

The economic and trading conditions in Switzerland had a great effect on the functioning of Antoni Patek and Franciszek Czapek's production company. The first decades after the Vienna Congress were a period of intensive and not always easy changes for a federation of cantons founded on liberal beliefs. France, which had chosen to follow a conservative path, more and more frequently employed an open politics of tax discrimination on Swiss products. A similar stance was taken by Austria, reformed in the spirit of distrust by the Austrian chancellor, Klemens von Metternich, an advocate of traditionalist conservatism. Switzerland was forced to enter the Holy Alliance, which allowed neighbouring states to meddle ruthlessly in the internal politics of the alliance and led to increasing internal conflicts.

Growing sectarianism between individual cantons flourished. Every region had its own financial system, often competitive with its neighbouring territories, different tax policies, its own measuring and weighing systems, and its own currency rates. Internal trade all but ceased because of numerous, often man-made obstacles such as bridge and road taxes, as well as toll-bars. There were near to four hundred custom houses in the entire federation, and little fewer different coins. All this explains why the Polish partners attempted to evade horrendous taxes.

Usually, the Polish manufacturers made use of contraband. Timepieces produced in the Patek, Czapek and Cie workshop generally made their way across the Swiss borders thanks to the goodwill of Poles passing through Geneva or smugglers especially hired for the purpose. This ran the risk of parts of watches being lost either by being confiscated at customs control or through the dishonesty of hired intermediaries. Hence Antoni Patek's numerous complaints repeatedly finding their way into his correspondence: "On the 24th of June [1840] we had smuggled out (as usual) your watch along with two others. All three have disappeared. How? We still don't know."

It is not unlikely that the relatively frequent "lost in transit" was one more reason for their loss of reputation. Perhaps other Swiss workshops had started similar enterprises.

These were not the only difficulties created for Patek by Geneva's legislation. The Geneva entrepreneurs chose a path by which it was not industrialisation but main-

taining their prime position in the manufacture of exclusive products that was to solve the accumulating problems caused by the local economy. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a number of institutions were set up to regulate manufacture in Geneva. One of these was *le Bureau de contrôle des matières d'or et d'argent*, which controlled the quality of gold and silver articles. Along with the introduction of the Central Office, stringent measures were introduced as to the possession and use of precious metals and their circulation. The greatest controversy among the local manufacturers was caused by the obligation to use, in production, gold hallmarked no less than eighteen carats. Antoni, too, struggled with this problem. He mentions it in one of his letters to Wielogłowski in 1840: "If you were to send us anything made of gold again, mention that the metal has to be at least eighteen carats."

Excerpt translated by Danusia Stok



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Selected awards

Polityka History Awards (2022) – nomination