

Trans-border Transfer of Design Concepts within the Comecon: The Case of Poland and Czechoslovakia

Julia Błaszczczyńska 

ABSTRACT

The striking visual similarity of furniture produced across the socialist bloc raises a fundamental question: Where did these shared forms come from? This article examines the transfer of furniture design concepts between the Polish People's Republic and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic within the framework of Comecon cooperation. Rather than attributing these similarities solely to a shared political system, it reconstructs the specific mechanisms that fostered the convergence of formal, material, and technological solutions. Based on archival documents from Poland and Czechoslovakia, the study traces lines of cooperation between ministries of internal trade, research and development institutions, and furniture enterprises. It pays particularly close attention to the Polish Central Furniture Development Center (Centralny Zarząd Przemysłu Meblarskiego) and the Czechoslovak Furniture Industry Development Center (Vývoj nábytkářského průmyslu), as well as to written exchanges, study visits, expert consultations, and participation in trade fairs. The analysis also addresses collaboration in regard to technology, ergonomics, transport, packaging, and plastics. Although initially asymmetrical, with Czechoslovakia having outpaced the other countries in terms of technology and design, these relations became more reciprocal from the 1970s onwards.

The article argues that similarities between Polish and Czechoslovak furniture did not stem from actual collaboration regarding the individual designs, but from a combination of analogous political, economic, and housing conditions, shared production challenges, and institutionally regulated knowledge exchange. Cooperation within Comecon thus indirectly fostered standardization and aesthetic convergence despite its focus on technological and organizational modernization rather than on creative design.

KEYWORDS: design, furniture, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Comecon

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The author has declared that no conflicts of interest exist.

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Julia Błaszczczyńska, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, julia.blaszczynska@amu.edu.pl,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3060-174X>

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“Amid so much visual multiplicity, reciprocal inspirations, and copies, it is easy to lose one’s bearings. Let us therefore take stock of what is ours, what is theirs, and what we can take pride in, or whether these designs are all, in fact, shared heritage?”¹

This is how the curators of the exhibition “War and Peace,” which juxtaposed elements of visual culture from Poland and Czechoslovakia in the mid-twentieth century, reflected on Czechoslovak and Polish design under communism. The presentation of strikingly similar objects may indeed have left visitors hard-pressed to identify and assign particular designs to one country or the other. Comparable types, identical structures, the use of the same materials, and closely corresponding aesthetic qualities and production techniques (cf. Fig. 1–6) could be observed in many of the displayed objects.² Small-format porcelain sculptures, along with interior and furniture designs, served as the primary examples to illustrate this phenomenon of “twin” design.

More than a decade later, in 2023, the exhibition “Retrotopia: Design for Socialist Spaces” opened at Berlin’s Kunstgewerbemuseum.³ A group of curators from the former “people’s democracies” worked together to create a display showcasing the design of the communist period. The participating countries were selected on the basis of their former membership in the so-called Eastern Bloc, whose common denominator was the communist system. Bringing together artefacts and design concepts from across Eastern Europe made it possible to trace visual and technological connections among them, and raised the question of whether these shared characteristics could be attributed to a single source—namely, the political system itself.

The similarity of designs produced in the former Eastern Bloc countries was clearly evident in the exhibitions mentioned above. Striking aesthetic and technological parallels attest to strong ties between individual countries, extending well beyond superficial visual resemblance. However, this phenomenon calls not only for recognition, but for closer analysis, in order to determine the sources of these common features. A particularly important question concerns the extent to which political alignment, the economic system, and technological exchange contributed to the emergence of similar design trends across the region.

1 ALICJA KLIMCZAK-DOBZANIECKA, KRZYSZTOF KUCHARCZYK: *Wojna i Pokój* [War and Peace], Kraków 2014, p. 12.

2 References originate from sources available elsewhere.

3 CLAUDIA BANZ: *Retrotopia: Design for Socialist Spaces*, Berlin 2023, p. 1.



Fig. 1:
Wall unit "Morava." Offer catalog of the national enterprise UP závody Rousínov, early 1970s (courtesy of Rostislav Koryčánek)



Fig. 2:
Wall unit "Kaszub." Offer catalog of the national enterprise Zjednoczenie Przemysłu Meblarskiego, 1970s



Fig. 3:
Chair no. 615 313 1310. TON enterprise, 1958. Collection of the Moravská galerie in Brno (courtesy of Moravská galerie)



Fig. 4:
Chair no. 0/200-203. Offer catalog of the national enterprise Zjednoczenie Przemysłu Meblarskiego, 1966



Fig. 5:
Chair. National enterprise OPP Humenné, 1960–1970. Collection of the Moravská galerie in Brno (courtesy of Moravská galerie)



Fig. 6:
Chair no. 10-20. Offer catalog of the national enterprise Zjednoczenie Przemysłu Meblarskiego, 1966

1 Communism Reflected in Furniture?

Considering the curatorial choices behind these exhibitions, which brought together products from communist-ruled Central and Eastern Europe, it is tempting to ask how far the political system shaped the form of such objects—whether it left its mark on their function and appearance or manifested itself in the materials used. At the two shows discussed above, visual similarities were conspicuous across a broad range of objects, but it would be somewhat misguided to claim that the resemblance of what is commonly grouped as “communist design” can be explained solely by reference to a shared political paradigm.⁴ While such an assumption might seem plausible, it ultimately obscures the concrete mechanisms through which the state actually influenced the function and form of designed objects.

In order to determine more specific sources of the phenomenon—and to narrow the inquiry to my own area of interest, i.e. furniture-making—this study examines documented activities that may have engendered the observed visual analogies. This paper does not attempt to offer a comprehensive explanation for the similarities in what might be tentatively called “communist furniture.” Instead, it will explore one of the paths—hitherto overlooked by researchers—which may have enabled the flow of ideas in furniture-making between the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL) and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (ČSSR).

Here, the official co-operation between Poland and Czechoslovakia will not be seen as the sole and exclusive reason behind the similarity of furniture production in the two countries, but rather as one factor that may have determined some of its features. The international contacts of the institutions involved in furniture design and production are abundantly documented, making it possible to assess both the scale and effectiveness of these interactions. The analysis is based primarily on documents from the Union of the Furniture Industry, later the Central Furniture Industry Administration (Centralny Zarząd Przemysłu Meblarskiego, CZPM), now held at the State Archives in Poznań;⁵ archival records of the Ministry of Internal Trade, notably the files concerning international activities of the Central Furniture Trade Office; and the holdings of the Furniture Industry Development Center (Vývoj nábytkářského průmyslu, VNP) in Brno,⁶ the central research and development institution overseeing the furniture industry in Czechoslovakia. In addition, collaboration between the PRL and the ČSSR was widely commented on in newspapers, and much of this

4 RENÁTA PŘEHNALOVÁ: *Období 50. a 60. let 20. století—inspirace pro dnešek* [The 1950s and 1960s—Inspiration for Today], bachelor’s thesis, Mendelova Univerzita v Brně, 2016, p. 14.

5 Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu (APP) [State Archives in Poznań], ref. no. 53/3200/0/1.7.

6 Moravský Zemský Archiv v Brně (MZA) [Moravian Provincial Archives in Brno], sign. K 204: Výzkumný a Vývojový Ústav Nábytkářský Brno 1954–1989 [Furniture Research and Development Institute, Brno, 1954–1989].

material is preserved in Polish, Czech, and German archives.⁷ Regrettably, archival documents concerning the activities of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Internal Trade, which are likely to contain interesting data, are currently not available for research.⁸

To begin with, it should be noted that Polish furniture design has only occasionally been discussed in an international context in the existing literature. References to the contacts of the Polish design community or industry are often limited to general statements about the isolation of Eastern Europe from capitalist countries.⁹ Polish participation in international exhibitions is mentioned, but the focus tends to fall on textile and poster design rather than furniture.¹⁰ Contemporary Czech literature similarly highlights the participation of Czechoslovak designers in exhibitions in Western Europe, most notably the 1958 show in Brussels, which has been extensively studied.¹¹ The international context is also occasionally invoked in the context of furniture export statistics, but again such references remain cursory.¹² With respect to the international contacts of the Czech furniture industry, scholarly attention has focused on mutual inspirations between twentieth-century Danish and Czechoslovak design.¹³ By contrast, interactions within the former Eastern Bloc have received little sustained attention in either Polish or Czech literature.

My attempt to explore the influence of cross-border contacts on furniture design of the communist period in selected satellite countries parallels, in certain aspects, the approach adopted by Klara Kemp-Welch¹⁴ in her study of unofficial contacts among conceptual artists from the former Eastern Bloc countries. Despite significant differences in the artistic field and in the nature of the exchanges considered (unofficial versus official), there are clear methodologi-

7 Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN) [Central Archives of Modern Records]; Pracownia Dokumentacji Sztuk Wizualnych XX i XXI wieku IS PAN (PDSW) [Laboratory of Documentation of 20th and 21st Centuries Visual Arts of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences]; Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe, Marburg, Press Clippings Archive (HI).

8 Ministerstvo vnitřního obchodu 1945–1992 [Ministry of Internal Trade 1945–1992], in: Národní Archiv [National Archives], Praha, sign. 982.

9 E.g.: JÓZEF A. MROZEK: Świat do zaprojektowania [A World to Be Designed], Warszawa 2020, p. 406.

10 IRENA HUML: Polska sztuka stosowana XX wieku [Polish Applied Art of the 20th Century], Warszawa 1978, p. 212.

11 E.g.: MILENA BARTLOVÁ (ed.): Budování státu: Reprezentace Československa v umění, architektuře a designu [State Building: Representation of Czechoslovakia in Art, Architecture, and Design], Praha 2015, p. 270.

12 LADISLAV ZIKMUND-LENDER: Tvary, barvy, pohodlí: Nábytek Jitona [Shapes, Colors, Comfort: Jitona Furniture], Cheb 2019, p. 27.

