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Courtesy or diplomacy? The visit of Elisabeth Queen of the Belgians to Poland in 1955

Zarys treści: Artykuł poświęcony jest wizycie Elżbiety królowej Belgów w Polsce w 1955 r. Monarchini miała być honorowym gościem V Międzynarodowego Konkursu Chopinowskiego. Królowa podjęła się przy tej okazji misji dyplomatycznej, której efektem miało być rozwikłanie problemów, których nie udało się rozwiązać na drodze negocjacji między Brukselą a Warszawą. Artykuł niniejszy poświęcony jest analizie tej misji oraz jej skutkom politycznym dla wzajemnych stosunków między obydwoma krajami.

Content outline: This article deals with the visit of the Belgian Queen Elisabeth to Poland in 1955. The monarch was to be the honorary guest of the Fifth International Chopin Competition. The queen used the opportunity to carry out a diplomatic mission, attempting to resolve issues that negotiations between Brussels and Warsaw failed to disentangle. This article analyses the mission and its political consequences for mutual relations between the two countries.

Słowa kluczowe: Elżbieta królowa Belgów, V Międzynarodowy Konkurs Chopinowski, relacje polsko-belgijskie.

Keywords: Elisabeth Queen of the Belgians, Fifth International Chopin Competition, Polish-Belgian relations

The goal of the present paper is to present a little-known episode in the history of Polish-Belgian relations – the visit of Elisabeth Queen of the Belgians to Poland in 1955. As demonstrated by the sources, her stay was not limited to acting as a guest of honour at the Fifth International Chopin Competition, but also served to fulfil a certain diplomatic mission.

The discussion is mostly based on materials stored in the archives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Poland and Belgium that have so far received little attention from scholars, but also on other sources, including press

publications, memoirs, and the scant secondary sources in which the topic is mentioned in passing.¹

From 21 February to 21 March 1955, Warsaw hosted the Fifth International Chopin Competition. The state authorities planned to give much splendour to the event, especially because it was coupled with the opening of Warsaw's National Philharmonic, restored after suffering war damage.² An honorary guest at the event was Elisabeth Queen of the Belgians,³ who spent almost two weeks in Poland (from 12 to 23 March), listening to the artists who had been qualified to the third stage of the competition.

The Belgian monarch was known among the community of classical music lovers because of her interest in this genre and on account of her work to support musicians and artists. Nevertheless, not only did her long stay in Stalinist Poland appear to cause a stir among the country's cultural elite, but it was also speculated upon by journalists, politicians, diplomats and wide groups of both Polish and Belgian society. This was especially pertinent since in the mid-1950s the relations between the Polish People's Republic and Belgium had been stalled.⁴ These circumstances meant that opening a political dialogue with Brussels (as had been the case with Paris after the death of Stalin) was not possible for Warsaw.⁵

The grievances included the unresolved matter of claims for nationalised Belgian property (the refusal of the Polish side to enter into talks on this topic led

¹ See e.g. J. Łaptos, A. Mania, "Dyplomacja polska wobec zimnowojennego podziału świata (marzec 1947 – grudzień 1955)," in: *Historia dyplomacji polskiej*, vol. 4: 1944/45–1989, ed. W. Matercki, W. Michowicz, Warszawa, 2010, p. 356 (the visit is summarised there in a single sentence: "The efforts of Polish propaganda were spectacularly crowned by the arrival of Elisabeth Queen of the Belgians to the Chopin Competition held in March 1955 in Warsaw").

² For more on Chopin Competitions, including the fifth edition and the circumstances surrounding the National Philharmonic, see e.g. A. Arendt, "V Konkurs. Konkurs na Jasnej 22 lutego–21 marca 1955 r.," in: A. Arendt et al., *Chopinowskie igrzysko. Historia Międzynarodowego Konkursu Pianistycznego im. Fryderyka Chopina 1927–2015*, ed. P. Majewski, Warszawa, 2020, pp. 129–152. The fifth edition was postponed by one year (it should have been held in 1954 according to the traditional five-year cycle of Chopin Competitions), because the National Philharmonic building had not been completed on time. Ultimately, it was decided to combine the inauguration with the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic of Poland and the Festival of Polish Music. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³ Elisabeth of Bavaria (1876–1965), Queen of the Belgians, wife of Albert I. During the First World War, she was acclaimed for her patriotism and charitable work. Known for her interest in art, she founded the Chappelle Royale de la Reine Elisabeth in Brussels, a place to hone the skills of young musicians. She also founded a musical competition that was later named after her (from 1951 onward).

⁴ Central Archives of Modern Records (hereinafter: AAN), Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, Department of Culture, call no. 237/XVIII/139, note of the CC PUWP, deputy head of the Department of Culture of CC PUWP Wanda Markowska to comrade Jerzy Morawski, CC PUPW secretary, Warszawa, 12 April 1955, p. 3.

