

JAN SAS ZUBRZYCKI AND HIS „THEORY OF THE FLYING BUTTRESS”

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The use and development of specific national forms of expression in the artistic vocabulary was one of the most intriguing phenomena of the 19th century, rooted in the Romantic era. The absence of the Polish state from the maps of Europe made these efforts ever more pronounced and pertinent for Polish artists, who strived to emphasize their national identity and the presence of the Polish nation among Europeans. The search for national forms was particularly evident in architecture; the first calls to use motives considered to be national, native or local were voiced in mid-19th century,¹ and became more intensified towards the end of the century. The response was most ardent in church architecture.² It led to the emergence of the “Zakopane style”, and in early 20th century – of the “manor style.” Jan Sas Zubrzycki (Fig. 1) was one of the most enthusiastic promoters of national forms in Polish architecture. His interest in this field prompted him to conduct some elaborate research into Polish architecture of the Middle Ages.

The scholarly passion awakened in Sas Zubrzycki in the years 1880–1884, during his studies at the Faculty of Architecture of the Lviv Polytechnic under the supervision of Julian Zachariewicz. This was when, by order of conservator Wojciech Dzie duszycki, Sas Zubrzycki conducted his first inventory measurements (1883–1884) of the Orthodox Church in Halicz, and in 1885 – of the Dormition Church (which was published in Russian).³ Towards the end of his studies, he took the position of assistant at the Chair of Civil Engineering of his *alma mater*, and directed his academic interests towards early Christian and mediaeval architecture. The results of his research were published as two small volumes: *Styl staro-chrześcijański* [Early Christian

Style] with 25 illustration panels (Lviv 1884) and *Sztuka średniowieczna* [Mediaeval Art] with 85 illustration panels (Lviv 1886).⁴ In May 1886, Sas Zubrzycki started work as a construction assistant at the Municipal Construction Office in Krakow, where he further developed his academic passion for mediaeval architecture, albeit this time focused on the area of Krakow and Lesser Poland. It was there that in 1895 he published his study entitled *Rozwój gotycyzmu w Polsce pod względem konstrukcyjnym i estetycznym* [The Development of Gothic Art in Poland with regards to structure and aesthetics] and in 1899 – another one, titled *Krakowska szkoła architektoniczna XIV wieku* [The Krakow School of Architecture in the 14th Century], which earned him the academic title of Doctor of Technical Sciences of the Lviv Polytechnic.⁵ Another reflection of Sas Zubrzycki’s passion for the architectural feats of the Middle Ages was the work *Bazyliki średniowieczne w układzie rzutów poziomych* [Mediaeval Basilicas in Horizontal Projections] (Krakow 1891). In his writings, the architect put great emphasis on the significance and distinctiveness of the Polish variant of the Gothic style, focusing on the architecture of Lesser Poland and stressing the original nature of the so-called Krakow School, associated with the city’s own construction system. In his study of local characteristics of Polish architecture, he also pointed to the Romanesque style and the role of traditional wooden architecture, following the footsteps of his German predecessors, notably August Essenwein and Władysław Łuszczkiewicz. He objected to the nomenclature adopted by the Warsaw academic community, which referred to the Gothic architecture in Poland as “Vistula-Baltic Gothic” in trying to revive this style as national in the Russian partition.⁶

¹ A. K. Olszewski, *Przegląd koncepcji stylu narodowego w teorii architektury polskiej*, „Sztuka i krytyka. Materiały do studiów i dyskusji z zakresu teorii i historii sztuki, krytyki artystycznej oraz badań nad sztuką”, 1956, No. 3-4, p. 275-372.

² A. Majdowski, *O poglądach na styl wiślano-bałtycki w polskiej architekturze sakralnej oraz Nurt narodowy w architekturze sakralnej Królestwa Polskiego od drugiej połowy XIX wieku*, [in:] *Studia z zakresu historii architektury sakralnej w Królestwie Polskim*, Warsaw 1993, p. 39-66, 101-156; K. Stefański, *Polska architektura sakralna w poszukiwaniu stylu narodowego*, Łódź 2000 (II ed. 2002).

