

“HELLO! KHERSON’S SPEAKING!”

Rendered by Yaroslav Stavytsky (February – April 2018)

Self-edited

This phrase was first said by a telephone operator more than 100 years ago. Telephone service amazed the people of Kherson with the possibility of handling business without leaving their desks or using courier services. You could easily make an appointment or wish your relatives happy holidays. It began somewhat like this...

In 1894, the City Hall sent a request to the government to install a telephone network in Kherson. On December 7, 1895, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Horemykin approved the “Terms of Using Public Telephone Network Installed and Maintained by the Government”. A year later, the central telephone exchange was installed. The telephone network was held by Odessa Post and Telegraph authorities, which is why the central telephone exchange was placed in the Kherson Post and Telegraph building (now liaison office № 25, Teatralna Street, 54), with Adolf Redlich as the head of it.

The first head of Kherson telephone network was the mechanical assistant and telegraph technician Fedir Yermakov. The telephone exchange was equipped with the facilities produced by the American company “Bell” and the Swedish company “Ericsson”. At that time, it could provide for 500 callers. The station was maintained by 7 people 24 hours a day. *“When the telephone exchange was opened, the staff was: 2 women as telephone operators, who made 35 rubles/month, a third operator who made 22 rubles/month, a supervisor who made the same amount, and two workers who made 15 rubles/month. The mechanic who was also the head of the network worked for 69 rubles/month”*, reported the local newspaper “The Yug” (“The South”).

Overhead lines were the first telephone lines installed in Kherson. They were made of uninsulated steel wire (which was later changed to copper). Only a year after the telephone was introduced, the length of lines in Kherson was already 35 km! With

the growth of the number of callers, the number of new lines and leaning posts grew too. *“The telephone agency, using the permit that has been given to them, continues to cut down every tree that stands in the way of their telephone lines”*, said a disgruntled reporter of the newspaper “The Yug” in the issue from July 27th, 1899. And even though the lines were changed with overhead ones in 1913, the aesthetic of the streets did not improve.

Using a telephone was not cheap. First and foremost, the subscribers were divided into two groups depending on the distance from where their telephones were placed to the telephone station: up to two kilometers and more. The set price was 75 rubles/year. Also, the lines that were connected to the house of a caller and the telephones with other equipment were the property of the state. What is more, telephone lines were very sensitive to rainfall which increased induction; as a result, it was often possible to hear people’s conversations on other lines.

Yet telephones became popular with the people of Kherson very fast. By 1899 the number of callers had reached 200. *“Only two years have passed, and everyone can see that telephone business is developing, making people’s lives a lot more convenient. It also brings a lot of funds to the treasury”*, reported “The Yug” on December 17th, 1898 (net gain was roughly 10 thousand rubles/year). There were also the first complaints from the people of Kherson regarding delays in installing new telephones (the only mechanic wasn’t able to do it alone), and about long waits for the telephone operators to answer. Therefore, the head of the station Albert Žamett (1904) increased the staff to 11 people. Within a short time, the City Hall was showered with hundreds of requests from the neighboring settlements to connect them with the regional centre. However, this required not only the change of equipment, but also more space for it. By the decision of City Council, a two-story house in Erdeliev Street (now Staroobriadnytska Street) was rented from the Catholic community. In this place “Central City Telephone Exchange” and “Long-Distance Telephone Exchange” were located until 1941. The latter worked in two directions: Kherson – Mykolaiv - Odesa and Kherson – Beryslav - Kakhovka. In March 1944, the fascists blew up the building while retreating. Today on this place – Staroobriadnytska Street 38, – there is an apartment building.

In 1913, radical changes took place in the equipment of Kherson's telephone exchange. City Council, upon looking at the state of the city's telephone exchange, requested the mayor Mykola Blazhkov to take measures to improve its work. The Russian Post Office, which also shared in the telephone network maintenance, allocated 25 thousand rubles for the reconstruction of Kherson's telephone network.

The very first Kherson residents who heard the ringing of telephones in their houses were the Nobel brothers, who sold ceramics, and the wood trader Grinseid. Naturally, the Kherson Zemstvo (elective provincial council) and the regional authorities, as well as the military units located in Kherson, were equipped with telephones. Nine "Government-issue" telephones, which were purchased with city budget resources, were installed in four police and two fire departments, in the flat of the Commander-in-Chief, in the Police headquarters, and in the office of the Coastal warden.

Thus, the first steps were taken to usher in the era of telephone penetration in Kherson.

Based on the article «Алло! Херсон на проводе!» taken from the book «Херсон: вчера и сегодня» by Aleksandr Skorokhod. (Скоруход Александр. Херсон: вчера и сегодня. Сборник очерков – Херсон: Надднепряночка, 2008. – 252с., ил.)

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