

NARRACJE #13

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SĄCZKI

Before the war, they were called Rieselfelder. After the war, people started calling them Sączki. For over one hundred years, they purified Gdańsk sewage, evolving from a dune into a verdant meadow. This is a story about a mysterious organism that grew on human excrement.

So, sit down and lend your ears.

There is a hidden city underneath this one: kilometres of channels belonging to two opposite kingdoms – purified water and sewage. Everyday human produce, rinsed and washed, falls into the underground corridors. Their architecture may be awe-inspiring, as Hans Christian Andersen wrote after his visit to Paris. You may have come here through a street of his name.

In the 19th century, apartments in tenement houses started being fitted with water closets, and a “flushing culture” swept through big-city Europe. You enter a closed-off toilet, sit down, a moment of concentration. One magical pull of the string removes your faeces deep into the city’s underbelly. Today it may even disgust you, but there was a time when life in cities was completely different. Water was obtained from shallow wells, and human excrement was stored in barrels or pits dug in narrow yards. And, by the light of the moon, the precious raw material of human manure was obtained by carters to supply suburban farmers.

The uncountable remains of human existence flowed down the gutters, mixing with sticky mud, and stained the cobbled road surfaces. Just imagine the enormous effort it took to turn everyday urban life upside down and introduce new hygienic protocols in just a few years!

So, in the mid-19th century, to save people from poverty, illnesses and contact with their own shit, the construction of channels began – a mirror image of the city hidden below its surface. Sewage was most likely directed toward rivers located below the houses and then to the seas. Soon, however, fishermen and then residents started demanding their purity. However, the muddy beginnings of urban hygiene include luminous examples too. The history of Gdańsk is one of them.

Want to hear it?

The year was 1863 when Leopold von Winter, the mayor of Gdańsk, called a meeting. Danzig needs drinking water and new hygiene! Danzig needs channels! This mission was accepted by Eduard Wiebe, a Prussian building councillor from today's Stalewo. He presented the residents with the following solution:

A city of channels will emerge underneath the city proper. The gut of Danzig. The sewage flowing out of today's downtown Gdańsk, instead of ending up in the sea, would be led to meadows, right next to the spruce forests between Stogi, Wisłoujście, and today's Przeróbka. Thus expelled, they will begin the transformation process, seeping through natural filters created by barren soil that is surprisingly effective in this aspect.

This will be an urban purification plant powered by nature, in close cooperation with soil bacteria, minerals, and gravitation. With human faeces as its capital, the product will be water and fertilizer, without which – as well we know – we have no future.

After less than a decade, Sączki began a process of various metamorphoses, ingesting the resources so efficiently rejected by the city. The human, like all animals or other organisms, is part of the flow of matter and energy in nature. People's fertile guano had since then fed the turnips, beets, corn, buckwheat, barley, and oat growing here. As well as rape, caraway, linen, cock's-foot, hemp, and tobacco.

This food went back to the city, ultimately reaching the stomachs of its residents. There, it

was decomposed and digested to again return to the fields in the form of expelled, valuable remains. To again feed the bacteria, fungi, invertebrates, and, most importantly, edible plants – this is its destiny.

This loop gave rise to life-giving fertilizer and soil. The stench was unbearable but – surprising as it may seem – water obtained from the sewage, unless it made contact with sand that coloured everything red, was completely transparent, odourless and tasteless. Trapped in laboratory test tubes, it underwent detailed examinations – chemists looked for traces of human urine and excrement but to no avail. The water was pure, and the faeces were removed in a permanent transformation of matter. Purified water was collected by underground drains, through whose channels it slowly made its way towards the sea.

Sączki are not far from here, near the forest.

They create a vast meadow with several distinct bulges and four water reservoirs overgrown with reeds. Sewage no longer flows into them. Now they are fed to a new treatment plant called Wschód. The surrounding area is marked only by relics of the former network of ditches, sedimentation tanks and small fields, now almost completely taken over by nature. The daily life of beavers and many other organisms that have found refuge in this forgotten part of the city plays out here. Raw sands have been replaced by luscious undergrowth. Roe deer run over it. Hardly anyone remembers Sączki today. They live a life of their own.

Only occasionally does the growl of an engine disturb the peaceful routine of the area. These are seekers of amber, searching for deposits of this resin of the amber pine that lived here many millions of years ago. But this theft is not without consequences, as has been heard of many times. What will bring about their doom is that in extracting an ancient resource from the earth, they offer nothing in return.