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Gdańsk Nowy Port Lighthouse, Poland

By Stefan Michalak

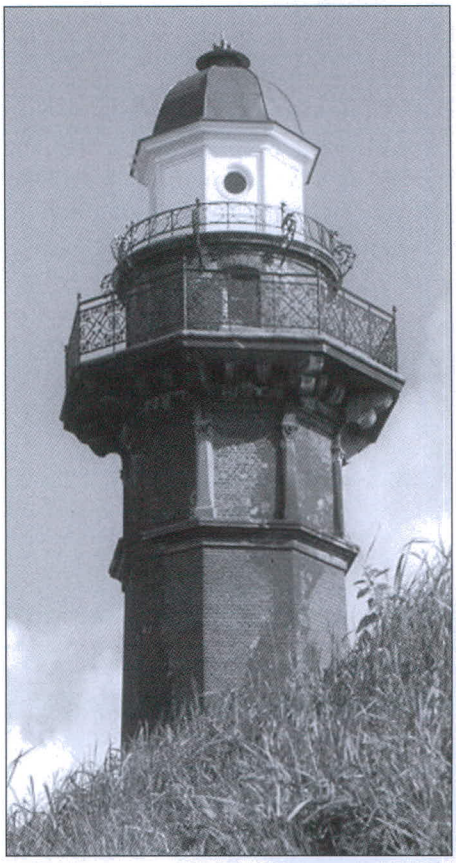
Considered one of the most beautiful lighthouses of the Baltic Sea (geographical position 54°24'28"N, 18°39'50"E), the lighthouse at Gdańsk is a 90-foot-tall structure built in 1893-94 as a twin to the Cleveland, OH Main Lighthouse erected in 1871. How did it come about? It is an enduring mystery.

One hypothesis links it with the visit of the City of Gdańsk delegation to the 1893 World Exposition in Chicago. During the visit the delegation would also have made an excursion to Cleveland, and, struck by the beauty of the Cleveland light, it decided to have a twin built in Gdańsk. Is that how it happened? Or were immigrant engineers and architects from Gdańsk responsible for the original design of the Cleveland lighthouse? Which of the two hypotheses is true? A challenge for any architectural sleuth.

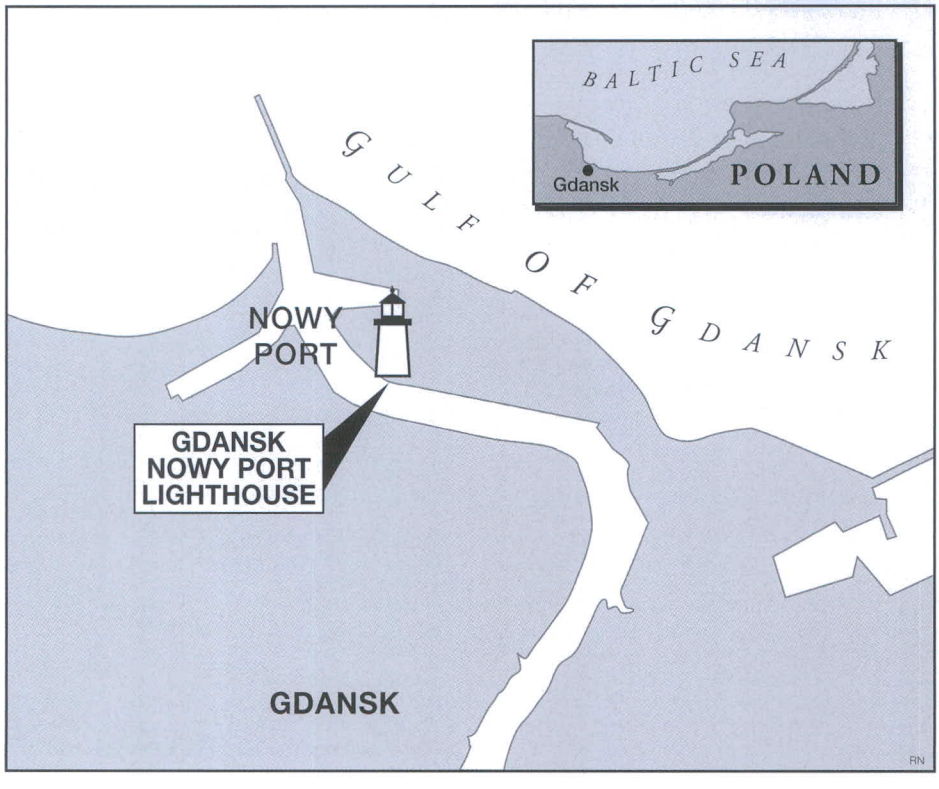
From the beginning, the Gda´nsk Nowy Port Lighthouse served a triple purpose: that of a coastal lighthouse, a harbor pilots' tower, and a time ball station. The latter, an ingenious instrument measuring five feet in diameter and weighing 150 pounds, was raised and dropped at noon every day to give a precise time signal to the captains of the ships lying at anchor in the Bay of Gda´nsk to allow them to adjust their ships' chronometers, whose accuracy was essential to safe navigation. Even a one second inaccuracy produced a sizable error in the positioning of the ship on the navigational charts and often resulted in tragic accidents and shipwrecks. The time ball in Gda´nsk functioned on the same principle as the original ball installed in the Royal Astronomical Observatory in Greenwich, England, except that its drop was triggered by a signal from the Royal Astronomical Observatory in Berlin, since the second partition of Poland in 1793 Gda´nsk formed part of the Kingdom of Prussia with the capital in Berlin.

