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## From the apartment for the worker to the apartment for Kovalsky: concepts and realities of housing in Poland in years 1918–1939 and 1944–1989

### Abstract

In pre-war Poland housing for families of modest incomes in towns (chiefly workers) was not the object of particular interest of the state authorities. Direct state involvement in solving the deteriorating conditions of workers' housing, cooperative building and employer initiatives in providing workers' housing were of negligible significance.

Two factors had a decisive influence on the transformations of this housing policy after World War II: varied war consequences (demographic and wide-scale destruction of the housing stock), and the political concepts of the new Polish authorities.

The new housing policy was already formulated in 1944–45. In accordance with the new law, local authorities acquired the right to allocate housing to people whose work required living in towns.

The ideological pressure to ensure better housing conditions, above all for industrial workers, caused restrictions on investment opportunities in the private housing sector initiative. It began to change after 1956. The Polish housing question was to be solved by state-subsidised cooperative building.

Distinguishing workers as that social group which for ideological reasons deserved privileged access to new housing was ever more frequently replaced in the official language of the authorities with "non-class" distinctions (faceless Mr and Mrs Kovalski).

In the end phase of the People's Republic, workers' housing conditions bore no comparison to those from before the war. But while the gaps separating them from those of other, higher social strata remained, the disproportions were reduced as compared to those of the prewar period.

**Key words:** Housing policy, the Second Polish Republic, Polish People's Republic, workers' housing condition

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## Introduction

The housing question in 20<sup>th</sup> century Poland constituted one of the key problems in social policy. For towns, the biggest challenge was to ensure adequate housing for the growing number of workers.

*The purpose of this article is to answer three main questions:*

1. What were the ideological and political concepts in solving the workers' housing problem?
2. What was the influence of building developers on workers' housing?
3. How did the social-spatial structure in Polish towns change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

An attempt at answering this question shall be undertaken in its issue-related chronological order. Detailed facts have been established in relation to two periods: the interwar period and the 1945-1989 period. The wartime period, which constitutes merely a point of reference to considerations regarding post-war reconstruction, shall be treated in a marginal manner.

## Concepts of solving workers' housing question; ideas and policies

In pre-war Poland housing for families of modest incomes (i.e. in the realities of those times, chiefly workers) was not the object of particular interest of the state authorities for a long period of time. That which was actually implemented on the threshold of the newly restored state (in 1919) and what improved the situation of its workers, were the regulations protecting tenants, which were binding (with various modifications) until 1939 (Krzekotowska-Olszewska 2001: 11; Klarnier 1930: 110–112). Due to these regulations, it was possible, above all, to maintain rent levels in housing built before this legislation (and only for those tenants who already lived in such accommodation) at the nominal pre-war level (Andrzejewski 1977: 109–111).

State policy, especially from the end of the 1920s, aimed at invigorating the building sector, which was to be achieved, among others, by the planned application of a system of incentives and preferences for private investors. With this aim, on the basis of an Act of 24 March 1934, tax reliefs and favourable conditions for loans and direct financing for housing development were created (Krzeczkowski 1939: 122). Investors however were not interested in building modest flats for workers. Only

in 1938, were increased tax reliefs for those building small and medium sized housing introduced. As per the adopted principles of housing policy, workers' housing was to be inferior to the average in terms of overall standards and fit-outs: in the executive act of 9 April 1937, workers' housing was defined as "housing modestly fitted out with normalised building elements to the extent possible, containing one and two room flats of an area not exceeding 42 m<sup>2</sup>" (Krzeczkowski 1939: 111).

Direct state involvement in solving the deteriorating conditions of workers' housing came in 1934 when a state-owned capital company under the name. Towarzystwo Osiedli Robotniczych (TOR – Workers' Estates Society) was formed. TOR developed or co-financed modest standard accommodation (of usable area not exceeding 36 m<sup>2</sup> in multi household blocks and up to 42 m<sup>2</sup> as single family houses) (Andrzejewski 1977: 116–117).

Another avenue for providing cheap workers' housing was via cooperative building. The concept of cheap cooperative housing for workers came from left wing milieus and its effect was the activity of the Warszawska Spółdzielnia Mieszaniowa (Warsaw Housing Cooperative) set up in 1922 (Mazur 1993). It soon emerged that that what was defined there as workers' housing turned out to be an unattainable luxury for most families belonging to this group (Springer 2005: 103).

