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PERSONAL WATCHES IN WARSAW, 1890–1914: SOCIAL MEANINGS

Abstract

The article discusses the phenomenon of personal watches in the Kingdom of Poland at the turn of the twentieth century. These lands can be considered doubly peripheral: both in terms of power over official time, which was exercised by the administration of the Russian partition (controlled from a centre in the East), and in terms of production of timepieces, which were imported from abroad (produced in the West). The importation of watches, mainly Swiss, was associated with various local practices (advertising campaigns, fabrication of dials with the names of local watchmakers, etc.), and above all, it created a spectrum of attitudes and symbols in the “theatre of everyday life”. The watch was a marker of gender, a symbol of social and professional status, power, and political attitudes; it signified historical memory and loyalty to superiors.

Keywords: personal watches, watch production, social time, everyday life, social prestige, Kingdom of Poland

In 1890, around ten million watches were produced worldwide. Over the next quarter of a century, production increased two and a half times. Switzerland maintained its position as a superpower in this field, consistently accounting for about half of the world’s output, despite growing competition from the US and Germany.¹ Historian Pierre-Yves Donzé calls the period between 1890 and 1914 “the first globalisation” of watch production. The rapidly increasing demand and competitiveness led to the mechanisation and standardisation of production – major Swiss brands such as Omega or Longines were

¹ Pierre-Yves Donzé, *Des nations, des firmes et des montres: histoire globale de l’industrie horlogère de 1850 à nos jours* (Neuchâtel, 2020), 62.

the standouts at the time – while the search for new ways to conquer global markets continued.² Russia was among the most absorbent of them. In 1900, half of the exports from Switzerland went to America (US and Canada), but Russia was in second place, receiving 15.3 per cent of new Swiss watches (and 21.4 per cent in 1910), particularly from leading manufacturers, such as Paul Buhré, Tissot, or Zenith.³

Swiss companies colonised the markets of Central and Eastern Europe, where – apart from German lands – the precision industry did not develop, and watchmaking existed in the form of small craft workshops repairing watches and assembling them from parts. Whole watches were imported, but so were parts and raw mechanisms (*ébauches*), which were bound in cases at the workshops and provided with dials with names of watchmakers operating in Russian, Austro-Hungarian or Romanian cities: “Herpy Arnold, Budapest”, “Brauswetter Janos, Szegeden”, “Мих. П. Петковић, Београд”, “Jakob Zwecher, Sarajevo”, “M. Helder, Galatz”, “Jan Seltenreich we Lwowie”, “A. Sulikowski, Kraków, Grodzka 1”, “L. M. Lilpop à Varsovie, Fournisseur de Sa Majesté L’Empereur”, “W. Grabau, Warszawa”, “F. Woroniecki, Warszawa”, and others.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Warsaw was perceived as a major supply centre for watches in the Russian Empire, next to St. Petersburg and Moscow.⁴ In 1901, the Swiss consul described the city as a major commercial hub whose enterprising watch merchants supplied the entire south of the empire, Siberia, the Caucasus, and even Persia.⁵ Warsaw, at the time, was a large and rapidly growing city of 700,000 inhabitants, one of the empire’s most important centres of industry, crafts, and trade. Connected to Europe by railway and telegraph lines half a century before, it was a major transport junction. A sculpture depicting Warsaw as a female figure adorned the façade of the main railway station in Paris, Gare du Nord. The political position of Warsaw did not correspond to its urban condition. It was a quasi-colonial city, deprived of independence and subordinated to the Russian military administration. After two Polish national uprisings (1830–1 and 1863–4), bloodily suppressed by the Russian army, the

² *Ibid.*, 63.

³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴ *L’Impartial* (La-Chaux-de-Fonds), 4 June 1905, 4.

⁵ *La Suisse Libérale* (Neuchâtel), 28 Mar. 1901, 1.

province of the empire called the Kingdom of Poland was deprived of all autonomy. This led to the underdevelopment of Warsaw's public functions – institutions and representative buildings – crucial for the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. One form of control over the province was the imposition of Russian time measures.

At the end of the nineteenth century, watches in the Kingdom of Poland were set “according to the Warsaw meridian”, in pursuance of international time regulations, although – as the newspaper *Kurier Warszawski* commented in 1900 – older people still adjusted their watches according to the sundial in the Saxon Garden, ignoring official time.⁶ However, even official time could be ambiguous: railways ran according to St Petersburg time (except for the Warsaw-Vienna Railway, which ran on Warsaw time until 1912). Station clocks indicated this time, and the correct departure time could be verified using special tables – at the end of the nineteenth century, additional red hands were added to the clocks, showing Warsaw time: the difference was 37 minutes.⁷ A more severe temporal discrepancy was due to the difference in calendars. Most Christian inhabitants of Warsaw used the Gregorian calendar (in force in Poland since 1582), but the administration imposed the Julian calendar, which was in use in Russia, shifted by thirteen days from the Gregorian. Newspapers were therefore published with two dates. These phenomena indicated the peripherality of Warsaw in relation to the centre of power located in the east. Another dimension of peripherality was the common conviction among the local elites of the superiority of the civilisational centre located in the west. This duality manifested in a peculiar complex, which famous literary scholar Maria Janion described as the awareness of being both coloniser and colonised.⁸ In the prevailing opinion of the Polish elites, they represented “Western” values, identified with Catholicism and respect for individual freedoms, superior to their “Eastern” counterparts, associated with Russia, which at the same time they had to bow to politically. However, this complex was confounded by the conviction that Polish civilisation was not up to the challenges of the present day, usually defined by

⁶ *Kurier Warszawski*, 9 Apr. 1900, 5.

