

Gustav Tönnies and sons

builders of Ljubljana

Authors: Milanka and Stojan Jakopič

Many of the buildings built by the Tönnies company in Ljubljana have become city monuments, which mark the prosperity of main squares and streets. At the same time, they are a permanent memorial to the visionary builder and successful industrialist Gustav Tönnies and his descendants.

Janez Koželj, Ljubljana city architect

Railways

After the decision to take up new roots in Carniola, Gustav Tönnies continued to work on the construction of facilities along the Vienna–Trieste railway line, which reached Celje in 1847, Ljubljana in 1849 and Trieste in 1857. In the latter, he built warehouses in the port and participated in the construction of the railway station. From 1870 to 1872 he was involved in construction of the Ljubljana–Tarvisio railway.

Quarries

In 1855 Tönnies took over the quarries in Nabrežina, Repentabor and Momjan to provide building materials for the construction of viaducts, bridges and buildings. He enabled the industrial production of stone by modernising production with appropriate machines and lifts. This, together with new transport links by rail, sea routes through the port of Trieste, the opening of the Suez Canal and the development of shipping, enabled the products of these largest quarries in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to penetrate wide markets in Europe, Asia and America. During this time, three to five thousand workers from the surrounding and more remote areas came to work in the quarries every day.

Industry

New transport links stimulated the development of the economy, industry and trade. Gustav Tönnies used his knowledge and ability of integrating in the construction of industrial facilities in the construction of a sugar factory, a brickyard, a textile spinning mill, a coffee substitute factory, a brewery, a tobacco factory and a printing house.

More about Tönnies' work can be seen in the Bistra Technical Museum of Slovenia, the Završnica Hydro Power Plant Museum, the Domžale Straw Hats Museum, and the Litostroj Power company.

In 1872 Tönnies founded the company Machine Factories and Foundries in Ljubljana. The company represents pioneering work in the field of mechanical engineering and in 65 years of operation laid the foundations for modern production of the wood industry, machine industry and energy sector in Slovenia. In 1884, his son Wilhelm took over management of the factory.

The Završnica hydro power plant (HPP) was the first regional power plant. This was the beginning of electrification of the network in Slovenia. The Pelton turbines at the Završnica HPP were manufactured in Machine Factories and Foundries.

A special hydraulic press was made for the straw hats industry, which enabled production in 25 factories, with branches in almost all major cities in Europe and in New York.

Tönnies' sons met Albin Belar while at the Realka secondary school in Ljubljana. They later assisted him financially in setting up the first earthquake laboratory in this part of Europe in 1898. According to the plans of Professor Belar, a world-renowned expert, seismographs – devices that detect earthquakes – were manufactured in Machine Factories and Foundries.

Heritage of the Töennies family

In the century from 1844 onwards, Gustav Tönnies and his family made an important contribution to the development of Ljubljana, the region of Carniola and neighbouring countries.

Gustav Tönnies was born in 1814 in Stralsund, a Hanseatic town on the Baltic Sea, where his father Balthasar – a ship carpenter – moved from the southern Swedish province of Småland. After studying carpentry in Hamburg, Gustav embarked on a long study tour of the German states, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Russia and Austria. In 1844, while living in Graz, he was invited to Ljubljana to build the roof of the Kolizej, the then largest building in this part of Europe. Following successful completion of the project, the then mayor of Ljubljana, Janez Nepomuk Hradetsky, invited Gustav to become a city carpenter.

Gustav saw a business opportunity in the railway connection between Vienna and the sea, which brought progress to these places. Based on the knowledge and experience gained in the most developed European countries at the time, he accepted an offer and started a new life in his new homeland. He married Amalija Malovrh, with whom he had nine children.

Gustav founded a carpentry, parquetry and locksmithing company, and continued construction work. The company initially had twelve employees. After establishing the Brickyard company and Machine Factories and Foundries, he employed more than six hundred workers, mostly locals. He paid them well and took care of their education, so he was very popular among the people.

In 1883, on the 600th anniversary of the annexation of Carniola to the Austrian monarchy, the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph visited the company Machine Factories and Foundries during his visit to Ljubljana. Gustav Tönnies was awarded the Golden cross with a crown.

Gustav Tönnies died in 1886. His sons, Gustav, Adolf and Rudolf, continued the construction side of the business, while Wilhelm took over the mechanical engineering business and Emil took over the commercial and stonemasonry business.

The century of the Tönnies family came to an end due to the turbulent economic and social development, wars, the emergence of new states and the economic crisis. This also brought

changes to the family. With changes in ownership, new technological developments and nationalisations, the Tönnies family was almost forgotten.

