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FLOODING IN WARSAW IN THE 1830S

Flooding in historic Warsaw is a many-sided subject, which, like a mirror, reflects a whole range of issues important to the city and its inhabitants. For this reason, it can be described on many different levels.

Floods can be studied and analysed, as they have been by Stefan Zbigniew Różycki and Teresa Dunin-Wąsowicz, as a natural phenomenon.¹ Their occurrence and course can be traced in the context of global climate change as well as local environmental changes caused by human settlement.

Warsaw floods can also serve as a backdrop for describing social differences in the city, which for centuries was divided into wealthier 'upper' neighbourhoods and poorer 'lower' ones. Adolf Suligowski wrote about these two parts of Warsaw as late as 1903: 'They are two separate worlds. They stand next to each other, but as though they were alien and unknown to each other, having nothing in common, as if there was nothing that could bring them together. In the latter world everything is different, inferior, poorer, and worse'.² It was this 'lower' city, i.e. Powiśle, and, on the right bank of the Vistula, Praga, that suffered most during floods.

Another thread that comes to the fore in the context of flooding is the social engagement of the residents of Warsaw, which became most visible

1 S.Z. Różycki, 'Dzieje Warszawy widziane okiem geologa', *Biuletyn Państwowego Instytut Geologicznego*, 2006, no. 419, pp. 90-91; T. Dunin-Wąsowicz, *Zmiany w topografii osadnictwa wielkich dolin na Nizinie Środkowo-europejskim w XIII wieku*, Wrocław 1974, pp. 50-54.

2 A. Suligowski, 'Warszawa i jej przedsiębiorstwa miejskie', *Ekonomista*, 1903, no. 3, vol. 2, p. 23.

during natural disasters. The members of associations and organisations that helped flood victims were not only motivated by simple compassion, but also by the responsibility they felt to their fellow citizens. They rescued them, helped them to survive and, once the flooding had subsided, assisted them in rebuilding their homes and supplied them with the tools they had lost. This aid was already well-organised during the great flood of 1813, when the Rescue Commission, headed by Marianna Lanckorońska, castellaness of Połaniec, was established. The following year saw the founding of the Warsaw Charitable Society at the initiative of Zofia Zamoyska; it seems that the experience acquired by community workers during the flooding of 1813 had contributed significantly to its creation.

Urban changes connected to flooding are another theme. Flooding made it necessary to regulate the Vistula within the city. In 1821, the construction of a stone boulevard in Solec to protect Powiśle from flood waters began.³ This protection did not prove very effective, however, and water destroyed the boulevard several times. Still, these initiatives marked the beginning of the spatial development of the river bank and the construction of embankments.

As can be seen from the above overview of topics and problems, floods in Warsaw were an important part of the city's history and deserve closer examination. They are documented in press articles from the period and mentioned in the literature on the history of Warsaw and on the lives of its inhabitants, but no comprehensive study devoted solely to the subject has been written so far. I am trying to fill this gap by writing successive articles; the first two, concerning the flooding of 1813 and Vistula floods before 1800, were published in the *Warsaw Almanac*⁴ in 2014 and 2017. It is now time to turn to the floods of the 1830s.

The spring flood of 1830

At the end of February and the beginning of March 1830 the rivers of Europe overflowed, especially in Germany and Austria. *Kurier Polski* wrote of the floods in Vienna: 'According to private correspondence received in Kraków, the number of people who have drowned in Vienna has already reached 1000. The waters rose so quickly that many people in apartments on lower floors did not have time to escape to upper floors.'⁵ It was feared that the same thing might happen in Polish lands. A journalist of *Gazeta Korespondenta Warszawskiego i Zagranicznego* reporting that the inhabitants of Kraków and of villages on the Vistula were fearfully awaiting the spring thaw, made a grim forecast: 'If Vienna could turn into Venice for a time, then why should

3 Władysław Koleżak, 'Powiśle Warszawy. Przeszłość, teraźniejszość i przyszłość Powiśla', reprinted from *Wędrowiec*, expanded version, Warszawa 1901, pp. 20–21.

4 J. Popiołek, 'Flood in Warsaw, 1813', *Almanach Warszawy*, 2014, vol. 8, pp. 89–102; J. Popiołek, 'Floods in Warsaw before 1800', *Almanach Warszawy*, 2017, vol. 11, pp. 123–141.

5 *Kurier Polski*, 1830, no. 107, p. 545.

Kraków, the first point along the Vistula, not share the same fate.⁶ In Kraków, the ice on the Vistula had begun to break up on 16 March. This news was relayed to Warsaw.

Four days later, the ice on the Vistula began to thaw in Warsaw as well, initially in the area of Solec and Saska Kępa. Thousands of people gathered by the bridge to watch the mighty forces of nature. The pontoon bridge was dismantled, but six floats were carried away by the water; two of them were only seized near Tarchomin. For the next few days, the water surged, a dense ice floe flowed down the river. As every time when flooding occurred, Praga, Saska Kępa, and Powiśle were inundated; people used paddle boats to travel. On 24 March 'Around two in the afternoon, the waters pushed huge masses of ice with reeds, which must have been uprooted from a pond or a lake together with the ice. Foam on the surface was an unmistakable sign that the water was still rising.'⁷ Three days later, the press noted that in Saska Kępa 'only the tops of houses can still be seen; the levees are flooded. [...] a brick house on the Praga bank, known as the Prochownia, has split into two parts, including the roof, its foundations having partly been washed away.'⁸