In the interwar period, employer initiatives in providing workers' housing were of negligible significance; in conditions of postwar reconstruction, and then during the economic crisis, factory directors did not have to worry about their workers. At the squalid bottom of the housing pyramid in towns were the unemployed and their families (Rodak 2013: 56–58).

What transformations did the concepts and policy succumb to in terms of providing a solution to the question of workers' housing after World War II?

First and foremost, it would be worth stressing that two factors had a decisive influence on these changes:

1. varied war consequences (demographic and wide-scale destruction of the housing stock);
2. ideological and political concepts of the authorities of the Polish People's Republic (PRL).

There was a great housing revolution in Polish towns already during the wartime period, when accommodation vacated by Polish Jews, who had been largely exterminated by the Germans, was taken over by Poles.

Moreover, the vast scale of wartime destruction also extended to housing. In total, in town and country, about 1.6 m homes were destroyed which represented 22–24% of the housing stock existing in 1939 on the territories within Poland's new post-war frontiers (Andrzejewski 1987: 138–140; Andrzejewski 1977: 132). Poland sustained the biggest losses out of all the countries that fought in the Second World War. Despite their enormity, they did not cause a dramatic deterioration in the general housing indicator, as is true of the number of people occupying single room flats. This stemmed from the enormous human losses estimated to have been approximately six million people. Of course these losses were not spread evenly- the highest figures were recorded by Warsaw (the destruction of 70% of the housing stock which corresponded to 71.1% of its single room flats), Wrocław and several other towns, especially in territories taken from Germany (Jeziński, Leszczyńska 1999: 426–427; Kaczorowski 1980: 51).

The new housing policy of the authorities was already formulated in 1944–45 in the basic legal acts that were passed at the time and whose general assumptions continued to be binding throughout the next decades. In accordance with the so-called public housing economy and control of rented accommodation, local authorities acquired the right to allocate housing to people whose work or work positions required living in towns, by adding lodgers to accommodation deemed to have spare capacity, to determine rent levels, and to regulate the ways of occupying living space. Owners of tenement housing were deprived of the right of letting their accommodation and setting rent levels by way of agreements with lodgers (Paczyńska 1994: 48). Rent levels were set centrally and raised only several times in the post-war period.

The most important ideological aim of the new housing policy was to ensure the best possible living conditions for workers' families. In order to improve their situation, trade unions called into being even in 1946 extraordinary housing commissions whose declared aim was to increase the number of homes for workers at the expense of "persons shirking work or speculators". In point of fact, they busied themselves seeking out free or insufficiently occupied accommodation (which meant that established by local authorities) (Jarosz 2010: 162–185).

This ideological pressure to ensure better housing conditions, above all for industrial workers, especially those of select sectors that were of particular importance to the national economy, caused restrictions on investment opportunities in the private housing sector initiative. This ten-

dency found expression in 1948 with the creation of the Zakład Osiedli Robotniczych (ZOR – Workers’ Estates Factory) as a state housing development agency financed by resources allocated for this purpose in the state investment plan. Decisions on allocating accommodation on estates built to cater for the labour force needs of industrial plants that were being extended or built from scratch were taken by the state authorities. It was they who decided what part of the newly built accommodation would be allocated to workers and what proportion would go to production specialists or state and party *apparatchiks* (Cegielski 1983: 36).

It was in the Stalinist period that symptoms of “social promotion” of workers in terms of access to better quality accommodation found reflection in spatial planning concepts. The most important example of the realisation of the guiding concept of Stalinism – bringing workers into the capital city’s central districts – was to be the Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa (MDM – the Marszałkowska Residential District) which was developed in 1950–52. This was the biggest show of social egalitarianism in constructing the city’s functional-spatial structure. (Molski 1988: 51–53).

The characteristic accent in the Stalinist period, which was placed on ensuring the best possible and cheap housing for workers, began to change after 1956. The state authorities came to realise that such far-reaching housing subsidies were unsustainable. Cheap council housing was allocated to an ever narrower group of the poorest members of society (and in the second half of the 1970s this was abandoned altogether, only to be restored in the 1980s). The Polish housing question was to be solved by cooperative building – albeit state-subsidised, but to a much smaller degree than the ZOR building development until then (Jarosz 2010: 45–60).

Distinguishing workers as that social group which for ideological reasons deserved privileged access to new housing was ever more frequently replaced in the official language of the authorities with “non-class” distinctions. This was associated with strategies aimed at legitimising the new party leadership headed by E. Gierek, which assumed power in the 1970s. The declared aim just after the new group took power was the promise of a separate home for every family (irrespective of its “class membership”) – by the mid-1980s. New high-rise block housing estates built with large prefabricated components were to contain tenants of mixed social status and origin (faceless Mr and Mrs Kowalski). This aim did not change until 1989 despite the political squalls that Poland went through in the 1980s. (Jarosz 2010: 60–74).

