

The Senior Committee Member Smashes the Kerosene Lamp

The people who built Poland's power plants and grids after World War II often grew up in homes lit by candles and kerosene lamps. Zbigniew Bicki, an engineer at the power plants in Kozienice and Połaniec, and later CEO of the transmission system operator Polskie Sieci Elektroenergetyczne after the democratic transition, recalls the excitement that accompanied the electrification of his village:

"I grew up without electricity. The light bulb in my parents' house didn't flicker on until I was in my last year of elementary school, in the fall of 1960, or maybe the spring of 1961. Before that, there was no power in my hamlet outside the village of Garbów, near Lublin."

Around this time, in the village of Rzążeń near the town of Siedlce, Krzysztof Tchórzewski, the future minister of energy, was doing his homework by the light of a kerosene lamp. The first electric device he ever used was a pocket-sized flashlight called a *baterijka* (little battery). "It was a present from my godfather. At night I would read books under the covers with that flashlight," he recalls. "The elementary school I attended in Bzów didn't have electricity either. The classrooms were lit by kerosene lamps."

Meanwhile in Szczekociny, in Poland Minor, Jasio Kurp, future CEO of the power company Południowy Koncern Energetyczny, witnessed the electrification of his village as a teenager.

For these young boys (and many of their friends), the arrival of electricity in their villages was an event that would leave a lasting impression on the rest of their lives.

"I soaked up every conversation, I knew every last detail of the electrification process. I shadowed the linemen, observing their work. They grew fond of me and let me install insulators on the utility poles, and eventually they even gave me a pair of pole gaffs¹ I remember the first time I climbed a pole. Getting up wasn't that difficult—climbing down was the hard part. I had to slide down a wooden pole treated with preservative solution. My entire outfit ended up in the garbage. But I was not deterred: I kept at it, until I finally taught myself how to

¹ Special footwear used to climb utility poles.

climb down using my pole gaffs. I was a twelve-year-old boy who was utterly fascinated by electrification. Nothing else mattered to me,”

Bicki says.

“From the linemen I learned all about electricity, I saw how the fittings were installed, and I even made two little lamps for my parents,” Tchorzewski recalls.

Poland emerged from World War II with a rural electrical grid that vastly surpassed its pre-war state. This was not the result of any extraordinary planning efforts, of course, though 140 villages were electrified under occupation. The most underdeveloped areas of the eastern borderlands were simply annexed by the USSR, while the Reclaimed Territories acquired by Poland after the war were industrialized and over 90 percent electrified. In 1936 the territory that would later be claimed by Poland produced as much electricity as was generated by the entire Second Polish Republic. The settlers who ventured westward encountered a completely unfamiliar technological culture, a dissonance aptly depicted in the cult classic film *Sami swoi* (*Our Folks*).

Jerzy Łaskawiec, the future head of the Turów power plant, also grew up in the countryside, near the town of Lwówek Śląski. But unlike others, he did his homework under the glow of a light bulb, because villages in the Reclaimed Territories did not need to be electrified from scratch. Though much of the equipment had been damaged in the course of the war, removed and shipped to the USSR by special Red Army units tasked with confiscating German property, or simply looted by marauders, connecting these areas to the grid was still a much simpler task than the electrification of rural Mazovia or the Lublin region.

In 1950 Poland enacted the law on the universal electrification of villages. The exceptionally short act contained a mere eight articles, taking up a single sheet of A4 paper. The law obligated the state to connect villages and settlements to the electrical grid, to build transformers, etc. It also established the Central Bureau for the Electrification of Agriculture. The Six-Year Plan naturally specified ambitious targets for rural electrification which, much like the entire plan, were soon revealed to be unrealistic. A mere 37 percent of the planned number of farms were connected to the electrical grid.

As villages languished on waiting lists, residents used their connections to reach local party officials and cut through red tape. Farmers also set up electrification committees to cover the cost of connecting their villages. These bodies played an enormous and positive role, not just by securing electrification outside of official channels, but also by teaching farmers self-organization and by developing a cadre of local leaders. Zbigniew Bicki recalls that the pressure exerted by small community organizations accelerated the electrification of Garbów. “A community electrification committee was formed,” he says. “My father, Bronisław Bicki, was chosen as its leader. Committee meetings were held in at my parents’ house, and our courtyard was used to stockpile the linemen’s equipment: poles, power lines, and insulators.”

