History of Toruń

The city was founded on 28 December 1233. Toruń was originally located by a crossing on the Vistula River - in Old Toruń. There, the Teutons built their first settlement in the Land of Chełmno - according to a legend - on a mighty oak, and then located a town, which was soon relocated to its present site in 1236 r due to recurrent floods.

The settling in the today's Old Town area began in the region of so called "Island", a developed area between the streets: Szeroka, Żeglarska and Łazienna, with a square around st. John church. The "Isle" is supposed to have been a defensive post, surrounded by a rampart which shielded first settlers from occasional dangers. Later on, when bulwarks and subsequently town walls were built, the "Island" lost its defensive role, the ground was levelled and new houses were built to become welcome lodgings for the richest merchants and councillors - as they were located close to the Market.

The city grew fast but in stages. The first site to be constructed was the southern part of the Old Town - around the "Island". The main transport route was the street nowadays called Kopernika (then st. Ann), which led towards the crossing in Old Toruń. Soon, it turned out that localising a town in this spot was such a successful investment, that it needed instant development to accommodate all the merchants coming from Silesia, bordering Polish lands and even from distant Westphalia and Lubeck - centres of Hanseatic league and of trade on the Baltic Sea.

Thus, after 1251 a Marketplace was localised to become the centre of the town and town walls encompassed franciscan monastery and church which used to be outside the town. Soon, in 1264, a new urban centre - the New Town - was founded. Contrary to the Old Town dominated by merchants and the richest artisans - brewers, bakers and butchers, the New Town was intended to be a centre of Toruń’s handcraft. The medieval town was ruled by four great guilds - brewers, tanners, cloth merchants and furriers. In the second half of XIII century and in XIV century monumental buildings were erected - the Town Hall and st. Johns, st. Mary and st. Jacob churches. Also in this period most of apartment houses in Toruń received their brick walls.

Numerous construction undertakings and influx of people stimulated development of crafts necessary to satisfy the growing needs. First Toruń mills probably operated near the castle under total control of Teutonic knights. As early as in 1259 a mill was opened in suburban Trzeposz. Toruń would not come into being without its brickyards. As early as in XIII century a Teutonic brick-yard was build by the "Struga Toruńska" stream, and probably at the same time or not much later a least 3 subsequent municipal brickyards were constructed by the Vistula River. The town was surrounded by suburbs where poorer craftsmen lived. These were wheelwrights, potters, blacksmiths, bee-keepers and porters - names of their professions were reflected in names of streets which do not exist today. A harbour, which at least till the end of XIV century was a sea port, functioned on the Vistula River, next to it - near the Monastery Gate - functioned a shipyard which built smaller vessels suited for river trade. Vineyards belonging to the richest merchants were located on the Vistula River terraces between the town and a village of Kaszczorek. The whole complex (town and suburbs), in its period of prosperity in late XIV century, was populated by some 20,000 citizens. The town, at least till mid XIV century, was a member of the association of Hanseatic Towns and was even the leader of the group of Prussian towns.

Subsequent centuries were not so generous to the hospitable port town by the Vistula River. Rapid development of Gdańsk in the second half of the XIV century caused gradual ousting of Toruń’s merchants from sea trade. Local merchants had to find a different niche for themselves and for their town in the economy of Poland, to which Toruń was incorporated in 1454. The Vistula River started to be a transport route for grain from estates belonging to nobles and from peasants’ farms. Merchants from Toruń, who enjoyed the right of preemption of wares rafted on the Vistula River, were taking over large amounts of grain to sell it in Gdańsk. A new patriciate of Toruń grew on grain trade - the Eskens, who modernised their splendid residence; the Krügers, the von der Lindens - who later ruled also in Gdańsk, the Koyens - who left a genealogy illustrated with dozens of coats of arms
of related families, the Strobands - founders of Toruń’s gymnasium and reformers of the city.