13 Discussed very comprehensively in: PAVLA ROSSINI, JIŘÍ PELCL (eds.): Století dánské a české nábytkové tvorby: Konvergence, divergence / A Century of Danish and Czech Furniture Creation: Convergence, Divergence, Praha 2018.

14 See: KLARA KEMP-WELCH: Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981, Cambridge 2018.

cal affinities. In outlining the pioneering nature of her work, Kemp-Welch points to the tendency to write art history from the perspective of individual nation states, imagined as isolated from their surroundings:

“In official terms, the Cold War world was divided into three ‘blocs’: Eastern, Western, and nonaligned. The metaphor of the descent of an Iron Curtain across Europe continued to dominate the political imagination throughout the Khrushchev-era ‘thaw’ and the superpower détente of the 1970s. One consequence of this view, in art history, has been the assumption that there was not one art world but many, and that these were largely unconnected, running in parallel at best. This in turn has led to the production of art history along the lines of political power blocs, and/or of nation-states—as a countermeasure.”¹⁵

That prevalent trend in the study of Eastern European art in the latter half of the twentieth century—as described by Kemp-Welch—also affected the historiography of design, including furniture design. Challenging this established narrative—an aim shared by the present study—allows for a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the subject, situating design objects within dynamic networks of actors, institutions and transnational exchange.

2 Parallel Industries?

The post-war development of the furniture industries in Poland and Czechoslovakia had many elements in common. Before turning to a closer examination of cooperation between the two countries, it is therefore necessary to sketch the broader context and outline the key issues that shaped this development.

After World War II, the furniture industries in Poland and Czechoslovakia were incorporated into the planned economy, which dictated both their organizational structure and the direction of production. In both countries, furniture factories underwent far-reaching centralization and nationalization in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹⁶ In Poland, the furniture industry was initially administratively embedded within the broader wood industry, but from 1952 onwards it came under the authority of a separate body: the Central Furniture Industry Administration (Centralny Zarząd Przemysłu Meblarskiego, CZPM) in Poznań. This institution supervised 43 furniture factories and launched extensive structural and personnel reforms.¹⁷ Similarly, in Czechoslovakia, furniture manufacturing was nationalized following the state take-over of the economy in 1948.¹⁸ In both countries, design and aesthetics initially played only a mar-

15 Ibid., p. 1.

16 ZIKMUND-LENDER, p. 27.

17 JULIA BŁASZCZYŃSKA: “Mebel centralnie planowany”: System projektowania i produkcji mebli w PRL. [“Centrally Planned Furniture”: The System of Furniture Designing and Production in the People’s Republic of Poland], in: *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 87 (2025), 4, pp. 217–244, <https://doi.org/10.36744/bhs.3910>.

18 PŘEHNALOVÁ, p. 22.

ginal role in furniture production.¹⁹ In Poland, design remained the responsibility of in-house technical departments, with little involvement of visual artists, but towards the end of the 1950s and in the 1960s, interest in design gradually increased. A three-stage classification system for furniture was introduced and models would undergo a selection process. In addition, institutions were established to supervise quality and design development, such as the Industrial and Construction Enterprise of the Furniture Industry (Przedsiębiorstwo Przemysłowo-Konstrukcyjne Przemysłu Meblarskiego, PPKPM) and the Central Furniture Development Center (Centralny Ośrodek Rozwoju Meblarstwa, CORM).²⁰ A comparable shift occurred in Czechoslovakia, where design likewise gained importance and dedicated institutions were created. In 1958, the Furniture Industry Development Center (Vývoj nábytkářského průmyslu, VNP) was established in Brno, headed by the acclaimed designer Jiří Halabala.²¹ The VNP performed much the same tasks as its Polish counterpart across the northern border, the CORM.²²

Toward the end of the 1950s, both countries experienced significant changes as prevailing notions of modernity in design were redefined. In Czechoslovakia, the so-called Brussels style emerged and was prominently presented at Expo 58 in Brussels. Combining modernist forms with decorative and folk elements, it prioritized lightness of form, asymmetry and vivid colors, and came to symbolize a renewed openness to international design scene in the spirit of optimism and progress. Meanwhile in Poland, the period of political thaw under Władysław Gomułka ushered in a new approach to design, enabling a gradual departure from socialist realist aesthetics and a turn towards functional and modern forms, albeit still within the constraints of the socialist system. During this time, plastics began to be employed in furniture-making in both countries, and there was a degree of cooperation in this area too.

The rise of prefabricated construction and the prevalence of limited living space prompted both Poland and Czechoslovakia to introduce housing norms that defined minimum standards for usable floor area and interior functionality.²³ Responding to these conditions, designers in both countries increasingly prioritized modularity, multifunctionality and ergonomics. This was reflected in the popularity of wall units, modular systems and functional kitchens that made maximum use of the available space.²⁴

19 W sprawie mebli nowoczesnych [On Modern Furniture], in: Trybuna Opolska, 1959-03-17, press clipping, in: PDSW, sign. 1959.29, p. 276.

20 BŁASZCZYŃSKA.

21 ZIKMUND-LENDER, p. 27.

22 Statut Vývoje nábytkářského průmyslu v Brně [Statute of the Development of the Furniture Industry in Brno], in: MZA, sign. K 204, p. 3.

23 ANNA KOSTRZYŃSKA-MIŁOŚZ: Polskie meble 1945–1970: Idee i rzeczywistość [Polish Furniture 1945–1970: Ideas and Reality], Warszawa 2021, p. 275; Nábytkáři v přeposledním roce pětiletky [Furniture Makers in the Penultimate Year of the Five-Year Plan], in: Tvorba, 1979-02-28, press clipping, in: HI, sign. T 63281, not paginated (n.p.).

24 MROZEK: Świat do zaprojektowania [A World to Be Designed], Warszawa 2020, p. 449; PŘEHNALOVÁ, p. 42.

These analogous circumstances—shared challenges, similar institutional frameworks and the close proximity of Poland and Czechoslovakia—created a favorable environment for cooperation. Viewed against this backdrop, the nature and directions of collaboration between the two countries become more readily intelligible, while closer analysis reveals both shared strategies and solutions shaped by specific national contexts.

3 The Long Run-Up

Industrial cooperation in the latter half of the twentieth century—including in the furniture sector—was largely shaped by the international body that coordinated economic relations among the Eastern Bloc countries: the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), established in Moscow in 1949.²⁵ According to the Comecon Charter, it was intended to “promote planned development of the national economy, accelerate technical progress, raise the level of industrialization, improve labor productivity and increase the prosperity of the member states.”²⁶ However, analyses of the organization’s actual performance demonstrate that it fell well short of these declared objectives.²⁷ Conceived as a counterweight to the capitalist Marshall Plan, Comecon was designed to support the economies of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its satellite states in post-war reconstruction.²⁸ The existence of a body that coordinated economic cooperation among the USSR satellites was also intended to limit the exchange of information outside of official channels.²⁹ In practice, however, the activities of the organization primarily

25 LESZEK JERZY JASIŃSKI: *Rozwój gospodarczy Polski w Europie Środkowo Wschodniej w XX w. i jego aspekty globalne* [Poland’s Economic Development in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th Century and Its Global Aspects], in: Przemysław Waingertner (ed.): *Polska w Europie i na świecie w XX wieku: Aspekty gospodarcze*, vol. 3, Łódź—Warszawa 2020, pp. 21–118, here p. 58.

26 Statut Rady Wzajemnej Pomocy Gospodarczej, podpisany w Sofii dnia 14 grudnia 1959 r. [Charter of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, signed in Sofia on 14 December 1959], <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19600350197/O/D19600197.pdf> (2025-11-02).

27 LEE KENDAL METCALF: *The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance: The Failure of Reform*, New York 1997, p. 2.

28 MAGDALÉNA LEICHTOVÁ, LINDA PIKNEROVÁ: *Rozvojová spolupráce východního bloku v době studené války* [Eastern Bloc Development Cooperation during the Cold War], Praha 2013, p. 35.

29 KAREL KAPLAN: *Československo v RVHP 1949–1956* [Czechoslovakia in Comecon 1949–1956], Praha 1995, p. 34, argues that Czechoslovakian president Klement Gottwald was the initiator of establishing Comecon, citing his contacts with Stalin: “In 1948, in a conversation with Stalin, Gottwald recommended that an economic cooperation organization be created. Gottwald’s initiative was mentioned in January 1949 by Viacheslav Molotov and later also by Nikita Khrushchev. Gottwald’s suggestion was prompted by the complaints about the activities of Soviet informers and experts who visited Czech-Slovak plants and inveigled technical documents concerning production,

strengthened Soviet influence in Eastern Europe and had a decisive impact on the direction of their economic development. Moreover, before promoting actual cooperation, the Council would first encourage autarkic development within each member state,³⁰ a policy pursued for a number of years with the aim of supporting post-war reconstruction in the Soviet economy alone.³¹

Formal economic cooperation between the PRL and the ČSSR began with the signing of an agreement on heavy industry on 18 October 1957.³² In the subsequent decades, cooperation gradually expanded, encompassing ever broader areas of production and technological exchange. By 1980, the PRL and ČSSR had entered into 41 bilateral and 61 multilateral agreements on specialization and cooperation in manufacturing.³³ Documents from that period emphasized favorable geographical conditions that facilitated cooperation, especially the proximity of the major industrial regions on either side of the border.³⁴ It was also noted that Polish-Czechoslovak cooperation occupied a special place within the overall relations between the member states of the Comecon.³⁵

It was not until the 1960s that—after a period of promoting independent development in each country—that the time came for networking and the creation of specialized economies, including in light industry.³⁶ Growing economic problems among the Eastern Bloc countries prompted the Comecon Council to convene on a regular basis to coordinate action plans and economic development. As a further step towards economic-industrial integration, twelve committees were established, each representing a specific branch of the economy, to facilitate the negotiation of bilateral agreements between countries. The work of the committees resulted in the adoption of essential guidelines for long-term cooperation in 1962. However, since clear-cut criteria for the specialization of individual economies were lacking and the economic performance of member states was difficult to evaluate, these arrangements did not translate

patents, inventions and, in many cases, even organized industrial espionage. Gottwald stated that such actions were unnecessary and proposed an exchange within the framework of an international institution, i.e. legally. Stalin condemned the practices of the Soviet citizens mentioned by Gottwald and agreed to his proposal.”