“Power engineers found all of this equally exciting. “Engineers and technicians at power plants would take on ‘side gigs’ which involved starting electrification committees, issuing ‘technical requirements for the supply of electricity,’ drafting project documentation, taking care of formalities, making arrangements with contractors, and performing final measurements. Entire cooperatives were established within power plants to provide a range of services. The additional wages earned by workers were significant, considering the exceptionally low salaries of energy sector employees compared to other industries. This made it possible to maintain a workforce at Polish power plants,”

Szyke explains.

The authorities weren’t too keen on the committees, especially since the “side gigs” performed in the countryside by power engineers and the involvement of the private sector were completely at odds with “socialist morality.”

“Despite its tangible accomplishments, this stage of electrification revealed a number of deficiencies. It didn’t not provide sufficient opportunity to exert class influence on rural areas and their local administrative units, which are populated by poor small and medium-holding peasants. Dominated by *kulaks*, the electrification committees have proven unsuccessful,” the government daily *Trybuna Ludu* reported in the early 1950s. At the time, the term *kulak* was leveled against the best and wealthiest farmers, regarded by the authorities as “class enemies.”

Following the fiasco of the Six-Year Plan, the state did not dare ban local initiatives. More than two thousand committees were established in total.

Their activities reached an apex in the late 1950s. The authorities, meanwhile, grew increasingly suspicious. At the time, state enterprises were prohibited from buying any goods or services from private businesses without special permission, which was granted begrudgingly and sparingly. The economic intersection of the state and private realms made the guardians of ideological purity shudder in disgust.

In 1958 a scandal erupted: the leadership of an electrification company on the Baltic coast was accused of engaging in an elaborate corruption scheme in which bribes were paid to procure the scarce resources needed to connect villages to the power grid. “The enterprise’s operations were based on fiction, not on sound economic principles,” the main defendant explained during the trial.

“After half a year on the job, I realized just how severe the shortage of resources was, and that the only way to complete the scheduled work on time was to acquire these resources through other means. I paid for them with bribes. I raised the money from farmers, explaining to them that there was no other way their villages would be electrified. In exchange, I issued fake receipts for construction material, which the farmers would then submit to the electrification committees for reimbursement. The rule was that bribe amounted to half the official price of the scarce resource.”

The defendants were sentenced to several years in jail. The formation of electrification committees was soon prohibited. Their role was taken on by the Central Bureau for the Electrification of Agriculture and its network of enterprises.

A special ritual soon emerged in rural Poland to mark the electrification of a village, a key element of which was the smashing of a kerosene lamp—which was then going the way of the dodo—against a new transformer. Often a priest would arrive first to bless the new equipment, followed an hour later by a representative of the local authorities, for whom it would be improper to be seen in the company of a clergyman.

Jacek Szyke took part in the electrification of the Kalisz region in the 1960s.

“As power engineers, we were required to deliver a standard speech, which included a quotation from Lenin: ‘Communism is Soviet power plus electrification.’ Following the official program, and after the electricity had been switched on, everyone (including the priest, party secretary, local authorities, contractors, and engineers) descended upon the local fire station or other spacious venue (not excluding a barn tidied up for the occasion) for a reception. The headage of poultry and cattle in the village was diminished, and alcohol (often moonshine) flowed freely at the gatherings.”

As the “delivery” drew to a close, often after a night of heavy drinking, the power engineers were showered with gifts (goats, ducks, cured meats, honey, cheeses, etc.) and, naturally, vodka. Most of these presents and vodka were taken home, while a portion ended up in the workplace, where employees could quickly duck into a “supply closet” for refreshments.

Józef Sołowiec, an engineer, offers this vivid account of the electrification of a village near Toruń.

