

## Farewell to Minister Mieczysław Zajfryd (1922–2020)

On the last day of July 2020, Minister Mieczysław Zajfryd passed away: one of the last great men of transport, a quiet yet efficient politician, but most of all a wonderful person and a role model for many generations of railway workers to emulate. It is difficult to find words that would properly describe, even in part, his achievements and his virtues. St. Don Bosco once said: “At the moment of death, we reap the fruits of what we have sown in our life.” His sowing was plentiful and the fruit magnificent. The Minister’s achievements were based on faithfulness to the path he had chosen, on hard work, and on iron determination.

He started to work on the railways in Brest, aged less than 18, in 1940—first as a laborer and then as a warehouse worker. At the same time, he developed his general and professional knowledge, which resulted in consecutive promotions. Between 1945 and 1952, he worked as a dispatcher at Ozorków Station, then in Kutno, and, finally, as the head of a department in the Regional Directorate of State Railways in Kraków. In 1953, he was moved to work for the central administration authorities of the Polish State Railways, where he continued his career. In 1958, the Minister of Transport promoted him to the position of the director of the Central Board for the Management of Railway Traffic.

Between 1965 and 1969, he served as an undersecretary of state at the Ministry of Transport. In September 1969, the lower house of the Polish Parliament appointed him as the Minister of Transport, a position he held until March 1976 and from December 1977 to October 1981. He worked under five Prime Ministers, from Józef Cyrankiewicz to Wojciech Jaruzelski. During the interruption in his time as a minister, he worked as a deputy to the permanent representative of the government of Poland at the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in Moscow.

This is just a formal description of the Minister’s professional career. His achievements are much more important, as they have a lasting place in the history of railways, remaining forever symbols of a great effort of man’s mind and hands in the process of building and modernizing railroads.

Undoubtedly, the greatest success of Minister Zajfryd was the initiation and organization of the construction of the Central Railway Line that covers a distance of 224 km. It was one of Europe’s first high-speed railway lines (200–250 km/h) and in fact still remains the only such line in Poland. Initially, the line was used by cargo trains; passenger trains were introduced in 1984. Today, the Central Railway Line handles mainly passenger transport.

Another major railway project M. Zajfryd greatly contributed to was the Broad Gauge Metallurgy Line (originally called the Metalworks/Sulphur Line), with a length of nearly 395 km. It was constructed between 1976 and 1979 and is Europe’s westernmost railway line with a track gauge of 1,520 mm. Today, it is one of the most profitable railway lines in the Polish railway network. Since there is more and more traffic on the Silk Road, its role will most likely grow even more.

The Minister’s other achievements in the area of railways should also be mentioned, such as the construction of Exit VIII from the Silesian region or the railway ring in southern Silesia. He also made great contributions to the modernization of rolling stock and the improvements in transport processes. These actions allowed an unprecedented increase in passenger and cargo transport via railways.

However, the Minister did not overlook other areas. This is confirmed in particular by two examples. Example one. Railway workers pay great attention to tradition and history. The first independent railway museum was

established in 1927 by the then Minister of Transport, Paweł Romocki. War damage and subsequent difficulties meant the facility functioned poorly, which culminated in its closure in 1953. By a decision of Minister Zajfryd, the Railway Museum was reopened in 1972 and has remained in the same location ever since. Example two. The level of general education of railway workers used to leave a lot to be desired. The Minister encouraged them to increase their qualifications, for instance by means of funding scholarships, strengthening vocational training centers, and popularizing professional literature. In close cooperation with the Transport and Communication Publishing House, five specialist monthlies were published.

The riches of a man are a smile, a friendly gesture, and a kind word. In addition to these virtues, Minister Zajfryd was incredibly tactful, cultured, and polite, always using reason to convince others, not insults. In spite of his extensive knowledge and rare skills, he was an unassuming man, sensitive to human misery, although, at the same time, he never tolerated mediocrity and putting things off for later.

Dearest Minister! Thank you for all that you have done for the Polish state, for our railways, and for each of us personally. Who we are is in many ways thanks to your influence. You will stay forever in our minds and in our hearts.

Farewell Minister, farewell Teacher, farewell Friend. Rest in peace. In honor of his memory.

*Adam Wielądek*