³ J. Sas Zubrzycki, *Curriculum vitae*, Krakow 1888, manuscript owned by the family.

⁴ Idem, *Curriculum vitae*, Krakow 1893, manuscript owned by the family.

⁵ J. Zubrzycki, *Krakowska szkoła architektoniczna XIV wieku*, „Rocznik krakowski”, vol. II, 1899, p. 109-150.

⁶ A. K. Olszewski, op. cit., p. 286-300; A. Majdowski, op. cit.; K. Stefański, op. cit., p. 29-60.

Instead, he proposed other terms, such as the “Vistula variant” or the “Vistula style”, thus underlining its original provenance associated with the Krakow school. He went on to elaborate further on this issue in his book *Styl nadwiślański jako odcień sztuki średniowiecznej w Polsce* [The Vistula Style as a Variant of Mediaeval Art in Poland] (Krakow 1910).

In his writings, Sas Zubrzycki also addressed issues of a more general nature connected with the theory of mediaeval architecture and construction. An example of this is his *Filozofia architektury, jej teoria i estetyka* [The Philosophy of Architecture, its Theory and Aesthetics], a book published in 1894 in Krakow, where the author introduced notions such as the spiritual nature of architecture, symbolism, sublimity, and stressed the need for a harmony between the beauty of form and the beauty of content. He also put great emphasis on the concept of style throughout the history of architecture. Already in his doctoral thesis, mentioned above, he accentuated the role of mystery in architecture. All these elements converged in the Gothic style, since it was primarily shaped and motivated by religion. In *Filozofia architektury* he writes: “The whole of Mediaeval architecture, most notably Gothic, is a sublime ideal of fine art (...). Mediaeval architecture, on the one hand driven by ideas and emotions, and on the other by logic and consistency, is a fine art that triumphs in glory, an ingenious artistic form of the sublime.”⁷ The Gothic style is to him an expression of man’s pursuit of God, of heaven: “In Gothic architecture, the symbolism of shape reached its zenith (...) the vertical imagery, directly symbolising the flight of human thought to God, triumphs (...). Everything works its way upwards and strives for heavens.”⁸

Sas Zubrzycki’s passion for Gothic architecture betrays an influence of Eugène E. Viollet-le-Duc, a French scholar and conservator whose ideas were very popular in the second half of the 19th century, while his propensity to read into this architecture

a symbolic and metaphysical meaning came from two English theorists: Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and John Ruskin. The latter’s essay titled *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* was discussed by Sas Zubrzycki in one of his books⁹.

As time went by, Sas Zubrzycki’s field of interest widened, particularly since he assumed the position of professor at the Chair of History of Architecture and Aesthetics at the Lviv Polytechnic. To take the job, he moved to Lviv, and stayed. This was also when, following Sławomir Odrzywolski,¹⁰ he directed his attention to Polish Renaissance motifs and the ways to use them in contemporary architecture.¹¹ He referred to Polish Renaissance as the “King Sigismund style” and promoted it, as he previously did the Krakow Gothic style, as a national form. During the Lviv period, his theoretical contributions lost some of their academic and scientific value to become more popular in character. He wrote about historical motifs in Polish art, historical folk customs of Poles and ancient Slavs, trying to revive and promote them. He advocated national pride and spirit, condemning the ubiquitous foreign influences,¹² and argued that many forms of European architecture originated from Polish and Slavic wooden types of construction.¹³