The Slovenian Swedish Society has revived the memory of the heritage of this family, which, according to previous research, greatly exceeded local boundaries and gained global proportions. The City of Ljubljana named the park by the Koseški bajer pond after Gustav Tönnies. Following the Tönnies Symposium, a collection of papers titled *The Century of the Tönnies Family* was published in a book of the same title. Experts are expected to continue their work on the study of the heritage of the Tönnies family, both locally and elsewhere in the world.

A century of the Tönnies family

Urban construction is a group creation. It is the result of the aspirations of visionaries, the skills of planners, the expectations of clients and, above all, the skills of builders. Another, even more important, role of builders is to construct monumental buildings that shape the main squares and streets of the city, giving the public space a special character and visibility. The community and the collective memory of the city is linked to them. Milestones in the development of culture and construction technology of a certain time are defined based on how monumental buildings are conceived and designed and how perfectly they are built. City builders are the ones who actually build. The larger and more demanding the projects are that they carry out, the more decisive their role is in urban development.

The contribution of the Tönnies is particularly valuable, exceptional and invaluable in this respect. Most of the buildings the company constructed were not only architecturally exceptional but also in terms of construction. The company constructed public buildings, residential palaces and industrial buildings, which were the most sophisticated, beautiful and largest buildings in the city at that time.

In the period before the Ljubljana earthquake, using German capital, the Tönnies built an opera house, a bank palace and bourgeois residential buildings for the Carniolan Building Society in the prestigious quarter of the building islands between today's Slovenska cesta and Tivoli Park, which became the beginning of a modern city. The cosmopolitan character of Ljubljana is still felt most strongly in this part of the city.

The company's ability to provide superior workmanship was reflected in the implementation of finishing works on the design of façade in various historical styles and especially in the decoration of Art Nouveau buildings. As part of the reconstruction of the city after the earthquake, the Tönnies company also built famous buildings on the eastern side of Slovenska cesta. Around Miklošič Park (at that time Slovenski park), an elegant Art Nouveau quarter of uniform style and modern technology was created according to the urban plans of the architect Maks Fabiani. This was a joint project of the economic and cultural elite of the then Slovenian bourgeoisie, which needed capable Slavic architects and builders for its project. It is in Art Nouveau architecture, with its fantasy plant forms and rich façade decoration, that the creators took advantage of the possibility of mass industrial production and the use of new raw materials, iron, steel, glass and reinforced concrete. Tests of new forms of spaces,

dynamic compositions, constructions and forms of Art Nouveau decoration presented both technological and craft challenges to the builders of that time.

The development of the Tönnies family business has been linked to the development of the city since its inception. Just as the city grew and modernised, so did the construction company. At the right time it was ready to introduce an advanced, industrial way of building, supported by an integrated production chain – from the raw material to the building element and its installation. Over time, by systematically integrating the extraction of raw materials and the production of semi-finished products and construction elements, the construction company mastered the entire integrated construction process, supervised the implementation and provided a guarantee of quality. With its development and innovations, on the one hand the company raised the technological and craft level of implementation, while on the other it encouraged the development of competition in Slovenian construction. Many of the buildings built by the Tönnies in Ljubljana have become city monuments commemorating the city's main squares and streets during the heyday. At the same time, these buildings are a lasting memorial to the visionary builder and successful industrialist Gustav Tönnies and his sons.

Chronology of the Töennies family

- 1814 Gustav Tönnies is born in Stralsund
- 1824 Gustav Tönnies attends carpentry school in Hamburg
- 1829 Amalija Malovrh is born to the innkeeper Marko Malovrh
- 1847 Opening of the Vienna–Ljubljana railway
- 1849 Gustav Tönnies marries Amalija Malovrh
- 1851 A son, Gustav, is born
- 1855 A son, Adolf, is born
- 1857 A son, Wilhelm Gustav, is born
- 1863 A son, Emil, is born
- 1869 A son, Rudolf, is born
- 1870 Opening on the Ljubljana–Tarvisio (Rodolfina) railway
- 1886 Gustav Tönnies dies
- 1895 Earthquake in Ljubljana
- 1900 Adolf Tönnies dies
- 1906 Amalija Tönnies dies
- 1922 Gustav Tönnies Jr. dies
- 1925 Wilhelm Tönnies dies
- 1929 Rudolf Tönnies dies; the construction companies are run by his son Emil and Rudolf's daughter Frigga
- 1941 Emil Tönnies dies; Frigga takes over management of the Tönnies' factories until the end of the World War II