⁷ *Kurier Warszawski*, 21 Apr. 1890, 3; „*Podróżnik Polski*”. *Przewodnik po Europie* (Warszawa, 1903), 2.

⁸ Maria Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* (Kraków, 2006), 328.

the industrialised Western world. This world simply imposed the products of its watchmaking on Warsaw and thus set the standard of expectations related to watches – devices of great practical and symbolic importance in bourgeois culture.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the owners of Warsaw watch shops would announce in the press that they had gone abroad in search of “novelties” or had just returned “from Paris and Switzerland”, in an effort to increase their reputation.⁹ Watchmaking in Poland adopted the model of dependent development, focusing on imports, repairs, and fabrication of parts, while also cooperating with local manufacturers of watch cases and dials, with engraving ateliers and dial painting workshops. Thus, when Wiesław Głębocki, monographer of the Warsaw watchmaking industry, states that there were five watch factories in the city in 1896, twelve in 1909, and twenty in 1912, he means primarily ateliers manufacturing watch components and assembling mechanisms from imported parts.¹⁰ No Warsaw company produced pocket, pendant, or wrist watches from scratch. Even if they advertised their products as their own, they only put them together. However, there were factories that produced larger (and simpler) clocks, especially alarm clocks, such as the Fortwängler brothers factory in the district of Wola, founded in 1891, the Bernard Poznański and Co. clock factory, and Hopfenstand and Co.’s Warsaw Alarm Clock Factory,¹¹ Peierman’s wall clock factory or Abraham Długacz’s clock factory. Many different elements of clocks were manufactured in the city. A man named Bryndel prepared stained-glass windows for cabinet clocks using brass and coloured glass.¹² Companies of this type operated on a relatively small scale and offered no threat to the famous products of “foreign factories”.

DOUBLY PERIPHERAL

The practice of fabricating clocks and watches developed in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the seventeenth century, reaching its apogee in the middle of the next century, which was marked by the

⁹ *Kurier Warszawski*, 18 Aug. 1900, 1; 10 Oct. 1907, 12.

¹⁰ Wiesław Głębocki, *Zegarmistrzowie warszawscy XIX wieku* (Warszawa, 1992), 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Goniec Wieczorny*, 18 Mar. 1911, 8.

formation of watchmakers' guilds (the first of them in Warsaw in 1752), but gradually lessened until it ceased in the nineteenth century. There was no reason for it to exist, given the growing rate of imports from England and France and, after that, mainly from Switzerland. These earlier workshops were established chiefly by migrants from German lands, for whom the most attractive city in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was Gdańsk/Danzig, only displaced by the capital city of Warsaw in the mid-eighteenth century.¹³ Their activity also involved a constant importation of know-how, tools, and mechanisms. When cabinet clocks appeared in Poland in the eighteenth century, set up in manors, palaces, and churches, they were generally built around foreign mechanisms, bound in wood by craftsmen from Gdańsk/Danzig, Toruń/Thorn or Kraków.¹⁴ It was a harbinger of phenomena characteristic of the subsequent centuries, when imported movements were bound in cases of personal watches at Polish workshops: around 1900, in the *belle époque*, Swiss movements were hidden under dials with inscriptions for "B. Kowalski, Łódź" or "E. Wiór, Warszawa", and in the 1960s, under communist leader Władysław Gomułka, Soviet calibres were set beneath dials that proclaimed "Made in Poland".

At the end of the nineteenth century, clocks and watches were still described in Warsaw by their city of origin as "Nuremberg", "Geneva", or "Parisian". The language retained concepts relevant to the guild system, closely linking production with ateliers and places. This phraseology, however, was in decline. "National" references (Swiss, French, American watches) began to dominate. Meanwhile, large-scale watch production also went beyond this framework through standardisation and specialisation, becoming dispersed and international. These phenomena became more apparent over the following half-century, during which production continued to concentrate in large factories and target large markets. This can be considered the second stage of taking over time. The first stage consisted of the nineteenth-century process of setting time zones and establishing global time, which pushed local time into the past while transferring power over time from watchmakers and astronomers to public institutions. Alexis McCrossen described this process on the example of the United

¹³ Zdzisław Mrugalski, *Historia zegarmistrzostwa w Polsce* (Radom, 2011), 28–9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26–7.

States.¹⁵ The years covered by the present text, approximately 1890–1914, can be understood as an interlude between these two stages. It is then that the era of local times, local (urban) identification of watchmakers, ended, and the era of “national” watch production began, leading, in fact, to international competition and expansion.