The inhabitants of houses located near the Vistula had to flee again. They took with them whatever valuables they could, especially children. Some managed to grab clothes or a household appliance, but there were also those who lost everything. It was not uncommon to see scenes similar to the one described by a shocked reader of *Kurier Warszawski*, although certainly not every flood victim had as much luck as the protagonists of this story:

I was a witness of the following event. Last Tuesday, water from the surging Vistula got into a wretched little house near the riverbank. A poor widow with three children, carrying all of her appliances under her arm, 'Where will we spend the night? (she said, weeping, to the poor orphans), what will we eat tomorrow!' This is overheard by a Lady riding by in a coach, who stops, questions the unhappy Mother, orders the servant to call in [another] coach, and the four unhappy beings get in. Surely she ordered them to go to her house, which undoubtedly shelters misery, and perhaps at this moment the Mother and her Little Children are blessing their merciful Benefactress, who is putting her fortune to such benevolent use. E.M.⁹

The flood did not last long and subsided after a few days. Mounds of silt remained in the streets of Powiśle (Dobra, Wiślana, Radna, Browarna, Topiel, Białoskórnica, Zajęcza), which had to be cleaned up. Repair works to fix the bridge were started. Immediately, a 'party made up of high-ranking individuals of both sexes' started collecting money for the victims. The press high-

6 *Gazeta Korespondenta Warszawskiego i Zagranicznego*, 1830, no. 66.

7 *Kurier Polski*, 1830, no. 109, p. 555.

8 *Kurier Polski*, 1830, no. 110, p. 558 [561]. A note about the flooding in Warsaw was even published by *Kurier Litewski*, 1830, no. 35, p. 3.

9 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1830, no. 83, p. 415.

lighted the role that women played in this charitable effort: 'In the depths of misfortune, they were the first to extend a helping hand to wipe away the tears of those afflicted.'¹⁰

The May flood of 1837

The May flood of 1837 was neither one of the biggest nor one of the most violent, but it came unexpectedly. Copious rainfall in the south of the country, reports of which had already come from Kraków at the beginning of the month, was to blame. In Warsaw, the inhabitants of the low-lying areas were warned of the possibility of flooding, but a catastrophe could not be averted: firewood dealers who stored their wood on the river bank failed to secure it properly and a large part of the stock was lifted by the river, stopping at the bridge. The next day, 10 May, water flooded the riverside streets and the bridge was broken. The destruction was completed by the masses of wood flowing down the Vistula; the bridge lost over a dozen floats. A short announcement appeared in the news the next day: 'Today at 7:30, the rest of the bridge floated away.'¹¹ According to the press, six Jews and a coachman who were trapped on the bridge were rescued by ferrymen near Rybaki Street. Unfortunately, the horse and wagon stayed on a fragment of the bridge which was carried away by the current and, as it later turned out, landed on one of the islands on the river. It was impossible to safely rescue the horse, so its owner, delighted to have found the lost animal, paddled to the island every day to deliver hay. He managed to recover the horse only once repair works had started on the bridge and the fragments carried off by the current had been retrieved. The bridge was put back into service on 31 May.¹²

As usual, part of Praga and Powiśle were flooded, the water reaching as far as the Prochownia on Mostowa Street. It was a problem for the locals, as Pentecost approached and they got ready for the traditional May outing to Bielany. The road usually taken to get to the festivities was not suitable for use, so the head of the Warsaw police, General Andrei Storozhenko, marked out a different route and published the following announcement in the press:

1) Anyone going to Bielany is to go there and back by way of the upper road, keeping right at all times. 2) Every vehicle must follow in line, vehicles are forbidden to pass or overtake one another. (3) Those turning into a street where a line of vehicles is already formed should stop and wait until the police has created an opening and allowed them into the line. 4) Those going over the embankments by the customs house near the Marymont tollgates are also to stop. 5) Vehicles are not permitted to overtake one another, neither beyond the tollgates, nor in the city. 6) The public going to Bielany is to proceed along Senatorska, Bielańska, and Nalewki streets,

10 *Kurier Polski*, 1830, no. 112, p. 573.

11 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1837, no. 123, p. 594.

12 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1837, no. 140, p. 689.

around the Krasiański Garden, Muranów, down Pokorna Street, by the sapper barracks, all the way to the Marymont tollgates.¹³

As it turned out, it was the right decision because despite the flooding the inhabitants of Warsaw did set off for the May festivities, as they did every year. According to the estimates of *Kurier Warszawski*, ‘carriages, coaches, cabriolets, 516 vehicles in general, 428 carriages, 429 chaises, and omnibuses went by constantly, 156 drawn by horses, and over 10,000 people on foot’ went through the Marymont tollgates.¹⁴ There were also boats that brought in trippers.

No blood-chilling descriptions of the flood and its aftermath appeared in the press this time, and not much was written about the charity effort. Only at a much later date, following the huge flood at the end of August 1839, *Gazeta Warszawska* published information about the assistance provided to flood victims two years previously. At that time, the government had set up a special committee to assess the losses suffered by those living near the Vistula and to distribute relief, both funds allocated by the authorities and money gathered during collections and a concert. This was used to help victims in Warsaw and the surrounding area, as well as ‘farmers’ in the Stanisławów, Łuków, Sandomierz and Lublin districts.¹⁵ Some of the money had been raised by *Kurier Warszawski* among its readers, who mostly made small donations of a few *złoty*.

