



SENAT RP

NOTES ON THE SENATE

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OF POLAND**

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The Parliament Building

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 in 1830, thus obliterating the memory of the tradition of the Polish Sejm (parliament) and how it had voted to dethrone Tsar Nicholas I as the King of Poland.

The first sitting of the Sejm of Poland, reborn after the First World War, was planned for half-way through February 1919, but first a venue had to be chosen. At that time Warsaw had no suitable building for a parliament, with large chambers and enough additional rooms where committees and floor groups could meet. As time was short – 61 working days – it was decided to adapt an existing building for temporary use. The choice was the Alexander and Mary Institute for Young Ladies, which had been evacuated at the beginning of the War. It was a secondary school of a markedly russifying nature, which had removed to Russia.

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' 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.

On 1st December 1918, the Department of Works of the Ministry of Internal Affairs was instructed to adapt the main building by 15th February of the following year, i.e. in 61 working days (including making the architect's drawing). It was no easy task to transform a boarding school into a parliament building in winter time, even



The building of the Senate, 1918–1939.

(Fot. National Digital Archives)



*The building of the Sejm
– view from Wiejska street.
(Fot. Senate Archives)*

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 and two chapels – Catholic and Orthodox – were renovated to provide Sejm committee rooms, meeting rooms for parliamentary floor groups, a library and a restaurant. The small utility building, which housed a kitchen, a laundry and a sanatorium 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 Sejm and from 1922 the Senate debating chamber, caused the most problems. It was too long and narrow, and hardly big enough to hold all the members of parliament. In photographs of the time, we see a long chamber with a row of tall, slim cast-iron pillars. The furniture is simple, made of stained pine. The sole decorative feature is the two old Empire chandeliers on either side of the rostrum.

Seven years later, in 1926, it was decided to rebuild – again provisionally – until the planned monumental parliament building could be erected on the site of the Ujazdowskie Hospital beside the Royal Castle, whose walls were to be integrated into the design. A new amphitheatre for debates was added to the south facade of the Alexander and Mary Institute. Its main feature was eighteen pillars of Kielce marble



*The building of the Senate
– view from Górnośląska
street.
(Fot. J. Zawadzki)*

around the gallery. This chamber was linked to a hotel for members of parliament and senators by a ground-floor smoking-room. The hotel contained 200 private furnished 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 chief architect was Kazimierz Skórewicz. 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 frosty February. A temporary metal and wood dome had to be erected hurriedly over the debating chamber. The entire ruined 19th century part of the buildings – the former Alexander and Mary Institute – was demolished. Work began in 1947 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 architectural style had to change as socialism took over. 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 met turn about with the Sejm in the latter's debating chamber, and later 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.

Dorota Mycielska, September 1993