30 METCALF, p. 18.

31 LEICHTOVÁ/PIKNEROVÁ, p. 36.

32 Jak będziemy współpracować z Czechosłowacją? [How Will We Cooperate with Czechoslovakia?], in: Sztandar Młodych, 1957-10-21, press clipping, in: HI, sign. P 43: Tschechoslowakei, I, n.p.

33 Rozwija się współpraca obu krajów [Cooperation between the Two Countries Is Growing], in: Życie Warszawy, 1980-04-17, press clipping, in: HI, sign. P 43: Tschechoslowakei, XI, n.p.

34 Pogłębiająca się współpraca przez miedzę [Deepening Cooperation across the Border], in: Gazeta Lubuska, 1980-03-25, press clipping, *ibid.*

35 Współpraca przez miedzę [Cooperation across the Border], in: Trybuna Ludu, 1980-02-18, press clipping, *ibid.*

36 METCALF, p. 48.

into real action.³⁷ It was only in the mid-1960s that the member states were able to communicate more effectively, and efforts were made to reorganize Comecon to create a network of economic cooperation involving exchange of information, joint development plans and coordinated production.³⁸

Efforts to establish cooperation between Poland and Czechoslovakia had been made decades earlier, without Soviet interference. Already during World War II, the governments of Poland and Czechoslovakia issued a joint declaration expressing their willingness to collaborate,³⁹ going as far as to adopt a common currency and pursue a coordinated foreign policy.⁴⁰ The Polish and Czechoslovak authorities hoped to halt the expansion of Soviet communism through a strong confederation of the two states.⁴¹ On 23 January 1942, the content of the agreement was published, while the Soviet Union was informed of the progress of the pact. The following month, the USSR began publishing a series of unfavorable commentaries regarding the prospective confederation, pointing out that only close union with the Soviet Union could protect Poland and Czechoslovakia from Germany. Under Soviet pressure, negotiations between the states were suspended.⁴² After the war, talks on economic cooperation resumed in 1947. It was decided that each country would develop industries with comparable costs and supply each other with goods at low prices. Again, however, these plans were abandoned due to Soviet opposition.⁴³ In the 1940s, any attempts at consolidation by Poland and Czechoslovakia were doomed to fail because they sidestepped Soviet supervision. Only strictly controlled initiatives by authorities responsible for cooperation within the Comecon had a chance of succeeding. Thus, close contacts between the Polish People's Republic and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in the latter half of the twentieth century were not just a result of geographical proximity; pressure from the USSR played a decisive role. After all, it was asserted that "in the name of 'socialist solidarity'," the states of Comecon should feel obliged to help Czechoslovakia and the GDR in particular, because those countries were "in a sense a display window viewed by Western Europe, which is why their standard of living should compete with that in Western Europe, and other countries should take that into account."⁴⁴ From that point on, joint research projects

37 Ibid., p. 49.

38 Ibid., p. 52.

39 Ibid., p. 20.

40 Ibid., p. 20, referring to a statement by Piotr Wandycz.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., p. 21.

43 Ibid.

44 ROBERT SKOBELSKI: PRL w Radzie Wzajemnej Pomocy Gospodarczej w latach 1956–1970 [PRL in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in the Years 1956–1970], in: *Kwartalnik Historyczny* (2007), 3, pp. 49–90, here p. 51.

and exchange of documentation also involved other countries, but to a much lesser extent.⁴⁵

4 Cooperation of the Ministries of Internal Trade in Furniture Manufacturing

Documents from the Polish Ministry of Internal Trade show that cooperation between the PRL and the ČSSR in furniture manufacturing was considered important, but it was not treated as a priority.⁴⁶ Direct collaboration between the respective Ministries of Internal Trade is first mentioned only in the mid-1960s. In late 1964, the Central Furniture Trade Office (CHM) requested to be included in the planning of foreign trips and submitted a detailed program of potential cooperation:

“The aim of such trips would be to familiarize ourselves with the furniture trade and industry in various fields, take advantage of good examples of their work, and bring their achievements to our country, which would certainly contribute to solving many of the problems we are facing.”⁴⁷

However, the plan for the following year, i.e. 1965, did not provide for any cooperation with the ČSSR in furniture-making, except for supplying furniture quality control files to the Czechoslovak side.⁴⁸ Plans drawn up by the director of CHM, J. Radecki, included visits to furniture fairs in Paris, Budapest and Florence, as well as the purchase of furniture designs from Denmark. Radecki explicitly intended to draw on Western designs.⁴⁹

45 Plany ogólne współpracy z zagranicą [General Plans for Cooperation with Foreign Partners] 1971–1972, in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/142, pp. 7–17; Plany ogólne współpracy z zagranicą 1973–1974, in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/143, pp. 52–62.

46 As regards mutual relations, the most frequently documented were those between clothing industries, as contacts in this area were intensive and frequent. Pismo dyrektora przedsiębiorstwa “Moda Polska” Stanisława Fusińskiego do Ministra Handlu Wewnętrznego z dnia 06.01.1966 [Letter from the Director of “Moda Polska” Stanisław Fusiński to the Minister of Internal Trade, 1966-01-06], in: AAN, sign. 2/1097/0/23/28/99, 1965, p. 1.

47 Pismo dyrektora Handlu Meblami J. Radeckiego skierowane do Ministerstwa Handlu Wewnętrznego z dnia 23 listopada 1964 roku [Letter from the Director of Furniture Trade J. Radecki addressed to the Ministry of Internal Trade, 1964-11-23], in: AAN, sign. 28/106: Sprawozdanie współpracy z zagranicą 1965–66 [Report on International Cooperation 1965–66], p. 1.

48 Wykaz materiałów stanowiących realizację pkt. 4. cz. II załącznika no. 2 do protokołu z rozmów z przedstawicielami Ministerstwa Handlu Wewnętrznego—PRL i CSRS z dnia 14 grudnia 1964 [List of Materials Implementing Item 4, Part II of Annex No. 2 to the Protocol of Discussions with Representatives of the Ministry of Internal Trade—PRL and ČSSR, 1964-12-14], in: AAN, sign. 2/1097/0/23/28/102: Dokumentacja współpracy sekretariatu Czechosłowacji [Documentation of Cooperation of the Czechoslovak Secretariat].

49 Pismo dyrektora Handlu Meblami J. Radeckiego (as in footnote 47), p. 2.



Fig. 7:
Chair “Pavouk,” ca.
1960. *Vecerni Praha*,
1960-02-27, in: HI,
sign. T 63281



Fig. 8:
Chair KA237, 1966. Design: Aleksander
Kuczma. Nationalmuseum Warschau
(photo: Michał Korta)

In Czechoslovakia, furniture designs also clearly drew on foreign examples, an eloquent example of which is the “Pavouk” armchair created at the turn of the 1960s (Fig. 7)⁵⁰—a close replica of the so-called “B.K.F. chair,”⁵¹ a 1930s design by three South American architects, Antonio Boneta, Juan Kurchan, and Jorge Ferrari Hardoy.⁵² A Polish example of a similar approach is Aleksander Kuczma’s 1966 KA237 chair (Fig. 8), which follows the pattern of Arne Jacobsen’s series 7 chairs,⁵³ designed in 1955.

The Ministry of Internal Trade’s foreign cooperation program in the first half of the 1960s covered areas such as goods trade, ministry-supervised pro-

50 PAVOUK [SPIDER], in: *Vecerni Praha*, 1960-02-27, press clipping, in: HI, sign. T 63281, n.p.

51 <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/4393> (2026-05-11).

52 <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/4393> (2025-08-01).

53 <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/1611> (2026-05-11)

duction, staff training, and economic cooperation.⁵⁴ Scientific and technical collaboration in the field of trade included “the impact of trade on industry in terms of the structure and size of the product range, quality and design.”⁵⁵ Although the furniture industry was not formally included in the plan at that time,⁵⁶ cooperation between Poland and Czechoslovakia was among the most intensive in the Eastern Bloc.⁵⁷ It was not until the 1968 plan that the expansion of scientific and technical cooperation of the CHM was formally provided for. This plan included the exchange of promotional materials and catalogues, the mobility of specialists and in-house trainings.⁵⁸

Export and import cooperation, which began in the 1960s, spanned both half-finished furniture components and finished goods. These goods were also subject to so-called homogeneous exchange, i.e. the mutual transfer of goods from the same category within a fixed financial bracket.⁵⁹ The scale of cooperation in furniture trade fluctuated in subsequent years. For example, in 1967, upholstered furniture to the value of 75,000 rubles was exported from the ČSSR to the PRL,⁶⁰ while no furniture was delivered from Poland to the ČSSR that year.⁶¹ In 1968/69, trade in furniture was one-sided and involved the import of upholstery fabrics from Czechoslovakia to Poland at a total value of 150,000

54 Obrót towarowy artykułami przemysłowymi [Trade in Industrial Goods], in: AAN, sign. 2/1097/0/23/28/46: Dokumentacja sekretariatów Bułgarii, Czechosłowacji, Jugosławii [Documentation of the Secretariats of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia], p. 2.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., p. 5.

