

## MS *Piłsudski* – the Fitting and Interior Design of the Polish Transatlantic Ship from 1934 to 1939

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In November 1933 in Monfalcone, representatives of Polish Transatlantic Ship Company signed a contract with an Italian shipyard for two luxury passenger ships. The first was MS *Piłsudski*, laid down on 3 March 1934, and the second was the legendary MS *Batory*, launched on 3 June 1935. The latter luckily came through the World War II.

Artists competed to design MS *Piłsudski*'s décor. It was to be a piece of art, "a floating part of Homeland" as well as a beautiful, modern and functional vessel. MS *Piłsudski* was to be the first so large-scale Polish liner to go mainly between Gdynia and New York. It was both to delight and to practically serve its passengers on their more than a week-long voyage to the USA. From the beginning MS *Piłsudski* was built as a creation of the national character and the works of the most renowned Polish artists were to be on board.

The artists had 20 months to accomplish the task. By order of the Ministry of Trade, an Art Committee was set up to select artists whose works best matched the ship function and, at the same time, represented the Polish art of the first half of 20th century. The Committee was spearheaded by representatives of Warsaw Academy of Fine Art and Warsaw University of Technology – professors Tadeusz Pruszkowski, Lech Józef Niemojewski, Wojciech Jastrzębowski and architect Stanisław Brukalski. They decided to reject the avant-garde and choose functionality, experience, esthetics and tradition instead. They listed 78 artists – architects, painters, sculptors, designers, textiles designers and craftsmen; among the others Tadeusz Breyer, Alfons Karny, Antoni Kenar and Julia Keilowa, who represented artistic groups such as *Rytm*, *Ład*, *Bractwo św. Łukasza*, *Ryt* or *Towarzystwo Polska Sztuka Stosowana*. Besides, highly-regarded factories of applied art - Porcelain Factory in Ćmielów and Factory of Metal Products Norblin in Warsaw were given special orders.

The space of seven decks for approx. 1,100 passengers and crew waited to be furnished and decorated with paintings, sculptures, furniture, porcelain and metal products, mostly made in Poland. The artists started the design process and had the products approved by the Committee. Once completed, the items were sent to Italy or waited for the ship to arrive in Poland. MS *Piłsudski* was not completed yet but its legend had already existed.

1. MS *Piłsudski* in its home port Gdynia, ca. 1935. Photo from Jerzy Drzemczewski's collection



Eventually, on 12 September 1935 MS *Piłsudski* arrived in its home port – Gdynia, cheerfully greeted by numerous spectators. Press photographers, journalists as well as a newborn Polish Film Chronicle were also present. Three days later the ship went on its maiden voyage to the USA with the president of Warsaw, Stefan Starzyński and a general Gustaw Orlicz-Dreszer aboard.

The passengers could see beautiful lounges, dining rooms, bars, a library with a reading room, a smoking room, a children's playroom, and a gym. Furthermore, MS *Piłsudski* was one of the first vessels with a swimming pool. American Polonia collected memorabilia from the liner – cutlery, coffee cups and ash-trays. Menu cards with typical Polish landscape and architecture also attracted a lot of interest. Commemorative medals were issued to commemorate special events.

The main lobby was the first place to visit the ship as it was accessible for everyone. From there, using either a lift or stairs everyone could move freely between the decks. The lift door and staircase fronted onto the portrait of Marshal Józef Piłsudski. The oil painting by Zygmunt Grabowski presented the Marshal in a dress uniform with full size medals and a sash. Fresh flowers were regularly supplied by the crew. The floor was dark with three transecting white stripes. The walls were painted light and the railings, by contrast, dark. The portrait of Marshal was also framed black. Eight round ceiling lamps lit the space.

Predominantly, the social life took place in the large lounge on the promenade deck. It was a place for the finest parties accompanied by a grand white piano music. Its centre was a round dance floor with a big round lamp above. Single and double white lines divided the floor into squares, also on the dance floor. The room was furnished with chairs and sofas with light upholstery and high, richly decorated floor lamps between them. As the room was huge, it had to have

2. Main lobby, authors: Stanisław Brukalski, Wojciech Jastrzębowski, Zygmunt Grabowski. Photo from Jerzy Drzemczewski's collection





3. Great lounge, authors: Lech Niemojewski, Waław Borowski, Wojciech Jastrzębowski, Tadeusz Breyer. Photo from Jerzy Drzemczewski's collection

some pillars. They were decorated with antique pottery, fruit, animals and musical instruments. On the opposite sides of the room two symbolic sculptures, *America* and *Europe* by Tadeusz Breyer, were placed. They both were represented by nude females holding objects. America held the Statue of Liberty while Europe - the model of Christopher Columbus's legendary ship - *Santa Maria*. They both had pinned up hair formed into the shape of an eagle holding a huge bowl in its wings, which was actually a light directed at the ceiling.