The real tragedy, most likely due to the flooding, occurred some time later. Warsaw was hit by an epidemic of cholera.¹⁶ It started in Powiśle; the first victim was a sixteen-year-old girl from Bednarska Street. Further cases were reported on the right bank of the Vistula: on 14 June in Saska Kępa; and on 22 June the epidemic struck again on the left bank. Initially, the inhabitants of cramped and humid houses along the Vistula were affected, but later the disease also spread to those living in wealthier streets like Senatorska, Miodowa, Długa, and on Krakowskie Przedmieście.

Jan Kulesza, a doctor practising in Warsaw, connected the outbreak of the epidemic with the flooding in Powiśle. He noticed that the river banks were covered with mud from the river, which dried up in the sun and gave off an unpleasant smell. ‘All the riverside streets were filled with these fumes, which hung in the air for a long time. I smelled them myself many times on Solec and Czerniakowska,’¹⁷ he wrote.

13 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1837, no. 125, pp. 606–607.

14 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1837, no. 1786, p. 1.

15 *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1839, no. 260, p. 1.

16 Jakub Jasiński, ‘Wiadomość o cholerye w m. Warszawie od dn. 2 VI rb. aż do jej ustania dn. 8 X 1837 r.’, *Pamiętnik Towarzystwa Lekarskiego Warszawskiego*, 1837, vol. 1, book 4, pp. 668–672.

17 Jan Kulesza, *Opisanie cholery azjatyckiej, jaka epidemicznie grassowała w Warszawie i Królestwie Polskim w latach 1831, 1836 i 1837. Postrzeżenia dotyczące natury tej choroby, jej niezaraźliwości, form, jakie na siebie przybiera, tudzież sposoby leczenia i środki ochronne, na własnym doświadczeniu ugruntowane*, Warszawa 1838, p. 11. In a footnote to this fragment, the author added a note on his smell impressions: ‘In August, when attending a stage performance at the Łazienki Amphitheatre, which is near water and outdoors, a light breeze brought the smell of cholera to my nose, just like the one I knew from everyday work at the hospital.’

According to the calculations of Jakub Jasiński, the 'city physicist', 2180 people fell ill in Warsaw, and 938 died during the cholera epidemic lasting from June to December 1837.¹⁸

The March flood of 1838

At the end of winter 1838, the weather changed rapidly. After a cold January, a warm February came with the thaw. The ice sheet on the Vistula river began to melt, huge floes floated down the river. Some daredevils, trying their strength and dexterity, ran across them to the other side of the river. One of the ferrymen, who was best at this, quickly found followers, but '[...] a number of tragic accidents happened before the authorities finally got down to it and forbade these dangerous amusements'.¹⁹

In the middle of February, the Vistula surged and flooded some of the streets in Powiśle. Soon, however, temperatures dropped again and a layer of ice formed on the surface of the water in the streets, which also hindered movement, and '[...] the local inhabitants had to get across improvised Hudson's Bays. Every now and then the ice would break under someone's weight and the person would fall through.'²⁰ On 2 March, Warsaw got news of rapidly rising water levels on the Vistula near Puławy and Zawichost. A few days later, a relay from Krakow reported that the Podgórze bridge had been broken. In Warsaw, on 6 March, when the wind was strong, water carried away several floats of the pontoon bridge, and crossing to the right bank became impossible. In the following days, the livestock market which usually took place in Praga had to be temporarily moved to Muranów.

The water continued to rise until 19 March. One of the reasons was ice blockage between Buraków and Tarchomin, as well as the persistence of ice on the Vistula near Zakroczym. As usual, the flooding affected the lowest parts of the city, inhabited by its poorest, who not only lost belongings, but also had to move out of their flooded houses for some time:

An extraordinary and unexpected flood on the Vistula River during this time put many families in a dire situation. Water and the cold united to oppress the poor and unfortunate inhabitants of the river bank, who can only find relief from their misfortune at the mercy of tender hearts.²¹

How greatly the condition of the flood victims contrasted with that of the inhabitants of the wealthy upper town can be seen in the *Kurier Warszawski* issue of 12 March, in which the misfortune of those affected by the flooding was related on one page, while an article on the next page described a sunny day in Śródmieście:

18 J. Jasiński, 'Wiadomość o choleryze...', p. 668.

19 Ibid.

20 Sigma, 'Trzy powodzie (Ustęp z dziejów Warszawy)', *Niwa Polska*, 1901, no. 27, p. 421.

21 *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1838, no. 71, p. 1.

In Warsaw, most of the wooden buildings in the riverside streets are inhabited by poor craftsmen, widows, etc. The current flooding during the cold season has become all the more severe [for many], as many poor families have nowhere to cook a humble meal, and many are without food!²²

In the afternoon, Krakowskie Przedmieście and Nowy Świat filled with those heading in the direction of the Aleje and Wiejska Kawa [Country Coffee]; carriages and coaches filled with beautiful ladies in tasteful, though well still winter, clothes. Their capes made of richly patterned fabrics wonderfully reflected the play of sunlight, and their shapely hats, most of them made of plush, velvet and satin, proved that although spring is near, we are still very much in wintertime.²³

Meanwhile, despair reigned below the escarpment, among the inhabitants of poor dwellings, some weathering the destructive power of the river yet again. The flood was even more afflictive because it occurred at the cusp of winter and spring, when the temperatures still often dropped below zero, and water took turns pouring in and freezing, while people suffered both cold and hunger.