Among these changes, the lands of the Kingdom of Poland – a fragment of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that fell under Russian rule – were subjected to a double peripherality. The first form of their peripherality was due to their subordination to externally imposed institutions. Power over time was exercised from the metropolis level, i.e. St Petersburg, which governed the Kingdom of Poland through its administration, police, and army. Thus, measures of time – the calendar and railway time – had a precise political dimension and were interpreted by patriotic Polish elites as symbolic and symptomatic of domination. The second form of peripherality consisted of the model of economic development. Since 1851, there was no customs border between the Kingdom of Poland and the rest of the Russian Empire, and the Kingdom was incorporated into Russian markets; the momentum of its production – especially in the textile and metal industries – was directed toward meeting the needs of these markets. Around 1900, about 80 per cent of exports from the Kingdom went there.¹⁶ When, after 1905, due to political changes, debate on the restoration of the customs border began, lawyer Julian Makowski argued that it would heal the local industry, directing it, among others, towards high-skilled precision industries such as automobiles, photography, and watchmaking.¹⁷ In other words, if made autonomous, the Kingdom would gain control over production and limit the economic pull of Russia, which favoured primarily less complicated production. Such attitudes were widespread in Europe then and promoted increasing tariffs and supporting local industry.

The global history of watches is a history of industrial espionage and the struggle to control markets and impose the sphere of influence. Both producer and importer countries created systems of tariffs

¹⁵ Alexis McCrossen, *Marking Modern Times: A History of Clocks, Watches, and Other Timekeepers in American Life* (Chicago-London, 2016).

¹⁶ Juliusz Łukasiewicz, ‘Zmiany kierunków szlaków handlowych w Królestwie Polskim w drugiej połowie XIX wieku’, *Przegląd Historyczny*, lxiv, 4 (1973), 823–38.

¹⁷ Julian Makowski, ‘Sprawa granicy celnej’, *Kurier Warszawski*, 17 Dec. 1906, 2.

and tax barriers as well as incentives, either to stop the outflow of technology and labour or to encourage the location of production in their own territories. These conditions were highly conflict-inducing. The development of watchmaking followed adaptations to the changing economic policies of major importers. Russia advanced a protectionist policy, trying to develop production in its own territory and applying high import duties. To avoid them, numerous Swiss companies stopped sending finished products to Russia, instead using a practice called *chablonnage*, i.e. they exported mechanisms in parts, which were assembled at their destination and placed in cases.¹⁸ *Chablonnage* caused much controversy, both in Switzerland and in the importing countries. It posed the threat of knowledge transfer, which Swiss manufacturers very much feared, but it was also treated as unfair competition by companies producing locally. In 1900, two St Petersburg watch factories, a bicycle factory in Riga and an unnamed Warsaw factory, were said to have addressed the Imperial Treasury Ministry with a demand for the imposition of customs duties on imported parts, the assembly of which fuelled unfair competition.¹⁹

The double peripherality of the Kingdom is clearly visible from the perspective of Swiss commentators. Information about Warsaw watchmakers in the Swiss press contained two characteristic features. Firstly, Polish watchmakers were treated as a distant and unreliable halfway house for Swiss exports on their way to the great Russian market. Secondly, the people involved in the importation of Swiss watches were identified as “Russians” and “Jews” rather than Poles. Thus, Poland was being treated as a periphery – both of industrialised Europe and of Russia, a kind of transitional land populated by immigrant entrepreneurs.

Undoubtedly, the idea was entertained to start the production of small and precise watches in the Kingdom of Poland. From time to time, the Swiss press reported on such projects. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it informed about the intentions of “Russian entrepreneurs” to open a watch factory in Warsaw. They were said to be looking for employees and facilities in Switzerland, which was deemed an unfair practice.²⁰ Job vacancies were posted, and the consulate was inundated with offers from workers willing to move

¹⁸ Donzé, *Des nations*, 67.

¹⁹ *Kurier Warszawski*, 13 Nov. 1900, 3.

²⁰ *Feuille d'avis de Neuchâtel*, 12 Oct. 1900, 4.

to Warsaw, attracted by excellent conditions, despite the warnings of the Swiss producers' unions, which threatened to blacklist them. The announcements were probably just a trial balloon to check the readiness of Swiss workers to take up work in Warsaw.²¹ In 1911, rumours circulated about the establishment of a silver watch case factory in Warsaw, supposedly operated by businessmen from La Chaux-de-Fonds, who organised the supply of equipment and the transportation of skilled workers. On this occasion, the Swiss press described as a serious mistake the employment of "Russians" (in this case, a certain Janowski, probably a Pole) in the Swiss watchmaking industry: foreigners used the acquired qualifications in their homeland.²² Any similar reports could indicate the development of watchmaking production in Russia, thus presaging the limitation of exports from Switzerland and causing the emigration of specialists and workers (*l'émigration horlogère*). Attempts to establish watchmaking factories in Austria-Hungary were regarded as a precedent.²³

Overall, however, Swiss commentators did not have a high opinion of the manufacturing capacity in Central and Eastern Europe. They reassured themselves that the ateliers built there were primitive and could not compete.²⁴ At the same time, they were concerned that *chablonnage* watches described as Swiss were shoddy and damaged the reputation of their "national industry". The purchasing power of the population of Warsaw was low, so there were many cheap watches with bizarre names correctly read backwards (Learsi, Reiem, Dracip, etc.).²⁵ This suggested the Jewish character of this industry and its clientele. All this, of course, was at the antipodes of the values that Swiss manufacturers attributed to themselves.