## The influence of building developers on workers' housing

In the pre-war period housing development was primarily in the gift of private initiative whose most important aim was profit. Housing for workers up to the 1930s was not the subject of greater state interest. Due to TOR activities up to the outbreak of war, about 2200 flats were built and in total about 9000 flats were financed. WSM, the best known building initiative aimed at satisfying workers' accommodation needs, built in 24 residential blocks, 1676 flats and 3132 single room flats (izby), which constituted only 1.4 % of the general rate of growth of single-room accommodation in interwar Warsaw (Krzeczkowski 1939: 122; Cegielski 1968: 248).

After the war the interest of the authorities in building flats for workers grew, which bore fruit in an increase in the sector's scale of development. Not only were there more homes for Poles, including for workers, they were also better equipped in basic installations. Primarily, this stemmed from the fact that the housing sector (state, cooperative and private) had to correspond to house-building standards set centrally by the state. On their basis, norms were worked out which were to be applicable in designing accommodation in terms of type and size, level of fixtures and fittings and finishes. The universality of norms in conditions of a centrally steered economy impacted on the 'egalitarianisation' of housing conditions.

What was the evolution that workers' housing then went through in the years 1918–1989? Though comparative data on this topic is difficult to come by due to such factors as differing research methodologies and representativeness of samples, not to mention the territorial changes that came in the wake of the Second World War, this does not mean that certain distinctive trends and tendencies cannot be identified.

According pre-war questionnaire-based research of 1927 and 1933, workers' homes were predominantly single room flats (70.7% and 78.4% respectively), with an indicator of 39.1 for the total population in 1921. In 1933, there were 5.1 people per flat, and 3.5 people per single room flat. The indicators in the case of the unemployed stood at 5.1 and 3.7 respectively (Zdanowski 1936: 56–59). They were susceptible to considerable fluctuations depending on the country's region. In 1978 the average occupancy rate per single-room flats for skilled workers in towns stood at 1.22. In 1984 the indicator of overcrowded flats (1.5 people per one room flat) in towns was estimated at 27.5% (and 45.5% in the countryside). For skilled workers it was 33.6% in towns and 43.1% in the

countryside. For comparison, in conditions of overcrowding established thus, 11.3% white collar workers with higher education lived in towns and 13.6% lived in the countryside. This group's housing occupancy rate stood at 0.90 in the towns and 0.83 in the countryside (Kozłowski 1987: 30–33). This and other data concerning the fit out of workers' housing before and after the war point to an improvement in their situation. Last but not least – people bereft of income in the interwar period, usually due to lay-offs, were threatened by eviction and the need to move to assorted temporary accommodation or non-residential (barracks, out-buildings, allotment sheds etc.) accommodation (Cegielski 1968: 250–254). In principle, after the war, such a threat did not exist.

### Social-spatial structure in Polish towns

Did this indisputable improvement in Polish post-war workers' housing conditions and housing policy as such, which increasingly diverged from class-based principles in favour of a homogenous socialist nation, attain its aims? Did the worker's home really become the home of the average Mr Kovalsky? It seems that this process did progress, but in no way was it fully accomplished despite the efforts of the state which, after all, had at its disposal strong instruments to enforce it.

In the end phase of the PRL, workers' housing conditions bore no comparison to those from before the war. But while the gaps separating them from those of other, higher social strata remained, the socialist policies that prevailed after the war ensured that the disproportions were reduced as compared to those heralding from the prewar period.

It would emerge from research into the 1970s that education and social status clearly differentiated the quality of the accommodation one occupied. Non-working class households occupied larger premises even though they constituted smaller households. Non-working class households headed by people with a higher education were twice as likely to occupy accommodation that was better equipped in modern facilities as workers' households whose heads, or those regarded as such, only had an elementary education. Workers' families, more so than non-working class families, were more likely to be allocated substandard accommodation by their work plants and local authorities (Kulesza 1984: 17).

This distance also had its social-spatial dimension. This would be suggested by social ecology research, which has quite a long-standing tradition in Poland. Among others, it has revealed the surprising degree

of durability in the immediate postwar period of the phenomenon of spatial segregation among town residents, notably where the processes of planning social-spatial town layouts was from scratch (as, for example, in postwar Wrocław) (Węclawowicz 1988: 59–60).

