

Between Destruction and Rebuilding –
Gdańsk in Kazimierz Lelewicz's Photography

The exhibition shows the state of the city from the time of the tragic fights in 1945 up to the decision of rebuilding in 1948, and the beginning of the work. The photos are commented by the words of the witnesses of these events.



MG/IN/5150

"Ruins all around. The path is not laid with asphalt nor cobblestone, but with heaps of bricks. Crushed by truck tires, artillery wheels, trampled by thousands of horse and human legs, the bricks sprayed heavily with rain turn into blood-like mush, which paints horses' hooves and human boots red."

"As if the soil was bleeding. We ride into the Long Market. The remains of the Town Hall, the Artus Court. Fire and smoke all around. It seems that some parts of St. Mary's Church survived, but it is impossible to tell."



MG1N14645

This is Gdańsk as seen by Stanisław Strąbski at the end of March 1945. The journalist was moved by the view of the ruined city. He absorbed the destruction with all his senses, smelled the burning, felt the warmth of smoldering walls, heard the cracking of flames and of falling bricks. 75 years later we can recall the picture of those days and of the following long months of Gdańsk, first overgrown and then raised from ruins, thanks to the photography of Kazimierz Lelewicz.

92251N15H



The center of Gdańsk was 95 per cent destroyed. Gdańsk, together with Warsaw and Wrocław, set a tragic record of wartime destruction.

Behind those numbers was the havoc of the city raised by the hands of the greatest masters of Dutch Renaissance and Baroque, a city that used to be one of the most beautiful historical complexes of Northern Europe.

Karol Małcużyński



MG1114150

I believe that Gdańsk should not be rebuilt at all. Nobody in this day seriously thinks that we should rebuild Forum Romanum to its original shape in order to house a county magistrate in Basilica Julia or to host motorcycle races in the Colosseum. We agree that it is more serious to display ruins in disciplined, carefully planned architectural framework. Let us not try to rebuild the ruins of densely built streets, but vice versa, let us demolish them to the foundations... Mieczysław Janowski

1991/1992



The necessity of rebuilding one of the most important Polish cities is not questioned by anyone, while the question: where Gdańsk is to be rebuilt - causes doubts and differences of opinion.

Port specialists and full-scale modern urban planners [...] believe that without looking at the sentiment, to which there are no grounds, the construction of the new Polish Gdańsk should be planned on a vast plane between Nowy Port and Wrzeszcz.

Marian Brandys



I was even more enchanted by the ruins of the Main Town in 1947, when the debris, temporarily ordered and stabilized, began to overgrow with greenery, bushes, and even glitter with the colors of field flowers. In combination with the fresh greenery, the dark, shapeless masses of walls and debris, shattered relics of the carved stonework of gables, portals, and especially the front porches, gained a sort of ancient value.

Jerzy Stankiewicz



MG/1449

A moonlike landscape opened in front of us. Time took its toll. What was about to collapse had already been overturned by storm winds. The cracked walls of buildings threatening the lives of passers-by were demolished. The debris settled somewhat and as if flattened, overgrown with weeds on which goats grazed here and there - the providers of the few families that found shelter in the surviving houses in the area of Osiek, at Sukiennicza street and around St. John's church.

Barbara Lepówna



MG/11/14796

Rubble seen from the streets of the Main Town did not make such an impression any more, I got used to it. But what I saw from the town hall tower was hard to imagine. Almost all of Gdańsk, especially its part between Motława and the market halls, was a huge ruin. Wall stumps, heaps of rubble, distorted girders and pipes, concrete fragments hanging on the remains of reinforcements, lonely, strangely high chimneys, massive walls of churches without towers...

Stanisław Goździelewski

MGHNIS049



Railroad tracks were laid to speed up the removal of debris. The railway line and a streetcar, already running along the Royal Route, kept us awake. Fortunately, the railway line reached only St. Mary's Church. We were also able to get an order to the tram driver to significantly reduce the speed of trams at the crossing of Długa street and Długi Targ. Therefore, these dangers had been moved away from the valuable monuments we were reconstructing.

Aleksander Juszkiewicz

MG IN | 5457



Part of the rubble, properly granulated, also served as a base for floors. The rest was loaded onto specially adapted galleys, which we received from the Gdańsk Shipyard, and exported to the Gulf of Gdańsk and sunk there.

Henryk Frey

Me(1N/4143



Gdańsk looks like a city that has collapsed in ruins ages ago. Distinctive ruins are already covered by bush and grass that is not trampled by the foot of man. There is absolute silence and emptiness there. On views the ruins of Gdańsk as ruins of Babylon or Nineveh.

