

Włodzimierz Karol Pessel

University of Warsaw

w.pessel@uw.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-2967-3415

Maritime Turn and the Sinking of Heweliusz*

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ABSTRACT: The article formulates a postulate of a maritime turn in research and public debate in Poland, grounding it in the context of the ongoing folk turn. The text argues for the need to increase maritime awareness and moving some of national interest from traditional land subjects to issues connected with the Baltic Sea. In the first part, the author defines maritime awareness, references concepts from the field of maritime sociology, history of culture and economy so as to show the historical conditions behind land-based foundations of Polish mentality and Poland turning away from the sea. Simultaneously, changing human aspirations and counting maritime economy among challenges for the near future are taken into account. The second part analyzes the significance of Adam Zadworny's non-fiction book *Heweliusz. Tajemnica katastrofy na Bałtyku* and the announced Netflix series for the popularization of maritime-related subjects within the postulated maritime turn. It shows that disasters, seen as "useful" in the sphere of communication, may play the role of a catalyst for communal forms of life, whereas when described at a temporal distance in texts of culture with broad public audience, they may co-create social climate favorable for the development of maritime economy.

KEYWORDS: maritime turn, sinking of Heweliusz, Adam Zadworny, Heweliusz TV series

The Maritime Awareness of Polish People

The article contains a postulate of a maritime turn. It would consist in forcing through and then consolidating a "new" research focus in our country, in supporting maritime awareness in Polish culture, despite the legacy and *longue durée* of land-locked mentality in Polish social history and, as a result, in inten-

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sifying interest in the sea in Polish public life and economy. It is my claim that the time is right for Polish society to cease to be focused only on land interests. Simultaneously, we encounter valuable academic and published body of work of many fields of study dealing with the sea and the people of the sea, among others, maritime sociology, transport economy and history of culture. This body of work could be publicized and popularized with the goal to increasing the maritime awareness of the Polish people.

I propose the following blueprint definition of maritime awareness. Maritime awareness is an attitude shaped by historical experiences and collective state of mind that sees the sea as the key source of prosperity, strategic space and cultural inspiration. It is expressed through knowledge, responsible management of resources, attention to security, as well as social and cultural activities. It constitutes a foundation of cultural identity and it marks directions for national maritime policies, including ports, navy, shipping, and professions connected with the sea both offshore and onshore. Therefore, an increase in maritime awareness should be seen as a product of the process of civilization. It consists in establishing requirements regarding economic activity connected with the sea, its resources and functions – activity which becomes socially required in the course of this process. These criteria include using the sea both as space for transportation, source of raw materials and energy, and in the function of a space for recreation and cultural activity. Following Norbert Elias, by such a psychocultural process I understand, in fact, constructing what is obvious in the given culture. It concerns building a cultural model in the context of issues of state organization, imposing moral norms, economic standards, etc. In this way, social compulsion changes into internal compulsion of individuals (Elias 2011: 495–517), on the level of culture of existence as well as symbolic culture (Boksański 2006: 193).

The present article has two parts. The second, shorter part, brings about a fundamental change of topic. It pertains to the recent Polish publication of a reportage concerning the reasons, course and consequences of the 1993 sinking of the Polish ferry Jan Heweliusz in the Baltic Sea. I do not interpret Adam Zadworny's publication in terms of a literary event – this I leave to literature scholars and their tools; rather, I note a public event of a game changer type. I realize that the *iunctim* between the two parts of my article may appear entirely impossible to grasp at first glance. However, I would like to show that given the faint maritime awareness of Poles, any starting point, any pretext becomes exceptionally valuable and can be fruitful. As the adage has it, beggars can't be choosers. Moreover, disasters, following a suggestive, paradoxical concept of a performative scholar, can be counted among culturally productive phenomena (Wojnowski 2016: 411–432). While they are rightfully seen as tragedies or destruction scenes, simultaneously, having broken the continuity of some structures or longer event chains, disasters open space for new forms of life, new ideas, languages, practices, etc. In this sense, among others, this popular reportage narration concerning the sinking of the Polish ferry may

pave the way for a maritime turn. Adam Zadworny's reportage has social resonance not only due to its pioneering nature and culturally productive disaster content. In the footsteps of Zadworny's book – admittedly, this is a pure coincidence, and not a business collusion or adaptation of some kind – there follows a notorious TV show. At the point when the present text is handed over to the editors, *Heweliusz* has not premiered yet, but it has already been emphatically announced in other media by its creators and producers from the Netflix streaming platform, and advertised according to PR techniques. It could be said that the *Heweliusz* TV show has become known before it was even shown on the screen.