While a prolific author, Sas Zubrzycki was also active as a designer. From late 1880s he designed and erected a number of Romano-Gothic churches, which exemplified his idea of the “Vistula style.” The most prominent of these were the churches in Szczurowa (1887–1893), Błażowa (1896–1900), Ciężkowice (1901–1903), (Fig. 2), Poręba Radlna (Fig. 3), Tarnów (1904–1906), (Fig. 4), Czortków (1908–1910), (Fig. 5), Jordanów (1908–1913) and Masłów (1926–1937). A very special place among Sas Zubrzycki’s designs is held by St. Joseph’s Church in the Podgórze district of Krakow (1905–1909). Its Gothic features are inspired by the architecture of Krakow (Fig. 6). The church in Żeleźnikowa (1912–1924), one of the architect’s most interesting realizations, combines early Gothic

⁷ J. Sas Zubrzycki, *Filozofia architektury, jej teoria i estetyka*, Krakow 1894, p. 272.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 183.

⁹ J. S. Zubrzycki, *Krótkie myśli z dzieła Ruskina „Siedem lamp architektury” wraz z uwagami*, Lviv 1902. When Sas Zubrzycki worked as a member of the editorial team of Krakow’s “Architekt” magazine in the years 1902–1903, the journal published Ruskin’s book in fragments (partly abridged) as translated by Franciszek Mączyński.

¹⁰ S. Odrzywolski, *Renesans w Polsce*, Vienna 1899.

¹¹ J. Sas Zubrzycki, *Styl Zygmuntowski jako odcień sztuki odrodzenia w Polsce*, Krakow 1914; idem, *Sklepienia polskie z doby średniowiecza i odrodzenia*, Lviv 1926.

¹² J. Sas Zubrzycki et al., *Obsypiny... Obsyłania... Rąbek złoty z czasów dobrobytu i oświaty Polaków dawnych*, Lviv 1921; idem, *Styl polski. Styl narodowy*, Lviv 1922; idem, *Sława*, Katowice 1924.

¹³ Idem, *Sklepienia polskie...*, op. cit.

inspirations with elements of the “Zakopane style”. Later in his career, Zubrzycki also used motifs associated with the “King Sigismund style,” inspired by Renaissance. Examples of this are the churches in Lwów-Zamarstynów (1925–1929), Suków (1930) and Chodów (1932–1937).¹⁴ He also designed lay buildings, e.g. the city halls in Myślenice, Jordanów, Niepołomice and Zator (Fig. 7), the building of the “Sokół” Gymnastic Society in Brzozów, as well as residential buildings in Krakow and Krosno.¹⁵

The heritage of this indefatigable artist and scholar is enormous: dozens of designs and implementations, nearly fifty published works, hundreds of photographs and drawings of the most characteristic features of Polish architecture and landscape (Fig. 8). Most have survived to this day in the family records in Krakow and Lviv. There are also several unfinished and unpublished manuscripts, among them a fascinating paper titled *Teorja łęków odpornych w architekturze kościelnej ostrołuku francuskiego. Rzecz naukowo przeprowadzona pod względem logiki konstrukcyjnej i estetyki stylowej* [The Theory of the Flying Buttress in French Pointed Arch Church Architecture. A Scientific Analysis in Terms of Construction Logic and Stylistic Aesthetics.], written during World War I¹⁶ (Fig. 9) in some interesting circumstances. In autumn 1914, when Lviv was threatened by the Russian army, Sas Zubrzycki and other professors of the Lviv Polytechnic were evacuated from the city. At the expense of the authorities, Zubrzycki was placed in Baden near Vienna, at the Zum Schwarzen Adler hotel, where on 8 October 1914 he set out to work on his study.¹⁷

The manuscript was never finished, and, consequently, never published.¹⁸ Still, however, it can be considered a valuable attempt at introducing the

Polish reader to the principles of Gothic architecture and its evolution. The text is also a testimony of the author’s life-long fascination with French architecture of the Middle Ages, and reflects the influence of the works of E. E. Viollet-le-Duc, most notably his *Dictionary of French Architecture from 11th to 16th Century*.¹⁹ In the first part of his manuscript, Sas Zubrzycki expresses his disapproval of the prevailing trends in contemporary architecture, which favours “modernism” and Art Nouveau, and dismisses the old values of mediaeval art. He writes: “It is because of such misapprehensions and falsities that mediaeval art is never of interest to contemporary research and only echoes in our minds as traditions of yore.” (p. 3 of the manuscript).