57 Reports on cooperation from the 1960s and 1970s also account for foreign trips, with the USSR, GDR, and ČSSR being the most frequent destinations. The capitalist countries were much less often visited. For example, aggregate data from 1961 showed that a total of 160 persons traveled to socialist countries (all types of trips, i.e. those related to cooperation, so-called compensation trips, and visits to trade fairs), spending there 1,429 so-called “man-days” (persons with special travel permits), while only 20 persons visited capitalist countries, staying there for 158 “man-days.” Sprawozdanie za rok 1961 [Report for the Year 1961], in: AAN, sign. 2/1097/0/23/28/46, p. 7.

58 Program współpracy naukowo-technicznej z zagranicą na rok 1968 [Program of Scientific and Technical Cooperation with Foreign Countries for 1968], 1967-10-13, in: AAN, sign. 2/1097/0/23/28/143: Plany i dokumentacja współpracy naukowo-technicznej z zagranicą [Plans and Documentation of Scientific and Technical Cooperation with Foreign Countries], p. 4.

59 Wykaz towarów, które strona polska dostarczy do ČSSR w roku 1968 w ramach rozszerzonej akcji wymiennej 1968 [List of Goods that the Polish Side Will Deliver to the ČSSR in 1968 as Part of the 1968 Expanded Exchange Action], 1967-05-13 to 1967-05-16, in: AAN, sign. 2/1097/0/29/26: Ministerstwo Handlu Wewnętrznego w Warszawie [Ministry of Internal Trade in Warsaw], p. 22.

60 Lista towarów, które strona czechosłowacka dostarczy do w 1967 do PRL w ramach transakcji wymiennych [List of Goods that the Czechoslovak Side Will Deliver to the PRL by 1967 in Exchange Transactions], 1967-05-13 to 1967-05-16, *ibid.*, p. 36.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

transfer rubles.⁶² By 1971, however, furniture had become the fifth most frequently exported commodity from the PRL to the ČSSR, at a value of 200,000 transfer rubles.⁶³ At the same time, furniture of the same value was sold to Poland, making it the sixth most valuable export in the ČSSR.⁶⁴ This data suggests that the process of aesthetic standardization of furniture in Poland and Czechoslovakia was not intentional. An analysis of import and export structures indicates that the aim of these activities was to enrich and diversify the range rather than standardize it. In practice, trade served to bring other design solutions, technologies and types of furniture onto the market, complementing domestic production. This expanded the selection available in furniture stores and, at least in part, helped relieve the problem of constant shortages.⁶⁵

5 Levelling the Disparity

The previously mentioned high “standard of living” in Czechoslovakia was most likely understood as being due to technological advancement, and this was probably the rationale for Poland’s cooperation with the Czechoslovak furniture industry. It was emphasized that cooperation would be advantageous given the considerable achievements of the Czechoslovak industry in certain areas of manufacturing,⁶⁶ such as the “use of polymers as structural materials, transport mechanization, the use of electronic computing technology in planning and management, and the development of working time standards.”⁶⁷ Although it cannot be asserted that Poland unilaterally supported Czechoslovakia

62 Lista towarów, które strona czechosłowacka dostarczy w 1969 roku do PRL w ramach transakcji wymiennych pomiędzy organizacjami Handlu Wewnętrznego [List of Goods that the Czechoslovak Side will Deliver in 1969 to the People’s Republic of Poland in the Framework of Exchange Transactions between the Internal Trade Organizations], 1969-04-23, *ibid.*, p. 17.

63 Lista A: Lista towarów uzgodnionych do dostawy między Ministerstwami Handlu Wewnętrznego PRL i CSRS na 1971 r. [List A: List of Goods Agreed for Delivery between the Ministries of Internal Trade of the PRL and ČSSR for 1971], 1971-02-24, *ibid.*, p. 3.

64 Lista B: Lista towarów uzgodnionych do dostawy między Ministerstwami Handlu Wewnętrznego PRL i CSRS na 1971 r. [List B: List of Goods Agreed for Delivery between the Ministries of Internal Trade of the PRL and ČSSR for 1971], 1971-02-24, *ibid.*, p. 4.

65 BŁAŻEJ BRZOSTEK: *Emilia: Meble, muzeum, modernism* [Emilia: Furniture, Museum, Modernism], Kraków—Warszawa 2016, p. 85.

66 Sprawozdanie o efektywności współpracy między Centralnym Ośrodkiem Rozwoju Meblarstwa w Poznaniu a Vývojovým Nábytkářským Průmyslem v Brnie w latach 1966 i 1967 [Report on the Effectiveness of Cooperation between the Central Furniture Development Center in Poznań and the Furniture Industry Development Institute in Brno in the Years 1966 and 1967], 1968-03-29, in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/149: Współpraca z CSRS 1966–68 [Cooperation with the ČSSR 1966–68], p. 112.

67 *Ibid.*

in becoming a “showcase for Western Europe,”⁶⁸ it may be noted that the overall standard of living of the average citizen of Czechoslovakia in the mid-twentieth century was higher than in Poland, owing to a more advanced industrial sector. This is corroborated by the account of an anonymous Polish technician employed in a senior position in the machine industry who visited Czechoslovakia in the mid-1950s:

“I am bewildered at the sight of the numerous private cars used here by that category of people to which I belong. But for us, in Poland, this will remain in the realm of dreams for a long time to come. [...] Here in PRAGUE it is no problem for a foreman to have a car, while I would not even be able to afford decent clothes if it were not for you. One cannot help feeling furious when one sees that things of which we can hardly dream are everyday matters here.”⁶⁹

Differences of this kind were also evident in the furniture industry. In Poland, the monotonous, poor quality fabrics were a frequent object of complaint,⁷⁰ whereas the Czechoslovak manufacturers turned out modern upholstery fabrics in fashionable designs and colors; it is therefore no surprise that these products attracted attention, especially given their export potential.⁷¹ Records show that such fabrics and furniture were imported from Czechoslovakia to Poland from the early 1960s until the end of the period under study.⁷² Even so, although this continued for a fairly long period and enriched the range available on the Polish

68 SKOBELSKI, p. 51.

69 Multitude of Private Automobiles Amazes Polish Visitor to Prague, 1956-06-12, press clipping, in: HI, sign. T 43 Polen, n.p. [Emphasis in original].

70 One of the many negative comments about Polish upholstery fabrics is formulated in a newspaper report relating to a visit to the Poznań International Fair: “In addition to domestic production, the exhibition also features numerous interesting ideas in the field of interior design from foreign exhibitors (Czech, Belgian, Romanian, Bulgarian, German), which were purchased at the most recent Poznań Fair along with the technical files. One important detail stands out here: All upholstered furniture is covered with very nice upholstery, which unfortunately cannot be said about the sofas and armchairs we produce.” Zgromadzono wiele ciekawych wzorów—czy jednak ukażą się one w sprzedaży? Z wystawy projektów mebli CHPD [Many Interesting Designs Have Been Gathered—But Will They Appear for Sale? From the Exhibition of CHPD Furniture Designs], in: Słowo powszechne, 1955-10-22/23, press clipping, in: HI, sign. P 63281, n.p.

71 Jak to je snabytkem? [How’s That for Furniture?], in: Gospodarskie nowiny, 1966-02-11, press clipping, in: HI, sign. T 63281, n.p.

72 Polsko–Czechosłowacka wymiana towarowa [Polish–Czechoslovak Trade in Goods], in: Życie Warszawy, 1969-04-26; Współpraca gospodarcza między Polską a CSRS i NRD [Economic Cooperation between Poland and CSRS and GDR], in: Głos Pomorza, 1980-03-20; Podpisanie protokołu Polska–ČSSR w współpracy gospodarczej w latach 1981–1985 [Signing of Poland–ČSSR Protocol in Economic Cooperation in 1981–1985], in: Życie Warszawy, 1980-03-20, press clippings in: HI, sign P 43: Tschechoslowakei, XI, n.p.

market, it had little direct impact on Polish furniture production due to its small scale.⁷³

It may be inferred from the available sources that furniture produced in Czechoslovakia (as well as in East Germany and Yugoslavia) was perceived as more advanced—technologically and design-wise—than the items made in Poland. As a result, furnishings from across the southern border served as a model for Polish manufacturers. The *modus operandi* changed over time. Shortly after World War II, Polish factories, which did not yet have their own design units, attempted to reproduce the designs and technology of Czechoslovak furniture, based on catalogues. This practice was noted in Polish newspapers, which also called for the employment of designers in furniture factories:

“Until now, individual plants and cooperatives have been designing on their own, following foreign brochures. I have seen some of these pieces of furniture. Couches, kitchen sideboards modelled on Czech designs [...]”⁷⁴

Czechoslovak influence on Polish furniture design was further reinforced by imports from that country to the People’s Republic of Poland, which began in the early 1960s. Although the quantity of ready-made furniture imported was relatively small and could not significantly alter the structure of the domestic product range,⁷⁵ it played an important role, offering a point of reference and a source of inspiration for Polish designers and manufacturers:

“With a turnover of over 6 billion in the furniture industry, imported furniture is only a minor addition to the market supply. Nevertheless, due to its quality, it is used to give our manufacturers and designers hands-on lessons in good furniture making.”⁷⁶

Unfortunately, no material indicating the exact pieces of furniture that served as models can be found in Polish or in Czechoslovak archives, with only a few examples reproduced in newspapers (Fig. 9).⁷⁷ In addition to the furniture imported from Czechoslovakia, Polish institutions also acquired prototypes with accompanying technical documentation at international trade fairs.⁷⁸

73 Więcej mebli krajowych i importowanych [More Domestic and Imported Furniture], in: *Kurier Polski*, 1965-02-04, press clipping, in: HI, sign. P 63281, n.p.

74 W sprawie mebli nowoczesnych [On Modern Furniture], in: *Trybuna Opolska*, 1959-03-17, press clipping, in: PDSW, sign. 1959.29, p. 276.