The book's author, Adam Zadworny, is a Szczecin-based journalist, anchored, above all, in regional community. Nevertheless, the book *Heweliusz. Tajemnica katastrofy na Bałtyku* [*Heweliusz. The Mystery of a Baltic Disaster*] had a strong national resonance. In addition to reconstructing the course of the disaster, describing the attitude of the shipowner, the institution of maritime administration in Poland, the surviving crew members and the experiences of the victim's families, the reportage provides a rare insight into the reality of Polish shipping and maritime transportation in the first phase of economic and system transformation. Zadworny succeeded in reflecting a certain *Stimmung*, a broad political, cultural, emotional, economic and infrastructural context of the 1990s, when shipping in the version brought over from the last years of Poland under a Communist rule was giving its last breath, while phenomena of the democratized Poland removing itself from the sea were accelerating. These include: lack of investment into state-of-the-art shipping vessels, departing from national fleet (Polish ensign), allowing for the fall of the shipyard industry and reduction of Polish technical support, the disappearance of deep-sea fishing.

The maritime turn will not be possible or efficient without an increase in maritime awareness. Maritime awareness will serve as cultural and mentality-related support for the process of increasing the role of the Baltic Sea, shipping and port economy in the social and economic development of Poland.

Maritime Turn

I postulate a maritime turn. I use the notion of a "turn" while being aware of all its burdens and wear in social sciences and humanities. There is no doubt that the multitude of novelties in theory and research announced one after another at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries (interpretive turn, performative turn, postcolonial turn, spatial turn, etc.) resulted in all these turns ceasing to appear as serious, great caesuras in the second quarter of the 21st century; the most they seem are amendments or supplements of the research state (Bohuszewicz 2012: 23–24). Similarly, the maritime turn, although it may sound novel, will in no way take place in an empty space. However, the logic of intellectual provocation that I consciously want to employ has its rights. In order to be heard and to give dynamics to a certain process initiated in the academia, but aiming to exceed it into public influence, it is the most efficient to announce yet an-

other turn. Here, this word is supposed to be received in the mind of academic audience as an unambiguous, understandable signal that another momentous and current topic – or, rather, a set of topics, together with a certain research focus dedicated to it – enters the agenda.

In cultural studies, metaphors are a normal tool of cognition and description. The maritime turn belongs to this order. Furthermore, as Doris Bachmann-Medick has shown, the strength and attractiveness of turns is determined by the fact that they perform a movement from research subjects to categories of analysis, while the categories of analysis as such undergo metaphorization. This means that a new “cultural turn”, instead of referring to cognitive objects, “becomes a *tool* and *medium* of knowledge itself” (Bachmann-Medick 2012: 31). As a result, the given subject area can be delineated right across a division into research fields. In the case of a performative turn, these will be ritual, translation or space, while in the case of a maritime turn – the navy, ports or maritime texts of culture. Turns do not impose a specific method; rather, they bring about a re-organization of imagination. A very broad range of interests, just as metaphors, are not an impediment in cultural studies, as they suit its holistic nature. Culture remains the final and target subject of study of all sciences, be they natural or political (Szahaj 2023: 160).

Currently, Poland is ruled by a folk turn. It will not be overly publicistic to state that there has been an outcrop of intellectuals who want to have something to say about the countryside, the past history of Polish peasants, or about other forms of life of the lower class. Whether they are able to hear, simultaneously, what the sources want to tell them, should be verified by professional historians. The fashion for the so-called folk histories made repressed excesses of noble culture and reckoning of bills of wrongs between peasants, lords and hegemony, or servants, the proletariat and townspeople into main subjects for debate. It is worth redirecting this attention to the “excess” of Poland turning her back to the Baltic Sea, and, starting today, balancing the folk turn with a maritime turn. Not just out of contrariness, as a gesture of discursive foolery – extending the postulate of a maritime turn has material justification that I present later. I assume that the folk turn is now reaching its culmination. When the given intellectual fashion reaches its peak, it must soon fade out or give way to another powerful trend. Although Georg Simmel referred mainly to aesthetic fashions, his observations can be extrapolated to ideas. Just calling something a fashion assumes that it will disappear as soon as it appeared. And, at the same time, fashion cannot be universal, for after a quantitative multiplication it becomes homogenized, becomes, “as pertains to its quality, a common good of the masses” (Simmel 2006: 25).

What I am aiming at is that space is being made for maritime interests and issues. Once there occurs an oversaturation with peasants and the land, navigating might become tempting for a change. *Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse*. In fact, the low maritime awareness and the scope of the folk turn are like the obverse and reverse of one and the same cultural formation. The fashion

for folk histories of Poland and its scope find their justification in the specificity of native cultural formation, shaped at the junction of folk and gentry tradition.

The Poles' turning their back at the sea is an inveterate issue, long-standing mental structure, the legacy of the noble Commonwealth – Poland before the Partitions, which took place at the end of the 18th century. The excellent twentieth-century historian, Władysław Konopczyński, put this particularity succinctly: “The pre-Partitions Poland had agrarian economic structure, and the population of the Commonwealth displayed characteristics of typical agricultural society. The nobility's interests and perceptions focused, above all, on land-related issues” (Konopczyński 2014: 226). A contemporary historian, Jan M. Piskorski, writes in identical spirit:

Poles were not drawn towards the sea. While in the times close to ours, especially in the euphoria after regaining independence in 1918, we were wont to boast about the homeland “from a sea to a sea”, we were actually drawn by that which was between those – “the Intermarium”: the rich soil of Ukraine and cheap, sometimes all but enslaved, labor force (Piskorski 2020: 11).