Flourish of grain trade brought about revolutionary changes in architecture. To store the grain it was necessary to build warehouses - granaries. Earlier, before mid XV century, grain merchants from Toruń lived in southern part of Mostowa street. During one century (1450-1550) about 60 new grain warehouses were built. The period when Toruń enjoyed the status of an intermediary between grain producers and Gdańsk was not a long one, in historical terms. As early as in the first half of XVI century citizens of Gdańsk, who were growing in power, and the gentry forced the king to cancel Toruń’s right of warehousing. Nearly half a century later, participation of merchants from Toruń in grain trade was minimised. However, despite such unfavourable changes in trading situation Toruń persisted and in the second half of XVI century could even enjoy its second golden era. In 1496 the city received a king’s privilege to build a bridge on the Vistula River. The construction was ready in 1500. The city was available through a “dry crossing” for merchants travelling on the roads of contemporary Republic and using the more and more numerous routes to transport cloth, spices, Rhine vines and salt from the west to the east and furs, wool, and oriental wares from eastern countries to western Europe. The exchange of goods took place on big fairs organised by the routes. Merchants from Frankfurt and Leipzig travelled to Poznań, Gniezno and then to Toruń. Also citizens of Gdańsk and merchants from Vlino, Grodno, Mohylew, Lublin and Wrocław came to Toruń to do business. Thus, during XVI century, Toruń gradually evolved once more, this time from a grain trade intermediary into a city of great merchants’ assemblies, a place of exchange of goods between east and west of Europe. In XVII century, merchants from Toruń who went to Gdańsk to acquire rare overseas wares such as: herrings, salt, colonial commodities, spices and English and Netherlandic cloth, travelled to far south-eastern borderlands of Poland - to Wołyń, Kijev and Lvov, to sell their wares with profit.

The XVI century also brought great religious changes. In 1557 the city accepted the doctrine of Martin Luther. The Council confiscated properties of dissolved catholic institutions, hospitals and schools. The mayor of Toruń, Jan Stroband initiated the founding of academic gymnasium. 1568 is regarded as the date of its founding, but the process of transforming a parish school into modern humanistic gymnasium started earlier, and ended with a reform of the school carried out by the initiator’s son - one of the most prominent Toruń’s statesmen - Henryk Stroband in 1594 r. During his term of office as councillor and then as mayor (1586-1609) the city witnessed another revolution, this time an administrative one. Stroband initiated reforms leading to complete centralisation of power in hands of the Council - a so-called "kamlaria" was formed, statutes of most craftsmen guilds were modified or rewritten, refugees for the poor, churches and schools received uniform administration, distribution of so called "orphans penny" was normalised, new administrative division of the city and suburbs into quarters was introduced. At the same time a new city-watch headquarters and a dormitory for gymnasium students were built, the Town Hall and the arsenal were reconstructed, a plan of construction of modern bastion fortifications was prepared.

During Stroband’s office, the influx of catholics into guilds was stopped and city authorities tried to hinder activities of jesuits who settled by st. John church in 1596. These were portents of growing conflict between lutherans and catholics. However, the principles of religious tolerance survived for a century and were reflected in theological dispute between representatives of different fractions of christianity - so called Colloquium Charitativum - organised in Toruń in 1645. The 1620s brought first omens of the fall of the city. Suburbs of Toruń burnt in 1629 were never rebuilt. New fortifications from 1640s encompassed only the city area within city walls and thus limited its spatial development. Economical and social crisis stimulated religious conflicts. The blame for deteriorating material situation and lack of possibilities for raising social status was laid primarily on "others" - persons of different confession or being ethnically different. This was, naturally simplified and omitting some direct reasons, the genesis of the lutheran - catholic conflict - the famous Toruń Mutiny of 1724 that led protestants to plunder a jesuit collegium, after which the leaders of lutheran community who were guilty of the situation, including mayor Johann Gottfried Roessner, were beheaded on king’s order.