In the social sense, the two factors which had an exceptionally significant impact on the social-spatial distribution of many Polish towns was the already mentioned takeover of prewar Jewish districts by Poles, usually workers (which improved their housing situation) and the mass migration from the countryside for which Polish towns were ill-prepared. Just after the war, this caused the spatial segregation of populations inhabiting regions with the worst housing conditions (so-called wild districts). Gradually, the elemental nature of these migratory processes was mastered (Węclawowicz 1988: 60).

Research into the 1970s would enhance our knowledge about these differences with fresh facts. An analysis of the factors affecting big cities (Wrocław, Warsaw, Toruń), as well as more than a dozen other towns of various size has revealed the incidence of two characteristic features: areas of relatively higher social-professional status (of people predominantly with a higher education) were usually situated in central parts of cities and towns, while areas regarded as less salubrious were located on the peripheries. It was in the city/town centers that better equipped accommodation was concentrated. This division into “better” and “worse” districts or areas, on occasion looked more like a mosaic, but the segregation of working class areas and those inhabited by people of higher social status, made itself most visible (Węclawowicz 1988: 72–75). Gradually the migratory dimension waned in significance as an element of social–spatial differentiation in the cities/towns.

Why was it that in postwar Poland, despite an egalitarian state policy, the gaps between housing conditions and the environmental quality of ‘socio-spatial’ locations while being reduced remained so significant?

This was the effect of numerous factors. Firstly, the priority of inducing industrialisation in conditions of under-urbanisation made housing a prized asset, the object of struggle between various industrial and governmental lobbies which snatched at the so-called housing pool in the gift of institutions deciding on the distribution of new accommodation. In this struggle for housing facilities, branches and specialists of particular importance to the central authorities enjoyed a particularly privileged status. The satisfaction of their housing needs tended to blunt the egalitarian thrust in the official housing policy.



In comparison with the interwar period, workers were far better off but, even so, they were proportionally worse off than the ordinary better educated and remunerated white collar workers. Even if both categories received the same standard accommodation built after the war, there were usually differences in terms of location. “Spatial segregation” of a kind existed though arguably, its scale was smaller and less onerous than before.

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### **Od mieszkania dla robotnika do mieszkania dla Kowalskiego: koncepty i realia mieszkalnictwa w Polsce w latach 1918–1939 oraz 1944–1989**

#### Streszczenie

W przedwojennej Polsce problem mieszkań dla rodzin miejskich o skromnych dochodach (głównie robotników) nie był przedmiotem szczególnego zainteresowania władz państwowych. Bezpośrednia interwencja państwa mająca na celu rozwiązanie pogarszającej się sytuacji mieszkaniowej robotników, budownictwo spółdzielcze i inicjatywy przedsiębiorców nie przyniosły spodziewanych rezultatów.

Na politykę mieszkaniową po II wojnie światowej miały decydujący wpływ dwa czynniki: różnorodne konsekwencje wojny (demograficzne, duża skala zniszczeń substancji mieszkaniowej) i polityczne koncepcje władz nowej Polski. Nowa polityka mieszkaniowa została sformułowana już w latach 1944–1945. Zgodnie z powojennym ustawodawstwem władze miały prawo przydzielania mieszkań osobom, których praca wymagała zamieszkania w mieście. Presja ideologiczna zapewnienia lepszych warunków mieszkaniowych przede wszystkim dla robotników przemysłowych spowodowała zastosowanie restrykcji wobec inicjatywy prywatnej w sektorze mieszkaniowym. Ta polityka zaczęła się zmieniać po 1956 r. Polska kwestia mieszkaniowa miała być rozwiązana przez subsydiowaną przez państwo spółdzielczość mieszkaniową.

Wyróżnianie robotników jako grupy społecznej, która z przyczyn politycznych winna cieszyć się uprzywilejowanym dostępem do nowych mieszkań, coraz częściej było zastępowane w oficjalnym języku władz przez dystynkcje „nieklasowe” (anonimowi Kowalscy). W końcowym okresie Polski Ludowej warunki mieszkaniowe robotników były nieporównywalnie lepsze od tych sprzed wojny. Chociaż dystanse oddzielające ich od grup o wyższym statusie społecznym pozostały, to dysproporcje w porównaniu z okresem przedwojennym zostały zredukowane.

**Słowa kluczowe:** polityka mieszkaniowa, II Rzeczpospolita, Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, warunki mieszkaniowe robotników