The nobility considered Ukrainian arable fields to be much more important than the sea. The First Polish Republic never had a big navy fleet, and its maritime significance was slight in comparison with maritime empires of the modern era. As follows, work on the sea, maritime professions were not held in high esteem by society. A certain exception lay in recruiting to foreign ships. It was not an accident that the maritime writer Józef Conrad Korzeniowski wrote in English. He might have been born in Berdyczów in the present-day Ukraine, but he swam on French and British ships. The English language provided him with rich technical vocabulary which, should he be writing in Polish, he would have needed to omit or make up himself first (Piskorski 2020: 12).

The measure of individual and collective success among Polish land owners was marked by the territory owned, family wealth and not the status of a ship-owner. Unless these were truly long-distance expeditions of explorers into foreign seas. Zygmunt Sójka, one of the seniors of Polish maritime economy, stated that it was this particular social, cultural and developmental grounding that “shaped a particular type of a Pole – a knight and a farmer – for centuries” (Sójka, Kasprzyk 1986: 17). In his historical and social exegesis of Polish modernity, Tomasz Kizwalter adds to this image of being immersed in agrarian peripherality the low level of urbanization, weakness of towns, complete elimination of “burgher components” (Kizwalter 2000: 33–37). In foreign trade, this meant stopping at exporting crops, agricultural products and “forest gifts” by cosmopolitan ports in such towns as Gdansk or Elbląg, which would at one point have better, and at another – more complicated relations with the Commonwealth.

Therefore, the issue of territory as such, Poland's limited access to the Baltic Sea does not entirely explain the propensity for Poland's weak utilization of

its seaside location and possession of an extensive shoreline in its own borders. However, it is a significant historical and political factor (cf. Znaniecki 1935: 33). Limiting the reflection to the past century, initially, during the inter-war period Poland only reached the Baltic Sea via a narrow corridor. General Józef Haller performed the lofty gesture of marrying Poland to the sea by throwing a ring into the sea in Puck in February 1920. In the interwar period, the capital of the Pomerania voivodeship was located in Toruń (which is admittedly situated at the Vistula shore, but at about 180 km from the Baltic Sea). After the end of World War Two and the fall of the iron curtain “from Szczecin to Trieste”, as Winston Churchill put it, the revived Poland took over a shoreline of about 770 kilometers. Took it over in the administrative sense, but managed it clumsily and ineffectively. This was supposed to be hidden by a surplus of patriotic pathos. In a poem unambiguously entitled *Powrót* [*The Return*], a poet familiar to many generations of children praised this return the following way: “Wróciła Polska na swój brzeg, / ku wiecznie swemu morzu” [Poland returned to its shore, to the sea that is forever hers] (Szelburg-Zarembina 1970: 3). The country’s return to the sea was also celebrated symbolically, by repeating the gesture of the pre-war general by the Polish People’s Republic’s authorities. In Kolberg-Kołobrzeg, liberated from German rule, corporal Franciszek Niewidziajło threw a ring into the sea on 18th March 1945.

Two literary fragments showcasing the shallowness of the Poles’ attitude towards the sea are familiar from ceaseless circulation. Both derive from the troves of literary history. It seems that a quote from a 1595 Baroque poem *Flis* [*Rafting*] by Sebastian Klonowic is the one more popular: “Może nie wiedzieć Polak co to morze, gdy pilnie orze” (What the sea is a Pole may not know as he is busy with the plow) (original quote following Rancew-Sikora 2010: 11). Rafters, people of the river finished their work where the world of the great water and foreign trade exchange by the means of deep-sea routes only began (Chwalba 2023: 154–171). This is why in the sphere of Polish cultural heritage people of the sea do not appear, while rafting was appropriately honored. Poland introduced timber rafting to the UNESCO “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity”. Until 2022, this was the fifth Polish entry on this list. The previous ones concerned nativity scene tradition in Krakow, tree beekeeping, falconry and flower carpets arranged for Corpus Christi in the village of Spycimierz in the Sieradz Land¹. Thus, these entries contribute to a constellation of an expressly landlocked nature.

Many years ago, Franciszek Bujak, a social and economic historian and, coincidentally, an inhabitant of the Lesser Poland region, noted that people of the land, including those from riverine cultures, even with rafters as central social figures, create cultures with a limited exchange of information and

1 See the official information from the Ministry for Culture and National Heritage: <https://www.gov.pl/web/kultura/flisactwo-piata-polska-tradycja-wpisana-na-liste-unesco> (retrieved April 27, 2025).

with narrowed circulation (Bujak 1934: 7–8). Meanwhile, the force of maritime cultures resembles *avant la lettre* globalized network form in Manuel Castells's understanding (Castells 2008: 405–452). People of the sea function in hubs belonging to extensive networks of transport nodes. Seaside cultures exist due to transfers both in the economic and political, and cultural and civilizational dimension. “Maritime culture – is a culture of exchange and circulation. Sailing – is above all trade”, Bujak (1934: 9) wrote. Tellingly, Bujak somewhat affirmed the dichotomy of land and maritime culture with his own biography and scholarly career. He wanted to do his habilitation on sailor's maps, but the Krakow Academy of Learning took that to be something exotic, an eccentric idea. Thus, having been quickly taught conformism, Bujak “abandoned endless seas and focused on the oldest villages in Lesser Poland, various Łęki, Zabłocia and Zakamycza” (Piskorski 2020: 12–13).