On Sundays and special occasions the room served as a chapel. Behind the piano there was a black sliding wall masking an altar with a figure of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn by Antoni Kenar. It was Madonna without the Child, eyes half-closed, hands folded on her chest and head bent to the right. The figure was decorated with an engraved silver gown with 42 rays, 12 stars and the double string of beads. Her crown was held by two angels.

The space just for ladies was near the lounge. It was a small room distinguished by a truly elegant design. The walls were covered with geometric-pattern wallpapers. There was also a several-meter-high mirror there.

On the boat deck passengers could relax in a tourist-class bar or in a smoking room. They could sit on stools at a long bar counter or have more intimacy at the tables or in the armchairs in a smoking room. The room was lit by natural light as well as by flat round lamps in ceiling lacunars. Two black, relatively narrow pillars were in the centre. The floor, except one black and one white stripe, was light and plain. In the smoking room the floor was covered with an abstract-stripped carpet. It was also a place where a sculpture of Adolf Karny "Girl with Jumping Rope" stood on a marble pedestal. The sculpture's copy is exposed in Warsaw Museum of Sport and Tourism.

Evenings were spent in bars and in lounges while daytime was for strolls and relax. Passengers had access to a gym, swimming pool and an islanded outdoor games room on the boat deck.

Passengers not interested in active recreation could spend their time in verandas. Light, peace and quiet space furnished with wicker armchairs made a perfect place for readers. Verandas from the stern and bow sides had a mosaic (*tessera*) floor in dozens of different shades. Unusual rhombus-shaped tabletops and the wicker wrapped table legs attracted attention. Both verandas had a direct access to a promenade deck.

After a stroll passengers returned to their cabins in which décor varied depending on the cabin class. Guests had a choice of one-, two-, three- or four-bedded rooms. Most cabins had their own toilets and fully equipped bathrooms. The first class cabins had a private mini lounge with comfortable sofas and armchairs. The furniture had to be functional and had a tilt- proof construction. It was decided to use simple constructions and classical forms. Wood was the main material but metal, bronze, iron and plastic were also used. Traditional furniture was combined with a modern Art Deco line.



4. Bar with smoking room, authors: Stanisław Brukalski, Alfons Karny, Mieczysław Kotarbiński. Photo from Jerzy Drzemczewski's collection

At the outbreak of World War II *MS Pilsudski* was on its way back to Poland but never returned to its homeland. In an English shipyard in Newcastle it was converted into military transport ship. Redundant deck devices were removed, panelling torn down, lounges divided into cabins to hold as many soldiers as possible. *MS Pilsudski's* unique interior was irretrievably lost and now the photographs are the most important source of information about it.

After the ship conversion, at night of 25 - 26 November 1939, *MS Pilsudski* set off to Australia and New Zealand for a group of soldiers. It was to meet another liner - *MS Sobieski* and, escorted by war ships, the two vessels were to reach their destination ports. At about 6 a.m. just a few hours after departure, at the longitude of Cape Flamborough two explosions rocked *MS Pilsudski*. The engines stopped, the light went off. The Captain, Mamert Stankiewicz ordered to abandon ship which sank five hours later. The exact number of deaths is unknown, but it is estimated to be a small number. The captain died of exhaustion and hypothermia, after spending too much time in the cold waters of the North Sea.

The wreckage is located off the coast of England and the cause of sinking remains unidentified. Nearly 70 years after the tragedy, Polish and British divers from the Polish Diving Club Waleń (Whale) tried to find out what happened in 1939 and mounted the first large-scale expedition. In mid-August 2009 they did not reach the wreckage due to weather condition, neither did they on 29 - 31 August. It was not until 12 September 2009 that the expedition succeeded and resulted in a short video and series of photographs taken by the divers. They also recovered the porthole which was handed over to the Maritime Museum in Gdańsk on the occasion of the exhibition *MS Pilsudski on 70th Anniversary of Sinking*.



5. Veranda, authors: Stanisław Brukalski, Eugeniusz Szparkowski. Photo from Jerzy Drzemczewski's collection