

## Chelmek – small Zlín

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Away from the main roads of Poland and the current trends of the interwar architecture in Chelmek in Lesser Poland there was created a complex of patronage buildings, which was built on the initiative of the Czechoslovakian shoe company "Bata". This investment has irreversibly changed this small town not only in the urban planning and architecture terms, but also demographic, sociological and customary ones.

The history of this city can be divided into two stages – the first one before the running of the factory and the second of after this date. Until 1932 Chelmek was a small village, which inhabitants were living from agriculture and work in nearby towns: Oświęcim and Chrzanów. The interwar period brought great changes here. Good communication with Cracow and Katowice, as well as a small distance between Chelmek and these cities influenced its further fate. It was this town that was selected by the employees of the Polish Shoe Company "Bata" registered in 1929 in Cracow, contributing to the start of the process of its transformation into a modern urban complex, inhabited by modern people.

The company "Bata" developed in Zlín in Moravia, a city found about 90 km to the west from Brno. The company was established in 1894 by Tomasz Bata with two siblings<sup>1</sup>. The shoe company "Bata" based on its flagship product has successively developed until the outbreak of the World War I. In the meantime, Tomasz Bata became the sole owner. After Czechoslovakia regained independence, a crisis took place in the "Bata" factory. In warehouses there were large amounts of shoes ready for selling, which was not

present. The owner lowered prices by half, what resulted in rapid emptying of warehouses, new production start-up and elimination of the competition, which could not cope with the dumped prices. This procedure allowed the company in a longer term to develop itself to a degree, which has not been known previously in Moravia.

The development of the factory was also associated with the construction of new industrial buildings. A recognisable sign of the company were the buildings founded on a modular grid 6,15 x 6,15 m, where a typical building was three modules wide, and thirteen long. The objects appearing from 1923 had a concrete frame construction with the brick filling and the repeatable, metal window and door woodwork<sup>2</sup>. This system was perfectly suited to construct factory buildings due to the possibility of any interior design both for the production, warehouse and office buildings.

The developmental success of the company has continually attracted people willing to work, especially because salaries in "Bata" were the highest in Czechoslovakia. The constantly increasing number of employees made it necessary to construct housing and public utilities. The process of the construction of houses for the employees began before World War I, and in 1928 there were almost 700 houses, and in 1939 approximately 2000<sup>3</sup>. There were created several dozen types of these buildings, they differed in cubic capacity, roofs and the layout of rooms. However,

2. L. Horňáková, *Výstavba meziválečného Zlína*, [in:] *Fenomén Baťa. Zlíská architektura 1910-1960*, ed. L. Horňáková, Zlín 2009, p. 59.

3. Z. Pokluda, *Ze Zlína do světa – příběh Tomáše Bati*, Zlín 2009, p. 28.

1. T. Baťa, *Jak jsem začínal*, Brno n.d., p. 17.

1. *Chelmek, houses for employees. Source: Problem szewski w Polsce, Chelmek 1936, p. 33*



2. *Zlín, fragment of the buildings of the old shoe factory. Photo by A. Syska, 2010*





3. Zlín, typical factory building. Photo by A. Syska, 2010



4. Zlín, house of the Zálesná colony. Photo by A. Syska, 2010

most often there were two-storey buildings with brick masonry walls, with simple, compact lumps covered with flat roofs. Large complexes of workers' houses were located successively on the hills surrounding the city.

The company, being the largest employer in the city, has also influenced the appearance of its representative spaces. The boundary between what is urban and what was created thanks to the initiative of "Bata" got blurred quickly, and over time Zlín became the patronage town of the factory. The construction layout of buildings checked in the factory was started to be used also for the construction of the public buildings: schools, hospitals, department stores, and even the film production company. The quadrate medieval market Zlín ceased to act as the most important public space in the town and this role was taken over by the square in front of the entrance to the production plant. In 1932, after the death of Tomasz, the control in the company was taken over by his half-brother Jan Antonin, who continued the expansion of the company. As a result, until 1939 around the whole world there were created 36 branches of the company.

In a Lesser Poland village of Chełmek located near Oświęcim in the 1930s there was created a complex consisting of the factory buildings and houses for the workers. Its construction was conducted according to the plan of František Lydie Gahura. The settlement was to be equipped with all

functions that a modern city needed. Public buildings were to be located near the wide green axis, which connected the factory with the housing areas. An important place was occupied by sports and recreation areas. The plan of Chełmek was modelled on the layout of the Industrial Town, which was the project developed in the 1930s in "Bata". This idea was to be possible, after small changes, for adaptation to the ground conditions in each new month, in which the branch of the company was created. Until 1939 it was possible to achieve about one percent of the whole establishment of new Chełmek.

