

NOTES

ON THE SENATE



SENATE
OF THE REPUBLIC
OF POLAND

The Parliament Buildings

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BEFORE THE PARTITIONS OF POLAND, the Senate and the House of Deputies both met in Warsaw's Royal Castle. The Russian authorities completely altered these chambers after the November Uprising to obliterate the memory of the tradition of the Polish Sejm and how it had voted to dethrone Tsar Nicholas I as the King of Poland in 1831.

THE FIRST SITTING OF THE SEJM of reborn Poland was planned for mid-February 1919, but first a venue had to be chosen. At that time Warsaw had no suitable building for a parliament, with a spacious chamber and a large number of additional rooms where committees and clubs could meet. As time was short, it was decided to adapt an existing building for temporary use. The choice was the Alexander and Mary Institute for Young Ladies, a secondary school of a markedly russifying nature, which had been evacuated to Russia at the beginning of World War I.

The site of the school, on a slope leading down to the Vistula river, had long remained undeveloped. In the 19th century, there were still gardens here, along a street called Wiejska (Country) Street. It was different in character from the already built-up districts next to it. The Gentlemen's Institute, a boys' 8-grade secondary school, was built there in 1851–53 and handed over to the Alexander and Mary Institute just under ten years later. All that is left of these buildings today is a small mansion house on the north side of the present parliament building. It gives us an idea of the style of the former complex.



The Senate building, interwar period (photo of the National Digital Archives)

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On 1st December 1918, the Construction Division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs was instructed to adapt the main building (and prepare its design) by 15th February of the following year, i.e. in 61 working days. It was no easy task to transform a boarding school for young ladies into a parliament building in winter time, even though the guidelines, calling the building “provisional”, recommended “the utmost economy, both in the construction and interior decoration of the buildings.” Four hundred men worked strenuously in two shifts, but there was no time to let the buildings dry out and they remained unpleasantly damp for several weeks. The classrooms, dormitories, two chapels (Catholic and Orthodox) and the headmistress’s apartment – were converted into the conference rooms for the Sejm committees, meeting rooms for parliamentary clubs, a library and a restaurant.

The small utility building, which had previously housed a kitchen, a laundry and an infirmary, connected to the main building by a covered walkway, was also used. Called the “ministerial” building, it housed the rooms of ministers, ambassadors and the head of state. The former Institute refectory, which was now the debating chamber of the Sejm and, from 1922, also of the Senate, caused the most problems. It was too long and narrow, and hardly big enough to accommodate all deputies and senators. Photographs from that time show a long chamber with a row of tall, thin cast-iron pillars. The furniture is simple, made of dark stained pine. The only decorative feature were the two old Empire chandeliers on both sides of the rostrum.

SEVEN YEARS LATER, IN 1926, a decision was taken on yet another alteration of the building – again provisional – until the planned monumental parliament building could be erected on grounds surrounding the Ujazdów Castle. A new amphitheatre for debates was to be added to the south façade of the former Alexander and Mary Institute (the chief architect was Kazimierz Skórewicz). Its main feature was eighteen pillars of Kielce marble, surrounding the gallery. The chamber was linked to a hotel for members of parliament and senators by a smoking-room on the ground floor. The hotel had 200 residential rooms, a badly-needed budget committee room and a library and restaurant, transferred there from the former Alexander and Mary Institute building. The project was completed in two years. The whole complex was intended as a venue for future international conferences. The Sejm debated in the new chamber and the old one was given to the Senate.

THE PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS DID NOT ESCAPE DESTRUCTION IN WORLD WAR II. All that was left of the Sejm chamber were the walls and the marble colonnade. Miraculously, the valuable interior frieze by the sculptors Jan Szczepkowski and Jan Biernacki was saved.

THE FIRST SITTING AFTER THE WAR IN 1947 was again held in the frosty month of February. A temporary metal and wood dome had to be hurriedly constructed over the debating chamber. The entire ruined 19th century part of the buildings – the former Alexander and Mary Institute – was demolished. Work began in 1949 on a new parliamentary complex, designed by Bohdan Pniewski. It consisted of long, low interconnected pavilions, with spans supported by columns. The completed building differed from the original design, because socrealism became a prevailing style then and the architectural design of the building was modified accordingly. No provision was made for Senate chambers, since parliament was to be a single-chamber one from then on.

THE SENATE ELECTED IN FREE ELECTIONS IN 1989 initially held debates in the debating chamber of the Sejm, alternately with the Sejm, and then in the Hall of Columns. The conversion of the first floor of a pavilion given to the Senate was completed in May 1991. Three conference rooms were linked to form an amphitheatre, where the 100 Senators now hold their debates.

