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## **ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SITUATION IN WROCLAW AND SILESIA BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR – A DOCUMENT FROM THE WROCLAW ARCHIVES**

### **SYTUACJA GOSPODARCZA I SPOŁECZNA WE WROCLAWIU I NA ŚLĄSKU PRZED II WOJNĄ ŚWIATOWĄ – DOKUMENT Z WROCLAWSKIEGO ARCHIWUM**

**ABSTRACT:** The document from February 1939 presented here concerns aid from the Reich authorities to the eastern provinces of Germany. It clearly informed about the war plans of the Third Reich.

**KEYWORDS:** Lower Silesia, Wrocław (Breslau), economy, unemployed population, magistrate

After the First World War, Wrocław (Breslau) found itself in crisis as a result of significant and prolonged wartime financial contributions to the army and as a result of the city's unfavourable economic structure, including the predominance of small or dwarf craft enterprises, most often one-man businesses. Due to the crisis, there was also an exodus of skilled workers from Wrocław to the West and in their place new, less professionally trained labourers came from the provinces. The housing situation in the city also deteriorated considerably, especially from 1921, when, after the plebiscite held in Upper Silesia on 20<sup>th</sup> March, Upper Silesians, opting for Germany, arrived in the city. The population of Wrocław came to about 600,000, because at the same time, in accordance with the results of the plebiscite, the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles and the Geneva Convention, part of

Upper Silesia was incorporated into Poland, which was something that they wanted to escape.

The influx of new inhabitants caused a sudden increase in the population of Wrocław, which in the centre (within the city moat) reached 380 people per 1 ha of built-up area and 1,022 people in the area of the industrialised Nikolai Suburb (Nikolai Vorstadt). This political-national and livelihood context created anti-Polish sentiments which were exploited, above all, by the Nazi movement. The city authorities associated with it, although acknowledging the many years of systemic deficiencies and negligence of previous governments in the city's economy, looked forward from 1933 to political and economic change and the creation of the "Greater Germany" announced by Hitler.

Both the inhabitants and the Wrocław authorities approved of the project to build the Oder–Danube canal and the motorway network, seeing it as a beneficial integration of Silesia, situated on the south-eastern edge of the Reich, into the modern system of goods and passenger traffic in the vast area of Eastern Europe. It was obvious that its capture and further development meant war, which was, however, approvingly and neutrally described as "expansion to the south and east of Europe". There was also no hiding the fact that the proposed solutions also meant the possibility of favourable territorial changes at the expense of the neighbour Polish state.

The part of the document presented here was written in February 1939 in connection with a decree issued by Hitler on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1939 formally concerning assistance from the Reich authorities to the eastern provinces of Germany. Its full content was known only to a small number of trusted state administration personnel, from whom a reaction was expected. This document was not published, presumably because it unequivocally reported on the imminent warfare of the Third Reich, within *Grossdeutschland*. Its full text was known only to the President of the Wrocław *Regierungsbezirk* (governmental district), and his staff were informed of the entire task by him in the form of a *mündliche Rücksprache*. Only copies of the parts of the document corresponding to their competences were given to them to work on. It is known that *Regierungsbezirk* Councillor Dr. Ehrlicher received a copy of the section on cultural affairs and Councillor Matzker a copy of the section on construction. The final report was signed by *Oberbürgermeister* Dr. Hans Fridrich and Dr. Georg Kroll, President of the Wrocław *Regierungsbezirk*.

**Fragment of the Secret Report of 1<sup>st</sup> Februar 1939 from the Magistrate of the City of Wrocław to the President of the Wrocław *Regierungsbezirk* about the economic and population situation of the city and Silesia in the years 1938-1939.**

The State Archives in Wrocław (Archiwum Państwowe we Wrocławiu), Wrocław Governmental District, No. 46, original in German, fragment typescript, no pagination.

**Economy**

[...] The Job Centre Magistrate of the City of Wrocław has estimated that there are currently around 14,000 job seekers, including around 3,000 women, and that migration to other German lands has not been stopped at all.