In turn, the other circulating literary fragment, containing a more developed thought, comes from *Rozmowy kruszwickie* [*Kruszwica Conversations*] by Jan Dymitr Solikowski from 1573. The archbishop admonished: “Whosoever has a maritime country and does not use it or allows [others] to tear it away, removes all benefits from oneself and brings all harm upon oneself, becoming a slave instead of a free man, a poor instead of a rich man, a stranger instead of familiar” (Solikowski 1906: 479). This quotation was used, among others, as a motto on the website of the Polish Navy in its previous version, or in the title of selection of source texts with historical-literary commentary (Kotarski 1970). It is difficult to imagine a more fitting comment to the desertion from intense development of navy, going on for a long time now, and a well-considered, perspective-oriented policy in maritime economy. Indeed, it is also a comment to the contemporary repeat of moving away from the sea by the Third Polish Republic.

A country's moving away from the sea has various determinants, such as a lack of strong commercial fleet under the Polish flag, actions leading to the fall of the shipyard industry, or the ongoing decrease in the mass of fishing nationally and deep-sea. Today, the historic BHP Room in the old Gdańsk Shipyard almost disappears among the intense building of developer estates, while shipowners make standard use of the so-called flags of convenience; according to the generally available data of GUS [Statistics Poland] for 31st December 2023, there were altogether 88 ships in Polish maritime transport fleet belonging to Polish shipowners and operators, out of which only 14 units, or 15%, displayed the white-and-red Polish flag. Moreover, according to official data, the number of coastal cutters declined between 2003 and 2022 from 991 to 697, representing a one-third loss without replacement by new vessels; this translates into a decline in fish caught in Polish fisheries from nearly 200,000 tons in 2016 to nearly 76,000 tons in 2024. This is compounded by the scale of neglect of smaller ports. Poland has four thriving ports of fundamental importance to the economy – this being a statutory designation for the ports in Gdańsk, Gdynia, Szczecin, and Świnoujście. Furthermore, there are several

dozen (approximately 30) ports considered medium-sized and small. An audit conducted by NIK [the Supreme Audit Office], covering most of Poland's smaller-scale seaports (27–29), revealed long-standing neglect, a deplorable state of their infrastructure, and their marginal role in domestic transshipment. The report, published in 2023, blamed the blocked development of these ports on overly fragmented ownership and lack of stable financing².

According to my research at this point, what the relationship between Poland and the Baltic Sea represents has been diagnosed most aptly by the Gdańsk polyhistor: a geographer, economist, nautologist, historian of civilization and geopolitics specialist in one. Andrzej Piskozub indicated three key features: “mystical attitude to the sea, mythical to maritime traditions, and volunteer in approach to maritime economy” (Piskozub 2004: 7). In other words, Piskozub expressed the opinion that the inscription of the Baltic Sea into patriotic feeling did not decide about the emergence of any kind of mature maritime culture in Poland, if it is to be seen in the categories of symbolic and material products of national community, resulting from economic and social activity.

Another person who thought it important to pragmatically include Poland into maritime civilization through developing contacts with the sea on all planes – economic, social, cultural, scientific and strategic – was the founder of the Szczecin school of maritime sociology (Janiszewski 1989: 281–283). Ludwik Janiszewski is known, above all, from his authorial concept of marinization. The processes of marinization consist of two free factors: the influence of forms of human activity connected with the sea as well as the influence of the sea as such on the structure and culture of coastal societies as a particular type of a community (Janiszewski 1984). In Janiszewski's research, a prominent place was taken up by maritime professions and sailors' families, especially how the specificity of offshore work transformed family relationships. At the same time, Janiszewski (1989: 267) perceived the Polish Coast in its entirety: from Świnoujście to Elbląg and ports at the Vistula Lagoon, without favoring the two major port centers: in Trójmiasto (Gdańsk–Gdynia) and in Western Pomerania (Szczecin–Świnoujście). Thus, he maintained a pragmatic, constructive way of thinking about Poland's location at the Baltic shore, one that Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski had tried to strengthen right after the war, when for a short time he was the government's proxy for reconstruction of the Coast (Kwiatkowski 1945: 57).

