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PROFESSIONAL AND PRIVATE VISITS. WELL-KNOWN AND UNKNOWN GUESTS IN THE BOCHNIA SALTWORKS (UNTIL 1995)

Abstract

This is the first academic study of this type pertaining to the history of tourist traffic in the area of the Bochnia Salt Mine. In contrast to the Wieliczka Salt Mine, no general academic or popular science studies have been prepared with respect to this issue to date. Prior works devoted to the Bochnia Salt Mine did not deal with this issue. The objective of this article is an attempt at describing, throughout the history of the Bochnia Salt Mine, the gradual process of emergence and development of tourist traffic.

The author of the work makes use of the existing manuscripts and printed sources, along with academic studies devoted directly or indirectly to the subject matter pertaining to the content of the article. Interviews conducted with the present and retired employees of the Bochnia Salt Mine also turned out to be helpful, both directors and traffic supervision employees, as well as persons directly involved in the tourist traffic servicing. Thanks to this, the gaps existing in the source materials and academic or popular science studies pertaining to the subject matter of the study were supplemented or filled.

The history of tourist traffic described in the article was closely related to the history of the Bochnia Salt Mine. The reader is going to find out that this process was not easy, whereas its history is replete with obstacles and threats during various stages of development, including a complete disappearance of tourist activity, which was finally reinstated and which has been pursued to date. Therefore, the issue deserves a detailed study.

In medieval sources, it is possible to find traces of princes' and kings' (and their officials') stays in the mine. Such visits were purely official. Their objective was direct or indirect control over all aspects of operation of the subordinate enterprise. Visits of representatives of commerce and handicraft in the Bochnia Salt Mine, whose enterprises were closely and durably related to the current operation of the mine, had a more "economic" character.

The situation was similar with holders of permits and privileges from the group of contemporary wealthy people, both clerics and secular. The ongoing necessity of taking care of their economic interest was the most important for this group.

Sources between the 16th and the 18th century offer new data. New categories of guests supplemented the above list of visitors in the Bochnia Salt Mine. The first one includes various travellers who, in their accounts or descriptions, offer the first experiences accompanying visits in the underground section of the mine. Another category are poets. Their works, preserved in the modern times, have a similar character, yet by their nature they are more filled with emotions. Therefore, all these authors were, in a certain way, “pioneers” – the first tourists in the modern sense of the word. The third category includes representatives of science, testifying to the growing interest in the Bochnia Salt Mine from a scientific perspective. They also form a part of the previously described group of travellers, who were testing their talents in the new area. These were predominantly people connected to the Bochnia Salt Mine who implemented their ideas, plans and intentions for its benefit. There was also yet another special category – the so-called “unwanted guests.” This group includes both “locals” and “foreigners”, whose activities had an adverse impact on the situation of the Bochnia Salt Mine.

At the end of the 18th century, a certain fundamental change occurred in the above-described group of “guests” at the Bochnia Salt Mine. The owner of the mine changed – the Polish king was replaced by the Austrian emperor and royal officials were substituted by the imperial bureaucratic apparatus. Simultaneous abolishment of former permits and privileges resulted in absence of visits of clerics and lay people. What is more, the former system of connections of the mine with trade and municipal handicraft also ceased to exist. Representatives of such professions disappeared almost completely from the area of the Bochnia Salt Mine. The 19th century, especially its second half, brought development of initially disorganised tourist traffic in the form of individual and collective groups. Visits in the mine, hitherto a privilege reserved for the chosen few, suddenly became a very fashionable pastime for a broader group of people. This situation was intensified by development of communication and dissemination of press information, as well as popularity of local sightseeing associations. Such groups included local people, as well as guests from other countries, officials, teachers, clerics, military men, young people and children. The number of descriptions and travellers’ accounts, resulting from visits in the underground pits of the Bochnia Salt Mine, also soared. The Bochnia Salt Mine has become a more attractive place for the conduct of scientific studies by outstanding researchers and specialists from various areas of knowledge. The Bochnia Salt Mine was also a venue for didactic activities for the future practitioners of science, who pursued classes, internships and professional practice here. However, the described century and the beginning of the 20th century were not free from negative activities and decisions of the group known from earlier centuries as the “unwanted guests.”

The inter-war period was a time of constant struggle with the governmental plans of liquidation of the Bochnia Salt Mine. In spite of the difficult situation, the unorganised

tourist traffic of numerous groups and individuals (from the country and abroad) continued to flourish in the mine. The mine was also visited by scientists and young graduates who were acquiring the necessary knowledge and professional skills. What is more, middle school pupils and college students followed the example of their senior friends and attended special classes in the mine and visited it as part of activities of school sightseeing groups. It is also worth remembering that the outbreak of WWII halted the plans of establishing a sanatorium at the Bochnia Salt Mine.

The period of Nazi occupation brought an end to popular visits in the Bochnia Salt Mine. At this time, the mine was only open for German people – ordinary citizens and military men. However, traces of stay of Polish people in the mine from this period have also been preserved – obviously, such visits were only possible upon the approval of the occupation authorities.

Throughout the communist period, the idea of making the Bochnia Salt Mine available for tourists was not popular and it resurfaced only in the form of sporadic initiatives. In the 1950s, a visit in the mine formed a part of subsequent historical anniversaries celebrated in the city and the local saltworks. Similar initiatives, even though planned, were not implemented in the 1960s - they were going to form a part of the celebrations of the 1,000th anniversary of the Polish state. Nevertheless, plans pertaining to the visits in the Bochnia Salt Mine in the 1970s were successful – they were included in the extensive programme of the “Days of Bochnia” inaugurated at that time. The last activity in the described period took place in the 1980s, when sightseeing in the mine was included in the celebrations of another historical anniversary of the city.

The 1980s were also a time of clear increased interest in the Bochnia Salt Mine as a historical facility. Inclusion of the most valuable pits and surface development of the mine in the list of national monuments definitely contributed to it. Simultaneously, next to the gradual process of limiting the industrial operation of the mine, former plans of establishing a sanatorium were brought back. This very difficult process of building a tourist and spa centre commenced at that time was halted by the political transformations of 1989. After 1990, it was continued for a long time until the middle of the 1990s.

The author of the work adopted the year 1995 as the end for the study; it constitutes the opening of a completely new chapter in the history of the Bochnia Salt Mine. The unorganised tourist traffic was provided with durable legal and organisational framework in the form of a newly-established entity: Uzdrowisko Kopalnia Soli Bochnia Sp. z o.o. Between 1995 and 2014, the company has been servicing numerous groups of tourists and patients who come to the Bochnia Salt Mine every year. Traditional sightseeing in the historical mining pits has been gradually supplemented by educational, health and entertainment activities. In 2014, “Kopalnia Soli Bochnia Sp. z o.o.” took over the organisation and servicing of the tourist traffic, continuing the long-term tradition of the Bochnia Salt Mine in this respect.