Help began to be organised immediately. The Government Commission for Internal Affairs, Religion and Public Enlightenment ordered all the residents of the endangered areas to be transported to a safe location by boat and to be provided with shelter. A medical care facility was set up and funds were allocated for food.²⁴ Charity organisations joined in the effort. The Warsaw Charitable Society (established in December 1814) in cooperation with the Rumford's Soup Society provided most of the assistance. Two committees chaired by Teofil Janikowski were set up – one to manage shelter and the other to 'pick up the truly unfortunate'. Members of these committees included Count Piotr Łubieński, Ludwik Adam Dmuszewski, Jan (Wilhelm) Malcz, and Rev. Rajmund Szczawiński.²⁵ The committees sought premises where flood victims could be put up, oversaw supply and distribution of food, and collected firewood needed to dry the houses. Money was also collected. The Society members collecting monetary donations received special booklets in which they recorded the names of donors and the amounts.

Over 300 people found shelter in the palace of the Counts Łubieński on Królewska Street, where special rooms had been prepared. Meals were distributed to those in need. According to *Kurier Warszawski*, within three days, 1850 'people affected by the Vistula flooding' received dinner which 'consisted of three dishes, i.e. *krupnik* or chicken broth with rice, half a pound of meat, groats or rice with gravy and a pound of bread per person. On Lenten days,

22 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1838, no. 69, p. 321.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 322; Wiejska Kawa was the name of an elegant café located near today's Sejm building, at the intersection of present-day Piękna, Górnośląska and Wiejska streets.

24 *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1838, no. 81, p. 1.

25 *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1838, no. 75, p. 1.

beer soup, pea soup, potato soup or borscht and cabbage soup, herring, peas, groats or rice with butter were served'.²⁶ The sick and the weak were placed in municipal hospitals, and when there was a shortage of places they were sent to the Health House in the Ostrogski Palace at the expense of the Charitable Society. Society members doctors Jan Malcz and Aleksander Le Brun took care of those who did not require hospital treatment and prescribed medicines, which were also paid for by the Society.²⁷

The staff of *Kurier Warszawski* also started to collect donations for the flood victims, recording the names of donors and sometimes additional details, for example: 'from Antosia for her night mazurkas, 2 *złoty*; from Franciszka for disobeying and returning home late: 1 *złoty* [...]'²⁸ or 'from Waldeman's [sic] three young children, Idalia and Teofil, 30 *złoty*; and from the servant Bazylek Ch... for his laziness and sluggishness, 2 and a half *złoty* [...]'²⁹ As one can see, some donations were made out of kindness and compassion, while others were made to compensate for minor transgressions; the latter mainly by domestic servants.

There were also original fundraising campaigns, such as the one organised in a poor shop, where a donation box was placed next to natural specimens. Those who made a donation could see the skulls of an 'antediluvian ox' and a Lithuanian bison in addition to a fragment of 'rhinoceros nail'. These sights were supposed to attract a larger clientele who would make donations into the charity box.³⁰

Money collections were also organised among the staff of Bank Polski, flood victims were supplied with bread from a bakery, and 'distinguished ladies' prepared a charity concert. The funds were to be used not for immediate help, but to purchase new household appliances, dishes and tools for craftsmen. The concert, which sold out, took place at noon on 1 April in the Reduta Rooms at the Grand Theatre. The pieces performed by 'excellent amateurs' included a song for voice and piano entitled *Flood*, set to music by Antoni Teichmann and performed by Amalia Pruszk. A lithograph of the score was published by Gustaw Sennewald, who, jointly with the composer, decided to donate the income to victims of the flooding.³¹

The Administrative Council of the Kingdom of Poland sought to bring order to these endeavours by setting up a committee whose aim was to coordinate money collections, collect in-kind aid, distribute support or grant loans, provide shelter and food, and, in cooperation with the police, to find employment for those who had to leave their homes in order to prevent vagrancy and begging. It was announced:

26 *Sigma*, 'Trzy powodzie'..., p. 422.

27 [K.J.], *Historia Warszawskiego Towarzystwa Dobroczynności od 1814 do 1852 r.*, [before 1864], manuscript, University of Warsaw Library, T.6403, p. 6.

28 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1838, no. 73, s. 341.

29 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1838, no. 87, p. 409.

30 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1838, no. 87, p. 409.

31 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1838, no. 108, p. 513.

In the light of the above, from now on, all the activities of charities, religious fraternities and private individuals are to be made known to the Committee. Once all the losses have been tallied up, the Committee will proceed to distribute assistance to the victims [...].³²

Both spontaneous and organised help turned out to be very effective, and there was only a single death, recorded at the Health House on Ordynacka, where a 100-year-old woman died. Unfortunately, one the rescuers, a young vicar from St Andrew's parish, Rev. Rajmund Szczawiński, a member of the Charitable Society, lost his life; when crossing to Saska Kępa to rescue people in the first days of the flooding he got hypothermia and died within a few days.³³

The flood victims, busy with their misfortune and struggling to survive, probably had neither the focus nor the opportunity to thank their benefactors, but there were some expressions of gratitude such as these:

The inhabitants of the village of Siekierki near Warsaw, who were deprived of their livelihood by the Vistula flood, having received gifts, 180 *złoty* from the Honourable Kon[stanty] Pruszek, 20 *złoty* from Lejbka Lewensztejn from Łomża, and 100 loaves of bread and 120 herrings from the Trinitarian Brothers, wish to thank their benefactors most tenderly.³⁴

At the end of March, the flooding subsided. On 4 April, traffic was restored on the repaired bridge, which made the residents very happy, since there had been concerns about prices rising 'due to interrupted travel' as Easter approached, 'but [...] the completion of the bridge allayed this fear, as three galleys filled with eggs arrived from from Kraków region'.³⁵ The holidays went by calmly, and the Warsaw Charitable Society organised an abundant special Easter food for the flood victims.