Janiszewski and Piskozub appear here in a *pars pro toto* mode, that is, a synecdoche of the general state of maritime writing in Polish. The issues of Poland's relationship with the Baltic Sea and the Poles' cultural attitude towards sailing have already been fairly richly described. It is even less possible to say that the industry literature connected with various scientific fields and discussing equally diversified maritime issues is lacking. Additionally, for instance, the

2 See The NIK Report *Małe porty morskie i ich duże problemy wraz z wystąpieniami pokontrolnymi* [Small seaports and their large problems with post-audit statements]: <https://www.nik.gov.pl/najnowsze-informacje-o-wynikach-kontroli/male-porty-morskie.html> (retrieved April 27, 2025).

achievements of Polish maritime sociology (see Kołodziej, Kołodziej-Durnaś, Królikowska 2024) are present and noted in international circulation. It is worth referring here to the publishing series “International Studies in Maritime Sociology” of the Brill publishing company or the directing functions of professor Maciej Kowalewski from the Szczecin University in the networking COST grant. The aforementioned repertoire of scientific publications is supplemented by industry and popular journals available in the regular offer of press stores („Morze” [The Sea], „Polska na Morzu” [Poland in the Sea], „Morze, Statki i Okręty” [The Sea, Boats and Ships], etc). There is also a constant niche for maritime literary fiction. As one can read in one of the monographs, this kind of prose by nature continually struggles for a higher rank in culture and tries to push away the opinion that it requires both special creators and refined audience (Karwacki 1975: 14), in brief, people fascinated with sailing and with the sea. Finally, the sea in Poland can crop up as both the pretext and the subject of “easy summertime reading”, that is, books purposely published at the very beginning of summer (e.g. Czechowska 2024; Øverås 2025).

Therefore, formulating the postulate of a maritime turn needs not lead to an appeal for a significant increase of subject literature. Still, a maritime turn should lead to a situation whereby broadly understood maritime research will go out to a larger audience and will, thus, serve to an increase in maritime awareness. “What we say and how we say it is really important, as, even if we are not always aware of it, it is always a part of a dialogue”, writes Monika Kostera (2019), inspired by the works of the Danish economic geographer, Bent Flyvbjerg. In humanities and social sciences we always refer not to laws of science, objective such as law of gravitation, but to problems, which are “someone’s”, situated in historical and social contexts. In order for these problems to be solved, theoretical knowledge has to be transformed into practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg 2001). The first step towards that, as clearly articulated by Kostera, is made when we have something meaningful to tell people. I see the maritime turn as a tool for making such considered stories heard. After all, they are no less meaningful than folk histories of Poland.

Moreover, within the maritime turn I would envision establishing an Institute for Maritime Affairs (Instytut Spraw Morskich) – named thus, as the shorter option, “Instytut Morski” (Maritime Institute) has already been taken. It is a name of the research-and-implementation institute that undertakes studies in the field of maritime law, water and port engineering and hydrology, existing in Gdańsk since 1950, in 2019, incorporated by the Minister for Science, Jarosław Gowin, into the Gdynia Maritime University. The new institutions – the Institute for Maritime Affairs – with aims in popularization and public diplomacy, would take care of what was called maritime upbringing in interwar Poland. It was supposed to be comprehensive, yet it started with a primer of “what every Pole should know about their sea” (Rylke 1926). This kind of maritime upbringing meant, in fact, shaping of what I call maritime awareness. To refer to the previously quoted diagnosis by Piskozub, it should fulfill three

criteria: of realistic approach to the sea, critical outlook at the history of Polish sailing and maritime tradition, and pragmatic attitude towards maritime economy and ports in “arranging” the future. Only in these circumstances would it be obtainable to identify Polish society with the sea in a measure equal to heretofore identification with the land through “being economical”. Only in these circumstances can the “cultivation of the sea” develop, as it would have been put by Franciszek Gronowski (Waldziński 2017: 33), in the post-war Polish academia a prominent expert with regard to economics of maritime transportation and port infrastructure.

Simultaneously, such a formulation of the tasks of the Institute for Maritime Affairs should safeguard from this enterprise sliding into propaganda, pathos or kitsch, and thus, from repeating past mistakes. A mixture of propaganda and pathos turned out to be a phenomenon characteristic for the moment of maritime agitation in interwar Poland. The Polish cultural identification at the Baltic shore was co-created, to a considerable degree, by Liga Morska i Rzeczna (Maritime and River League), a social organization which, in a phantasmagoric sense of historical mission, changed its name to Maritime and Colonial League in 1930. The League produced and disseminated the phantasm about gaining exotic overseas colonies for Poland, including terrains suited for new settlement. Contemporarily, given the force of postcolonial theory, the program and activities of the League faces directly strict criticism. And unfortunately, such an image of the Maritime and Colonial League does not serve well maritime awareness, as it aids in creating the sense that for Poles, presence in the sea does not work out, or, due to some kind of determinism, must take on distorted forms. Thus, the League’s failed attempt at starting a settlement called Morska Wola [literally: Seaside Will] on land purchased in the Brazilian state of Parana is summarized bluntly by a historian of culture: “Well, seaside will turned out to be sea sickness (it is difficult to escape this inelegant association), but one way or another – the sea remains a very important figure of the colonial dream, wherein the process of regaining and purchasing territory is interwoven with internal symbolic violence [...]” (Litwinowicz-Drożdziel 2022: 21). This is my response to this dictum: the point of maritime turn is to wake up and to do maritime Poland of the 21st century in the waking world.