Further in his study, the architect goes on to outline the history of architecture starting from ancient Egypt. But his main point of focus is making comparisons between ancient and mediaeval architecture and describing their most characteristic features. When discussing the Middle Ages, he evokes examples from the Romanesque style, then Gothic, analysing their structural solutions to observe the evolution of form. In much detail, he discusses the main principles of and solutions employed in mediaeval temples: the plan, the interior and structural elements such as piers, vaults, buttresses and, of course, flying buttresses. To better explain the subject, he adds several hand drawings (Fig. 10, 11). Ironically, the text ends at the precise moment when the author takes up his main subject – flying buttresses. The main topic of the work remained unexplored.

Teorja łęków odpornych is a zealous glorification of the Gothic architecture of France. The author is full of admiration for the Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages: “Can any beholder, looking at the cathedrals in Amiens, Chartres and Beauvais, even

¹⁴ Fr. P. Drewniak, op. cit., for a full list of churches see vol. II, which catalogues the designer’s work; K. Stefański, *Jan Sas Zubrzycki...*, op. cit., p. 17-18.

¹⁵ A catalogue by Jan Tysson (TS), Lviv 2000.

¹⁶ The author of this paper owes access to the text and information on its origins to the courtesy of Jan Tysson from Lviv, grandson of J. Sas Zubrzycki and owner of the manuscript, and Zofia Gunaris from Wrocław.

¹⁷ The details regarding the place and time of writing the manuscript are noted down by the architect on the reverse of the title page: “I began this study in Baden near Vienna on the 8th of October 1914 – at the hotel ‘zum schwarzen Adler’ Rathausgasse No. 11 – floor I, room 1.2 – during the war between Russia, Germany and Austria and between Germany and France.”

¹⁸ *Teorja łęków odpornych...* is handwritten in ink on paper, now quite yellow from age, in an unusual size format of 34 x

21,5 cm; it comprises a total of 78 and a half pages and ends in mid-page on page 79. It contains six chapters, of which the last, unfinished one, only comprises two and a half pages. Reading the manuscript is a challenging task due to the many corrections and crossings-out. The spelling of many words is different to the present one. There are also a number of underlined passages or words that were evidently of special importance to the author. The manuscript contains 11 hand drawings, and the reverse of many pages contain handwritten notes or sketches in pencil or ink.

¹⁹ Eugène-Emmanuele Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du XI^e au XVI^e siècle*. Vol. 1-10, Paris 1854–1869. Cf.: *Teoretycy, artyści i krytycy o sztuce 1700–1870*. Selection, introduction and commentary by E. Grabska and M. Poprzęcka. Publishing series *Historia doktryn artystycznych. Wybór tekstów*. Part 2, Warsaw 1974, p. 472-478.

upon careful consideration, ever conceive of how powerful a spirit of ingenuity holds those stones hanging in mid-air and interacting with one another! How admirable an equilibrium, as if a mysterious spell, binds all the elements together in one unity of structure, which – while comprised of many a material, natural motif – makes for a stunning representation of live forces still today in action. Can this beholder, even if a scholar well versed in arts and ingenious science, help feeling utter admiration for the merest spiritfulest stone every step of the way? And being an architect understanding the principles of construction, would he not be all the more strongly and longer engrossed in such a masterpiece that keeps revealing its fascinating mysteries no researcher can ignore...?

“Oh indeed! Among all architectural achievements throughout history there is no construction more deeply intellectual than the Gothic!” (p. 7 of the manuscript).