"WHOEVER SEES THIS WATCH WILL BELIEVE THAT IT IS GOLD"

We know neither the amount of global import (and smuggling) of watches to the Kingdom around 1900 nor how many timepieces

²¹ *La Suisse Libérale* (Neuchâtel), 28 Mar. 1901, 1.

²² *Journal du Jura* (Bienne), 14 Oct. 1911, 1; 28 Oct. 1911, 1.

²³ *Journal du Jura* (Bienne), 11 Oct. 1900, 2; 6 Mar. 1907, 4; *Le Franc-Montagnard* (Saignelégier), 25 Jan. 1901, 2.

²⁴ *La Suisse Libérale* (Neuchâtel), 28 Mar. 1901, 1.

²⁵ *Journal du Jura* (Bienne), 11 Oct. 1900, 2.

were owned by its population at the time. Partial data on the export of watches to the Russian Empire is likely to be found in the archives of Swiss and other manufacturers and probably also in public archives – for instance, in Bern. On the other hand, ownership can be judged to some extent by press information indicating the prices of watches, the conditions of trade, and various illegal practices related to watches. Classified ads also provide much room for interpretation.

Personal watches used by the inhabitants of the Kingdom were primarily of Swiss production, and they were almost exclusively pocket or pendant watches (ladies). Instructions on “watch hygiene” published in a newspaper from 1909 referred only to such types of timepieces. They advised how to wind the watch and in which pocket to carry it.²⁶ Until the end of the nineteenth century, watches were wound with a key, which was often attached to a key chain affixed to the watch (usually one of many, with various ornaments, medallions, or small scissors). In 1891, a “novelty” was advertised in Warsaw, being a watch that did not require the use of a key, then called “automatic” (offered in a classified ad for a very significant sum of 150 silver roubles).²⁷ Watches were worn in pockets – for men, at the bottom or top of a waistcoat, for women, in less predictable places on dresses, in handbags, or in various types of pouches, mostly leather, often offered by mail order as a watch accessory. The concept of a “wristwatch” did not exist, although there were reports of “watches on bracelets” being sold or lost, which was to be understood as a type of women’s jewellery equipped with a watch. For example, a lady’s watch “bound in a bracelet” was lost in the spring of 1891.²⁸ Nine years later, a lost “watch in a leather bracelet” no longer had to be jewellery, but rather a practical device; nevertheless, it still belonged to a woman.²⁹ At the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, “bracelet watches” began to be offered in Warsaw – what would be called “wrist watches” in the interwar era, but still intended only for women. For example, in 1908, a certain Leokadia Wulf advertised the mail-order sale of such watches as “the latest fashion trend

²⁶ ‘Higiena zegarka’, *Kurier Warszawski*, 30 Nov. 1909, 6.

²⁷ *Kurier Warszawski*, 30 Apr. 1891, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Kurier Warszawski*, 1 June 1891, 9, 13 Oct. 1900, 16.

in France”.³⁰ However, the masculinisation of what was called *montre-bracelet* in France would not occur until the First World War.

Significantly, the main meaning given to watches in newspaper advertisements related to the outward sign of status that a watch was supposed to represent. The material was emphasised more so than other properties – as in the advertisement for the Augustynowicz company in Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, recommending “a great selection of gold, silver, black steel [i.e. oxidised] and nickel watches”.³¹ In similar advertisements, little attention was paid to the precision of the mechanism or other functional advantages. The watch was primarily supposed to “look” and have value. This, of course, attracted thieves, which fostered some tension around the watch as an item that was often stolen or forcibly seized. This is the context for the news item from 1890 about the appearance of watches with rubber cases, an idea of “local watchmaker, Mr. K.”, which the newspaper described as useful because such watches could not be pawned; in other words, they did not make for an attractive target for thieves.³² (It seems that the invention did not catch on.) On the other hand, the supply of cheap watches was developing, “costing 100 roubles”, which were supposed to look like they were gold as much as possible. Mail order companies specialised in their distribution, offering watches and accessories in “new”, “African”, or “American” gold, “real French new gold”, or “a metal similar to Japanese silver”. They were different alloys, probably based on aluminium and copper. In any case: “Whoever sees this watch will believe that it is gold”.³³

Erving Goffman’s metaphor of the theatre of social life seems perfect for the times described here, with its notions of backstage and characterisation of the actors. Incidentally, writing in the 1950s and referring to British examples, Goffman undoubtedly relied on his memory of Victorian culture. In any case, he focuses on the construction of the “particular front” of the actors of the social spectacle, who use various elements of the image to make the expected impression on others.³⁴ He also describes the importance of arranging the social

³⁰ *Kurier Warszawski*, 17 Dec. 1908, 14; 22 Dec. 1908, 11; 26 Sep. 1909, 12.

³¹ *Kurier Warszawski*, 13 June 1890, 7.

³² *Kurier Warszawski*, 3 Aug. 1890, 4.

³³ *Dziennik Polski*, 26 Apr. 1914, 5.