Factory premises consisted of 10 objects and had diverse structure: reinforced concrete, steel. On the premises there were also wooden buildings, which acted as storages and brick objects in which there were offices, canteen and the company store. All buildings retained the proportions of projections of Zlín prototypes, however they were not multi-storey. All of them were also placed in the barrack system. The residential area, till today called the "colony", consists of 17 buildings, which were designed for employees of different levels. Just like in Zlín, residential houses were the two-storey brick buildings, with dense lumps, mostly covered by flat roofs. In Chełmek they were constructed on stone foundations and they have reinforced concrete stairs. In some there were added wooden porches,

5. Zlín, typical factory building. Photo by A. Syska, 2010





6. Otmęt, factory premises. Photo by A. Syska, 2011



7. Otmęt, workers' houses. Photo by A. Syska, 2011

and in others tall roofs, which were created mostly in the 1960s of the 20th century. The flats had from about 50 m<sup>2</sup> to about 75 m<sup>2</sup>. The smaller ones, suitable for families of the production employees, consisted of two chambers: kitchen and room; toilets were available from the stairwell<sup>4</sup>. Flats for senior executives were in two-family buildings, where one occupied the whole floor, while each one was equipped with a full bathroom. While the workers' hotels had 20 rooms.

To Chełmek, together with the plans of buildings, technology and production equipment, representatives of "Bata" brought the Zlín way of thinking about the worker, who was not only to be the element of production, but also "the member of the integrated community in which in force were certain values and ethical rules."<sup>5</sup> The Polish Shoe Company "Bata" in Chełmek apart from the factory and workers colony also financed the construction of the school, co-financed the construction of the church, contributed to the creation of the health care object. Forty five hour working week influenced the completely new layout of the day, what with good wages resulted in the development of the free time culture. That is why the company willingly supported the operation of associations and the Sports Club. Shaping the body was then connected with the shaping of the spirit, what was perfectly used by the company.

It is significant that neither in Czechoslovakia nor in Poland the modern architecture of "Bata" was the topic which has often appeared in the architectural press. In the native

4. Currently the examples of combining two flats into one are common (footnote by A. Syska).

5. A. Szczerski, *Buty i utopia nowoczesności. Polska Spółka obuwia „Bata” w Chełmku*, "Artluk" 3 (9) 2008, p. 38.

8. Chełmek, two-family houses for employees. Photo by A. Syska, 2007



country it was considered as purely capitalist, which should bring tangible benefits to the factory's owner. Modernist forms were regarded only as the tool to achieve this goal – as the unification, simple solids, lack of plaster and decorations reduced the costs of the construction of houses for workers.

Tomasz and Jan Antoni Bata developed a system, which allowed the formation of a new type of society, to a very large degree dependent on the parent plant. Thanks to the labour plant it gained the social care in the form of access to education, shops with subsidised goods, factory canteen, health care, sports equipment, developed public transport and culture. In return it gave absolute loyalty towards the employer. Tomasz Bata claimed: *My whole life has been a continuous education of conscience and the*

9. Chełmek, porch of the workers' house. Photo by A. Syska, 2007





10. Chelmek, eight-family houses for employees. Photo by A. Syska, 2007

*formation of my own and others' character* – this shows his attitude to others, whom he called colleagues<sup>6</sup>.

The attempt to build the Polish Zlín in Chelmek was only partially successful. The far-reaching plans assumed the implementation of the town for 15,000 residents with about 1,500 houses for the employees and 40 public buildings<sup>7</sup>. Today the "Bata" buildings are the remains of the unfinished process of construction of a modern town. The complex of houses for employees is a unique example of the interwar modernist architecture, which arose away from all urban centres. Thanks to its timeless simplicity, usability and genesis it became the material evidence of the uniqueness of Chelmek, also proving that this Lesser Poland town had a chance to become the small Zlín.

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6. H. Hebda, *W widłach Wisły i Przemszy*, p. 72, typescript in the Municipal Cultural Centre of Sport and Recreation in Chelmek.

7. A. Syska, *Enklawa batyzmu* [in:] *Architektura województwa krakowskiego*, ed. A. Szczerski, H. Postawka-Lech, Kraków 2013, pp. 251-274.