75 For instance, in 1986, with annual furniture production estimated at approximately PLN 70 billion, furniture imports amounted to only PLN 7 billion and mainly included products from the GDR and Czechoslovakia, as well as—to a lesser extent—Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, and the USSR: *Meble są czy ich nie ma?* [Is There Any Furniture or Not?], in: *Życie Warszawy*, 1986-09-09, press clipping, in: HI, sign. P 63281, n.p.

76 *Meble z importu cieszą się powodzeniem* [Imported Furniture Is Popular], in: *Głos Pracy*, 1965-08-06, *ibid.*

77 500 wzorów mebli [500 Furniture Designs], in: *Gazeta Handlowa*, 1961-09-22, *ibid.*

78 Zgromadzono wiele ciekawych wzorów (as in footnote 70).

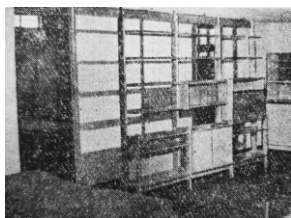


Fig. 9:

A model of Czechoslovakian furniture purchased as a prototype for the Polish furniture industry. 500 wzorów mebli (as in footnote 77)

By the 1970s, the gap between the Polish and Czechoslovak furniture industries had begun to narrow perceptibly. As one contemporary noted, “Poland had largely caught up with Czechoslovakia’s industrial level, mainly thanks to rapid industrialization and more dynamic industrial development in the post-war period.”⁷⁹ This convergence was also reflected in intensified technological exchange in furniture-making and increased Czechoslovak interest in Polish technologies, such as Polish-produced colored varnishes.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, importation of Czechoslovak furniture continued as a means to diversify the domestic interior furnishing market, which was still widely considered sub-par in the 1980s.⁸¹ By that time, exchange had become bilateral, with furniture products also being exported from Poland to Czechoslovakia.⁸²

6 Areas and Forms of Cooperation

Cooperation between the CORM and the VNP was formally initiated at a meeting of representatives from both institutions in Brno at the turn of June and July 1966, following an interministerial agreement between the two countries.⁸³ The meeting aimed to facilitate an exchange of experiences, familiarize both sides with ongoing research, and explore proposals for future document exchange and consultations. The arrangements recorded in the minutes from that meeting were approved by the Minister of Forestry and Wood Industry, Roman Gesing,

79 ALEKSANDER ROLEW: Integracyjne aspekty polsko-czechosłowackiej współpracy gospodarczej [Integrative Aspects of Polish–Czechoslovak Economic Cooperation], in: Sprawy międzynarodowe (1973), 3, press clipping, in: HI, sign. P 43: Tschechoslowakei, VIII, p. 21.

80 Uspesna spoluprace z polskymi podnikami [Successful Cooperation with Polish Companies], in: Rudé právo, 1974-10-25, press clipping, in: HI, sign. T 63280, n.p.

81 Rozmowy gospodarcze w Warszawie: Polska-Czechosłowacja [Economic Talks in Warsaw: Poland-Czechoslovakia], in: Trybuna Ludu, 1982-04-16, press clipping, in: HI, sign. P 43: Tschechoslowakei, XII, n.p.

82 Společnými silami [With Combined Forces], in: Pravda, 1980-01-31, ibid.

83 Designating specific cities where the most important institutions related to furniture-making would be located was a recurring practice in communist states, and the choices were usually based on the industrial tradition of the region and its production potential. Poznań’s equivalent furniture center in communist Czechoslovakia was Brno, a home to numerous institutions, whose names and business profiles corresponded to those in Poznań.

on 5 December 1966. However, it was not until the early 1970s that an official agreement was signed,⁸⁴ clearly defining the objectives and mechanisms of collaboration:

“The objectives of cooperation are: comprehensive development of the furniture industry of both countries in order to secure domestic and export demand; determination of scientific, technical and economic tasks in line with the development directions of the furniture industry of both countries; specialization, cooperation and industrial exchange with respect to products, materials and certain equipment; exchange of experience regarding investment issues in the furniture industry; improvement of workforce qualifications [...]. Cooperation [...] encompasses three main groups of issues: economic cooperation; scientific, technical and business cooperation; cooperation between furniture-making enterprises in the ČSSR and the PRL.”⁸⁵

The first consultation with experts from the ČSSR was scheduled for late October or early November 1967 at the initiative of the Czechoslovak side⁸⁶ and in accordance with an agenda they proposed.⁸⁷ The planned visit included efforts to establish cooperation with the Institutes of Wood Technology in Poznań and Warsaw and the Wood Industry Design Bureau in Warsaw, as well as a tour of the Wyszków Furniture Factories. These plans were soon disrupted,

84 Czechoslovakia was represented by officers from both VNP Brno and Výrobně-Hospodářská Jednotka Drevounia (in present-day Slovakia): Dohoda o přímé hospodářské a vědeckotechnické spolupráci mezi československým a polským nábytkářským průmyslem [Agreement on Direct Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation between the Czechoslovak and Polish Furniture Industries], 1972-12-14, in: Moravský zemský archiv v Brně (MZA) [Moravian Land Archives in Brno], sign. K 204.29, p. 16.

85 Porozumienie o bezpośredniej współpracy gospodarczej i naukowo-technicznej między przemysłem meblarskim CSRS reprezentowanym przez Naczelnego Dyrektora Nabytkářský Průmysl w Brnie, tow. Oldřicha Prusenovského, i Naczelnego Dyrektora Nabytkářský Průmysl w Žilinie, tow. inż. Juliusza Migala, a przemysłem meblarskim PRL reprezentowanym przez Naczelnego Dyrektora Zjednoczenia Przemysłu Meblarskiego w Poznaniu, tow. mgr inż. Henryka Królikowskiego [Agreement on Direct Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation between the Furniture Industry of ČSSR, represented by the Chief Director of the Furniture Industry in Brno, Comrade Oldřich Prusenovský, and the Chief Director of the Furniture Industry in Žilina, Comrade Eng. Juliusz Migala, and the Furniture Industry of the People's Republic of Poland, represented by the Chief Director of the Furniture Industry Association in Poznań, Comrade M.Sc. Eng. Henryk Królikowski], in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/150: Współpraca z zagranicą CSRS 1973 [International Cooperation ČSSR 1973], p. 15.

86 Marian Pabisia, Jaroslav Reiser: Protokół ze spotkania przedstawicieli: Ministerstva Spotřebního Průmyslu ČSR i Vývojového Nábytkářského Průmyslu (skr. VNP), Brno oraz Centralnego Ośrodka Rozwoju Meblarstwa (CORM), Poznań odbytego w Poznaniu i w przedsiębiorstwach w dniach 8–14 września 1966 roku [Minutes of the Meeting of Representatives of the Ministry of Consumer Industry of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Furniture Industry Development Institute (VNP), Brno, and the Central Furniture Development Center (CORM), Poznań, held in Poznań and in industrial enterprises from 8 to 14 September 1966], in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/149, p. 51.

87 Návrh program [Program Proposal], undated, *ibid.*, p. 71.

however, by the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which forced a suspension of further cooperation.⁸⁸ Attempts to restore coordination among socialist states were undertaken at an international conference of communist and workers' parties in June 1969.⁸⁹

The administrative transformation in Czechoslovakia in the wake of the events of 1968, i.e. the division of the country into the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic, resulted in organizational changes in the country's furniture industry. Czech furniture companies were subordinated to the newly-established General Directorate of the Furniture Industry (Generální Ředitelství Nábytkářského Průmyslu) in Brno. Meanwhile, in Slovakia, a new enterprise by the name of Drevounia—Wood and Furniture Industry (Drevounia—dreviarsky a nabytkarsky priemysel) was created with headquarters in Žilina.⁹⁰ At that time, approximately 75 furniture plants operated within six enterprises in the Czech Republic whereas in Slovakia there were approximately 25 factories grouped into four enterprises.⁹¹ Given that the Slovak institution did not carry out furniture-related research on a scale comparable to the Furniture Research and Development Center (Ośrodek Badawczo-Rozwojowy Meblarstwa, OBROM, earlier: CORM) in Poznań, it was decided that establishing cooperation between those units would serve no purpose. Drevounia nevertheless expressed interest in maintaining contact with the Polish ZPM,⁹² though without any intention to engage in scientific and research cooperation. Consequently, OBROM worked exclusively with the VNP as the principal institutional partner representing the Czechoslovak furniture industry.

As in the PRL, the so-called leading economic units of ČSSR were responsible for pursuing the national economic plan. Their responsibilities included ensuring:

“the long-term and effective development of the industry, [...] coordinating the work of subordinate enterprises and organizations in order to accomplish the aims of the state economic policy while pursuing its own goals and objectives, [...] and ensuring the optimal creation of resources for their own development and for the needs of the national economy.”⁹³

Decisions concerning furniture design were made by the technical director, assisted by the Artistic Council for Design. The Council was responsible for outlining development directions and design concepts for new products and, cru-

88 Ibid., p. 103.

89 This attempt was unsuccessful. The Soviet Union was unable to reach an agreement over the economic development model. Ibid., p. 105.

90 W. Czarnota: Sprawozdanie z pobytu służbowego w Czechosłowacji w dniach 4–13 lipca 1972 r. [Report on an Official Trip to Czechoslovakia from 4 to 13 July 1972], undated, in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/186: Sprawozdania z wyjazdów służbowych CSRS 1972–73 [Reports on Official Trips to ČSSR 1972–73], p. 1.