I therefore ask for intervention in this situation in order to carry out in Wrocław in full the indications provided for in the decree of the Führer and Chancellor of the Third Reich of 1<sup>st</sup> February 1939, because the general situation in Wrocław and the emigration movement observed here require this.

**General matters**

To find reasons why it is necessary to intensify the economy in Wrocław, one should consider, among other things, lagging of the economic and social development of Silesia in relation to the Third Reich. We will allow ourselves to characterize the lower wage level (we give merely one of the symptoms here) with a few examples, especially the most striking ones. Gross earnings per hour of work of a Silesian worker were lower than the average in the Reich in the chemical industry by 27%, in iron production by 21.5%, in textile industry by 19%.

Another symptom of economic and population problems is a great loss caused by immigration.

**Population movement in Wrocław**

Migration population losses were in the years: 1934 – 1,060 persons, 1935 – 2,311, 1936 – 6,738, 1937 – 4,655, 1938 – 3,365.

The migration losses were greater than the population growth for many years. At a normal, natural further development, Wrocław would have today around 640,000 inhabitants, but in reality it has only around 622,000 of them, so by 18,000 less.

The extraordinary intensity of population movements in the post-war period, as well as already in the pre-war period, was mainly due to the fact that many young, yet untrained immigrants, mostly from the eastern part of Silesia, come to Wrocław only to later, after learning a profession and getting practical experience, move further west to industrial districts with better salaries, higher living standards and wider professional opportunities. This phenomenon, beneficial for industry in central Germany, was for Wrocław a severe disadvantage due to the loss of qualified specialists, which made it difficult to switch the specialisation of the plants necessary after the war. However, a thorough switch of plants' production was necessary in Wrocław. The industrial production of Wrocław has lost around 3 million consumers due to the renunciation of areas in the eastern part of the Reich. In addition, the purchasing power of the population who arrived in the city immediately after the end of the war was very weak. This resulted in an extremely heavy burden on the Wrocław social welfare system and the Wrocław housing market.

The statistics of the last 50 years show that most of the people who came to Wrocław were servants, people with no professional training, unskilled craftsmen and day labourers, and at the same time the city was constantly losing highly qualified workers and people with large incomes. In the last six years (since 1933), there has been a very strong outflow, above all, of skilled workers, followed by scholars, civil servants, military personnel, qualified industrial assistants and wealthy people without a profession. The natural consequence of this population movement, considered according to professional groups, is a constant decline in education and culture due to the continuous inflow of low-skilled and unskilled workers and the outflow of highly-skilled people.

The picture of the negative development and influence of the economic structure of Wrocław is further emphasized by the results of statistical research concerning the age of emigrants. Over the last six years, Wrocław has recorded an increase in its population mainly in the age group from 5 to 15, whose training is a burden on the city budget, and in the age group from 40 to 50 and older people, i.e. the ageing and disabled, who lack initiative and strength to work. These people are very often a burden on the municipal social care. Conversely, people aged 20 to 30 years and 30 to 40 years, productive and fully qualified workers with experience, 15 to 20 years of age, who have just obtained their professional qualifications and can go into production, emigrate in particular. **Thus, professional and biological selection of the Wrocław population takes place, as a result of which Wrocław**

**loses a better part of its population. Immediate stopping of this phenomenon is a pressing need.** [emphasis – T.K.]

### **Additional discussion on housing issues in the city**

Wrocław is still one of the cities with the most unfavourable housing conditions, both in terms of living space and hygiene. According to the 1937 housing census, there were 11.1 single-chamber dwellings per 100 flats; when in all the larger cities in Germany only 3. These housing ratios have not changed fundamentally also at present, as evidenced by the still high percentage of small flats (1- to 3-chamber), which at the beginning of 1938 was 68.3%, while in other cities this percentage was on average around 50%.

The Wrocław housing issue is particularly pressing due to the large number of children in families in of the German East. About 20% of flats are overcrowded. Wrocław has a sad record in this regard among other cities. The housing shortage cannot be covered by the existing efforts in the field of housing and estate construction. Today it can be estimated at about 15,000 missing flats.