⁵ For more on the *détente* in Polish-French relations in late 1953, see D. Jarosz, M. Pasztor, *Robineau, Bassaler i inni. Z dziejów stosunków polsko-francuskich w latach 1948–1953*, Toruń, 2001, pp. 241–255.

to a decline in trade between the two countries)⁶ and the case of Albert Snauwaert, a Belgian citizen sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment for espionage, whose release was demanded by the Belgian diplomatic mission in Warsaw.⁷

Another factor that marred the relations was the issue of passports of Belgian female citizens who acquired Polish citizenship automatically by entering into marriage with Poles. These documents were held in custody by Polish authorities, preventing the women from visiting their families back in Belgium.⁸ The mood was also soured by politically motivated obstacles put before Polish schools in Belgium.⁹

In the view of Warsaw, Brussels was not only harassing and hindering the work of Polish teachers, intimidating Polish children who attended consular schools and their parents by appearing at their homes (as reported on numerous occasions by Polish diplomats accredited in Belgium), but also demanded that taxes be imposed on the salaries of Polish teachers employed and remunerated by consulates.¹⁰

⁶ In 1948, Poland proposed to supply Polish coal in lieu of compensation for Belgian property, an offer Brussels rejected (explaining that it was unable to accept Polish coal because it had its own). In April 1955, the trade agreement was extended by three months. Poland endeavoured to enter into a long-term agreement.

⁷ Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMSZ), no. 8, file 51, vol. 679, Letter of Director of the Ministry of Public Security office [signature illegible] to the MFA, 2nd department, Warszawa, 7 July 1949, pp. 4–9, 17, 23, 64. Albert Snauwaert was sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment by a verdict of the District Court in Szczecin (13 January 1949). He served his term in Nowogard, and later in Wronki. According to the indictment, he had allegedly “collected information constituting a state secret” (i.e. information about the Polish navy and merchant marine). In a note of 27 April 1951, the Belgian embassy demanded that Snauwaert be pardoned and allowed to return to Belgium, citing the fact that he had previously been subjected to psychiatric examination. The pardon request was examined by the Council of State and rejected by a decision of 17 January 1955.

⁸ AMSZ, no. 8, file 46, vol. 600, p. 19–21, Note of Maria Krobicka from a conversation held with the secretary of the Belgian mission, Mr [Félix] Standaert, on the 15th (on the initiative of the latter). According to Belgian law, the so-called *épouses belges* retained their Belgian citizenship and were issued passports by Belgian authorities. Conversely, under the Polish Citizenship Act, foreign women who married Poles became exclusively Polish citizens. Passports issued to the Belgians by Belgian authorities were seized and held in custody by the Polish police. The Belgian authorities argued that passports issued to Belgian citizens were not their property, but “the property of the Belgian state, thus regardless of the position of Polish authorities on double citizenship the Polish police has no right to retain them.” Cf. also: AMSZ, no. 8, file 46, vol. 600, p. 2, 7, confidential note of Deputy Minister Marian Naszkowski from a meeting with the Belgian envoy [Hadelin] de Meeûs d’Argenteuil, Warsaw, 4 February 1955. According to Naszkowski, until 4 February 1955, consent was granted only to five out of twenty-four persons requesting leave for Belgium.

⁹ AMSZ, no. 8, file 46, vol. 600, p. 2–3, Note of the MFA [not signed]. The status of Polish-Belgian issues, which can be brought up by the Belgian envoy [H. de Meeûs d’Argenteuil – MP] in tomorrow’s conversation, Warsaw, 1 February 1955. The Polish MFA argued that pursuant to a 1951 letter of the Belgian MFA, Polish teachers did not have to apply for a work permit (*permis de travail*).

¹⁰ AMSZ, no. 8, file 46, vol. 600, p. 2, 7, confidential note of Deputy Minister M. Naszkowski from a meeting with the Belgian envoy [Hadelin] de Meeûs d’Argenteuil, Warsaw, 4 February

Another controversial issue concerned the settlements and costs ensuing from the planned construction of the seat of the Belgian diplomatic mission in Warsaw, an undertaking the Belgians tried to tie with the indemnification for Belgian property in Poland¹¹ and criminal offences perpetrated by Polish citizens in Belgium.¹²

The lack of goodwill in resolving the disputed issues mentioned above and the mutual allegations of unwillingness to take “a more liberal position” and understand the arguments of the other side proved an obstacle in the development of mutual relations, perpetuating the cold rapport between Poland and Belgium. As stressed by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Marian Naszkowski, “the Belgians proved unwilling to adopt a conciliatory attitude” in disputed matters while, as he argued, “the intention to improve the mood must exist on both sides.”¹³

Improvement in relations between Warsaw and Belgium (despite the temporary thaw between the superpowers after 1953) was likewise obstructed by the strengthening of Western alliances and the establishment of the Western European Union (11 October 1954), the failure of the Berlin conference attended by ministers of foreign affairs of the Big Four (25 January – 1 February 1954), the accession of Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany to the Western European Union, and an invitation for Bonn to join NATO.