³⁴ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh, 1956), esp. 13–9.

scene. There is no doubt that the latter was of great importance for the bourgeois and that they tried to exercise strict control over it. This involved the arrangement of private spaces (flats), semi-private spaces (studies and offices, often a part of the flat), as well as public spaces – both the interior of the institution and the exterior, for instance, the street and the square. Clocks were a very important part of this arrangement. Mounted on the facades of railway stations and official buildings, they showed the seriousness and precision of the operation of public institutions. They hung over the sidewalks as signboards of watchmakers' workshops; the newspaper *Kurier Warszawski* praised their proliferation as a social benefit.³⁵ Time had an educational value and regulated the functioning of the urban organism. In residential interiors, it manifested itself thanks to standing, wall, table, and fireplace clocks, which were both aesthetic and practical objects, contributing to the necessary furnishings of a wealthy apartment. They were sold together with complete sets of furniture, as indicated in the columns of classified ads in major city newspapers. Against the backdrop of this Goffman-esque set design, serious-looking men and women presented themselves with obligatory watch chains, depicted in an office-like space: the watch as the attribute of a solid, self-confident man and an exacting woman who controlled the work of the domestic servants.

Around 1900, the style of appearance imposed by the European bourgeoisie predominated: it was governed by very strong conventions, the most expressive manifestation of which was a tightly laced woman's corset, as well as a very stiff collar of a man's shirt. One important element of the bourgeois attire was a watch chain. The watch belonged among the attributes of a gentleman who lived a fulfilling life, so it was part of the offer of shops that sold items that contributed to a "particular front". Such was the offer of the Mankielewicz shop in Warsaw ("in the theatre building"), which offered "gold and silver canes, gold and silver cigarette cases, 'Gentleman's Watch' flat watches, decorative women's watches, cufflinks, buttons for light-coloured waistcoats, tie pins".³⁶ According to the logic of the bourgeois social theatre, objects of this kind were primarily supposed to make a specific impression and foster convictions about the user's status. That is why

³⁵ *Kurier Warszawski*, 11 July 1890, 3.

³⁶ *Kurier Warszawski*, 21 Apr. 1905, 9.

the watch became an important attribute of social advancement and why it took ostentatious forms, gilded or made of pseudo-gold. All the “new” gold and silver were supposedly impossible to distinguish from real precious metals “even by a specialist”, and the watches were impressive. At the same time, they were offered with extraordinary discounts, exceeding three-quarters of the original price, and came with free gifts in the form of chains, tiny stereoscopes, compasses, and suede pouches.³⁷

Particularly prominent were mail-order companies operating in Berlin, such as Export-Haus J. Jakubowitz, Berlin-Pankow, and in Vienna, such as Goldwasser’s company. They belonged to a species that a hundred years later would be called “no-names”, that is, networks of interests directed from an unspecified location and operating with ephemeral names and addresses. This is indicated by the locations named in the advertisements. In the years 1910–14, there were numerous offers for the sale of quality watches below a third of the asking price, but in this case, it was not the material that was praised, but the shape of the watch (very flat, “not thicker than the Russian rouble”) and the mechanism on 16 jewels with a reserve of up to 38 hours. “Only Berlin” and “only Vienna” could sell such fine watches at this low price!³⁸ Why Berlin and Vienna? The advertisements argued that the companies had special capacities, probably intended to refer to the wealth and vastness of the local markets. This can also be seen as a sign of the difference in the saturation of the markets: Germany absorbed masses of domestic and imported products, while surpluses, mainly goods of the lowest quality, were shipped to the Kingdom of Poland and probably into the neighbouring lands. The Swiss press also considered areas east of Germany as markets filled with worthless products, which served to distort the image of the national industry (as discussed earlier). The press attributed this to Jewish advertisers who conducted mail-order sales on a large scale. To counteract them, some “Petersburg merchants” organised an “exhibition of all that junk”, including watches.³⁹ An insight into these practices can be found in the accounts of the trial before the Commercial Court in Warsaw of a certain

³⁷ *Nowa Gazeta*, 5 Apr. 1906, 9; *Dziennik Polski*, 22 Mar. 1914, 5.

³⁸ *Goniec Wieczorny*, 11 Apr. 1911, 7.

³⁹ *Goniec Wieczorny*, 28 Jan. 1911, 5.

Menko Gordon, who ran several mail order companies (“Bugeot et Comp.”, “Waldcham i Comp.”, “Scharcoi Comp.”, etc.), publishing announcements in newspapers, mainly Russian, about watches for 3–5 roubles sent by postage.

After collecting orders, he went to wholesale warehouses, bought watches, and shipped them to recipients. Since he provided poor-quality goods that were not worth the few roubles he received, in order to avoid acrimony from the gullible, Gordon changed the company name from time to time in the advertisements. He conducted similar manipulations for twelve years, selling goods to Russia that sometimes amounted to 4,000 roubles per month.⁴⁰

Above all, similar announcements suggest a considerable appetite for watches in the Kingdom of Poland. Their nature indicates the role of the watch as a symbol of social status, an element of a “particular front”, suggesting status. The importance of this “front” is further emphasised by press releases about watch thieves who inspire the confidence of onlookers (or clerks in a watchmaker’s shop) precisely because of their “exquisite exterior”. A person who appeared to own a watch was not suspected of wanting to steal one.