The economic situation of the Wrocław population, worse than the average, is closely related to the city's finances. It is important that, despite the external alignment of budgets in the years 1937–1938, no real internal balance of the budget was ever achieved. (Statutory reserves are completely inadequate. There are no reserves for urgent matters, such as the construction of schools, the reorganisation of transport in the city centre, the construction of cheap and mass “folk” flats, etc., and insufficient coverage of individual plans). It should also be taken into account that external budget alignment have been achieved thanks to the alignment of finances by Prussia. Therefore, it must be preserved in its consequences unconditionally to ensure at least the existing services. It should also be pointed out that Wrocław has increased its tax base to such an extent that it will undoubtedly impede economic recovery.

However, in order to enable the city to make the necessary undertakings, which will be discussed further in this report, new financial resources should be made available to the city. This includes, among other things, loosening the credit ban on municipalities and loosening the blockade of credits intended for savings banks and other cash institutions. Such a financial policy is of particular importance for the city of Wrocław, as the Wrocław savings bank has not used up much of the

mortgage quota and, as a result of it, would be able to immediately grant far-reaching loans for the construction of small housing once the credit blockade would have been lifted.

In view of the low real incomes and the need to raise the standard of living, it should also be examined whether it is not possible to include Wrocław in a better pay scale and thus raise the real wages of local workers. Wrocław is currently at the 16<sup>th</sup> level of the urban pay scale<sup>1</sup>, while Königsberg, a city with disproportionately better conditions, is at the 14<sup>th</sup> level of that scale.

**The general facts set out above make it clear that there are grounds for the Führer Decree in Wrocław to be implemented as far as possible and as quickly as possible. [...] Favourable conditions for political and economic development within Grossdeutschland [emphasis – T.K.]**

Never has there been a more favourable situation for successfully tackling the difficulties in the economic development of Silesia than today, as favourable conditions have been created for the economic regeneration of Silesia and Wrocław. There is a change in the political and communication situation, such as the construction of the Oder–Danube canal, the privileged transit motorway Wrocław–Brno–Vienna and the facilitated car traffic through Czechoslovakia, which means the incorporation of Silesia into the Reich’s motorway network and the facilitation of communication for privileged transit, goods and passenger traffic through Czechoslovakia, i.e. there will be a complete change in the strategic situation, enabling the creation in Silesia of economic and military potential and future prospects in the great eastern area.

**It is furthermore pointed out the economic benefits created by the creation of the Wrocław–Brno–Vienna motorway and expects another political and communication construction, namely the Oder–Danube canal and the expansion to southern and eastern Europe[...]. [emphasis – T.K.]**

Untersigned:

*Oberbürgermeister* – Dr. Hans Fridrich,

*Regierungspräsident des Regierungsbezirks Breslau* – Dr. Georg Kroll

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<sup>1</sup> Urban pay scale – in the Reich, some cities were considered privileged centres in terms of wages. State officials in these centres received higher wages than the average in the Reich. The same applied to craftsmen for their services. However, Wrocław did not belong to this category of cities.

## STRESZCZENIE

W prezentowanym tu dokumencie z lutego 1939 r. władze miasta Wrocławia konstatowały wieloletnie braki i zaniedbania systemowe poprzednich rządów w gospodarce miejskiej, jednocześnie oczekiwały ekonomicznych zmian oraz utworzenia zapowiadanych przez Hitlera “Wielkich Niemiec”. Zarówno mieszkańcy, jak i wrocławskie władze z aprobatą odnosiły się do projektu budowy kanału Odra–Dunaj i sieci autostrad, widząc w nich korzystne włączenie Śląska, usytuowanego na południowo-wschodnim krańcu Rzeszy, do nowoczesnego systemu ruchu towarowego i osobowego na wielkim obszarze Wschodniej Europy. Oczywistym było, że jego opanowanie i dalszy rozwój wiązał się z rozpoczęciem wojny, którą jednak aprobatywnie i neutralnie określano, jako “ekspansję na południe i wschód Europy”. Nie ukrywano też, że projektowane rozwiązania oznaczały możliwość korzystnych terytorialnych zmian w odniesieniu do polskiego sąsiedztwa.