Sas Zubrzycki describes in much detail the construction elements of mediaeval French churches, and presents the important moments that marked the transition from Romanesque to Gothic style. He makes an evident distinction between the two, arguing against the notion of a “transitional style” combining elements of both. He expresses an opinion that the Gothic style appeared the moment rectangular cross vault came to be used: “A vault is either Romanesque when having a square base, or not Romanesque when its base is rectangular instead. And for a cross vault to have a rectangular base one must employ a pointed arch rather than a semi-circular arch.” (p. 31 of the manuscript).

The text also makes references to German and Polish Gothic architecture. This is where the author discusses the “Krakow school of architecture” and explores some mediaeval monuments of Wrocław. Naturally, he also speaks of his notion of the “Vis-tula style.”

Gothic architecture in the eyes of Sas Zubrzycki is a style that employed bold construction premises where every single element was meaningful. The main challenge was to conquer the forces of

gravitation and expansion, which were successfully abated by being spread through a complex system of structural elements, most notably by flying buttresses. In his admiration of mediaeval architecture, Sas Zubrzycki follows in the footsteps of his predecessors, e.g. Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and John Ruskin.²⁰

The language of the manuscript is highly emphatic, which underscores the discussed idea of mystical and religious symbolism that pervaded Gothic architecture. To make this idea even more evident, the author underlined certain recurrent words such as ‘grandness’, ‘symbol’, ‘idea’, ‘idealism’, ‘sublime’ – all of them being, according to the architect, intrinsically characteristic of this style in architecture. Some passages of the text reach the heights of exaltation, an emotional language of an author in raptures about his topic: “A grand, sublime form of art, mysterious as much as solemn, shooting high into the skies, was for centuries a true favourite of mankind; for in none other could the latter better indulge and fuller develop its spiritual nature. And the stronger the love of ideals in a time or religion, the more powerfully they crystallise in architecture! What limitless power achieved in the ever more expansive fields of thought and emotion, artistic expression translated into matter through lines, surfaces and forms, making it tangible and visible in front of our amazed eyes.” (p. 57-58 of the manuscript). To Sas Zubrzycki, Gothic art is thoroughly Christian: “All religions make use of symbols, yet none indeed betrayed a more overwhelming passion for them than Christianity. So profoundly did it imbue stone with feeling that philosophers called it music – and it was no metaphor, for every stone in such a structure voiced a tone and played a melody that for ages inspired those who cared to listen. How strange the charm of mediaeval architecture that it prayed litanies, recited poetry, sang hymns and whispered psalms, and not even the merest ashlar failed to attract attention, while all the muses and sculptures combined formed a unity that taught the human heart and spirit in a manner no one can resist (...).” (p. 27-28 of the manuscript).

²⁰ Cf.: K. Stefański, *Renesans chrześcijaństwa a rozwój architektury neogotyckiej w XIX wieku*, [in:] *Idee chrześcijańskie w życiu Europejczyka. Język, piśmiennictwo. Sztuki plastyczne. Obyczaje*. Part II. Proceedings from a conference of 15-17 May 2000, p. 103-115; *Teoretycy, artyści i krytycy o sztuce 1700–1870*, op. cit., p. 464-471, 479-485.

The language of the manuscript is very lively and colourful. The architect used a rather unusual terminology in an attempt to shun borrowings from foreign languages, especially German, and instead proposed his own Polish vocabulary. He particularly bewared of the term “Gothic,” in an effort to dismiss the notion that “Goths,” i.e. Germans, played any significant role in shaping the style. To him, all the credit should go to France: “The entire pointed-arch-based art is purely French by origin. In France it emerged, developed and flourished like a hymn, and only in its perfected form did it arrive in Germany (...) and other countries.” (p. 40 of the manuscript). Instead of the term “Gothic” he uses words such as “pointed arch”, “pointed arch style”, or sometimes “French style.”