FIDELITY OR AMBITION: A WATCH IN THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY

In January 1911, three bandits attacked a worker of the Gas Company who was putting out the lamps in downtown Warsaw and took his silver watch, threatening him with knives.⁴¹ Indeed, only the elite of Warsaw’s workers could afford a silver watch, but owning one was becoming a more common aspiration. A silver watch could also find its way into the pocket of a shoemaker in the city’s Old Town, as mentioned in a note about a robbery committed in February of that year.⁴² Thieves operated in the cloakrooms and vestibules of theatres, as well as at the exits of churches, especially the very centrally located churches of St Alexander and of the Sacred Cross, on feast days or during funerals or wedding ceremonies. High society gathered in these places, and people dressed in their Sunday best, so they

⁴⁰ *Nowa Gazeta*, 15 Mar. 1906, 5.

⁴¹ *Kurier Warszawski*, 23 Jan. 1911, 3.

⁴² *Goniec Poranny*, 18 Feb. 1911, 2.

were more likely to have valuable objects with them, including gold watches with chains. In June 1890, during vespers, people were robbed every day in the church of St Alexander. Thieves cut off one woman's gold chain when the watch itself "wouldn't budge out of a hidden pocket".⁴³ Therefore, it was expected that such places would be guarded by "agents of the investigative office". In the Grand Theatre, after a performance, two pickpockets were detained when they took a watch from a certain Szyja.⁴⁴

The estimated value of lost watches mentioned in classified ads illustrates the spectrum of capacity and status in the metropolitan society. In January 1906, a gold watch worth 200 roubles was stolen from a doctor at the doors of the Philharmonic, and in March 1907, a judge lost one of his own in the exact location. The owner of another timepiece stolen in the same place offered the thief anonymity and that he would ransom the gold watch with a gold-platinum chain for 150 roubles.⁴⁵ In the summer of 1907, a thief was caught having pulled out the gold watch of a pallbearer exiting the church of St. Alexander. In the same place, a gold watch worth 100 roubles was stolen from a landowner.⁴⁶ Post offices were also an area of operation for pickpockets. At the post office at Świętojerska Street, a gold watch worth 100 roubles was stolen from Lejba Kozak, and at the main post office at Warecki Square, another gold watch worth (together with chain) 350 roubles was taken from Ewaryst Strzemiński ("upon sending a registered letter").⁴⁷ Of course, the valuation of the lost goods came from the victims, so it should be taken with a grain of salt. They likely often felt hurt far more than they really were, but the willingness to pay for a found watch or to ransom one from a thief indicates the material – and especially the emotional – value of the watch.

Classified ads provide knowledge about yet another phenomenon: the sense of continuity of ownership, that is, watch tradition, manifested in the passing of watches from father to son or as a gift on a special occasion. Unlike the lower social groups, which came into possession

⁴³ *Kurier Warszawski*, 11 June 1890, 4.

⁴⁴ *Nowa Gazeta*, 29 Jan. 1906, 4.

⁴⁵ *Nowa Gazeta*, 14 Jan. 1906, 5; *Kurier Warszawski*, 2 Mar. 1907, 5; 9 Sep. 1909, 16.

⁴⁶ *Kurier Warszawski*, 19 Feb. 1906, 3; 12 July 1907, 3.

⁴⁷ *Kurier Warszawski*, 9 Apr. 1900, 5; 21 Dec. 1900, 5.

of watches recently, bourgeois families felt attached to commemorative watches, whose statement of origin was dedicated. That is why the rewards for the return of a (found) watch were very diverse and often indicated its sentimental rather than material value, which was a distinction – the former corresponded to the value of attachment to family and friends, highly valued in a bourgeois society. Thus, when a lady offered 3 roubles for a watch whose market value was “very small”, she may have been motivated by an attachment to the object “made of a white metal mixture with an embossed view”, but the attachment was apparently not particularly great. Another woman offered as much as 10 roubles for a (gold) watch “with a short, oxidised silver chain with scissors”. The fact that the reward was thrice as high was due to the fact that “it is a dear souvenir”. Higher rewards were usually justified by the brand and material of the watch – these were Lange or Patek gold products, the return of which was rewarded with sums approaching 100 roubles.⁴⁸

At the turn of the century, the sum of 100 roubles corresponded to the monthly earnings of a middle-ranking official. It was also a relatively low price for a new Swiss watch in a gold case. The prices of such watches in stores fluctuated around 100–350 roubles, which was an unattainable amount to most residents of Warsaw, equivalent to the entire annual earnings of a worker. At that time, however, the supply of watches was great. The price of the cheapest watch was less than 2 roubles, and watches with a precise (in theory) mechanism on 15 jewels were already being offered at a price of about 4 roubles. Simple, base-metal watches were sold in instalment plans starting from a half-rouble weekly.⁴⁹ It only took a few weeks to pay off the watch. A typical worker’s wages amounted to about 20 roubles per month, and the minimum wage of a shop clerk was 30 roubles (in the best stores, up to even 80 roubles), so it was not difficult to buy a watch.⁵⁰ The issue was quality and, especially, the material, which explains the tension around the “golden” appearance of the cases. It can be assumed that watches played an important role in the lives

⁴⁸ *Kurier Warszawski*, 3 Feb. 1900, 8; 28 Feb. 1900, 8; 16 June 1900, 16; 16 July 1900, 10; 31 July 1900, 12.