The great flood of 1839

In 1839, a great flood occurred in Warsaw. Like the memorable cataclysm of 1813, it occurred at the end of August, but the first warnings about the possibility of flooding had appeared in the press as early as May. Apparently, after the flooding of the previous years (1830, 1837, and especially 1838) the inhabitants, fearing another catastrophe, kept close watch of water levels on the Vistula.

Every flood endangered the pontoon bridge. Sometimes the bridge was partly dismantled before the winter or before the ice mass started moving in the early spring, but in the spring and summer it could be destroyed by rushing waters, which usually carried objects swept up by the current, such as wood stored on the

³² *Kurier Warszawski*, 1838, no. 80, p. 374.

³³ *Kurier Warszawski*, 1838, no. 109, p. 517.

³⁴ *Kurier Warszawski*, 1838, no. 81, p. 377.

³⁵ *Kurier Warszawski*, 1838, no. 92, p. 433.

banks, unmoored boats and rafts, or even entire houses. To safeguard the bridge, on 14 May the Municipal Office issued a decree which stated that every citizen who contributes to saving the bridge during flooding, or rather to saving fragments of the bridge swept up by the current, will be rewarded. The amount of the reward would depend on the size of the retrieved fragment. And so, for example: 'Whoever holds down one complete bridge section, i.e. two floats with binding, will receive a reward of 150 *złoty*.'³⁶ The decree also regulated how the authorities were to be notified in such an event and how the bridge parts were to be secured. The finder should make his way to the nearest local authority in order to obtain a document confirming his identity and describing the nature of the found fragment. The document had to be sent to the Municipal Office, which then had fifteen days to collect the bridge fragment and pay the reward. If the office failed to meet the deadline, it had to pay the finder an additional fee for storing the piece.

At the same time, the decree warned that 'anyone who dares to obtain for personal use wood, iron or any other material from the stopped deck, float or any other part of the bridge, will be referred to the criminal court and face severe punishment once the material has been checked.'³⁷ The decree was to be proclaimed 'by the local authorities, as well as from church pulpits' to the inhabitants of riverside settlements north of Warsaw.

On 1 June, the press printed a warning issued by the Municipal Office in connection with news from Zawichost that the level of the Vistula was rising, and that the freshet could also threaten Warsaw. Boat owners were advised to check their anchoring to prevent danger to the bridge.

The message from Zawichost was received by relay. As reported in 1845 in *Warszawska Gazeta Policyjna* (Warsaw Police Newspaper), before 1840 Warsaw would receive information about the level of the Vistula from Kraków. This turned out to be insufficient because the Dunajec, Wisłoka and San rivers, flowing into the Vistula between Kraków and Warsaw, carried such masses of water during floods that they significantly contributed to the occurrence of flooding in the capital. Intermediate observation stations were therefore established in Zawichost and Puławy, from where warnings were issued for Warsaw about water levels on the Vistula. Although *Gazeta Policyjna* cited 1840 as the commencement of these observations, we can see that the Zawichost station, from which relays arrived with warnings, was used as early as 1839. In order to make rescue possible, the speed of the flood wave and the time left to prepare for danger were also calculated. It was established that it took 66 hours for water passing Zawichost to get to Warsaw, while 'the relay from Zawichost arrives in 23 hours, therefore the residents of Warsaw are sometimes notified 43 hours ahead of time and can take appropriate precautions.'³⁸

The relays arriving from Zawichost on 11 and 12 August reported rising water levels, but the warnings proved premature. It was only at the end of the

36 *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1839, no. 139, p. 1.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Warszawska Gazeta Policyjna*, 1845, no. 81, p. 2.

month that heavy downpours began in southern Poland, which first caused the Vistula to flood the vicinity of Kraków, as described by Kazimierz Girtler:

The water in the Vistula rose so much that – unable to get to Wieliczka – I watched this terrible catastrophe from the Wanda mound. The whole Vistula plain was submerged, here and there a small patch of land was visible, and the villages along the Vistula, like flocks of ducks, floated among the trees, which resembled small bushes or reeds sticking out of the water. This is an extraordinary sight for someone who lives on land – such a wide spill of water, but a sad one the moment one recalls the effects, leading to hunger and misery³⁹.

In Warsaw, it rained heavily from 22 to 24 August, and the rain was accompanied by strong winds. In the following days more and more disturbing news came from Zawichost, and more and more trees and haystacks were seen floating down the Vistula in addition to a corpse.⁴⁰ During the night from 26 to 27 August, water rose by six feet, fortunately the next day the Vistula ceased to swell, but the lower areas of the city presented a dramatic sight:

Looking down from the hills of Warsaw, one seems to be looking out to sea, since it is difficult to take in the whole expanse across which the flood has spread. In Praga, roofs stick out of the water, even the iron column in the Grochów fields seems to be half submerged in water.⁴¹

A terrible view haunted us yesterday: all of Saska Kępa, a large part of Praga and the adjacent fields [looked] as though they had been turned into a sea; the riverside streets of Warsaw were deserted because the water, having flooded the lower flats, already reached as high as the upper floors; fear was growing because the increasing surge seemed to be as threatening as that of 1813, when on 28 August it had reached a level of 21 feet.⁴²

The flood exceeded the severity and duration even of the flood of 1813. It was so sudden that one had neither the time to think about the proper means of rescue, nor about the boats. Some of the inhabitants of lower Warsaw, Praga and Saska Kępa became half-naked nomads, starving in attics and on rooftops, and for so many days and nights, with children and sick people.⁴³

The bridge was not destroyed: 'it owed its salvation to the forceful breakeage of many rafts that were going to strike it, as ordered by the Municipal Office'.⁴⁴

39 K. Girtler, *Opowiadania. Pamiętniki z lat 1832-1857*, Kraków 1971, p. 90.

40 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1839, no. 226, pp. 1093-1094; no. 227, p. 1098.