The failure of the USSR’s policy in its struggle with the West did, however, alert the Soviet leadership to the need of changes in Kremlin’s foreign policy (as suggested by the first secretary of the CPSU, Nikita Khrushchev). Although the downfall of Lavrentiy Beria and the replacement of Georgi Malenkov with Nikolai Bulganin as prime minister (8 February 1955) did not stop the internal transformation that had been taking place after the death of Stalin, the continued hegemony of Vyacheslav Molotov in Soviet diplomacy hampered any further-reaching changes in foreign policy of the Eastern bloc,¹⁴ reducing Polish diplomacy to the role of a pawn of Moscow.

1955. According to Polish consular offices (especially in Limburg), Belgian policemen “visited teachers and parents of children at their homes, requesting a list of pupils attending consular schools, their addresses and hours spent in school.” In his conversation with Deputy Minister Naszkowski, the Belgian envoy apparently tried to steer clear of the uncomfortable question, stating that “he received instructions from the Belgian MFA not to handle any matters concerning teachers, because the whole topic is being arranged between the Polish mission in Brussels and the Belgian MFA. Therefore, he cannot provide an answer.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., confidential note of Deputy Minister Naszkowski, p. 3. Matters raised by Belgian diplomacy included the case of Mrs Mikusińska, a Polish citizen, whose bank account in Brussels was cleared out by her husband who withdrew 200,000 Belgian francs based on forged signatures (which nonetheless had been legalised by the Belgian mission).

¹³ Ibid, p. 4-6.

¹⁴ G. Cophornic, “Les interférences entre construction européenne et détente,” *Relations Internationales*, 71 (1992, automne), pp. 258–260; G.-H. Soutou, *La guerre froide de la France*, Paris, 2018, pp. 266–267.

The eleven-day long visit of Queen Elisabeth to communist Poland was therefore all the more sensational. In view of the popularity she enjoyed in Belgium among all classes of society due to her charitable work and involvement in saving Jews (including Polish nationals of Jewish ancestry) during the occupation, her “generous” attitude towards the World Peace Council and her interest in the Peace Congress in Wrocław, the authorities in Warsaw could not reject the proposal despite some confusion that a visit tied in with the Chopin Competition caused – especially as, in the view of the Polish diplomatic mission in Brussels, the Belgian queen stressed her “progressive views” and supposedly demonstrated “steady and sincere interest and authentic fondness for Polish affairs.”¹⁵ An official proposal was sent to the queen by the head of the International Chopin Competition (the exact date remains difficult to determine).¹⁶

In these circumstances, the queen’s visit appeared troublesome not only for Warsaw but also for the Belgian government: the latter had no intention to improve the relations with Poland. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Belgians attempted to dissuade Elisabeth from leaving for Warsaw through the influence of the Belgian envoy to Poland Hadelin de Meeûs d’Argenteuil (who held the honorary title of the grand master of the queen’s household) – as the Polish envoy, Leon Szyguła, reported from Brussels.¹⁷ It was assumed, after all, that Polish authorities would try to exploit the visit for propaganda purposes.¹⁸

The resolve of Elisabeth forced the Belgian government to accept her decision. Warsaw, too, could hardly afford to refuse, considering the queen’s standing, her “left-wing political beliefs” and age, especially since she left the Polish MFA a wide discretion in arranging the visit’s schedule, communicating through the Belgian mission in Warsaw that during her stay “she would like to hear Mass on both Sundays, preferably in the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw.”¹⁹

In addition to touring the Chopin Museum in Żelazowa Wola, meeting with the Mazowsze Ensemble, and a trip to Kraków, Belgian diplomats suggested that the

¹⁵ AMSZ, no. 6, file 64, vol. 844, p. 7, the Polish mission in Brussels [chargé d’affaires Edward Bartol] to the MFA in Warsaw on 13 November 1947; AMSZ, no. 6, file 64, vol. 844, p. 7, the Polish mission in Brussels to the MFA in Warsaw, 17 February 1948. For saving Polish citizens of Jewish origin, Queen Elisabeth was awarded the Polish Medal of Victory and Freedom.

¹⁶ Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères de Belgique (hereinafter AMAEB), Correspondance Diplomatique, Pologne, call no. 13.035, Le séjour de la Reine Elisabeth à Varsovie, le 28 mars 1955, unpaginated sheet.

¹⁷ AMSZ, Cable Team, file 42, vol. 534, p. 7, cryptogram no. 2235, strictly confidential, direct dispatch, Leon Szyguła to Andrzej Krajewski, Brussels, 10 February 1955. Szyguła learned about the pressure exerted on Elisabeth from a Belgian MFA official.