XVIII century Toruń was a depopulated city. Fires caused during a siege by the Swedes in 1703 caused a temporary ruin of the Town Hall. In place of houses that stood on the Marketplace and were also destroyed in the fire a new lutheran church was built. After a period of relative economic
prosperity in the third quarter of XVIII century, the first partition of the Republic of Poland took place. It is true that Toruń was taken over by Prussians later, in 1793, but economic blockade after 1773, the decay of trade on the Vistula River and break-up of existing commercial bonds caused by the partitions, led to depopulation of the city and gave rise to economic crisis.

This situation continued in the first period of Prussian rule (1793-1807), in time when the city was a part of Warsaw Princedom and came under Russian occupation (1807-1815). The advent of Prussian rule saw the gravest demographical crisis - in 1793 the number of inhabitants fell to some 6 thousand. The number of artisans was decreasing and only few grain merchants could recommence their businesses when rafting route to Gdănsk was re-opened and Bydgoszcz Channel was built to open water route to the heart of the Prussian state. A large number of Prussian clerks came to the city with a Prussian garrison. The return of Toruń under Polish rule did not change the situation much. In 1808 the city received the status of a municipality (together with Warsaw, Poznań and Kalisz), which allowed at least for greater formal autonomy of the commune. In 1810-1812 the French decided to turn Toruń into a stronghold. The city was encircled with twelve bastions with walls and palisades. Soon, the defensive quality of the fortifications could be tested during a siege of Russian army in 1813. As a part of defensive preparations, the suburbs, Mokre village, as well as Podgórz and Majdan settlements located on the other side of the Vistula River were destroyed. The siege led to further devastation of the city - 100 houses were ruined, 250 buildings were partially destroyed and only 400 houses were fit to live in them. As a result of the war and due to closed English market, the so far prosperous grain trade in Toruń deteriorated. Importance of Toruń’s gymnasium was also diminishing, as it lost two highest classes and ceased to be a semi-university.

Once again, a change of national authority did not stimulate growth. Prussians, who came back to the city in accordance with provisions of the Vienna Congress (1815), focused their attention on developing fortifications around Toruń. The city became Prussian border stronghold. In this way, the it lost a possibility of spatial development. Only in some distance from the fortifications new suburbs appeared - these were: Mokre suburb inhabited by labourers, as well as Bydgoskie, Jakubskie and Nowe Przedmieście Chełmińskie suburbs. In mid XIX century their population did not reach the numbers from 1812. Moreover, very unfavourable conditions for Toruń’s trade persisted allowing only for its local development.

The most important technological inventions reached the city very slowly. The first hard surface road to Grudziądz was built in 1828, a telegraphic connection with Berlin was established in 1855, in 1859 a city gas station was built, the first railway line (to Bydgoszcz) was finished in 1861, and in 1899 a power plant and the first electric tram line were ready. These facilities, their number growing rapidly after 1850, allowed for better conditions for demographical and economic development of Toruń. However, before the conditions improved Toruń was visibly lagging behind nearby Bydgoszcz and Grudziądz.

The decision to relocate fortifications into areas distant from the city was particularly important for facilitating its spatial development. A victory in war with France gave Prussians substantial compensation funds which were spent on developing defensive system of united Germany. This fact was also important for the fate of Toruń which was categorised as a first class stronghold. In the 1878-1892 period a complete ring of external fortifications was built. It comprised 7 main forts, 6 medium forts, a large cannon battery and shelters for infantry and artillery. Strategic and economic importance of the city rose when in 1873 a railway bridge was constructed on Berlin - Wystruć line being the best connection of central Germany with East Prussia.

