

## **Blue trams running on rails through one hundred streets of Wrocław...<sup>i</sup> – the history of Wrocław public transport from the perspective of colours**

Before Maria Koterbska sang this hit song, making Wrocław famous all over Poland, trams in the metropolis on the banks of the Oder River had changed their colours many times. These changes perfectly illustrate the history of Wrocław tramway transport, or more broadly of public transport, as, with time, trams were joined by buses. It is rich and full of – sometimes surprising – plot twists. It is enough to mention that at one time there were as many as three tramway operators in the capital of Lower Silesia – two private and one municipal. The year 2021 marks an important anniversary – in 1901 the horse-drawn tramway was electrified, but this is not the moment when electric trams appeared in Wrocław. This is because they have been running in the city since 1893. Later we will explain all these intricacies.

At first there were small wooden carriages painted beige-dark green. The first horse-drawn tramway line started operating on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1877, and thus Wrocław (at that time Breslau, German Empire) joined the ranks of cities that were proud to have this means of transport. It should be noted that Wrocław was not at the forefront in this respect, as for a long time the city authorities were against the introduction of trams, arguing that the local streets were too narrow and crowded. The first route led from Ohlauer Vorstadt (Polish Przedmieście Oławskie) to Scheitnig (Polish Szczytniki), and today its continuation is the “10”. Within a few years quite a large network of connections was created, e.g. to Kleinburg (Polish Borek), Oderthor (Polish Nadodrze) railway station, Pöpelwitz (Polish Popowice), and also the most characteristic for Wrocław – a circular line going around the city centre (after many modifications it is the current “zero” line). The horse tram network was built and operated by a private joint stock company Breslauer Straßen-Eisenbahn-Gesellschaft (Breslau Street Railway Company).

After a few years the company gained a competitor, the joint-stock company Elektrische Straßenbahn Breslau (Breslau Electric Trams) opened one of the first electric tram routes in Germany on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1893. New carriages painted white, green and black went from from Gräbschen (Polish Grabiszyn) to Morgenau (Polish Rakowiec) and Scheitnig (Polish Szczytniki). This is the oldest route of electric trams on the present land of Poland. At the time of its launch it was the largest electric tram network in Europe. It became a model for many German tramway companies at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The inhabitants of Wrocław liked the electric trams very much – they were faster than horse trams (at the beginning they moved at the speed of 15 km/h, while in the case of horse trams it was about 10 km/h), reliable and more comfortable. It was requested that BSEG should electrify its routes. The company, however, was reluctant to do so, as its existing 30-year concession was coming to an end in 1906, and Wrocław authorities were also reluctant to extend it. Eventually, under the pressure of public opinion, an agreement was reached and BSEG’s shareholders secured funds for significant investments, which included electrification of the network, purchase of new carriages and construction of three depots, which took place in the years 1899–1901 (the last horse-drawn line, running along Parkstraße (nowadays Parkowa Street), was in operation until 1906, although it was rather a kind of tourist attraction). To operate the electrified routes, BSEG purchased two types of motor carriages. The first type were two-axle trams, with a standard length of 8 m, of which one hundred were ordered. Such a tram could take 34 passengers on board at a time – 20 seated on two longitudinal benches and 14 standing on both platforms. Fifty trams of Maximum type were purchased especially for the line from Südpark (Polish Park Południowy) through the Market Square to Oderthor, which had the largest number of passengers. These were longer carriages, as they exceeded 10 metres. For this reason an innovative construction solution was used – the body rested on two steerable bogies. Due to this the tram could carry more passengers: as many as 28 on the two benches and 16 on the platforms – a total of 44 people. The vehicles were painted in the traditional colours of the operator. The platforms, as well as the window section and the lower part of the boards

were beige, while the upper part of the boards was dark green. The carriages looked very chic, with delicate maroon, black and beige-coloured ornaments on the sides.

In the 1930s the Maximum carriages were significantly modernised. The platforms were replaced, new build-ups and sliding doors were added. In this condition they survived the siege of Festung Breslau. They ran on the streets of Wrocław until the 1960s, when they were gradually consigned for scrapping. Fortunately, one of them miraculously survived to the present day, because one of the MPK employees bought the body of the carriage to be used as a summerhouse in a garden in Smolec near Wrocław. In this form the tram survived until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when it was brought to Wrocław and its reconstruction began. Its finale, planned for the second half of 2021, will mark the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the electrification of horse-drawn trams in Wrocław. The historic carriage is being restored to its original 1901 appearance. It will therefore appear on the city streets in elegant honey-green colours.