¹⁸ AMAEB, Correspondance Diplomatique, Pologne, call no. 13.035, la Reine Elisabeth en Pologne, Monsieur Paul-Henri Spaak, ministre des affaires étrangères à M. le Comte de Meeûs d’Argenteuil, ministre de Belgique à Varsovie, le 3 mars 1955.

¹⁹ AMSZ, Cable Team, file 42, vol. 534, p. 10, cryptogram no. 3548, strictly confidential, direct dispatch, Leon Szyguła to Andrzej Krajewski, Brussels, 10 February 1955.

queen “would like to have the opportunity to talk to surgeon Leon Manteuffel and ophthalmologist Wiktor Arkin due to her interest in medical devices.” In addition, Brussels said, the queen wished to invite about twenty-four persons to a dinner at the Belgian mission, or, if that proved impossible, to give a reception “elsewhere in Warsaw.”

Envoy Szyguła also learned “in confidence” that the queen hoped to “get to know as many people and institutions of culture as possible and to demonstrate the highest degree of cordiality, expecting the same on our part.” According to the same source, the queen, “while not a believer, does not want to scandalise Belgian public opinion (nor its Polish counterpart) and wishes to hear Mass in the church where Chopin’s heart lies.”²⁰

She also insisted on being allowed to visit the Warsaw Old Town, the former Jewish ghetto, the Jewish Historical Institute Museum, a workers’ housing estate and the Auschwitz Museum. Due to her interest in ophthalmology, rheumatology, and paediatrics, she desired to meet eminent Polish physicians.²¹

Citing the ancient “anti-German traditions” of the (Wittelsbach) family and the “desire to pursue a policy of balance to counter the influences of Germany in Belgium,” envoy Szyguła suggested that the MFA headquarters should use the visit for propaganda purposes and hinted at a conflict between the queen and envoy de Meeûs d’Argenteuil, of whom the heads of the Polish MFA (and, as it appears, also the staff of the Belgian mission in Warsaw) were not particularly fond.²²

The mood surrounding the planned visit to Poland was additionally stirred up by the daily Belgian press that expressed bewilderment and concerns about the potential negative effects of the visit for the image of the ruling dynasty. The staff of *La Libre Belgique* charged that the Polish mission in Brussels was meddling with Belgium’s internal issues (meaning the involvement of Szyguła in the struggle between the various factions of the Belgian Communist Party),²³ which

²⁰ AMSZ, Cable Team, file 42, vol. 534, p. 10, cryptogram no. 3548, strictly confidential, direct dispatch, Leon Szyguła to Andrzej Krajewski, Brussels, 10 February 1955. That pressure was exerted on Elisabeth by the Belgian MFA was also confirmed by Zygmunt Mycielski, who participated in a breakfast organised in honour of Queen Elisabeth at Jarosław’s Iwaszkiewicz home in Stawisko. In his memoirs, Mycielski wrote that Elisabeth “told me about the difficulties she had to overcome in Belgium to come here [...]” Cf. Z. Mycielski, *Dziennik 1950–1959*, Warszawa, 1999, pp. 52–53. The remaining wishes of the queen referred to her lodging conditions and culinary preferences.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. In addition, Zygmunt Mycielski wrote in his memoirs that “the old lady appears astute, willing to come to terms with the Soviet bloc, opposing the rearming of West Germany, overly complimenting us, even suspiciously delighted with everything she saw.” Mycielski, op. cit., pp. 52–53.

²³ Reported in *La Libre Belgique* in an unsigned article “La purge au sein du Parti Communiste belge,” 1er avril 1955, p. 2. The article also intimated that envoy Szyguła was pulling the strings in the Communist Party of Belgium on behalf of Moscow and Warsaw and making sure that the former leadership of the party was “done for,” and that the financial links between the CPB and PUWP were unclear.

could undoubtedly increase tension between the two countries and thwart the queen's visit to Poland.²⁴

Despite unfavourable circumstances and tensions in mutual relations, Warsaw (not without the influence of envoy Szyguła, who desired to raise the prestige of his mission) viewed the royal visit as an opportunity not merely to improve the artistic standing of the Chopin Competition, but also to champion the "idea of socialism" and "a model of socialist culture" abroad.²⁵ As it appears, the opportunity to exploit "the Belgian dynasty's traditions of policy of balance to counteract German influences in Belgium," excessively stressed by Szyguła, was also important, particularly in the context of winning the Queen Mother over for the cause of the Oder-Neisse border.²⁶

The Polish authorities, once notified by envoy Leon Szyguła about Queen Elisabeth's willingness to visit Poland, dispatched a special plane, and set aside the Belweder palace as her quarters. The visit agenda, arranged beforehand with the queen, went greatly beyond her participation in auditions of competitors and concerts of prize winners of that special event, whose renown was also noticeable beyond the musical world.²⁷

The powers that be in Warsaw were well aware that the competition's importance is much more than a mere cultural event, and that the presence of the Belgian queen during competition auditions might not only enhance its prestige but also serve as a prime opportunity to promote the cultural achievements not just of communist Poland but the entire "socialist" bloc. As Wanda Markowska, acting deputy head of the Department of Culture of the CC, wrote in a note to CC PUWP secretary Jędrzej Morawski that "the competition was burdened with the lack of collective political direction" and "lack of consultations between the Ministry of Culture and Art with the Foreign Department of the CC [PUWP] and MFA," but the authorities did appreciate its "enormous political importance" nonetheless.²⁸

²⁴ "Visite à Varsovie," *La Libre Belgique* (8–9 mars 1955), no. 91.

