of the donated and transferred objects were to be incorporated into the collections; it decided on the collections' conservation; their cataloguing and making them available for public viewing; as well as maintaining domestic and international contacts with other museums. The Museum Council actually had authority over all the aspects of the Museum's operations, and their decisions were authorized by the Minister.



5. Minister of Posts and Telegraphs Emil Kaliński, together with his wife and son, visiting the Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Warsaw and its display 'History of Polish Legions' on 25 November 1933.



6. Fragment of permanent display of the Historical Department of the Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Warsaw, 1934.

(All photos – Unknown Author, Collections of the Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Wrocław)

In the spring of 1929, on Minister Bogusław Miedziński's initiative, Philatelic Committee was founded at the Museum; its task was to help verify the donations. The numerous incoming donations, accepted unselectively, boasting varied value, led to the accumulation of a great number of artefacts, duplicated in their majority, and occasionally worthless. As of 1929, the appointed Committee was to verify the acquired exhibits and qualify as museum objects only those which could truly enrich the Museum's collections.

To sum up the activity of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs with regard to the Museum of Post, a substantial contribution it made, as well as the personal commitment of the ministers to its activity and development, have to be emphasized. All the actions and steps taken by the Ministry over the number of years significantly contributed to the effective operations of the only Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Poland. The Museum's dynamic development was interrupted by WW II.

**Abstract:** In 1921, at the instigation and with the contribution of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs, a post museum was founded in Warsaw. It was until 1950 that the Ministry continued to serve as the Museum's sponsor supporting it. The establishment of the Museum under the auspices of the Ministry, being an organ of the central state administration, provided the institution with numerous benefits and essentially enabled its activity. The initiative was actually priceless; had it not been for the post department support, it would have been most likely impossible to establish the Museum in the first years following the end of WW I and Poland regaining independence. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, the Ministry organized social

actions of collecting historical objects for the Museum, providing it with financing and factual backup, legal guidance, care for proper museum space, for the selection of appropriate museological staff, and last but not least, for the promotion of the Museum and its collections; at the same time, the Ministry made frequent donations to its subordinate institution.

The activity of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs, as well as the personal commitment of its ministers to the establishment, and later to the maintaining of the Museum on the cultural map of Poland's capital, significantly contributed to the effective operation of the only Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Poland.

**Keywords:** Museum of Post and Telecommunications, Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs, patronage, mail, collection, donation, museum history.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Decree on Establishing the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs (Journal of Laws 1919, No. 13, Item 142.).
- <sup>2</sup> Act of 5 December 1923 on liquidating the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs (Journal of Laws 1923, No. 131, Item 1061).
- <sup>3</sup> Order of the President of the Republic of Poland of 18 January 1924 on establishing the General Authority of Posts and Telegraphs (Journal of Laws 1924, No. 9, Item 85).
- <sup>4</sup> Act of 3 June 1924 on Post, Telegraphs, and Telephones (Journal of Laws 1924, No. 58, Item 584). The Act was adopted on 3 June 1924, it entered into force on 9 July 1924, and was overruled on 15 March 1955.
- <sup>5</sup> Regulation of the President of the Republic of Poland of January 19, 1927 on the establishment of the office of the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs (Journal of Laws of 1927, No. 5, item 26).
- <sup>6</sup> *Report of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs on the Activities between 1 July 1920 and 30 April 1921* in: supplement to 'Dziennik Urzędowy Ministerstwa Poczty i Telegrafów' 1921, No. 33, pp. 15-16.
- <sup>7</sup> A.B. Piaszkowski, *Polish Museum of Post*, in: 'Kurier Filatelistyczny' 1928, No. 55, p. 60; W. Rajchel, *60 Years of the Museum of Post*, in: 'Filatelista' 1981, No. 23(620), p. 592; B. Rejnowski, *Museum of Post and Telecommunications. 75 Years' Jubilee*, in: 'Filatelista', 1996, No. 5(883), p. 162.
- <sup>8</sup> *Moving of the Museum of Post and Telegraphs in Warsaw*, 'Ilustrowany Przegląd Filatelistyczny' 1927, Nos. 1-2, p. 14.
- <sup>9</sup> *Moving of the Museum of Post and Telegraphs...*, *Ibid.*; Antoni Łaskiewicz claims that the Museum in Wierzbowa Street boasted the surface of 371.65 sq m, see: A. Łaskiewicz, *Exhibition of the Legions' Post at the Museum of Post*, 'Ilustrowane Wiadomości Filatelistyczne' 1934, No. 28, p. 5.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Nowy Filatelista' 1922, No. 1, pp. 3-4; *International Exhibition of Postage Stamps in Geneva*, 'Filatelista Polski' 1922, Nos. 7-9, p. 95.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Przegląd Teletechniczny' 1933, Fasc. 11, p. 394; 'Przegląd Pocztowy' 1933, Fasc. 12, p. 185; *XX Dwaście lat poczty i telekomunikacji w Polsce Niepodległej* [Twenty Years of Post and Telecommunications in Independent Poland], Warszawa 1939, pp. 20-21, 172-173.
- <sup>12</sup> W. Polański, *Collections of the Museum of Post and Telecommunications Connected with the Field Post and Communication Services of the Polish Legions*, in: 'Przegląd Pocztowy' 1933, Fasc. 12, pp. 186-90; A. Łaskiewicz, *Exhibition of the Legions' Post...*, pp. 5-6. The display consisted of four parts. The first covered literature related to the Legions and the Legions' communication services. In the second one, the display included photographs, orders, instructions, and other historical documents. The third exhibition section presented postage stamps with Legions-related topics donated in 1920-34, while the fourth was dedicated to the Legions' communication services, whose showpiece was a complete field telephone station. The detailed list of exhibits on display given by W. Polański, 'Przegląd Pocztowy' 1933, Fasc. 12, pp. 186-90. More on the Legions' Post Exhibition see: T. Suma, *Exhibition on the History of the Polish Legions' Post at the Pre-war Museum of Post and Telecommunications in Warsaw*, 'Niepodległość i Pamięć' 2020, No. 1(69), pp. 237-46.
- <sup>13</sup> Emil Kaliński used to be a legionary in the past, the fact that must have had an impact on the decision to create the Polish Legions' Unit at the Museum. He enrolled in 1914, serving as deputy Head of Communications at the Legions' Headquarters. He simultaneously served as telephone clerk with the First Brigade Command. Following the Oath Crisis (9 and 11 July 1917), he worked in Łódź. In 1919-21, he was Head of Communications on the Lithuanian-Belarusian Front, while in the Battle of Warsaw (13-25 Aug. 1920) he served as Head of Communications of the Supreme Commander's Staff.
- <sup>14</sup> The attitude to enriching the Museum collections changed only following 1956, when a great stress was put on the development of the telecommunications



section. In 1961, the Minister of Communications issued a relevant internal Order for the purpose (No. 26./W) (Communications Journal, 1961, No. 20, Item 145), instructing post offices and administrative units to review the unused equipment pieces and transfer them as exhibits to the Museum of Post and Telecommunications.

<sup>15</sup> The first opening of the Museum's permanent display to the public took place on 25 March 1928 on the Order of the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs No. 2062./XI of 19 March 1928. (Official Journal of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs of 31 March 1928 No. 7, pp. 105-6).

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