Going back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it must be said that the fierce competition between the two private companies (BSEG and ESB) was not always favourable to passengers. The shareholders were interested in profits, and not necessarily in ensuring efficient transport throughout the city. For this reason, the mayor of Wrocław, Georg Bender, ordered suspension of granting of licences to private transport companies. He also established a third transport company, which belonged to the city. This is how the Städtische Straßenbahn Breslau (Breslau City Trams) – the ancestor of today's Municipal Transport Company – came into being. The company inaugurated its operations on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1902 with the opening of two lines: from Oderthor railway station to Südpark (Polish Park Południowy) and to the depot in Steinstraße (nowadays Kamienna Street). The carriages of the third Wrocław operator were painted red and white. Why these colours? These were the historical colours of the city, also present in the flag of Wrocław at the time, consisting of four narrow alternating white and red stripes. It is worth mentioning that, in contrast to the two private companies, the Wrocław coat of arms was painted on the sides of the city carriages.

The following years were marked by continuous disputes between the city and the oldest company BSEG. As it was losing passengers, it tried to block the development of municipal routes. This led to the purchase of the company by the city and its incorporation into the structure of the municipal carrier in 1911. In the following years, the BSEG carriages were successively repainted in the city colours. The apogee of the tramway infrastructure development came in 1913. Wrocław was then the host of the Centenary Exhibition commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King Friedrich Wilhelm III's proclamation "To my people" calling for a fight against Napoleon. The impressive modernist exhibition complex with the Centennial Hall at the forefront was built in Scheitnig. The city had to prepare an appropriate transport service for this area.

The ambitious plans of the magistrate were interrupted by the outbreak of World War I and then by the post-war crisis. It was not until the mid-1920s that investments were resumed. Routes were created to new housing estates and villages incorporated into the city, such as Zimpel (Polish Sępólno), Karlowitz (Polish Karłowice) and Bischofswalde (Polish Biskupin). The airport in Gandau (Polish Gądów) was also connected. In 1924, the ESB company was bought out by the city and its assets were incorporated into the structure of the SSB company, which thus gained a monopoly. Additionally, in July 1925, the city tramways expanded their operations by launching the first bus line. The buses complemented the tramway service, connecting the terminals with the outskirts of Wrocław and with suburban towns. In the years 1925–1929 the SSB replaced the outdated tramway fleet by purchasing 232 units of the *Standard* type of carriage developed especially for Wrocław from the Linke-Hofmann-Lauchhammer AG, H. Meinecke AG and Eisenwerk G. Trelenberg factories in Wrocław. From that time on, all passenger trams in Wrocław were painted in cream, which was the colour of most trams in the Weimar Republic. The city buses of the time were also cream-coloured.

Another crisis in the late 1920s and early 1930s again halted the development of municipal infrastructure. It also resulted in the Nazis taking power in Germany, which soon led to the outbreak of World War II. For most of the war years Wrocław was a safe place, far from combat operations, so many residents of the more troubled cities of the Reich came here. In 1944 the population reached one million, so the trams worked very intensively. Everything changed at the end of the year. Wrocław

was declared a fortress, and in early 1945 Soviet troops began a siege. The trams operated despite the tightening ring of troops, although it was a rather depressing and bizarre sight, as they mostly ran empty. It was, however, a deliberate move of the *Festung Breslau* command to create the impression that the situation in the city was under control. The reality was quite different. Faced with increasing destruction, the trams stopped running on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1945. The next day, the Soviet army launched an attack, and Wrocław was engulfed in a sea of fire.

The war fires had not yet died down, and on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the Transport Establishments of the City of Wrocław resumed operations under new Polish management and a translated name (since 1939 operated the company *Breslauer Verkehrsbetriebe*). The picture of devastation was terrible: streets and tracks were damaged and covered with rubble, depots were in ruins, the catenary system was torn down, carriages derailed or burned. For this reason, initially it was planned to focus on the development of bus transport (the first bus, intended for officials, started operating in the first days of June), but the lack of suitable vehicles quite quickly led to the reconstruction of the tramway network. The first line was launched already on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1945. “1” connected Biskupin with Olbin, i.e. the areas least destroyed and most populated in the initial post-war period. In 1946 most of the main routes were already passable. One of the most serious tasks was the reconstruction of the ruined Grunwald Bridge in 1947. Interestingly, for the first post-war years Wrocław trams had the same colour as before – cream.