²⁵ AAN, Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (hereinafter CC PUWP), Department of Culture, call no. 237/XVIII/139, Note of the Department of Culture of the CC PUWP, deputy head of the Department of Culture of the CC PUWP W. Markowska to comrade J. Morawski, secretary of the CC PUWP, Warszawa, 12 April 1955, p. 3.

²⁶ AMSZ, Cable Team, file 42, vol. 534, p. 10, cryptogram no. 3548, strictly confidential, direct dispatch, Leon Szyguła to Władysław Domagała and Edward Bartol, Brussels, 5 March 1955.

²⁷ During the trip, the monarch was accompanied by some of her entourage: a lady of honour, Viscountess J. Davignon, secretary Ch. Pigault de Beaupré, the composer P. Collaer and the Polish envoy to Belgium Leon Szyguła.

²⁸ AAN, CC PUWP, Department of Culture, call no. 237/XVIII/139, note of the Department of Culture of the CC PUWP, deputy head of the Department of Culture of the CC PUWP W. Markowska to comrade J. Morawski, secretary of the CC PUWP, Warszawa, 12 April 1955, p. 3. Markowska also wrote that "we could not count on Polish jury members as the best 'propagandists' of People's Poland" and suggested "the need to move beyond pure music." She also objected to the scoring system for participants of the competition, which would have to be "revised in the future."

Thus, on 12 March, the royal visitor was received at the airport by Deputy Head of the Council of State Waław Barcikowski, Minister of Culture and Art Włodzimierz Sokorski, Secretary of the Council of State Marian Rybicki, deputy Minister of culture and Art Prof. Zbigniew Drzewiecki, secretary of the jury Stanisław Szpinalski, director of the diplomatic protocol Edward Bartol, and Head of the Executive Committee of the Chopin Competition Jarosław Iwazskiewicz.

On the following day (13 March) the queen, in keeping with the prearranged agenda, heard the morning Mass at the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw, which, according to consistent reports of the Belgian press and envoy de Meeüs d'Argenteuil, provoked "a fervour that made the clergy and security staff hardly able to shield Her Royal Highness from the expressions of cordiality manifested by the throng of churchgoers gathered outside." The very presence of the queen, in the grandiloquent relation of de Meeüs d'Argenteuil, "personified for these crowds the hope and symbolised the Western liberty about which the Poles did not cease to dream and, at any rate, their presence in places visited by Elisabeth appeared to serve as proof of interest and even trust in the queen, instinctively producing feelings that originated from an outburst of gratitude." It was this aspect, in the eyes of the envoy, which formed "the most fascinating, and even moving" (*attrayant et meme émouvant*) part of the visit. This fervour, he believed, appeared all the more understandable because of (unfounded – M.P.) rumours circulating among Poles that Queen Elisabeth had come to Poland because she was concerned about the fate of the "unfortunate" (*malheureux*) Cardinal Wyszyński.²⁹

Besides taking part in auditions and concerts of the participants of the Chopin Competition, the monarch toured the Chopin mansion in Żelazowa Wola (13 March) and the monuments of Old and New Warsaw (14 March). Over the next two days (15 and 16 March), she visited Kraków, where, accompanied by local authorities, she saw the Wawel Castle, the Church of the Holy Virgin Mary, and the Princes Czartoryski Museum. The visit to Auschwitz concentration camp in Oświęcim (16 March) was a moving experience for her.³⁰

The Polish press mentioned her presence at the performance of *Halka* in the National Theatre and meeting with the Mazowsze Ensemble at its headquarters in Karolin (19 March). On the same day, Elisabeth reportedly met members of the Polish cultural elite during a banquet organised in her honour at

²⁹ AMAEB, Correspondance Diplomatique, Pologne, call no. 13.035, Le séjour de la Reine Elisabeth à Varsovie. Le Comte de Meeüs d'Argenteuil, ministre de Belgique à Monsieur Paul-Henri Spaak, ministre des Affaires étrangères à Bruxelles, Varsovie, le 28 mars 1955. The devotion of the audience and the respect shown to Queen Elisabeth by Polish society are mentioned in, among others, the memoirs of Roman Jasiński, *Noweżycie. Wspomnienia 1945–1976*, Kraków, 2020, pp. 181–182.