“I started working in 1955. At the time, the electrification of agriculture was being carried out as an entirely private venture. Farmers would set up an electrification committee which included the local priest, village head, or school principal—representatives of key institutions. There was a collection: the whole village, which numbered ten to thirty farms, chipped in. They would determine the size of each household’s contribution. The first step towards electrification involved drafting the documentation. The chairman of the committee would visit the regional offices of the utility and ask who could draw up the paperwork, and he’d also go to the power plant itself. And the plant had designating zones for drafting documentation. One engineer had one zone—villages to the north, for example—while another was responsible for all the villages to the south, and so on. It was one way to earn some extra cash. After work the engineer—or the technician, in some cases—would take a two-meter measuring stick and pace the village, calculating the number of utility poles and other things needed. Some time later, the documentation would be prepared. It would always specify a particular contractor that would carry out the electrification, which of course was done on wooden poles and began as soon as the documentation was approved. Once it got the stamp of approval, the draftsman would be paid and the documentation would go to the contractor. That would be a craftsman—a private tradesman with the necessary licenses, and a crew of workers beneath him. The contractor usually worked for one, two or three months, first collecting a deposit from the committee, and then quoting a final price, and the committee would have to raise the funds. These villages typically also had churches, which he would connect to the grid, as well. The head of the regional power utility would set the date of completion. The farmers would agree on a fixed contribution: each household chipped in, say, a chicken, ten eggs, and an appropriate quantity of alcohol; they baked bread and made sausage, and often a piglet would be slaughtered. Back in those days people were poor, but incredibly kind. They would scrimp and scrape just to contribute to the electrification of their village. And so the committee would arrive and sit down, with the chairman at the table. This would happen at one of the

farmers' houses, the fire house, a school room, or at the rectory. Of course, there was no drinking at all until it was determined that the site had been successfully connected. And then they would sign the minutes, with fifteen men—the entire village elite—standing there, along with their wives, the chicken soup simmering on the stove, waiting impatiently to see if the light would go on. The priest was ready, and there was a kerosene lamp prepared. At last, the time would come to close the switch. Everyone marched to the transformer—the whole committee and the priest with his holy water, and he would sprinkle the transformer, and the senior committee member would take the kerosene lamp and smash it over the transformer. The chairman would put on rubber gloves, grab the switch, and... with a snap and a flash, the village was all in light! It was quite a celebration!”

As late as the 1990s, Sołowiec was stopped by a passer-by: “Mister, I’m from the village of Łobdowo. You gave us light!”

Sometimes the attempt to connect the village to the grid would end in fiasco, and the power engineers had to go home with their tails between their legs. Ryszard Michniewski recalls one misadventure in the village of Żołnowo, near Bydgoszcz.

“We showed up and we couldn’t get the connection working. But the village school had a reception planned. So we jury-rigged a hookup, just to let them have some fun. The lights came on in the school, and the party started. They invited us in, and we were sitting at the table when rocks started crashing through the windows. The villagers saw that the school had electricity while their houses were still dark, and so they started throwing stones. We needed to make a hasty retreat (...) but the mob surrounded our car and lifted it up. The driver floored the accelerator—and nothing happened. Then the others started pelting the car with rocks. I thought we were going to be stoned to death, but we finally managed to drive away. Then we had to go back and hook up their electricity.”

Events such as these, however, were infrequent. In rural Poland, power engineers were greeted like heralds of a new era of light, and they found their jobs immensely rewarding. “It’s such an amazing feeling when you’re surrounded by darkness and then suddenly... everything becomes bright,” Michniewski marvels.

The electrification of the countryside was undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of the People’s Republic of Poland. By 1964 80 percent of villages (and 74 percent of farmsteads) had electricity. During the electrification campaign from 1951 to 1974, 60 thousand rural transformers were built, and 85 thousand kilometers of high-voltage power lines were installed. Electrification standards weren’t very high: two or three light points and

a single outlet per household. “Everyone in Rzążew bought a chandelier, but they ended up putting in a single light bulb, anyway,” laughs Krzysztof Tchórzewski.

Barns, cowsheds, and chicken coops would only be fitted with a single light point. Only after the liberalization of agricultural policy in 1956 were more powerful fittings installed, for a fee, but they only accommodated small, 1.5 kW single-phase motors.

These limitations would later become a serious obstacle hindering the development of high-output agriculture, which requires the use of good electric motors. This, however, didn't become apparent to Polish authorities until the 1970s.

Rafał Zasuń