

From the Neolithic to the present day

The production of salt in Wieliczka has a long tradition dating back to the Neolithic times. Salt was evaporated in small vessels, on modest hearths as early as 6,000 years ago – before the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Code of Hammurabi, before the Greeks besieged Troy, and Homer composed his famous epic.

In the second half of the 13th century, after the discovery of rock salt deposits, extraction of the valuable raw material began. At the same time as Marco Polo travelled to China, miners were drilling the first shaft in Wieliczka.

Salt trading was a source of huge profits in the Middle Ages and was carried out on an international scale. Why was salt so important? There was no other equally good way to preserve food – without salt it was impossible to store fish, meat and dairy products for prolonged periods of time. It is well known that cities such as Venice and Genoa were enriched by salt trade – but salt was also of great importance for Poland.

It is said that Casimir the Great, the 14th-century ruler of Poland, found it made of wood and left it made of stone. Rarer mention is made of the fact that he could not have done this if it had not been for the income from the salt extraction, which then constituted as much as 1/3 of the royal treasury's income. Thanks to the high profits from salt he was able to found, among others, the Krakow Academy – the first Polish university (today the Jagiellonian University). The same ruler issued the Saltworks Statute in 1368, ordering the customary laws related to the production and trade of salt.

In the Renaissance, the mine was already famous in Poland and abroad. The first tourists came to Wieliczka to see the underground with their own eyes. The first of those we know by name was Nicolaus Copernicus, the brilliant astronomer, physician and engineer. The first mentions of the therapeutic significance of Wieliczka salt appeared in the writings of German humanists at that time. In 1644, a salt bath was established – an organised treatment centre for miners. A dozen or so years earlier, the Swedish geometrician Marcin German, who came from Sweden, drew the first maps of the Wieliczka underground.

The change of borders in 1772 left the Wieliczka Mine under Austrian administration for almost 150 years. The new hosts planned the long-term development of the company, cared for the safety of the miners and invested in modern technologies. Salt extraction using gunpowder was started, a steam machine was used, a railway line was built underground, and the company gained its own

power plant. In 1912, a modern saltworks was opened – which provided much more salt than the slowly depleting deposit.

The new hosts were able to take advantage of the mine's fame and, through a number of investments, make it popular in Europe for sightseeing tours. During the tour, an orchestra played, fireworks were shown and boat rides on the brine lake were organised.

During the partitions of Poland, Poles came to Wieliczka not only to satisfy their curiosity, but also to “fortify their hearts”. At the time, the Mine was a symbol of the former greatness of the nation, while a visit to the salt underground became a kind of demonstration of Polishness and attachment to the national idea.

In 1918, after Poland regained its independence, the mine came under Polish administration again. The names of the shafts and underground excavations were symbolically changed to Polish, for example, the shaft of Empress Elisabeth became St Kinga's Shaft.

Another period of intensive changes came after World War II. At that time, the depletion of the deposit was becoming more and more evident, and at the same time the awareness of the cultural, historical and natural significance of the Mine was constantly growing. There were visions of the future of the plant, which were an alternative to the production and extraction of salt. Tourist traffic was also becoming more and more important – the fame of the Wieliczka mine was growing, and with it the number of tourists eager to visit the underground.

The shutting down of salt production took place in stages. In 1964, the mining of rock salt in Wieliczka was completely discontinued in favour of the industrial production of evaporated salt using the wet mining method (this was discontinued in 1996, today salt from Wieliczka is produced only as a result of evaporation of salt water).

The year 1978 proved to be important for the contemporary history of the mine, bringing the inclusion on the UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage List, as did the year 1992 (water leakage in the Mina Crosscut). These events have shown that the historic mine is a priceless monument that requires special care and protection. In 1996 a decision was made to end industrial salt production in Wieliczka. Since 1976, the underground Wieliczka has been listed in the register of monuments, and in 1994, it was declared a national Historic Monument by the President of the Republic of Poland.

Throughout history, the way of thinking about the “Wieliczka” Salt Mine has changed from an industrial plant to a world-famous tourist attraction, a place of unusual events and a health resort.

Today, the most important goal set by the miners working here is to preserve for future generations and make available to the public the monument to the history and culture of the Polish nation, a unique monument to the world’s natural and technical heritage and a place of worship. Their work is a continuation of the achievements of tens of generations of free, educated miners whose traditions they want to maintain and develop.