As a result of relocation and further liquidation of the internal fortifications line adjacent to Old Town walls, it became possible to develop the areas left by the army. Many new military and public buildings were constructed in the area, including a garrison church (built in 1894-1897), a city theatre (1903-1904), new seat of the bank located nowadays in Rapackiego square (1906) and a building of industrial school (the present Collegium Maius of Nicolaus Copernicus Univesity, 1907). In 1906 the Mokre commune was incorporated into Toruń. At that time its population was 12,000, mainly Polish workers, who were attracted to Toruń by the possibility of finding employment in extending the fortifications. In the 1861 - 1906 period, the population of Toruń rose from 14 to circa 33 thousand, and after incorporation of Mokre - to over 40,000. In 1861, for the first time in more than a century, the number of artisans increased (in the1867-1900 period, the number rose from 195
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Economic and demographical development of the city resulted in more lively cultural and scientific life in Toruń. The publishing of History of Toruń by J.E. Wernicke in 1842 can be regarded as the beginning of increased interest in scientific life. In the same year, Ernst Lambeck printing house started to operate. It also published books in Polish, including the first legal edition of "Pan Tadeusz" by A. Mickiewicz (1859). 1853 was the year of founding of the “Copernicus-Verein für Kunst und Wissenschaft zu Thorn”, which contributed to raising interest in the history of Toruń. Members of the society were, among others, Georg Bender (1848-1924), many years’ member of Prussian parliament, senior- mayor of Toruń in the years 1888-1891, and keen explorer of the city’s past, as well as possibly the greatest historian of Toruń of German origin - Artur Semrau (1862-1940).

Despite lack of Polish intellectual circles after 1793, in the second half of XIX century Toruń became a centre of Polish independence movement. It was connected mainly with the fact that in 1866 Toruń became the place of residence of editors of the biggest Polish newspaper in East Prussia - "Gazeta Toruńska" - its first issue was printed in Józef Buszczynski printing house on 1 January 1867. Another institution that was very important for Polish citizens and operated in Toruń was the Scientific Society founded on 16 December 1875 to group mainly Polish gentry and catholic clergy from West Prussia. In the 1897-1914 period it was chaired by rev. Stanisław Kujot, an explorer of the history of Pomerania.

In the beginning of XX century the national conflict between Germans and Polish citizens intensified. It was fuelled by actions of so called "hakata" (Ostmarkverein) and the bill on associations prohibiting the use of Polish language in open public gatherings. Before the outbreak of the First World Wary (1910), the city was inhabited by 46 thousand citizens of whom 55-60% were Germans, 38-43% were Polish and 2% were of Jewish origin. After the war lost by Germans and in accordance with provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, Toruń became a Polish city once again. On 18 January 1920 troops of Polish Pomerania Division entered Toruń. Two days later, the first Pomeranian voivod Stefan Laszewski (nominated already in October 1919) arrived at Toruń. Thus Toruń became the capital of a large voivodship encompassing a part of former West Prussia now belonging to Poland. New administrative functions brought about a change in commercial character of the city. It was gradually transformed from a pre-war stronghold into a modern administrative and cultural centre. During the presidency of Antoni Bolt (1924-1936) Toruń’s transport routes were modernised and construction of new centre was commenced. After 1928 the building of Pomeranian Voivodship Office was erected (in 1933 it became the District Office of Management of National Railway) as well as the Management Office of National Forests, a redemptorist monastery and school in Bielany district and an antenna mast and broadcasting station of Polish Radio. In 1934 a modern highway bridge connecting the city of Toruń with Podgórz was built. The number of citizens rose in the 1920-1939 period from 37 to 79 thousand. Also industry flourished - gingerbread factories still operated successfully. The biggest of them, the Gustav Weese factory was taken over by "Społem" Association of Food Industry Co-operatives in 1939. In 1932 the biggest industrial plant in Toruń was opened. It was a Belgian-Polish Chemical Plant "Polchem" Ltd. which produced sulphuric acid and phosphoric fertilizers. Scientific and cultural life flourished. In 1925 the Baltic Institute was created and soon became the main body doing research on the Pomeranian region. In 1936 it was moved to Gdynia. In 1923 a large scientific library - The City Library was opened. It collected scattered scientific books and old-prints copies. The theatre played a significant role in cultural life of the city. In the 1920-1939 period approximately 700 plays were produced.