91 Ibid., p. 8.

92 Ibid., p. 7.

93 Ibid., p. 11.

cially, for defining production programs for the factories in terms of “purposefulness, functional properties, excellence of form and external aesthetics of furniture.”⁹⁴ Having familiarized themselves with the essentials of the furniture industry in Czechoslovakia, the Polish delegation identified several factors that significantly impacted production practices there. These included a high degree of product uniformity and design solutions closely aligned with the production capacity of individual plants, both of which contributed to streamlined manufacturing. Furniture aesthetics were further shaped by the exclusive use of natural veneer, matte finishes for items intended for the domestic market (with virtually no high-gloss products), a broad selection of modern fabrics, and imitation leather upholstery.⁹⁵ Observations of this kind were reported by both Polish and Czechoslovak specialists after each mutual visit. The resulting reports would also typically include recommendations, some of which were later adopted by competent directors, however most proposals concerned organizational practices rather than technology or design.

By the end of the 1960s, the Polish furniture industry remained somewhat smaller in scale than its Czechoslovak counterpart. In 1969, 41 factories were overseen by the Union of Furniture Industry, while an additional 14 enterprises belonged to the State Territorial Industry and the Labor Cooperative sector.⁹⁶ The main difference in organizational structure consisted in the fact that the factories in Czechoslovakia were grouped into six large-scale enterprises with several plants each, supervised by the General Directorate, whereas in Poland one central institution—ZPM—administered most of the country’s factories, with only the largest comprising more than one plant. Research and development structures were broadly similar in both countries, each relying on a single central institution serving the entire furniture sector.

In 1970, the Soviet Union announced the final international division of labor within Comecon under the so-called Comprehensive Program, framing cooperation between member states as a cornerstone of socialist economic integration.⁹⁷ Production specialization by country was linked to technological modernization. At the same time, it was argued that innovative, mechanized, high-volume production was not economically viable for smaller countries, so the decision was made to regionalize production within Comecon.⁹⁸ According to a Soviet economist, this socialist division of labor was to be based on several fundamental principles:

94 Ibid., p. 14.

95 Ibid., p. 20.

96 Kształtowanie się sytuacji ekonomicznej przedsiębiorstw meblarskich w latach 1961–1967 [The Shaping of the Economic Situation of Furniture Enterprises in the Years 1961–1967], in: APP, sign. 53/1256/0/5/111: Biuletyn Informacyjny Zjednoczenia Przemysłu Meblarskiego w Poznaniu [Information Bulletin of the Furniture Industry Association in Poznań] (1969), 2/3, pp. 2–3.

97 METCALF, p. 104.

98 Ibid., p. 58.

“Defining categories and a single nomenclature of goods, whose output is organized cooperatively; preparing proposals for expanding the product range; unifying standards and conditions of reciprocal deliveries; making full use of productive capacities; and coordinating scientific research, experimentation and design.”⁹⁹

Planned cooperation between the Polish and Czechoslovak furniture industries covered all of these areas. Accordingly, the general framework of bilateral cooperation closely mirrored the principles of labor division adopted within Comecon. Specific terms were formalized in an agreement on direct cooperation between the two research institutes, signed on 14 April 1973.¹⁰⁰ A variety of cooperation modalities were agreed at that time, from central to factory level. Partner enterprises were paired based on similar production profiles. As a result, the Bent Furniture Factory in Radomsko was partnered with TON, a plant in Bystřice pod Hostýnem; the Bent Furniture Factory in Jasienica with the Tatra Furniture factory in Pravenac; the Wyszków Furniture Factory with UP závody Rousínov; the Krakow Furniture Factory with the Nový Dom factory in Spišská Nová Ves, and the Wolsztyn Furniture Factory with Mier in Filakov.¹⁰¹ Besides the essential scientific-technical, economic, and organizational matters, the enterprises were expected to consult on the amenities available to the personnel, the activities of the works council and the workers' committee, labor directions, occupational health and safety and fire prevention.¹⁰² From 1973 onwards, the broad areas of cooperation formulated centrally in the mid-1960s were specified annually in detailed work plans. These plans outlined issues that were to be solved jointly, exchanges of completed research files, the sharing of scientific and technical data, and scheduled consultations.¹⁰³ In principle, factory-level cooperation could have been fruitful, since enterprises with similar production profiles could address shared problems in considerable

99 OLEG BOGOMOLOV: The International Socialist Division of Labor, in: *Voprosy Ekonomiki* (1960), 1, pp. 84–85, here p. 85.

100 Report on the course of consultations between representatives of the employees of OBROM and the employees of the Furniture Industry Development (VNP) in Brno, which took place on 22–24 May 1973 in Brno, in: MZA, sign. K 204.29, p. 161.

101 Protokół ze spotkania delegacji czeskosłowackiego przemysłu meblarskiego w “Zjednoczeniu Przemysłu Meblarskiego” w Poznaniu [Minutes from the Meeting of the Delegation of the Czechoslovak Furniture Industry at the “United Furniture Industry” in Poznań], 1972-12-15, in: MZA, sign. K 204.27: Zápis z porady vedení 1970–1973 [Minutes of the Management Meeting 1970–1973], p. 3.

102 M. SZANIAWSKI: Pismo kierowane do dyrektora ZPM Henryka Królikowskiego [Letter Addressed to the Director of the ZPM, Henryk Królikowski], 1968-02-13, in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/149, pp. 107–108.

103 Korespondencja dotycząca współpracy gospodarczej oraz naukowo-technicznej pomiędzy delegacjami Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej i Czechosłowacji z dnia 20–24 listopada 1973 r., pomiędzy OBROM Poznań a VNP Brno [Correspondence on Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation between the Delegations of the People's Republic of Poland and Czechoslovakia on 20–24 November 1973 between OBROM Poznań and VNP Brno], in: MZA, sign. K 204.29, p. 334.

depth. In practice, however, the results of such collaboration were rarely reflected in national-level documentation.

Joint research tasks were typically coordinated by a designated lead organization, often with the participation of a foreign expert assigned to the partner center for long-term consultation. However, the reports show that the contribution of such guests was often negligible.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, the mutually declared willingness to share documents did not always mean that all the information needed to apply a technology was indeed provided. In some instances, additional stipulations were introduced to protect the interests of the country in question, for example, VNP Brno agreed to provide technological designs for mechanized veneering and staining lines, but withheld detailed blueprints, thereby encouraging the purchase of Czechoslovak-manufactured machinery.¹⁰⁵ A proportion of the exchange was also concerned with accounting methods and work organization in the furniture industry.¹⁰⁶ To match Czechoslovak commitments, the Polish side was obliged to provide data and research results relating to various technical, technological,¹⁰⁷ economic and organizational issues.¹⁰⁸ In addition to the transfer of information, documents, and experience as part of the cooperation, the partners also agreed to a free exchange of publications, professional guidelines, instructions, and standards. It was further agreed that the partners would work concurrently on the mechanization of assembly work and subsequently share their respective achievements and relevant documentation. Although cooperation reports show that document exchange obligations were generally met, delays were not uncommon.¹⁰⁹

104 Ibid.

105 WŁADYSŁAW PSZONKA: Protokół z przebiegu praktyki pracowników z VNP–Brno w zakładach przemysłu meblarskiego w Polsce w dniach od 27.8. do 6.9.1974 r. [Protocol from the Course of the Practical Placement of VNP–Brno Employees in Furniture Industry Plants in Poland, from 27 August to 6 September 1974], in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/153: Współpraca z zagranicą CSRS VNP i OBROM 1974 [Cooperation with Foreign Countries VNP and the Furniture Research and Development Center ČSSR], p. 37.

106 Such as automated administration using AKTIMA alphanumeric machines: Porozumienie w sprawie bezpośredniej współpracy gospodarczej i naukowo-technicznej między przemysłem meblarskim CSRS i PRL, 14.12.1972 r. [Agreement on Direct Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation between the Furniture Industries of the ČSSR and PRL, Poznań, 1972-12-14], in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/150, p. 17.

107 E.g., the use of melamine-finished fibreboards in the manufacture of kitchens (Funder system) with grained surfaces (Steinman system), possibly Burkle in furniture production, a pass-through machine for fibreboard wetting, properties of particle and pressed boards and their use in furniture production, mechanical edge lacquering, production lines for polishing furniture parts, experimental methods and standards for furniture testing, *ibid.*, p. 18.

108 Determination of optimal batch volumes, studies on the optimal extent of co-operative contacts in furniture production, studies on the optimal shift pattern in a specific plant under the assumption of progressive mechanization, *ibid.*, p. 19.

109 Analiza wartości w resorcie nadrzędnym i przemyśle drzewnym: Materiały ze spotkania Branżowej Rady Koordynacyjnej Polskiego Towarzystwa Ekonomicznego przy

Based on the surviving records, it appears that during the period covered by the cooperation reports between CORM/OBROM and VNP (1966–1975), all major issues concerning furniture production in Poland and Czechoslovakia were known to both sides. This conclusion, however, is at odds with contemporary remarks pointing to the “questionable effectiveness” of document exchange, particularly where competitive advantage was concerned.¹¹⁰ At the same time, it was noted that direct personal contact between experts in specific fields was the most effective form of cooperation.¹¹¹ Representatives of both institutions were expected to meet twice a year in Poland or Czechoslovakia, with itineraries that included visits to furniture factories. Additional expert consultations focused on specialized issues, and in 1974 a new form of cooperation was introduced in the form of long-term placements, during which delegates would work on selected issues, the results of which were intended for use by both partners.¹¹² One of the primary aims for the Polish and Czechoslovak furniture industries was to jointly determine the scope of manufacturing standardization, as it was assumed that effective cooperation relied on uniform mechanical, physical, chemical, and functional properties of furniture.¹¹³ There were also plans for joint projects and “the development of framework guidelines for design [...] and the development of new types of selected furniture.”¹¹⁴ Despite

Ministerstwie Leśnictwa i Przemysłu Drzewnego, odbytego w dniu 19 czerwca 1973 r. w Zielonogórskiej Fabryce Mebli [Value Analysis in the Leading Ministry and Wood Industry: Materials of the Meeting of the Branch Coordination Council of the Polish Economic Society in the Ministry of Forestry and Wood Industry on 19 June 1973 in Zielonogórska Fabryka Mebli], in: MZA, sign. K 204.29, p. 447.