The newly established Institute for Maritime Affairs should be named after Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski. It is truly puzzling that no political decision-makers to this date came up with referring to this deserving namesake of the development of Poland, as well as its technological infrastructure and ports! In February 1947, and thus still fulfilling the role of a government proxy on the Coast, Kwiatkowski wrote: “the sea has been and continues to be a great power that forms and transforms the nation’s psyche. The sea educates people in issues of large spaces, in international ones, it bends human characters to tenacity, [...] to fierce stubbornness, mounted, however, on the anchor of reason [...]” (Kwiatkowski 2009: 369). Kwiatkowski, who had previously rendered significant services for the creation of the port city of Gdynia, encouraged continuous

and realistic development: “the huge disproportion between political ambition of playing the role of an empire and economic inertia may be currently eliminated. Pointless ambition can be processed into positive and worthy economic facts” (Kwiatkowski 2009: 367).

Given the existence of such formations as the Narutowicz (formerly: Dmowski) Institute or Narodowy Instytut Wolności [the National Institute of Freedom], the accusation of straining public means by the new institute whose goal is to make proper use of the maritime country becomes baseless. Especially taking into account the fact that among pointless public spending, registered by the reports of the independent analytical center, Warsaw Enterprise Institute, there are wasteful curiosities next to which the ideas of the interwar League seem innocent. Let us just consider that the „Pamięć i Tożsamość” Museum in Toruń was gifted a medieval sword purchased in an antique shop by a company of the National Treasury, which medieval scholars suspect of being a forgery (Staciwa 2024: 48). A penny saved is a penny earned for the budget of the Institute for Maritime Affairs.

Background of the Maritime Turn

It is possible to indicate at least four different circumstances in favor of the maritime turn, its background, which appears increasingly better prepared.

Firstly, there is a development of aspiration culture in Polish public space. It involves, as should be immediately emphasized, an increasing group of social actors, connecting them into a power above the basic sociopolitical division in the country (Obacz 2021). This means that above the division line of the currently governing coalition of democratic parties versus the right led by the folk PiS party, we are dealing with a confrontation of a “party” of development with the “font” of investment minimalism. This is why the recent words by Prime Minister Donald Tusk regarding a proposal of hosting the 2040 Olympic Games in Poland are no longer discussed in media or social media, while the government is regularly appraised by society with regard to both continued (Central Port Komunikacyjny – Central Port of Communication) and hotly awaited new investments (nuclear power plants). These are megaprojects on a Polish scale (cf. Flyvbjerg 2017). The Polish government officially added expanding Baltic ports to the priority goals for the “Rok Przełomu 2025” [Year of Change 2025].

Jakub Dymek puts modern port economy and an expanded fleet among “nice things” that Poles need urgently (Dymek 2024). According to the journalist, the maritime issue needs to be put in the center of debate concerning the future, next to CPK or high-speed trains. Maritime concerns must also find their place in the first rank of strategic development thinking. This is a thought expressed in the spirit of professor Marcin Piątkowski. This economist consistently encourages Poles to become aware that they are at the best possible moment in the history of their country. In common terms, it can be described as window of development. According to official prognoses cited by Piątkowski,

Polish GDP is supposed to exceed 1 trillion dollars in 2025. The country currently faces the opportunity of breaking through to an above average status, an opportunity to turn into European leader (Piątkowski 2023: 317–337). Such aspirations are not at all among phantasms, and the window of development constitutes a factual moment. Therefore, it is obvious that a leading country located at the sea shore cannot make limited usage of this access, or not have its own commercial fleet.

Secondly, in worldwide academia, which Polish academia increasingly catches up with, there are developing various trends of reflection in the fields of eco-social sciences and eco-humanities. It suffices to mention here blue economy, ocean studies or reflection on ocean literacy – a sensitivity to maritime ecosystem in the approach of new humanities. An excellent example of a Polish response to international intellectual trends is the publication of “Przegląd Kulturoznawczy” under the moniker of Blue humanities. The aforementioned trends react to crises (climate change, rising sea levels, etc.) simultaneously studied by nature scholars and drawing the current attention of political decision-makers and the media. Today, discussions concerning new infrastructure (including water infrastructure) or sea exploitation actually turn into cultural wars: battles regarding language, cultural imagination, new human practices, as well as technological solutions with regard to green transition (e.g. Owczarska 2021; Henry 2023; Macura-Nnamdi, Sikora 2025).

Thirdly, the year 2026 will bring about a “round” birthday for Gdynia, namely, the 100th anniversary of the old fishing settlement over the Gull of Gdańsk receiving township rights (10th February 1926). In Poland, we often have excessive anniversary celebrations; we also have celebrations that not enough advantage was taken of, or dates strangely overlooked, such as the 1000th anniversary of the coronation of the first Polish King, Bolesław Chrobry. However, it is difficult to imagine the authorities overlooking the celebration of this port town, “the promised Gdynia”, as it was termed in the renowned book by a critic of architecture and the Second Polish Republic (Piątek 2022). Thus, one should expect official celebrations, publications on the occasion, events of ludic nature, even a *Sejm* act. Still, I am referring here to Piątek’s book for another reason: this narrative devoted relatively little space to the port and port activities. Even Grzegorz Piątek, when taking on the “town of the sea”, inscribed himself clearly into land-driven cultural tendencies.