41 *Gazeta Codzienna*, 1839, no. 2584, p. 1.

42 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1839, no. 228, p. 1101.

43 A.J., 'Wspomnienie o Teofilu Janikowskim', in *Wieniec. Pismo zbiorowe, ofiarowane Stanisławowi Jachowiczowi przez pierwszych kraju Autorów oraz licznych innych Jego przyjaciół i wielbicieli*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1858, p. 440, footnote.

44 *Gazeta Poranna*, 1839, no. 227, p. 1.

An eyewitness described the actions taken by 'fishermen' on 29 August: 'they chased rafts, jumped on them, cut their joints with axes, and then quite boldly and agilely jumped into a boat, helping elsewhere, so that the mass of wood, pushing towards the bridge, would not unavoidably crush it [...]'.⁴⁵

The people in boats also helped flood victims. Moving between the houses, they took away those most threatened, while handing out food and water to others; they also transported members of the bridge brigade and guards. Members of the Warsaw Charitable Society were also among the rescuers.

At the beginning of the flood, the Society appointed a forty-person Vistula Committee from among its members, chaired by Teofil Janikowski. Its task was to provide immediate help to flood victims and to collect funds. The rescuers went by boat to flooded houses whose inhabitants had not managed to leave, and used pike poles to serve them bread, salt, lard and vodka (!). Others searched the attics, where elderly and handicapped people could be hiding. Two members of the Society, Pietrusiński and Scholze, went to *Saska Kępa*, from where they brought back some people trying to save themselves on haystacks. The Charitable Society Committee published a thank-you note in *Kurier Warszawski* to express its gratitude 'the Jew Chaim Jesionowski for gratuitously donating a boat to transport food to the inhabitants of *Saska Kępa*'.⁴⁶ The names of those who distributed food in this area under the direction of members of the Society were also mentioned.

The damage caused by the flood was enormous, but it affected only the poorest and most neglected parts of the city. The author of a note in *Gazeta Warszawska* was aware that the situation on both sides of the river differed greatly. On the left bank, the flood affected only the poor population living by the Vistula, while on the Praga side, where the land was flat, the damage extended over a much larger area:

We witnessed some terrible traces left by the devastating flow across extremely swollen embankments, the riverside dwellers on this side of the river barely had time to carry some of their property to higher places, their houses were seized by the foamy element, destroying everything they could not carry away; but the poor inhabitants of Praga and of so many villages on both sides, who had no ready means of saving themselves, how much damage they had to suffer. One has but to look from the hills onto this area, just recently bedecked with greenery, gilded with lush and mature grain, animated by the movement of hard-working farmers, today it is a skyline of water, from which only the top of a house or a tall tree protrudes here and there.⁴⁷

In the early days of September the waters dropped. The inhabitants of the wealthier districts went for walks, curious to see the aftermath of the flooding. They rode to Praga, taking advantage of the fact that the bridge was not

45 M.Z., 'Wezbranie Wisły. (Wyjątek z listu do Brata)', *Gazeta Poranna*, 1839, no. 232, p. 2.

46 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1839, no. 232, p. 1122.

47 *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1839, no. 232, p. 1.

destroyed: 'Beyond the bridge, Praga is scarred by water. The cobblestones in the main street, leading to the St Petersburg tollgates, have shifted in many places, water in moats, moisture and unhealthy homes. Behind the tollgates, the same traces of destruction. Roads [...] washed away, sometimes broken off, little bridges thrown to the side, vegetables slanted and pressed to the ground with silt.⁴⁸ In Łazienki, people viewed the damage caused by inundation, while Królikarnia afforded a view of the meadows and fields of Czerniaków, which were still flooded. 'Everywhere, during a pleasant ride, the thought of compassion for the misery of so many residents affected by misfortune and loss came to mind.'⁴⁹

For the members of the Warsaw Charitable Society there was not just the 'thought of compassion', but above all a desire to help and to alleviate suffering. They had already gained some experience during the previous floods; they knew what kind of assistance was needed when the waters were still high and in the days after. Initially, the most urgent need was to provide food and shelter. This was dealt with by the above-mentioned committee, known as the Vistula Committee or the Support Committee for Vistula Inhabitants Affected by Flooding. Just as in 1838, the counts Łubiński provided rooms in their palace at Królewska Street; 'dormitories' were also opened at the Sapieha Barracks on Zakroczymska Street. As reported, 'those already qualified for food by members of the committee may go there upon showing their food cards, it must be mentioned that separate rooms have been set up for Christians and for Jews [...].'⁵⁰ Until 12 September, lunch, as specified in the Committee report, was served at these places, consisting of 'three warm dishes (and on Lenten days of two dishes and a pound of bread)', while food was delivered to those who could not leave their homes. The products were purchased from contributions and collections, and some were in-kind donations from bakers or butchers. 14,663 meals were handed out this way,⁵¹ and in addition, over the course of 13 days, 920 people in Praga and Saska Kępa were supplied with food to their homes. The Rumford's soup department fed 200 people from its own funds. Some of the bread and meat had been donated free of charge by members of the bakers' and butchers' guilds.