Despite what today seems a somewhat obsolete language and vocabulary, Sas Zubrzycki’s manuscript is a fascinating read on the evolution of mediaeval architecture. This compelling story of how human mind and spirit tackled the challenge of erecting ever more sky-high edifices and how these efforts ultimately conquered matter has no equal in Polish literature of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is full of poetic raptures about architectural forms, such as the following passage: “The flying buttress is a work of an architectural genius. The moment it was introduced among all means of mediaeval construction came as the dawn of a new era in architecture and an absolute breakthrough in applying its techniques. From then on, the vaults of the nave, the transept and the apse were kept in balance with flying buttresses over the aisles and ambulatories at each intersection associated with transverse ribs (...).

“This had a far more profound significance than one could have expected. And what is first and foremost worth emphasising is the consequence it had on the shape of the pillars between the nave and aisles. They naturally had been exempt from the play of oblique forces, so pillars in the pointed arch style only functioned as support against gravitation, that is a vertical force. This explained the rapid transformation of these pillars into columns, since the material function of the latter had from the ancient times been solely vertical support (...).

“Introducing columns into the French cathedral was a most meaningful addition to the mediaeval interior, in which the efforts to attain perfection reached a pinnacle that art had hitherto never known. Meagre in cross-section, columns made the interior

brighter and more spacious to such a degree that they themselves came to be considered ornamental rather than obstructive. In terms of verticality, nothing could have more pertinently spoken of the religious spirit of the time than clear-cut edges forming sharp or soft shading from the floor right up to the roof. Symbolically speaking, columns reflected the effort of individuals for the benefit of all and limited physical space in order to let the spirit fly higher towards eternity.” (p. 67-69 of the manuscript).

Other passages contain Sas Zubrzycki’s detailed analyses, an example of which are the last words of the text (Fig. 12): “Let us compare this with the figure beside. Line AB. represents the transverse, diagonal and wall ribs of the nave. For a springing to be pleasing to the eye, that is beautiful, all the arches must start at the same level so [that] their middle points are all on one horizontal plane, which is the one represented by the ideal line AB. On that line let us plot the transverse arch BCD, and the diagonal arch with ribs. Following Viollet-le-Duc, let us mark a line at an angle of 35° from the middle of the arch – it will show us the point where the oblique force line becomes tangent with the arch. This tangent line is the line GH. Where line GH crosses the outer surface of the nave wall at point P is the most dangerous place for the building due to the structure of the nave vault.

“The very first attempt at capturing oblique thrust GH, as scientifically evidenced in the previous chapter, would be to apply a quarter-circular arch from point K whose radius will equal the width or the span of the aisle. If this arch LP is integrated in the construction in such a way that along its line a vault is made as a part of a bay with a width used in the springing C then the arch transfers the force GP to the wall of the aisle in point L.

This is how one could imagine the very humblest [sic?] attempts of introducing a transverse rib in order to transfer a force, especially when it was initially placed only under the roof of an aisle. This is how abbot Suger first used one in the abbey of Noyon, this is how it is in the cathedral in Worms, and the one on the Wawel hill.” This is where the text stops.

Sas Zubrzycki’s *Teorja łęków odpornych w architekturze kościelnej ostrołuku francuskiego. Rzecz naukowo przeprowadzona pod względem logiki konstrukcyjnej i estetyki stylowej* was written more than a century ago, but it is still a valuable source which gives an insight into the typical way of thinking of

the era of Historicism – the late 19th century, since that was the time which shaped Sas Zubrzycki's creative personality and his tastes and notions regarding the history of architecture and its contemporary role. The architect's manner of presentation was, however, obsolete in a way, in that it used concepts and reasoning characteristic for mid-19th century, the times of Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin, whose writings were such an inspiration for Sas Zubrzycki. Still, his unpublished manuscript is a precious document of a time which to a large extent shaped the face of Polish architecture of the beginning of 20th century, where a great emphasis was still put on searching for national forms.

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