Marek Żuławski

MGLINI4459



Much was written about the enthusiasm of the reconstruction, about the generosity of the crowds of the people of Gdańsk who cleared the main communication arteries with their shovels and pickaxes, and then moved towards the smaller ones. What incentives drove them to do this? Was it an explosion of energy accumulated by the war, which the invaders did not manage to suppress neither by terrible physical nor moral terror?

Włodzimierz Gordziejczuk

MG11N14458



During the reconstruction of the Main Town, a random human motley was employed from various parts of the country and different environments. Some of the carters, for example, were clever, full of original ideas aimed at tricking construction management. Before we introduced the obligation to hand over receipts at the landfill, it happened that such a smart citizen, riding for a few hundred meters, turned into the nearest street and dumped a load of debris onto uncleared rubble.

Włodzimierz Gordziejczuk

MGIN/5138



95

Initially, the construction was self-sufficient - the brick was obtained from demolition, but when the daily consumption exceeded 100,000 pieces, the problem of supply became extremely important, even more so that, for unknown reasons, the supplier was to be Braniewo, a destroyed and sleeping town. [...] Every day up to twenty trains arrived at the stations in Wrzeszcz and Gdańsk.

Włodzimierz Gordziejczuk

MG11N14516



I just lost my breath. Because here I was in a huge cemetery, among stumps of the facades of burned buildings with gaping sockets of windows, where heaps of debris piled up in the old streets and the smell of burning hovered around. In the partially ruined St. Mary's Cathedral the abyss of open tombs darkened, and rotten skulls and bones were scattered on the floor covered with debris.