Meals at the Łubiński Palace were served by members of the Vistula Committee, the sisters of mercy, as well as 'a distinguished group of ladies, noble Benefactresses of the Society, who, as they had in the past, divided the food with their own hands.'⁵² The assistance was provided efficiently and with great kindness towards the needy, in accordance with the Society's resolutions, which recommended sensitivity in dealing with the poor and unfortunate. However, not everyone was capable of behaving in this manner. One

48 'Przejażdżka po prawym brzegu Wisły', *Pismo dodatkowe do Gazety Porannej*, 1839, September.

49 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1839, no. 232, p. 1121.

50 *Gazeta Codzienna*, 1839, no. 2592, p. 1.

51 *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1839, no. 259, p. 1.

52 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1839, no. 242, p. 1169.

of the benefactors, prelate Rev. Antoni Kotowski, gave a speech to the flood victims gathered at the palace. It is worth quoting at least part of his speech, because the contrast between the compassionate albeit pragmatic attitude of other members of the Charitable Society who tried to help and comfort the victims as best as they could, and the priest's way of thinking, especially his words, which certainly did not reassure anyone, is striking. After emphasising how much the victims owed to the 'merciful hearts' of their benefactors, he concluded:

In your misfortune, which the raging element has brought upon you, you can neither murmur nor grumble. GOD created the elements, He rules over them and does not change their nature. The physical order of the world depends on His all-powerful will. If they sometimes have unpleasant consequences for individuals, they are nonetheless striving for the overall good of the world.⁵³

None of the victims was likely comforted by such a vision of 'general good' at their own expense. It is worth mentioning that, although he held high positions in the Church and was a member of the Charitable Society, Rev. Kotowski earned the following opinion from his contemporaries: 'He was widely known for his expressive preaching, but there was more performance than substance in his sermons; he lacked thoughtfulness and heart, but he had an eloquent gesture and all the superficial trimmings of a church speaker.'⁵⁴

After the emergency aid was provided, it was time to assess and repair the damage. The Charitable Society Committee examined damaged houses and assessed their condition. According to the 'builders' who performed these inspections with members of the Society, 84 houses required repair. It was agreed that the owners would make individual arrangements with craftsmen, while circuit supervisors would disburse money 'as works progressed'. The money used both to feed the flood victims and to pay for renovations largely came from public collections and charity events organised by enterprising Varsovians.

The first collection was announced by the Charitable Society in *Kurier Warszawski* on 2 September. The already mentioned Committee, made up of about 40 individuals, was authorised by the government to collect contributions. Its members included some of the most generous members of the Society, known for their charitable activity: Teofil Janikowski, Stanisław Jachowicz, Henryk and Piotr Łubieński, Jan Malcz, and Ludwik Pietrusiński. Donations were sent to the office of *Kurier Warszawski*, whose publisher, Ludwik Adam Dmuszewski, was also a member of the Charitable Society. By 15 September, over 23,000 *złoty* had been collected, but this amount was insufficient given the extent of the damage and spending on food. 'Distinguished ladies' led by

53 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1839, no. 243, p. 1174.

54 J. Bartoszewicz, *Kościoty warszawskie rzymsko-katolickie opisane pod względem historycznym*, Warszawa 1855, p. 42.

Countess Zofia Ożarowska decided to organise a performance at the Grand Theatre, during which the countess herself, despite health problems, recited the poem *Nadwiślanie* (Vistula dwellers) by Stanisław Jachowicz. It is worth mentioning that Jachowicz refused to grant permission to print *Nadwiślanie* in *Gazeta Poranna* because he believed that readers would then refrain from buying brochures of the poem, while the income from their sale was supposed to fuel the flood fund.⁵⁵

Another poem was also written on this occasion and for the same purpose: *Straszliwa noc nadwiślańska w czasie wezbrania Wisły on 29 August 1839* (Terrible night by the Vistula during the flooding of 29 August 1839) by Wincenty Połatkiewicz.⁵⁶ This little work had to have been created at a mad pace, since on 9 September the press was already announcing its sale at 16 *grosze* per copy.

The Variety Theatre put on Ludwik Adam Dmuszewski's play *Wezbranie Wisły* (The Vistula surge), written 26 years earlier at the time of the memorable flood of 1813.⁵⁷ *Gazeta Warszawska* reported that the play was very well received, and that after the performance the audience rewarded the actors with roaring applause and made them come back on stage twice.⁵⁸

A 'music party' took place in the gardens on Foksal Street – the Warsaw Orchestra conducted by Napoleon Kurzątkowski performed for several hundred people, and 385 *złoty* were collected for the flood victims.