110 Sprawozdanie o efektywności (as in footnote 66), p. 111.

111 Sprawozdanie dla Ministerstwa Leśnictwa i Przemysłu Drzewnego z dnia 29 marca 1968 r. dotyczące efektywności współpracy Centralnego Ośrodka Rozwojowego Meblarstwa w Poznaniu oraz Vývoj nábytkářského průmyslu v Brně w latach 1966–1967. [Report for the Ministry of Forestry and Wood Industry, 1968-03-29: On the Effectiveness of Cooperation between the Central Furniture Development Center in Poznań and Vývoj nábytkářského průmyslu in Brno in 1966–1967], *ibid.*, p. 109.

112 Protokoły rozmów pomiędzy kierownictwami VNP Brno i OBROM Poznań, przeprowadzonych w Poznaniu w dniach 19–23.11.1973 r. [Minutes of Discussions between the Managements of VNP Brno and OBROM Poznań, Held in Poznań on 19–23 November 1973], in: MZA, sign. K 204.29, p. 109.

113 Such arrangements were made during consultations in May 1974, as a follow-up to the meeting of the Polish-Czechoslovak Standards Commission in October 1973 in Wrocław: Protokół konsultacji pomiędzy Czechosłowackim Zjednoczeniem Przemysłu Meblarskiego w Brnie a Ośrodkiem Badawczo-Rozwojowym Meblarstwa, Poznań, 22–24.05.1974 [Minutes of Consultations between the Czechoslovak Furniture Industry Association in Brno and the Furniture Research and Development Center, Poznań, 22–24 May 1974], in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/194: Współpraca zagraniczna VNP z Ośrodkiem Badawczo-Rozwojowym Przemysłu Meblarskiego [Foreign Cooperation between UNP and OBROM], p. 11.

114 Ramowy program współpracy naukowo-technicznej na lata 1976–1980 pomiędzy VNP Brno a OBROM Poznań [Framework Program for Scientific and Technical Coopera-

these plans, existing documentation does not indicate that any common standards for furniture production were ever introduced.

The several-year gap in cooperation records between the initial establishment of contacts and the signing of the formal agreement was most likely the result of the political crisis triggered by the attack of the Warsaw Pact troops (including Poland) on Czechoslovakia. After a lengthy hiatus, a Polish delegation visited Czechoslovakia¹¹⁵ in April 1973, with the aim of signing a long-term agreement on direct industrial cooperation.¹¹⁶ During this visit, the delegation participated in the international conference INTAPO 73 entitled “New Directions in Upholstered Furniture Production,” which was accompanied by a small exhibition featuring two items produced in Poland. One of those was a prototype of the KAL shell armchair by the Poznań-based designer Aleksander Kuczma, notable for its use of leatherette upholstery. Another highlight of the visit was a tour of the Brno furniture fair, summarized succinctly in the official report:

“The furniture exhibition was visited. Foreign companies from Finland, Yugoslavia, the GDR, Bulgaria, the USSR (very modestly) and Poland also participated in the show. Nothing particularly noteworthy was observed. Furniture intended for the Swedish market was very similar to our products. A trend towards system furniture was noted, with a predominance of white and light (matte) colors and upholstery fabrics of higher quality than ours. The use of plastics was limited (e.g. injection-molded drawers).”¹¹⁷

Similar visits—often including furniture exhibitions, trade fairs and factories tours—were organized in subsequent years and invariably culminated in reports. Exposure to each other’s furniture production methods, finished designs and manufacturing technology was undoubtedly an important source of inspiration for Polish and Czechoslovak designers. At the same time, designers from both countries also visited furniture fairs on either side of the Iron Curtain, which may have exerted an equally significant influence on their later work.

In the months that followed, cooperation intensified and its scope expanded. The second half of 1973 saw the first commercial proposal between the Unions, concerning the sale of a ČSSR-made machine for coating upholstery padding.¹¹⁸ In September the following year, it was proposed that the trade unions at VNP and OBROM also collaborate, with the aim of “deepening contacts, improving friendly relations between the staff and enabling mutual use of re-

tion in the Years 1976–1980 between VNP Brno and OBROM Poznań], 1975, in: MZA, sign. K 204.29, p. 455.

115 Apart from the courtesy inauguration meeting in July 1966.

116 Sprawozdanie z wyjazdu służbowego do Czechosłowacji, 11.–14.04.1973 [Report from an Official Business Trip to Czechoslovakia, 11–14 April 1973], 1973, in: APP, sign. 53/3200/01.7/150, p. 33.

117 Ibid., p. 35.

118 Ibid., p. 71.

creational facilities.”¹¹⁹ That year, too, a two-person VNP delegation was hosted for a twelve-day placement focusing on furniture transport.¹²⁰ Specifically, the consultations concerned standardized packaging and securing container shipments of furniture to the USSR. Poland and Czechoslovakia also held conferences on furniture production, to which the partner institutions were invited. While most sessions focused on technological issues¹²¹ and work organization,¹²² some—such as the 3rd National Conference entitled “Design and Industrial Development: Furniture and Household Culture,” held in May 1974¹²³—prioritized design.

7 Plastics

The use of plastics in furniture manufacturing posed a significant challenge to industries across all Comecon member states. The issue was considered so important that, from the outset, it was addressed in a coordinated manner, beginning with a preliminary assessment of the problem. One of the earliest stages of such cooperation was a conference of furniture industry representatives of the “people’s democracies,” held in Brno in 1963.¹²⁴ During the conference, participants discussed the possibility of specialization in manufacturing plastic furniture components, and examined the prospects for their use on an industrial scale. At that time, however, Eastern European factories were not yet capable of manufacturing seating furniture made entirely of plastic. Instead, plastic technologies were primarily used to produce synthetic varnishes, quick-drying adhesives and small furniture components, such as legs and drawer in-

119 Protokół ze spotkania pomiędzy VNP Brno a OBROM w Poznaniu, 25.–28.09.1974 [Minutes of the Meeting between UNP Brno and OBROM in Poznań, 25–28 September 1974], in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/154, p. 2.

120 Paletyzacja, konteneryzacja i formowanie jednostek ładunkowych na przykładzie zakładów produkcyjnych w Słupsku, Wyszku, Koszalinie i Radomsku [Palletization, Containerization, Assembling Freight Units, Using the Example of Production Plants in Słupsk, Wyszku, Koszalin, and Radomsko], in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/153, p. 9.

121 E.g. the National Conference on Adhesives and Bonding in the Furniture Industry “ADHEKO,” February 1974; 2nd National Conference with International Participation on the Application of Synthetic Materials in Furniture Production “INTERMOPLAST”; Expert Seminar of Toolmakers; Application of CT Tools in the Woodworking Industry; State Specialist Conference on Surface Treatment in Furniture Production “MOFINIŚ,” October 1974; a summary of the events of VNP Brno in 1974 can be found in: MZA, sign. K 204.29, p. 379.

122 E.g. a scientific session entitled “Noise Elimination during Wood-Based Material Processing,” June 1974, *ibid.*

123 *Ibid.*

124 Meble “made in RWPG” będą nowocześniejsze [Furniture “Made in Comecon” Will Be More Modern], in: *Głos Pracy*, 1963-05-21, press clipping, in: HI, sign. P 63281, n.p.

serts.¹²⁵ In the 1970s, cooperation between Poland and Czechoslovakia in this area become more focused and concrete. After a visit of Polish experts to Brno in June 1974, requests were made for consultations on the “molding of furniture fittings from flexible polyurethane foam,”¹²⁶ along with an exchange of documentation related to stress tests of furniture made from expanded polystyrene and rigid polyurethane. A simultaneous visit of Czech experts to Poland likewise centered on the application of new materials, particularly plastic furniture and upholstered furniture, with an emphasis on design and production technology.¹²⁷

The following year, during a consultation in Poznań,¹²⁸ Polish experts presented methods for making gypsum models of armchair shells, techniques for designing and manufacturing furniture parts from fibre glass-reinforced polyesters, as well as production of armchair shells from rigid PUR (polyurethane) foam at the Lubuskie Furniture Factory in Świebodzin. At the Brno International Trade Fair in September 1974, exhibitors from the local light industry sector showcased injection molding machinery for the production of thermoplastic components; however, no corresponding molds for polyurethane foam products were exhibited.¹²⁹ In the course of subsequent consultations, the Czechoslovak side offered to provide a gypsum model of a seat, which the Polish partners were to use as the basis for developing technological and struc-

125 Ibid.

126 Współpraca z Czechosłowacją—plan współpracy naukowo-technicznej na rok 1975 [Cooperation with Czechoslovakia—Plan for Scientific and Technical Cooperation for 1975], 1974, in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/152, p. 6.

127 Ibid., p. 8.

128 The subjects discussed included the technique and methods of designing and producing molds for the manufacture of PUR rigid foam seat shells as well as methodology and research directions in that field. Protokół konsultacji pomiędzy VNP Brno a Ośrodkiem Badawczo-Rozwojowym Meblarstwa w Poznaniu, 22.09.1975–26.09.1975 [Minutes of Consultations between VNP Brno and the Furniture Research and Development Center in Poznań, 22–26 September 1975], in: APP, ref. no. 53/3200/0/1.7/156: Współpraca pomiędzy VNP a Ośrodkiem Badawczo-Rozwojowym Przemysłu Meblarskiego [Cooperation between VNP and the Furniture Research and Development Center], p. 1.