³⁰ AAN, CC PUWP, Department of Culture, call no. 237/XVIII/139, schedule of visit of HRH Queen Elisabeth from 12 to 23 March 1955, pp. 19–20.

the Belgian diplomatic mission, where she talked to eminent Polish artists and scientists.³¹

An event widely commented by Polish cultural elites was the queen's attendance (21 March) at the breakfast held in her honour by Anna and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz in Stawisko, in which the royal entourage was joined by Professor Kazimierz Michałowski from the National Museum, Jan Parandowski, Maria Dąbrowska, Eugeniusz Eibisch, Witold Lutosławski and Zygmunt Mycielski. As Iwaszkiewicz himself admitted: "the breakfast was splendid [...] what an oddity in our dismal, grey lives. The pleasure for me was that I could represent good old Polish culture together with Hania."³²

The visit of the queen to Poland was widely commented in the Polish press; not only in ordinary dailies and cultural magazines, but also in media outlets that focused on politics.³³ It also became the subject of political satire owing to the Student Satirical Theatre (STS).³⁴

As reported to Belgium's MFA by envoy de Meeûs d'Argenteuil, the queen was not only greeted ("everywhere") with expressions of respect and admiration of the common people, but was also granted special favours (*une grande prévenance*) and attention by Polish authorities, which, the envoy opined, "generally did not try to use the royal personage for propaganda purposes in the manner typical of them."

Ultimately, the reports of the Polish press concerning the queen and her stay in Poland produced more subdued feelings in the Belgian diplomat because (as he reported after the visitor's leave) "although official communications concerning

³¹ "Wizyta królowej w Karolinie," *Expres Wieczorny* (20 March 1955), no. 246.

³² J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Dzienniki 1911–1955*, ed. A. and R. Papiński, Warszawa, 2007, p. 473. Iwaszkiewicz accompanied Elisabeth during her visit in Kraków, staying with her under one roof for two days. The visit of Queen Elisabeth to Kraków and Oświęcim (the Auschwitz Museum) was also mentioned in *Trybuna Ludu*. Cf. "Królowa Elżbieta w Krakowie i Oświęcimiu," *Trybuna Ludu* (17 March 1955), no. 2227. Details of the Stawisko breakfast were also recorded by Maria Dąbrowska: "We had lunch at his house [J. Iwaszkiewicz's – M.P.] with Elisabeth and her entourage, the hosts and Parandowski, Prof. Michałowski, Eibisch, Mycielski and Lutosławski. The lunch was splendid [...] Elisabeth is full of charm, the conversation rolled smoothly, and it was perhaps the most pleasant social gathering I attended in that decade, even if it was as light as foam, with no real meaning." M. Dąbrowska, *Dzienniki powojenne 1955–1959*, ed. T. DREWnowski, Warszawa, 1997, vol. 3, p. 11. See also Mycielski, op. cit., pp. 52–53; J. Waldorff, *Wielka gra. Rzecz o Konkursach Chopinowskich*, Warszawa, 1980, pp. 105–107.

³³ "Przybycie Królowej Elżbiety Belgijskiej na Konkurs Chopinowski," *Trybuna Ludu* (13 March 1955), no. 2223; "Z pobytu królowej Elżbiety Belgijskiej w Polsce," *Trybuna Ludu* (22 March 1955), no. 2232; "Przyjęcie na cześć uczestników Konkursu Chopinowskiego," *Trybuna Ludu* (23 March 1955), no. 2233; "Królowa Elżbieta belgijska opuściła Polskę," *Trybuna Ludu* (24 March 1955), no. 2234.

³⁴ A. Jarecki, "Salve Regina," in: *Trudno nie pisać satyry. Teksty kabaretowe teatru satyryków STS 1954–1972*, ed. R. Prac, Warszawa, 2004, pp. 23–24. Quoted from Arendt, op. cit., pp. 141–143. The comedians made a joke at Iwaszkiewicz's expense, writing: "This progressive cultural icon was made a baron in return." Rumour had it that Elisabeth ennobled the writer by appointing him viscount at her court.

her stay in Poland were moderate in tone, unlike for some other eminent guests, it can be said nevertheless that in some circumstances one may have wished that the said authorities could have showed even more restraint.”³⁵

The envoy also stressed that the mere presence of Elisabeth ensured “exceptional publicity” (*un éclat exceptionnel*) for the Chopin Competition, supposedly contributing to increasing its renown, a result of which was that “the [propaganda] objective [of Polish authorities – M.P.] has been achieved anyway.”³⁶

The biggest surprise for the Polish hosts, and also the most “resounding political effect of the visit,” at least in the view of de Meeûs d’Argenteuil, was the queen handing in an *aide mémoire* addressed to the Polish government (to Chairman of the State Council Aleksander Zawadzki), a move on which the Brussels government had insisted.