⁴⁹ *Kurier Warszawski*, 14 Oct. 1900, 23; *Goniec Poranny*, 30 Apr. 1911, 8.

⁵⁰ Halina Kiepuska, *Warszawa 1905–1907* (Warszawa, 1991), 13–4; Anna Żarnowska, *Robotnicy Warszawy na przełomie XIX i XX wieku* (Warszawa, 1985), 159–75.

of young plebeian men who sought social advancement and sexual or matrimonial opportunities, which were easier to come by with a “serious” appearance – and a watch.

This also explains the special importance of the watch as a prize in various public lotteries or games organised, especially in May, when communities of craftsmen and workers left town. In 1914, during the bookbinders’ picnic with dances, theatre, cabaret, and children’s games, a silver watch could be drawn in a „blind luck” lottery.⁵¹ Prize watches also appeared at events organised by the elites to satisfy their social sense of duty to the poor. At a charity party “for the benefit of poor students” in 1906, participants received a coupon entitling them to draw lots for a gold watch (as well as a horse, cow, or rabbit!). In the same year, at the event of the Society for the Care of Poor Mothers, one could also win watches in a raffle.⁵² The watch (especially a silver or gold one) was, therefore, a symbol of status, but also of the sudden happiness that could be shared by anyone and a fair reward for participants in aid campaigns. In each of these cases, the watch became a symbol of justified inequality, which was an element of the bourgeois imagination. However, the same imagination contained a vision of a fast career across social divisions, so different from the moral system of the nobility. The watch was at the intersection of these visions, in a place marked by social and moral tensions in a society undergoing intense civilisational changes.

Winning the lottery could promote a random person to the rank of one who owns a silver watch. Crossing status boundaries, however, confirmed their objective existence. The watch, above all, testified to the fact that one belonged to a group, it was an attribute of important social roles. This was largely due to the existence of service watches, given to railway workers or officials by their superiors: these watches emphasised the importance of punctuality and speed of action in industrial and urban civilisation. That is why clocks appeared on the factories’ gates and in the foremen’s pockets. Industrial civilisation, as Löfgren writes (and this applies to both Sweden and the Kingdom of Poland), was, after all, based on the sale of work (time) by hired workers to plant owners. The central problem of entrepreneurs was

⁵¹ *Dziennik Polski*, 17 May 1914, 4.

⁵² *Kurier Warszawski*, 27 June 1906, 4; 28 May 1906, 5.

time management, as well as the unpunctuality and unreliability of employees.⁵³

Service watches confirm the professional hierarchy and paternalistic relations in the company. They set boundaries of the function, confirmed promotion and merit, and at the same time marked the way to further career. Thus, they were symbols of a stage on the path of life, which distinguished them from the traditional prize watches that appeared at the same time, confirming the immutability and stability of life, attachment to the ruler, lack of aspirations beyond serving the monarch, and the incarnation of God. The merit watches were presented by kings and emperors, confirming the inviolability of the hierarchical order threatened by the revolution. Upon receiving an engraved imperial watch, the highest and (apparently) the least important officials were to feel the power of this order and the righteousness of their own service. Thus, "the chief cashier of Warsaw theatres, Mr Rudolf Froniek", had "for his long, diligent service received a gift from the Most Exalted in the form of a golden watch with the coat of arms of the state and a golden motto".⁵⁴

At the beginning of 1905, amidst the revolutionary turmoil in the Kingdom of Poland, the following incident took place in Warsaw: a Russian gunner was accosted in the street by a student (probably himself a Russian), who persuaded him "to not listen to the Emperor and the authorities, and to not shoot at the crowd when suppressing street brawls". The gunner reacted by drawing his sabre and handing the student over to the gendarmes. For this, he received "a watch with an inscription from the police chief".⁵⁵ It is hard to find a clearer example of the consolidation of the social hierarchy and patterns of conduct by the state apparatus. Watches received from high officials as a token of merit were symbols of loyalty, linking the durability and cost of the object with moral principles. The inscriptions and portraits contributed to the political and social image of the owner. In February 1910, a classified ad was published about a watch with a portrait of Governor-General Iosif Gurko (Hurko) and a chain

⁵³ Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life*, transl. Alan Crozier (New Brunswick, NJ – London, 1987), 20, 24–6.

⁵⁴ *Goniec Wieczorny*, 1 Feb. 1911, 4.