The Exhibition of the Regained Territories in 1948 was a big impulse. On that occasion the trams that were refurbished for the event were painted blue. This was to be the identifying mark of the trams heading towards the exhibition grounds and the Olympic Stadium. “The blue tram will take you to the exhibition” – visitors were informed. The first tram in new look appeared on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1948 on line 9. This is how the symbol of Wrocław was born, recorded in the famous “Wrocław Song”. And why was the blue colour chosen? There are many legends and myths on this subject, but the most probable version is that this is how Kraków tramway workers marked their presence during the reconstruction of Wrocław transport. They were the most numerous group to arrive in Wrocław shortly after the fall of *Festung Breslau* and they mainly took up management positions. The blue and white colours in turn can be seen on both the Krakow flag and its trams.

After reconstruction, it was the time for development. In the years 1948–1951 completely new routes were created: to Pafawag industrial factories, and to Leśnica, Oporów, Klecina, Księża Małe and Gaj housing estates. In 1951, the hitherto municipal ZKmW became state-owned and was renamed Miejskie Przedsiębiorstwo Komunikacyjne (Municipal Transport Company). This was an important element of state centralisation. A visible sign of this was the new colour of the trams. Since 1954, by order of the Minister of Municipal Economy, all municipal public transport vehicles were painted red. The first red tram served the “zero” line on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1954. Within two years, all the trams were repainted and the blue colour disappeared from Wrocław streets for almost two decades. In 1956 the first carriages produced after the war appeared in Wrocław – the N type carriages from Chorzowska Wytwórnia Konstrukcji Stalowych (Konstal Chorzow). It was a breath of fresh air in the Wrocław public transport, as until then the inhabitants of Wrocław had only used pre-war rolling stock.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a decline in investment in trams in favour of buses, which were then considered to be the future. In 1962, trams still had a crushing advantage over buses in terms of transport work. According to MPK reports, trams covered 23 million vehicle-kilometres, while buses only 6 million. However, the situation was changed by the deliveries of Jelcz 272 MEX, commonly called cucumbers (Polish: *ogórek*), which began in 1963. In 1972 they were joined by Jelcz PR100, three years later by PR110, in 1981 by Ikarus 280, and again three years later by Jelcz M11. Due to this, the number of vehicle-kilometres performed by the buses was able to grow steadily to around 16 million in 1972 and as much as 23 million in 1982. The deliveries of Jelcz 272 MEX alone allowed 28 regular and eight express bus lines to operate in Wrocław with a total length of 330 kilometres. Thus, buses surpassed trams both in terms of the number and length of routes, as well as in terms of vehicle-kilometres and passengers carried. In the case of buses, red and white or red and cream

coloured sides prevailed for almost the entire post-war period, only to be widely replaced at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries by red and yellow, referring to the post-war flag of Wrocław.

Returning to the tramway system, the 1960s saw the modernisation of the rolling stock. The pre-war trailer tramcars were withdrawn and the N family trams were rebuilt and equipped with electrically operated doors. Interestingly, the mechanism for opening and closing them consisted of two rods, a bicycle chain and a motor from a drill which is a good illustration of the problems faced by the mechanics working at MPK at the time. In 1969, articulated, so-called high-speed trams from the 102N family appeared, which introduced a completely new quality to city travel. The next decade brought many changes. It was decided to paint the trams bought by Wrocław's industrial plants (among others Pafawag) blue in order to distinguish them from the ones delivered from the central allocation. Thus, in 1970 the colour from the famous song returned to the streets of Wrocław. In 1971 the Voivodship National Council formally decided to return to the blue colour. In the 1970s the transport system in the city centre was rebuilt. The East-West route was created, thanks to which, in 1978, tram traffic was withdrawn from the Market Square. From 1975 new generation carriages belonging to 105N family were delivered, which allowed to withdraw the pre-war rolling stock from the traffic. The last pieces of Standard motor carriages ran in 1977. It is worth mentioning that in 1979 two 105N double-carriage tram sets appeared on line 12, which were also a gift from Wrocław's workplaces. This time, to distinguish them from the majority of blue carriages, they were painted yellow and red, which was supposed to refer to the city colours. However, the intensive development was followed by a time of deep crisis, which resulted in the strike on the Coast. The crew of Wrocław's MPK joined the protest. For several days, public transport in Wrocław did not function. This is how the Lower Silesian "Solidarity" was born.