In the opinion of the Belgian diplomat, by taking on a political mission, the monarch stressed that her stay in Poland “was not limited to music, but had a wider, general purpose, a humanitarian one.” In fulfilling this mission, Elisabeth, de Meeûs d’Argenteuil asserted, “did not fail the expectations of the voiceless – some may even say dumb – victims of the regime.”³⁷

Citing the above considerations, the document, handed over on the final day of the visit, contained a plea to allow Belgian wives of Poles (*épouses d’origine belge*), twelve in number, to visit their families in Belgium, to pardon Albert Snauwaert, who had already served six years of his sentence in the Rawicz prison, and to give consent to members of Polish-Belgian families to leave Poland and reunite in Belgium.³⁸

Although no documents testifying to the reaction of the Polish government to that *aide mémoire* have been preserved, the proposals contained therein were not promptly followed upon, despite the respects paid to Elisabeth and the declared willingness to normalise relations with Brussels. Neither party was particularly willing to overcome the stalemate in those relations, which was evident even after the queen returned to Belgium, when the Polish trading vessel “Hel” was arrested in the port of Antwerp by a decision of the president of the local *tribunal de commerce* (31 May 1955).³⁹

³⁵ AMAEB, Correspondance Diplomatique, Pologne, call no. 13.035, Le séjour de la Reine Elisabeth à Varsovie, Le Comte de Meeûs d’Argenteuil, ministre de Belgique à Monsieur P.- H. Spaak, ministre des Affaires étrangères à Bruxelles, Varsovie, le 28 mars 1955, unnumbered page.

³⁶ Ibid., unnumbered sheet.

³⁷ Ibid., unnumbered page.

³⁸ AMSZ, no. 17, file 5, vol. 50, *Aide mémoire*, 18 March 1955; cf. AMAEB, Correspondance Diplomatique, Pologne, call no. 13.035, Le séjour de la Reine Elisabeth à Varsovie. Le Comte de Meeûs d’Argenteuil, ministre de Belgique à Monsieur Paul-Henri Spaak, ministre des Affaires étrangères à Bruxelles, Varsovie, le 28 mars 1955. The plea referred to permitting three persons to leave and join their families in Belgium: Wanda Boheme with her daughter to a husband in Belgium, Jełowicki to his wife, Bilińska to her daughter-in-law. The plea was symbolic in character.

³⁹ AMSZ, no. 8, file 5, vol. 679, L. Szygła to minister Stanisław Skrzyszewski, Brussels, 31 May

This incident caused the Polish MFA to withdraw the motion previously filed with the General Prosecutor's Office to resubmit a plea to pardon Snauwaert to the State Council,⁴⁰ a move that led to an escalation of tensions between Warsaw and Brussels.

In addition, the Polish side was vexed by the Belgian note on this matter, dated 15 January 1955 and sent to the MFA on 7 July 1955, which the ministry leadership considered "highly inappropriate." This attitude resulted from the fact that, as asserted above, the note was sent to the MFA when "Hel" was "under compulsory arrest" in Antwerp. In effect, the note requesting an early release of Snauwaert was submitted at a time when a Polish vessel was being held in detention.

Under these circumstances, the ministry did not intend to follow up on matters mentioned in the note. Another request made by the Belgian mission's *chargé d'affaires* Félix Standaert (4 August 1955) had little effect, as had the Belgian assurance of Brussels' more liberal position concerning the granting of work visas to employees of Polish missions leaving for Brussels.⁴¹

Regardless of the rhetoric that affected the contacts with Belgian diplomats, Warsaw did realise that in the context of the negotiations concerning "Hel" (including securing a bank guarantee), a further escalation of the tensions between Warsaw and Brussels would not help to resolve the increasingly problematic issues, especially as Brussels appeared more disposed to seek a *modus vivendi*, consenting to have a delegation of Belgian members of parliament sent to Poland.⁴²

This must have been the case, which appears to be all the more probable, as the Polish *chargé d'affaires* in Brussels, Józef Cywiak, reported: "the delegation was instructed to mention the matter of the compensations during its stay in Poland (planned for the autumn of 1955), which could lead to profits in trade exchange with Belgium."⁴³ Hosting the visit of the Belgian members of parliament and the propaganda effects expected by Polish authorities (the delegation

1955. The Belgian tribunal of commerce put the Polish Hel vessel under arrest, demanding the amount of 3.6 million Belgians francs as collateral securing the verdict of a British court on satisfying the pre-war claims (arising under an employment relationship) of 126 Polish sailors who were hired by Żegluga Polska S.A. and later lived in exile in Britain. The Polish side decided to launch a diplomatic action appealed for by envoy Szyguła because of the "abusive behaviour of the tribunal towards the Polish state." Cf. AMSZ, Cable Team, file 42, vol. 534, cryptogram no. 9696, L. Szyguła to M. Naszkowski, direct cable, Brussels, 12 June 1955; *ibid.*, cryptogram no. 9764, L. Szyguła to M. Naszkowski, direct cable, very urgent, Brussels, 14 June 1955.