Zygmunt Wysocki

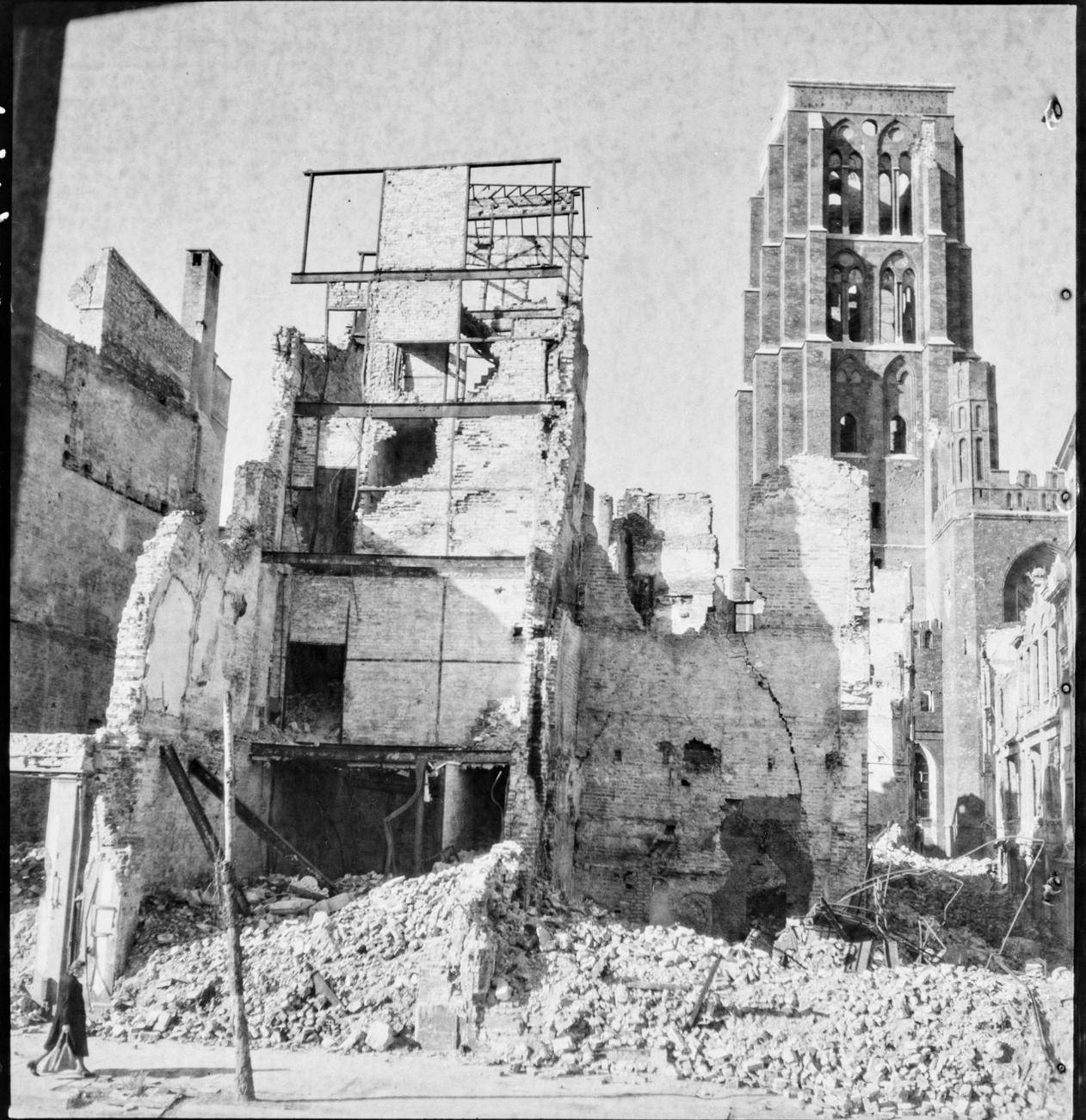
ME11N14635



A valuable monument requiring reconstruction was St. Mary's Church. A young forest began to grow on the debris of its fallen vaults, the floor slabs, shattered by shelling, exposed coffins with remains.

When I climbed the 78-meter church tower to give instructions about its cleaning, a tall birch tree was already growing there. I ordered to replant it somewhere near the church. Zdzisław Kwaśny

ST. MARY'S CHURCH



The reconstruction of the Main Town Hall was being carried out. Its tower was surrounded by high scaffolding, narrowing upwards. At the very top it all shook a lot. The vertical deviation was so significant that you had to have very strong nerves to get to the top and work there without fear. Despite the allowance for working at heights not everyone decided to do it.

Barbara Kosianowska

89151N168



When the steeple was ready to be clad with copper sheet, the trouble with getting it started. There was no sheet in the entire country, it was among strictly regulated materials, and to receive it one was required to deliver an appropriate amount of copper scrap.

So, all employees began to pick this scrap metal up from the debris. When separating copper sheet from unburnt wooden blocks we swallowed quite a lot of harmful patina.

Aleksander Juszkiewicz



MG-11N(4203

At the corner of Tkacka and Piwna Streets was a damaged building called the Schlütter House. At first glance it seemed whole, there was no burned woodwork and the corner gable was damaged. Work began with the strengthening of the basement walls and the removal of debris in the basement, where five more corpses were found. The Milicja exhumed them partially, the rest of the remains were scraped into a corner, walled up and a large cross was carved on the plastered wall.

Michał Bojakowski



NGINIS152

27/91

My housing allocation, arranged by the Polytechnic in a townhouse standing on the rubble at Wałowa Street, did not disappear. I felt strange here.

Whatever I looked at from my windows on the fourth floor of the dirty-red tenement house was also dirty-red: the edifice of the library, St. James' church, St. Bartholomew's church and finally - seen through heaps of brick debris - the train station.

Adam Haupt

MG11N14134



The facades of the Golden Townouse required gilding. Due to the "clockwork" nature of the job, for protection against wind, its front was enclosed with something like a wooden, well-glazed barrack with stairs and landings inside for goldsmiths. The gold they used was the thickness of cigarette paper, the size of a postcard, folded in the form of books. [...] It was a job requiring skill and precision, very time consuming.

Michał Bojakowski

NGIN|N19N



The greenery-covered ruins of Mariacka Street created a landscape that seemed to me no less beautiful than the one depicted in the old engravings and photos. Although later on I always preached my categorical protest against the tendencies opposed to the reconstruction of the historical landscape of the Main City, but deep down I understood the spokesmen of the romantic concept of leaving this part of the city as a great green lapidary.

Jerzy Stankiewicz

MG/IN/46 37



Gdańsk is near. The smell of burning grain burst through the half-open door of the wagon. We learned that it is smoldering grain on Granary Island. The whole wooden structure of the granaries had burned down, and the grain stored in them still smoldered under piles of brick walls. And it smoldered the next year because it did not bother anyone. Gdańsk was almost gone.

Janusz Ciemnołoński



MG11N14574

At the section of Ogarna Street, where construction was managed by engineer Czesław Honik, the brigade working there found its way to the cellars with wine must. All of Ogarna was bursting at the time - some residents were carrying full tubs of this raw wine. My friends brought me a two-liter bubble as well. It tasted like French cider.

Bernard Hinz

MG11N14276



Credits

Curator: Klaudiusz Grabowski

Translation: Piotr Świercz

The commentary for the photos are the words of witnesses of these events, gathered in two volumes of „Wspomnienia z odbudowy Głównego Miasta” („Memoirs of the reconstruction of the Main Town”, editors Izabella Trojanowska and Izabella Greczanik-Filipp).