Performances by 'artificial riders' associations', i.e. vaulting and rope climbing shows under the direction of Eliza Tourniaire and Jan Salamoński, were held at the Olympie Circus, also known as the *Szczwalnia* or *Heca*, on Chmielna Street near Bracka. The income from the 10 September shows, together with donations collected during the performance, totalling 750 *złoty*, was transferred to the flood fund. One of the spectators, moved by Mrs Tourniaire's attitude, immediately wrote a poem in her honour.⁵⁹

Money was collected in various circumstances, for example 'at a dinner among friends' (147 *złoty* 15 gr) or during a 'delicious friends' supper in the Rembaczowski garden' (180 *złoty*). What did such collections during family or social gatherings look like? Here is an example:

Yesterday, at a dinner organised (due to a name day a few days ago) in honour of a distinguished Varsovian, proudly known to the poor on account of the fact that he zealously tries to wipe away their tears, someone mentioned the unfortunate residents of the Vistula riverside. One of those present proposed a collection, and

55 H. Skimborowicz, *O Stanisławie Jachowiczu*, w: *Wieniec. Pismo zbiorowe ofiarowane Stanisławowi Jachowiczowi przez pierwszych kraju Autorów oraz licznych innych Jego przyjaciół i wielbicieli*, volume 3, Warsaw 1858, p. 53.

56 I. Piotrowski quotes Połatkiewicz's work in its entirety and discusses it in his article 'Warszawa tyłem do powodzi, czyli pod nami choćby potop – rekonosans', in *Powodzie, plagi, życie i inne katastrofy*, ed. K. Konarska, P. Kowalski, *Colloquia Anthropologica et Communicativa*, Wrocław 2012, pp. 367-370.

57 Cf. J. Popiołek, 'Flood in Warsaw, 1813', *Almanach Warszawy*, 2014, vol. 8, pp. 98-99.

58 *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1839, no. 240, p. 1.

59 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1839, no. 240, p. 1161.

immediately a plate filled up with voluntary donations. The total amount of 147 *złoty* 15 gr was collected.⁶⁰

The donations sent to *Kurier Warszawski* also included prizes won in games, for example at dominoes (6 *złoty* 20 gr). Like the previous year, payments were often a form of compensation, for example 'from Karolina the Younger for her conceit, and from the concierges Andrzej and Stanisław for their drunkenness and laziness'⁶¹ (3 *złoty* each), or 'for allowing myself to tell an indecent joke' (6 *złoty* 20 gr). Others were made out of heartfelt compassion: 'The artist J.D.' donated a gold ducat and the employees of a rubber factory donated half of their daily earnings to the flood victims.

The campaign was joined by others: the owner of a wax museum donated his one day's income; at the same time, visitors were encouraged to do another good deed: 'good gentlemen are asked to buy a ticket for domestics or poor children who long to enjoy these pleasures'.⁶² In the poor shop, there were no more skulls or rhinoceros nails to be seen for a small fee but 'a mushroom larger than the one shown here previously, a giant puffball (*lycoperdon giganteum*) from the courtyard of the Kazimierzowski Palace, measuring one and a half elbows and weighing four pounds'.⁶³

The Prussian prince, Albert, who was visiting Warsaw, donated 50 gold ducats to the Committee fund when he left. At the end of September, 'the Most Illustrious the Emperor and King' supported the flood victims of the Kingdom of Poland with the sum of 50,000 *złoty*.⁶⁴ In December, even the inhabitants of Łęczyca and Zgierz became involved in organising collections.

Thanks to all of these initiatives, a total of 81,000 *złoty* was collected, of which 45,000 were used to help flood victims, while the remaining 36,000 were added to funds raised by Stanisław Jachowicz for the construction of a boys' orphanage. Soon a two-storey building was erected in Nowy Świat, where 65 boys found shelter, with a shelter for smaller children on the ground floor.⁶⁵

Floods in the 1830s strongly affected the inhabitants of Warsaw. The last one in particular caused great damage. Although the water levels did not match those of the cataclysm of 1813, as we can read on the memorial plaque preserved at the former Water Chamber on Kłopotowskiego Street, the difference was small. The highest water level on the Vistula was recorded five years later, in 1844. Fortunately, this record has not been broken to this day.

60 *Gazeta Warszawska*, 1839, no. 231, p. 1.

61 *Kurier Warszawski*, 1839, no. 229, p. 1105, no. 230, p. 1109.

62 *Gazeta Codzienna*, 1839, no. 2604, p. 4.

63 *Gazeta Poranna*, 1839, no. 251, p. 1.

64 *Gazeta Poranna*, 1839, no. 256, p. 1.

65 Stanisław Jachowicz, *Józefa Ungra kalendarz warszawski popularno-naukowy ilustrowany na rok zwyczajny 1862. Rok siedemnasty*, Warszawa [1862], p. 4.

Flooding in Warsaw in the 1830s

Floods are an important part of the history of Warsaw. They mostly affected the lives of those inhabiting the low-lying, poorer neighbourhoods of the city: Powiśle on the left bank, and Praga on the right one. They also mobilised the city's wealthier inhabitants to organise help for those affected. The great flood of 1813 saw the founding of the Warsaw Charitable Society, which also played a significant role when the Vistula overflowed in the 1830s.

The spring flood of 1830 destroyed a bridge, as did the surge of May 1837. The latter, although not particularly violent, probably contributed to an outbreak of cholera which spread to over 2000 people, 938 of whom died. The next flood, in the early spring of 1838, was so severe that the city authorities and the Charitable Society did not stop at organising a rescue operation but also provided material support to the victims of the flood once the waters had dropped. Shelter and food were offered, in-kind and monetary donations collected, and relief funds distributed. A similar effort was repeated the following year. After the experience of the previous years, Varsovians were already prepared for the next big flood, which came at the end of August 1839.

Keywords: Warsaw, Vistula, flooding, 19th century