This short period of rapid development of the city was ended by war. On 7 September 1939 Wehrmacht troops marched into Toruń. On 16 and 17 October 1939 German police started to arrest Polish citizens, mainly clerks and intellectuals. They were transported to Fort VII which became a central prison for Poles from the city and the region. A total number of 1200 persons were imprisoned. In the period between 28 October and 6 December 1939, 500 of them were executed in Barbarka forest. By March 1941some 5000 Polish citizens were expelled from Toruń. Already in Autumn of 1939, Germans transported the last group of Jews from Toruń to Łódź. German authorities forced the rest of Poles remaining in the city to accept German nationality. Furthermore, German presence in the city was strengthened by immigrants from eastern Europe and III Reich - a total number of circa 16 thousand Germans settled in Toruń by the end of 1944.
German occupation ended on 1 February 1945. On this day German troops trying to reach Bydgoszcz were forced out of the city by Russian army. Soon, Polish administration was organised. One of the first administrative decisions of the Temporary Government, inspired by PPR (Polish Labour Party), was to move voivodship capital from "intellectual" Toruń to "working class" Bydgoszcz (on 2 March 1945). However, the city was soon compensated for its administrative degradation. Professors from Stefan Batory University in Vilno were forced to leave their hometown and arrived at Toruń. In co-operation with local cultural circles they realised the idea of creating a university in Toruń. It was finally opened on 24 August 1945 by the Presidium of National Council. Prof. Ludwik Kolankowski was appointed the first rector of Nicolaus Copernicus University. In its fifty-years’ history, the university became one of the most important scientific and educational centres in Poland. Currently, it has more than 31,000 students and is ranked four in classification of Polish universities doing scientific research. In the 1967-1973 period, the university received a modern library, new didactical and housing buildings for students and a rectorate building localised in newly built academic campus in Bielany district. The campus is still being developed.

Social situation in the city in the post-war period was not favourable. Degradation to a sub-region and transfer of numerous regional institutions to Bydgoszcz hindered economic and cultural development of the city. However, a slow headway could be observed in this area. In 1947, Toruń Clothing Factory (now "Torpo") was opened, Pomeranian Low Voltage Equipment Factory (now "Aparat") started production next year and in the 1950-1955 period existing industrial plants were modernised ("Polchem" for example) and new factories were built (in 1951 Toruń Dressing Materials Factory was opened ). The 1960s saw a breakthrough in this sector. After central authorities’ decision, Toruń became the location of two large industrial plants - "Elana" Chemical Fibres Production Plant (opened in 1964) and "Merinotex" Toruń Spinning Factory (1965). Development of industry in the 1960s caused a massive influx of people from the region. Only "Elana" and "Merinotex" employed some 10,000 persons in 1975.

Flourish of industry brought about increased demographical growth. In 1946, population of Toruń was 68,000, in 1960 it was 105,000 and now it totals over 210,000. The influx of people necessitated spatial development of the city. The biggest development investment was the building of "Rubinkowo" housing estate where about half of inhabitants of Toruń live at present. The rapidly growing city also received a new hospital (1971), a heating-power station and a drinking water intake on the Drwęca River. Transport network was developed (Bydgoszcz-Gdańsk highway, a new Merinotex-Elana tram line).

In 1975, as a result of administrative reform, Toruń once again became the seat of voivodship authorities. However, this situation influenced further development of the city only to minimal extent. Much greater change was induced by political reforms which were introduced after 1989 r. As a result of a reform of territorial local government, city authorities could have real influence on development of Toruń. In 1992, after a decision of pope John Paul II, Toruń became the seat of a bishop. In the 1990s the city gradually regained the position of an important cultural centre - international theatre and film festivals organised in Toruń became firmly established and the role of Toruń as Polish and European tourist attraction increased. The fact that Toruń was entered into World Cultural Heritage list in December 1997 can be regarded as the crowning of activities undertaken by city authorities in this area.