⁵⁵ *Kurier Warszawski*, 7 Mar. 1905, 5.

with a medallion depicting Emperor Alexander III, which a resident of Wiejska Street had lost in a wealthy district of Warsaw associated with government officials and the Russian community.⁵⁶ Iosif Gurko (1828–1901) was remembered as one of the high-ranking Russian officials most hostile to Polish national sentiments. Having a watch with his portrait on it was, therefore, a very telling sign of identity, especially considering the somewhat ceremonial gesture of checking the time on a pocket watch. Situations of this type were therefore marked by symbolism – today, this can be seen mainly in the columns of classified advertisements, in which watches symbolising the opposing poles of ideological and political affiliation met each other on the newspaper page. They informed about lost watches with portraits of Tadeusz Kościuszko, leader of the anti-Russian uprising of 1794, or with images of the Polish eagle and Catholic religious emblems – the production of such “patriotic” developed on a large scale, with some being made by Patek et Cie’s Geneva factory, among others. An ad proclaimed: “A gold watch with an enamelled Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn [*Matka Boska Ostrobramska*] on one side of the case and an eagle studded with diamonds on the other was stolen”.⁵⁷ Such watches were passed down in the family; they were a “souvenir item”, as one of the ads defined it, offering a “generous reward” for a lost watch with the coat of arms of Lithuania.⁵⁸

Watches with portraits (not necessarily of the tsar – equally as often of a husband or a wife), coats of arms, or emblems were symbols of constancy and belonging. By demonstrating them, one defined one’s role in the social spectacle and confirmed participation in a group. Watches received as a gift on the occasion of a jubilee, birthday, for long service, as a proof of recognition by co-workers or the society had a similar, but not identical meaning. In the nineteenth century, it became a social custom to give a watch on the occasion of the 50th birthday or 25th anniversary of work – for example, at the fire department in Skierniewice near Warsaw (1905), when the longest-serving firefighters were given “valuable watches with appropriate inscriptions”.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *Kurier Warszawski*, 22 Feb. 1910, 18.

⁵⁷ *Kurier Warszawski*, 1 Feb. 1900, 16.

⁵⁸ *Kurier Warszawski*, 19 Apr. 1900, 14.

⁵⁹ *Kurier Warszawski*, 27 Aug. 1905, 6.

Löfgren associates giving a watch for a man's jubilee (preferably the fiftieth birthday) with the bourgeois concept of life as a path – a career in which a man goes through successive stages, gaining various resources (material, but also knowledge and maturity).⁶⁰ Indeed, this model of reward seems to differ from merit rewards (to a ruler or community), which related to ideas such as fidelity and loyalty, and so were associated less with success in life than with serving certain fixed values; these were rewards for constancy rather than change. Meanwhile, the notion of personal success developed within the bourgeoisie became an attractive reference for other social groups, combining with more plebeian values, such as resourcefulness and cunning. A clear symbol of this connection can be found in one of the main attractions of annual public Easter games – the “greasy pole”, a tall mast coated with soap, with items to collect placed on the top.⁶¹ Among the items was usually a suit, a bowler hat, and a watch – attributes of a burgher (accompanied by the indispensable plebeian bottle of vodka). In 1911, a commentator in a Warsaw newspaper used the competition for prizes on the “greasy pole” as a symbol of a more general striving “to the top”, so characteristic of the bourgeois elites.⁶²

Climbing on top of a greasy pole during popular festivities could be a marker of success, and so could also be the development of a large trading company. Both provided models of male agency and effectiveness, ambition and courage. The importance of the pace of work seemed as large as that of the pace of commercial competition or of bicycles participating in public races. Cycling was of particular political importance in Warsaw, as restrictions on public activities made the actions of the Warsaw Cyclists Society more significant. The watch played a major role in these activities, serving (among others) to time the races between different cities of the Kingdom.⁶³ At the same time, watches with a stopwatch function were being advertised “for the use of doctors and sportsmen”, as one individual seller (incidentally, a doctor) put it.⁶⁴ Special watches (or watch-shaped

⁶⁰ Frykman and Löfgren, *Culture Builders*, 31–2.

⁶¹ Kazimierz Wroczyński, *Z moją młodością przez Warszawę* (Warszawa, 1957), 17.

⁶² *Goniec Wieczorny*, 18 Apr. 1911, 6.

⁶³ Piotr Kubkowski, *Sprężysci. Kulturowa historia warszawskich cyklistów na przełomie XIX i XX wieku* (Warszawa, 2018), esp. 503–23.

⁶⁴ *Kurier Warszawski*, 22 Feb. 1905, 11.

objects) were also built to match new passions, especially sports and cars. In 1906–7, a certain Ossowski encouraged readers to buy *pedometers* imported by him from the US – devices measuring the pace of runners (“The watch hangs from a button, with each leap the arrow on the dial moves to the appropriate numbers”) at Chmielna Street. He also offered “speedometers” or “watches that show the speed of a motorcycle”.⁶⁵ In 1910, the press reported on an object that could be considered the progenitor of the smartwatch: Italian physicist Luigi Cerebotani “constructed a small device that allows anyone to receive telegrams without wires. The camera is shaped like an ordinary watch, and the dial has letters instead of numbers. An internal spring drives a small lever, one end connected to the pointer and the other to the electromagnet”.⁶⁶

Watches, as everyday objects, were therefore at the intersection of various social trends defining the Kingdom of Poland around 1900. They symbolised both its subordination (to Western manufacturers) and its creative abilities (developing trade) in the economy; its dependence on Russia and its desire to preserve Polish patriotic ideas; its constancy and fidelity to principles (loyalty and obedience) and its ability to challenge social hierarchies. They combined the nobility of the material (gold) and the pretence of playing a role in the social theatre (pseudo-gold), the attachment to nineteenth-century rules of life, and the striving for modernity.

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⁶⁵ *Kurier Warszawski*, 27 July 1906, 12; 2 May 1907, 17.

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