Fourthly, it is necessary to take into account the return of maritime and naval subjects due to and by the means of the latest texts of culture. I treat cultural premieres as social events. In humanist political studies, as advocated by Włodzimierz Anioł, the importance of soft means of influencing public life is emphasized (Anioł 2021: 48). Thus, in addition to systemic factors, public life is also shaped by carriers of humanist interpretation and understanding. This is precisely how things are with regard to the reportage I discuss below. It concerns the biggest maritime catastrophe in the history of Polish commercial navy at the time of peace; 55 people died (10 crew members and 45

passengers), only 9 were saved. Regardless the tragic dimension, catastrophes are good forms of communication (cf. Wojnowski 2016: 429). The author of this book has something significant to say about how, in its beginnings, economic transformation of Poland prolonged the last moments of negative phenomena and practices from the end of Polish People's Republic. The transition from an illusory stage to a realist one in commercial ferrying did not happen until Poland started to turn away from the sea.

A Useful Disaster

The Czarne publishing company released the non-fiction book entitled *Heweliusz. Tajemnica katastrofy na Bałtyku* [*Heweliusz. The Mystery of a Baltic Disaster*] (Zadworny 2024) in the late autumn 2024. Finally, an important maritime and Baltic subject appears in mainstream! Almost at the thirtieth anniversary of the tragedy, although closer to the thirty-fifth one – the Polish cargo-and-passenger ferry's sinking in the Baltic Sea took place in 1993, in the morning of 14th January. The few survivors belonged to the crew. All passengers were shortly annihilated by the forces of raging sea: these were truck drivers and their companions, including one child. Some, surprised by the monstrous listing during their night sleep in cabins, were unable to get to the deck, as bulkheads suddenly turned into floors and ceilings; the others died in the freezing water during the forced evacuation, the announced alarm to abandon ship. In accordance to the old sailing honorary code, the captain, Andrzej Ułasiewicz, voluntarily went down with the ferry. A few weeks after the disaster, his body was easily found at the bridge by divers and extracted from the wreckage.

At the same time, the TV series directed by Jan Holoubek and scripted by Kasper Bajon was made; it awaits its Netflix premiere in the second half of 2025³. The film-makers had the opportunity to film the series on the car-and-train ferry Jan Śniadecki, built almost ten years later (in 1986) than Jan Heweliusz (1977), yet in the same technology: it is also a ROPAX ferry. The film crew took advantage of the time right before Śniadecki was sent to Greece to a new shipowner.

It is worth adding that heretofore, the Heweliusz case had not been described in any monographs, and the title of a publication by Andrzej Soysal, a famous retired captain of deep-sea sailing (*Tajemnica zagłady Heweliusza* [*The Mystery of Heweliusz Sinking*]) is simply misleading, as it does not reflect the contents of the book, which is simply autobiographical storytelling. It only contains one passage concerning Heweliusz, does not reveal any mysteries or solve any crimes (Soysal 2010). Adam Zadworny fills this gap skillfully, as it was earlier done by films and documentary television programs of the “black series” kind: presently, most of them have been made available online. However, their feature is that after seeing a few such productions, one achieves a level of saturation with facts. For obvious reasons, I am not yet familiar with

3 I have finished writing this article in April 2025.

the Netflix series, and thus I devote some attention to Zadworny's non-fiction work. Not much later, the book *Katastrofa Heweliusza* [*Heweliusz Disaster*] appeared in bookshops, marketed as a fictionalized reportage (Janiszewska 2025). Given the perspective of engendering a maritime turn, such thematic doubling is a good sign.

Among the announcements making it to the public domain and concerning "the most expensive Polish Netflix series", thus, apparently sentenced to success in advance of its release, two may be considered of note. Firstly, the crew made every effort, by, for example, traveling to a set at a special water (and underwater) Belgian film studio, so as the dramatic scenes taking place in the stormy Baltic whirlpool could be presented most faithfully, realistically and with momentum, and, at the same time, with respect towards the victims and the survivors who had to witness other people dying. Nonetheless, Jan Holoubek assures that the disaster is not the dominating mode of the series, which is supposedly much closer to psychological cinema. What is emphasized is what happened after *Heweliusz* sank – establishing the reasons behind the disaster, fates of the families, seeking justice, human attitudes. As follows, the series creators needed to somehow address the tradition, as created and fixed during Polish People's Republic, of the *Izba Morska* [Marine Chamber] to issue sentences favoring shipowners. The character of the captain, played by Borys Szyc, bears the name of the actual leader of the MS *Jan Heweliusz*.

Moreover, the Holoubek-Bajon tandem will face a different situation that in the case of the three-season thriller series *Rojst* [*The Mire*]. There, as befit a crime series, everything needed to be clarified, all jigsaw puzzles of narrative schema had to be finally joined together with craftsman-like precision due to the demands of cultural realism (Czubaj 2010). Here, we are dealing with a pre-defined set of established facts (that is, those known from the testimonies of surviving crew members, rescuers, etc.) and comments to those (analyses of experts in the field of naval ferry construction, reactions of state authorities of the time, etc.), and these facts cannot be exceeded. In that case, one needs to move from the events to a narrative built around those facts; they do not speak for themselves, and thus they need to be presented, culturally played in some way. Therefore, there arises the question as to what narrative Holoubek and Bajon have proposed – and what interpretation of the problems of Polish navy at the end of the 20th century, the state of the country, economy and society in the beginnings of free democratic Poland they will reveal.