The end of the People's Republic of Poland saw more plans than realisations. The biggest investment was the construction of the so-called Społeczny Square. MPK was also developing its technical facilities, but it entered the new reality in poor technical and financial condition. In 1991, MPK ceased to be a state enterprise and returned to the city. In the same year, the carriages of the N family disappeared from the streets. The reorganisation of the transport system started. The modernisation was halted by the flood which hit Wrocław in July 1997. Again, public transport was not functioning for several days. The damage caused by the disaster contributed to the rebuilding of the infrastructure. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the transport system was modernised and interchanges were created, including a tram and bus terminal at Grunwaldzki Square. At the end of 2006, the first low-floor carriages appeared: 205WrAs produced by the former Wrocław factory RMT Protram and 16Ts from the Czech Škoda factory. The impulse for the development of tramway transport was the European Football Championship in 2012, of which Wrocław was the co-host. At that time, new routes were created: to the City Stadium and to the Gaj and Kozańów housing estates. Interestingly, two-way Škoda 19T trams were ordered to service the new routes. Originally it was planned that they would have a completely different colour – there were proposals of orange or light green. However, the citizens of Wrocław chose the traditional blue colour, although the carriages were decorated with colourful patterns. The subsequent carriages: Pesa Twist and Moderus Beta were given a dark, navy blue varnish. It, too, was not accepted by the inhabitants. In 2020, the modernised 205WrAs trams were repainted in light blue – this colour is also planned for the new carriages which should arrive in Wrocław in the next few years.

Currently, there are 22 day tram lines in Wrocław, which are served by 240 trains, with around 200 in operation every day. Wrocław tramway network is one of the oldest and the largest in the country. The total length of the routes is almost 90 km (about 200 km of tracks).



A pre-war Linke-Hofmann Standard tram (with a damaged pantograph) pulling a post-war ND-type trailer-car. It is passed at the rear by a set consisting of an N-type motor car together with two ND trailers. By this time the trams were already blue and cream again  
Photo Zbigniew Nowak/Ośrodek Pamięć i Przyszłość (Remembrance and Future Centre)



Konstal 102Na tram takes passengers from the stop at Arkady  
Photo Zbigniew Nowak/Ośrodek Pamięć i Przyszłość (Remembrance and Future Centre)



A red-and-cream Jelcz 272 MEX bus passes through the Wrocław Market Square  
Photo Zbigniew Nowak/Ośrodek Pamięć i Przyszłość (Remembrance and Future Centre)



Linke-Hofmann Standard tram from 1929, belonging to the Towarzystwo Miłośników Wrocławia (Wrocław Enthusiasts Society), with restored cream-coloured painting and markings typical of the first years after World War II (the emblem ZKmW – from Transport Establishments of the City of Wrocław – is visible)  
Photo Tomasz Sielicki



One of the Linke-Hofmann Standard coaches waiting for renovation. The red colour on the sides corresponds to the painting used in the years 1954–1971.

Photo Klub Sympatyków Transportu Miejskiego (Municipal Transport Enthusiasts Club)



Konstal 4N1 tram from 1960, belonging to the Municipal Transport Enthusiasts Club, after the renovation carried out in 2012 represents the state from the end of N-generation trams' regular use, that is from the turn of 1980s and 1990s.

Photo Klub Sympatyków Transportu Miejskiego (Municipal Transport Enthusiasts Club)



In the collection of the Municipal Transport Enthusiasts Club there is also a Konstal 102Na tram from 1972. Thanks to a comprehensive renovation it looks exactly as it left the factory in Chorzów  
 Photo Klub Sympatyków Transportu Miejskiego (Municipal Transport Enthusiasts Club)



Jelcz M11 of the Municipal Transport Enthusiasts Club in red and cream colours  
 Photo Klub Sympatyków Transportu Miejskiego (Municipal Transport Enthusiasts Club)



Ikarus 280.70E during service on line 139, in red and yellow colours referring to the post-war flag of Wrocław. Originally, however, Ikaruses were white and red or red and cream. The Ikarus in the photo currently belongs to the Municipal Transport Enthusiasts Club and is being slowly renovated.  
 Photo Klub Sympatyków Transportu Miejskiego (Municipal Transport Enthusiasts Club)

<sup>i</sup> These are translated lyrics of the “Wrocławska piosenka” (Wrocław song) which was written in 1951 or 1952. The melody was composed by Jerzy Harald and the lyrics were written by his wife Krystyna Wnukowska. The song was popularised by Maria Koterbska’s performances. The original lyrics are “Mkną po szynach niebieskie tramwaje przez wrocławskich ulic sto...”.