⁴⁰ AMSZ, no. 8, vol. 679, file 51, note of Wł. Domagała concerning A. Snauwaert [undated].

⁴¹ AMSZ, no. 8, vol. 679, file 51, note of Wł. Domagała, deputy director of Department II, to M. Naszkowski, 8 August 1955.

⁴² AMSZ, ZD file 42, vol. 534, cryptogram no. 6031, L. Szyguła to Wł. Domagała, Brussels, 15 April 1955. The issue of work permits for Polish teachers remained of prime importance for Warsaw.

⁴³ AMSZ, no. 8, file 43, vol. 643, Józef Cywiak, *chargé d'affaires* to deputy minister of foreign affairs M. Naszkowski, Brussels, 9 August 1955.

was to visit Poland's western borderlands) induced Polish authorities to adopt a more conciliatory tone towards the proposals of the Belgian side outlined in the *aide mémoire*.⁴⁴

By a decision of 16 November 1955, the State Council exercised its right to pardon with respect to Albert Snauwaert and ordered his release from prison and deportation from the territory of the Republic of Poland.⁴⁵ The Belgian wives were allowed to visit their families in Belgium.⁴⁶

In his summary of the variegated effects of Queen Elisabeth's visit, envoy de Meeûs d'Argenteuil seems to have been right in stating that – regardless of the actual, direct results of the visit – the arrival of the queen was meant to improve the atmosphere in the political relations between the two countries in the longer term, especially as “the revolutionary phase in the Eastern bloc countries appears to be over due to internal and external factors, giving way to an evolutionary phase.” In these circumstances, he advised his principals to replace their intransigent approach with gestures of understanding (which did not preclude them from taking harsh measures on some occasions) and a friendly mood, which would subsequently lead to changes in the Eastern bloc's policy that would ultimately result in the normalisation of mutual relations. In this aspect, the visit of the queen, in the envoy's view, contributed to the rapprochement of the “two ideologies” (*deux idéologies*) that “have increasingly come to understand that, if they want to survive, there is no choice but to coexist.”⁴⁷ This assessment appears to have run in parallel to the new tactics of the Kremlin towards Western Europe adopted in mid-1955, according to which the socialist bloc's “gestures of good will” were to convince the West of the peaceful character of the USSR's policy.⁴⁸ Naturally, Warsaw could not step out of the line drawn by Moscow, a result of which was the thaw in Poland's relations with Belgium.

⁴⁴ AMSZ, no. 8, file 49, vol. 643, J. Cywiak to Wł. Domagała, note from talks with Belgian members of parliament following their return to Poland, Brussels, 26 October 1955.

⁴⁵ AMSZ, no. 8, file 51, vol. 679, Albert Snauwaert was released from prison on 28 November 1955 and handed over to an official of the Belgian mission in Warsaw. Chancellery of the Council of State to the MFA, Warsaw, 17 November 1955. Decision of the council of state of 16 November 1955.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ AMAEB, Correspondance Diplomatique, Pologne, call no. 13.035, Le séjour de la Reine Elisabeth à Varsovie. Le Comte [H.] de Meeûs d'Argenteuil, ministre de Belgique à Monsieur P.- H. Spaak, ministre des Affaires étrangères à Bruxelles, Varsovie, le 28 mars 1955.

⁴⁸ Evidence of the changed tactics of Kremlin and Nikita Khrushchev's takeover of the USSR's foreign policy was, among others, the conclusion of a treaty with Austria (15 May 1955) and the Soviet proposal to convene a Big Four conference in Geneva (11 May 1955). This was a counter-offensive to prevent the West from exploiting the advantage gained by ratifying the Paris treaties. For more on this, see G.-H. Soutou, *La Guerre de Cinquante Ans. Les relations Est-Ouest 1943–1990*, Paris, 2001, pp. 313–314.

Abstract

From 21 February to 21 March, Warsaw hosted the Fifth International Chopin Competition. A guest of honour was Elisabeth Queen of the Belgians, who spent almost two weeks (from 12 to 23 March) in Poland, listening to artists who were taking part in the third stage of the competition. For the Warsaw authorities, the presence of Elisabeth was meant not only to ensure “exceptional publicity” to the Chopin Competition, but also help improve the image of the Polish People’s Republic abroad. A surprise for the Polish hosts, and also the most “resounding political effect of the visit,” was the queen’s handing in of an *aide mémoire* addressed to the Polish government to Chairman of the State Council Aleksander Zawadzki, a move previously insisted on by Brussels. The document, handed in on the final day of the visit, contained a plea to allow Belgian wives of Poles, twelve in number, to visit their families in Belgium, to pardon Albert Snauwaert, who had been serving his conviction in the Rawicz prison for six years, and to give consent to members of Polish-Belgian families to leave Poland and reunite in Belgium. Ultimately, although the visit did not bring any tangible political results, the stay of the queen was expected to improve the atmosphere in political relations between Poland and Belgium in the longer term.

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