Meanwhile, Zadworny remains transparent in his text, especially in its first part, which reconstructs the course of events of the fatal night as well as what preceded them: the history of MS *Jan Heweliusz* as such and its use by shipowners, a series of negligence and twists of fate (Zadworny 2024: 7–99). As a result, the writer reveals something fundamental. Over thirty years ago, an enormous disaster took place in the Baltic sea, the fifth in terms of victims in the 20th century, but it was not simply this kind of a catastrophe! It was also a shock for the Polish navy, a paroxysm for sailing in its Polish People's

Republic guise, transported into the reality of open borders and free market competition. In fact, the *Jan Heweliusz* ferry was all but a relic in 1993. It might have incurred admiration against the background of the gray countries of people's democracy, but after the political and economic turn of 1989 it should have been deemed a sick guest at the Baltic waters. To stick to the metaphor, a fluffed up and glum bird. Especially given that, instead of modern, electronic security supports, it moved around the uneasy Baltic waters with an increasing number of repairs following subsequent accidents and malfunctions (over 30!), including serious listing and a fire. Indeed, *Jan Heweliusz* was an unlucky ferry. Its first serious accident happened just one month after its launch: in August 1977, the new ferry collided with a barge in the Ystad port.

The capsizing of MS *Jan Heweliusz* during a storm of over 12 on Beaufort scale and its sinking revealed systemic deficiencies. The myth of naval greatness and made-up reason for national pride toppled over. The sinking of *Heweliusz* gave the fatal blow to the "colonial" phantasm of Poland as a true maritime country. Although advanced systems of electronic stabilization were available in 1993, the ferry only had at its disposal manual way of balancing lists by the means of a valve at the bottom of the ship, based on pumping water between ballast tanks. The crew used a mechanism dedicated for use during loading/unloading in a port in the deep sea. Makeshift repairs, postponed due to the shipowner's pressure for continuity of journeys (every day that the ferry spent at the shipyard meant financial losses), in connection with semi-legal practices being tolerated aboard (the crew members supplementing their official income by, e.g., trading alcohol or cigarettes, and letting unregistered passengers on board) increased the risk of exceeding a critical point in terms of security. All this seemed to foretell the final tragedy. In January 1993, the ferry set sail after hasty repairs to the stern gate, only welding and sealing. The captain's decision regarding steering with the stern, incorrect assessment of the water level in ballast tanks and extreme weather conditions resulted in a list of 30–40 degrees and made it impossible for the ferry to return to a vertical position. In his convincing narrative, *Zadworny* demonstrates that the disaster was the result of technological, economic and human factors all coming together, and not simply extreme weather or individual negligence.

In the year of the *Heweliusz* disaster, Polish commercial navy had already been suffering tonnage and course regression, and by the end of the 20th century indicators fell to 1/5 of post-war achievements. They peaked at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the demand for coal from Upper Silesia. In 1990s, Polish deep-sea fishery was also in its agonal stages. There also occurred the phenomenon of gradual leaving Polish flag, which *Heweliusz* still boasted. "The most lucrative line fleet went completely over to the exotic 'flags of convenience'", as *Piskozub* concludes (*Piskozub 2004: 250*). The passenger ferry *Nieborów*, bought in 1994, was immediately registered under the Bahama Islands flag, meaning that its port of origin was Nassau. This was noted with an appropriate sign on the ship's hull – in the place where *Heweliusz* had the

“Świnoujście” inscription. The MS Rogalin ferry lost Polish flag for Nassau in 1999. Today, Polskie Linie Oceaniczne [Polish Ocean Lines], a company that Euroafrika, a sub-company running Heweliusz on its regular line to Ystad, emerged from at an early phase of Polish transformation, has no ships registered in Poland. In fact, a verification of a long-term prognosis developed in the Gierek era had negative results back in the first half of the 1980s. Neither did Polish ports catch up to Rotterdam, nor did Polish commercial fleet reach the size of Norwegian fleet, as had been promised in the prosperous 1970s (Piskozub 2004: 248).

In conclusion, it is possible to express the belief that although the tragic moment of the Heweliusz sinking with its passengers and transported cargo three decades ago did not become a psychological or practical bridge for a new era of Polish maritime activity, as a subject present due to public events it can become a starting point for re-evaluations and changes of attitudes indispensable for the formation of maritime awareness. The potential of a disaster which, as a form of communication, leads to the end of the “old world”, may offer a favor to the maritime turn. Given the metaphoric nature of all cultural turns, the conclusion should also contain a rhetorical figure: the memory of Heweliusz resembles a lighthouse, as it warns of rocks and shallows of the past, while casting bright light towards the horizon of the future.

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