The invention of radio by Marconi at the beginning of the twentieth century gradually rendered the time ball method obsolete, and the ball in Gdańsk was removed in 1929. To





Two views of the present day Nowy Port Lighthouse. Note the intricate ironwork in the railings in the view at right. Photos by the author.



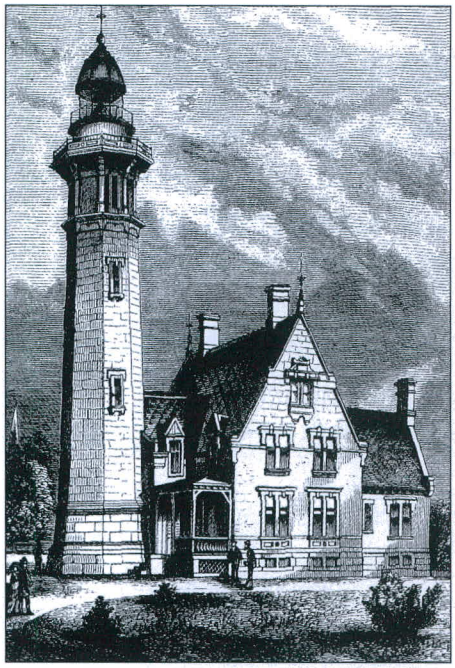
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see the famous time ball again on top of the Nowy Port Lighthouse is the dream of many in Gdańsk.

The Gdańsk Nowy Port Lighthouse entered world history on September 1, 1939, when at 4:45 a.m. a German army's machine gun mounted in its embrasure (and the cannon of the battleship *Schleswig-Holstein* moored nearby) opened fire on the Polish positions of Westerplatte, across the Vistula River, starting World War II. The Polish outpost returned fire with their sole cannon, wiping out the German gun nest. Today, ohne can still see the damage caused by the shelling to the lighthouse's structure. Thus the Gdańsk Nowy Port Lighthouse became the very point where the Second World War started.

In 1945, despite the fact that Gdańsk and its harbor sustained heavy bombardment from all sides and lay in ruins, the Nowy Port Lighthouse survived largely intact. In 1984 a new, modern lighthouse was built in the North Port of Gdańsk and the old lighthouse abandoned, seemingly forever.

In 1999 I was living in Montreal, Canada, but had my roots in Gdańsk. As a lifelong lighthouse aficionado, I offered a proposal to restore the old lighthouse and turn it into a world lighthouse museum. The proposal was warmly received by the City of Gdańsk and the harbor administrations and in 2004, on the 110th anniversary of its original commissioning, the Gdańsk Nowy Port Lighthouse opened its doors again. This time as a historical monument to welcome visitors from all over the world and offer them a unique chance to admire not only its beautiful *fin de siecle* architecture and a panoramic view of the Gdańsk harbor, Westerplatte, and the whole Bay of Gdańsk, including the Hel Peninsula, but also a superb lighthouse exhibit inside it. The theme of the inaugural exposition was: "Gdańsk Lighthouses Throughout History".



Cleveland (OH) Main Lighthouse, believed to have been the model for Nowy Port Lighthouse. It no londer exists.

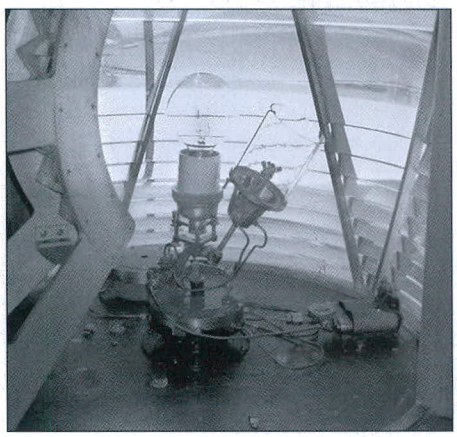


Above and Below – Nowy Port Lighthouse in its present setting next to a harbor administration building. Author's photos.



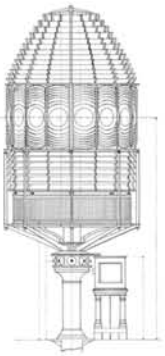


The view from the top with the busy Nowy Port of Gdansk in the background. Photo by the author



Left – The lamp changer inside the lens at Nowy Port Lighthouse. Author's photo.

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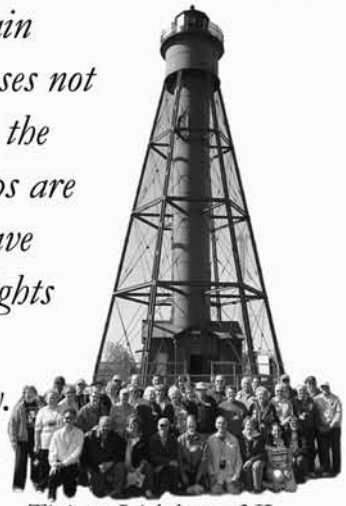
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