129 Sprawozdanie z wyjazdu służbowego o charakterze techniczno-szkoleniowym na Międzynarodowe Targi Brneńskie w Czechosłowacji, 11.09.1974–15.09.1974. [Reports on a Technical and Training Service Trip to the Brno International Fair, 11–15 September 1974 in Czechoslovakia], 1974, in: APP, sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/192, p. 2.

tural blueprints for a rigid PUR foam armchair shell.¹³⁰ Such components were produced by OBROM and delivered to Czechoslovak partners.¹³¹

The intensive exchange of findings from research and experiences relating to plastic furniture manufacturing, frequent bilateral consultations,¹³² as well as joint development of seat structure and technology¹³³ suggest that visual and technological parallels in furniture design between Poland and Czechoslovakia may be most clearly identified in this particular area of production.

In the second half of the 1970s, the scope of cooperation expanded further to include consultations on computing technology in furniture production and other organizational matters.¹³⁴ Alongside department-level exchanges, the directors of OBROM Poznań and VNP Brno met periodically to review the progress of cooperation, plan future initiatives, and discuss ministerial guidelines from both countries. One report from such a meeting in 1975 mentions a planned organization called INTERMEBEL, whose establishment was linked to proposals for the design of new furniture types and equipment modernization.¹³⁵ These initiatives, however, appear to have been abandoned later that year.

130 As a non-cash consideration, OBROM employees had the opportunity to become acquainted with PVC drawer production technology using the “Schock” method during a return visit to Czechoslovakia in December that year. This method consists in injecting molten plastic into a mold maintained at a lower temperature, resulting in the rapid cooling of the material layer adjacent to the mold walls. The Polish delegation was hosted again on 1–5 December 1975, when they were introduced to the “technology, equipment, materials, organization and economics of operating a varnishing line using UV light to cure coatings,” in: sign. 53/3200/0/1.7/156, pp. 18–19.

131 Protokół z rozmów pomiędzy kierownictwem VNP Brno a kierownictwem OBROM Poznań, przeprowadzonych w Poznaniu w dniach 07.–10.07.1975 [Minutes of the Talks between the VNP Brno Management and the OBROM Poznań Management on 7–10 July 1975 in Poznań], in: MZA, sign. K 204.29, p. 630.

132 Protokół konsultacji przeprowadzonych w Poznaniu w dniach 22.09.1975–26.09.1975 pomiędzy VNP Brno a OBROM Poznań [Minutes of the Consultations Held on 22–26 September 1975 in Poznań between VNP Brno and OBROM Poznań], *ibid.*, p. 601.

133 *Ibid.*, p. 602.

134 For instance, Poles coming to Czechoslovakia could find out about the system of operational control of production processes in the ČSSR furniture industry, production management by means of a productograph at Vimprek (a plant belonging to the Jitona enterprise), as well as principles of workstation streamlining at the enterprises of the Ministry of Forestry and Wood Industry. Protokół przebiegu konsultacji pomiędzy przedstawicielami pracowników OBROM z Poznania a pracownikami VNP w Brnie, przeprowadzonych w Brnie w dniach 22.–24.05.1973 [Minutes of the Course of Consultations between Representatives of OBROM Employees from Poznań and VNP Employees in Brno, Held on 22–24 May 1973 in Brno, *ibid.*, p. 156.

135 Protokół rozmów pomiędzy kierownictwem VNP Brno a kierownictwem OBROM Poznań, przeprowadzonych w Poznaniu w dniach 07.07.1975–10.07.1975 [Minutes of the Talks between the VNP Brno Management and the OBROM Poznań Management on 7–10 July 1975 in Poznań], *ibid.*, p. 633.

8 The End of Cooperation within Comecon

Political fluctuations during the last decade before the collapse of the communist system caused the terms of cooperation within Comecon to change quite rapidly. The unsustainable debt incurred by many of the satellite states through imports of advanced Western technologies in the 1970s brought about an economic downturn early on in the following decade.¹³⁶ Once again, these problems were to be addressed through increased cooperation within Comecon, but the implementation of the new resolutions was hampered by further major political events on the international scene, including the emergence of Solidarity and the introduction of martial law in Poland. A plan for enhanced political and economic cooperation between the satellite countries was outlined by Mikhail Gorbachev only in June 1984, during a session of the Comecon Council, but it ultimately came to nothing, as it failed to receive the approval of all members states.¹³⁷

The difficult political and economic situation of the entire Eastern Bloc affected relations among its individual members. The 1980s are in fact considered the most difficult in terms of foreign policy in the entire history of the People's Republic of Poland, a condition that was also evident in relations along the Warsaw–Prague axis.¹³⁸ Strained relations manifested, for instance, in the propaganda narrative of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which “presented the economic situation in Poland as catastrophic and, at the same time, emphasized the threats to economic cooperation between the two countries and warned that Poles may buy up goods on ČSSR territory.”¹³⁹ Affecting Eastern Europe as a whole, as well as individual countries, all these factors undermined the cooperation between the Polish and Czechoslovak furniture industries, which gradually abated in the late 1970s and came to an end in the early 1980s. In the 1980s, the frequency of mutual visits and cross-border contacts within the Eastern Bloc decreased considerably compared with the previous decade. In an effort to repay foreign debts, the countries of Eastern Europe were forced to reduce imports, which contributed to a decline in public satisfaction. In the aftermath of the political revolutions of 1989, the role of the state apparatus in the economy began to systematically diminish, losing its primacy for the first time since the establishment of Comecon in 1949.¹⁴⁰

136 METCALF, p. 120.

137 Rejected by the GDR, Romania, and Vietnam, *ibid.*, p. 121.

138 ANNA SZCZEPAŃSKA: Oficjalne relacje polsko-czechosłowackie w latach 1980–1989 w świetle Ambasady PRL w Pradze [Official Polish–Czechoslovak Relations in the Years 1980–1989 in the Light of the Embassy of the Polish People's Republic in Prague], in: *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski* 25 (54) (2010), 4, pp. 67–82, here p. 67.

139 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

140 METCALF, p. 121.

10 Conclusions

Due to similar political, economic, and social circumstances, Poland and Czechoslovakia adopted comparable strategies in design and the structure of the furniture industry. At the same time, the socialist system imposed administrative and economic restrictions that affected quality and limited the creative freedom of designers. The history of furniture-making in both countries between 1945 and 1989 demonstrates analogous processes of transformation within the framework of planned economy, as well as efforts to accomplish similar development goals. These processes ultimately yielded a relatively uniform heritage of design and furniture manufacturing in Central and Eastern Europe, reflecting the prevailing social and economic realities.

In furniture-making, the earliest—and in fact essential—cooperation between Poland and Czechoslovakia involved the exchange of commodities, coordinated by the Ministries of Internal Trade. This cooperation was part of a broader practice of importing and exporting consumer goods between the Comecon countries, following a shift in political priorities in the socialist world. The new course, initiated in the USSR by Khrushchev¹⁴¹ and later spreading to other satellite states of the Soviet Union, placed emphasis on improving citizens' standard of living, which translated into greater demand for everyday goods. In addition to clothing, footwear, and textiles, furniture accounted for a significant proportion of trade within the so-called Eastern Bloc countries from the 1960s onwards. These goods were intended to broaden the range available on the domestic markets and satisfy the diverse needs of consumers more effectively. Cooperation in the field of consumer goods thus constituted an element of a broader strategy to modernize the socialist model of everyday life.

Source analysis indicates that cooperation focused primarily on organizational and technological issues, such as furniture transport and packaging (palletization, containerization, heat-shrinkable film), plant modernization, working conditions, wood joinery technologies, surface finishing methods, and the use of various adhesives and binders. Other major areas of interest included upholstered furniture, ergonomics, and the functionality of residential interior furnishings. Concerns of this kind may have manifested themselves in similarities of formal solutions, even though the technological arrangements themselves—such as those related to packaging—were not directly relevant to the design phase.

It should also be noted that cooperation between the furniture industries of Poland and Czechoslovakia evolved considerably over time. In the first decades after World War II, it was asymmetrical, reflecting a clear disparity in technological development and manufacturing quality. With its superior industrial base and higher standard of living, Czechoslovakia acted as a supplier of technological and design models that the Polish industry initially imitated, for

141 ERIK RADISCH: *Der Rat für Gegenseitige Wirtschaftshilfe als Konsensimperium* (1949–1971), Stuttgart 2022, p. 345.

example, by copying designs from catalogues or importing ready-made furniture. It was not until the early 1970s, with the accelerated industrialization of the PRL, that these differences began to gradually disappear, enabling a more balanced technological and commercial exchange.

The absence of jointly developed furniture designs does not imply that mutual contacts had no influence on the convergence of production. Study visits, participation in trade fairs and factory tours enabled Poles and Czechoslovaks to become acquainted with one another's manufacturing processes, which fostered the exchange of design inspirations. Uniformity in that regard should be understood as an indirect result of being part of the Comecon rather than as an explicit goal of cooperation. In practice, both countries sought to expand their market offerings, as evidenced by the exchange and import of finished products. Furthermore, documents from the Ministry of Internal Trade demonstrate that the 1960s and 1970s—the decades during which cooperation between the furniture industries of both countries began—were also a period when both actively sought inspiration in Western concepts and incorporated these into domestic designs. The adoption and adaptation of foreign formal solutions therefore played an important role in the development of the furniture industry in both countries.

Although cooperation between the furniture industries of Poland and Czechoslovakia was formally limited and relatively short-lived, the convergence of political, economic and technological factors in both countries naturally led to similarities in production and manufacturing processes. While cooperative initiatives focused primarily on organization and technology, with design playing a secondary role, joint research, consultations, and study visits nonetheless encouraged the application of comparable technical, material and formal solutions. Shared interest in furniture functionality, new technologies in upholstered furniture and ergonomics, as well as the use of similar machinery, influenced the design process and ultimately resulted in a convergence of furniture styles and aesthetics on both sides of the border.

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