

Jadwiga Rafałowiczówna, *A z Warszawy nowiny te... Listy do Elżbiety Sieniawskiej z lat 1710–1720 (And Here Are the News From Warsaw... Letters to Elżbieta Sieniawska From the Years 1710–1720)*, edited and prefaced by Bożena Popiołek, Kraków 2000, Wyd. Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej, 281 pp., index of persons.

The letters are extremely interesting, it is a real pleasure to read them. Rafałowiczówna, a lay resident of the Warsaw convent of the Nuns of the Visitation who wrote regularly to her patroness and friend, Lady Elżbieta Sieniawska, the wife of Hetman Sieniawski, was undoubtedly a woman of vast interests, an intelligent female, curious about the world; she had a sharp eye and frequently a biting pen. The 185 letters published by Bożena Popiołek paint an interesting panorama of events in Warsaw and in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the years 1710–1720. It is a great pity that the volume does not include Rafałowiczówna's earlier letters from the years 1695–1701 sent by her to the starost Henryk Denhoff, but since Popiołek found them in the Central Archives of Historical Records, there is reason to hope that she will publish them in the future. For persons interested in the Saxon period, Rafałowiczówna's correspondence is a genuine treasure casting a new light on that epoch which is unjustly regarded exclusively as a period of ignorance and coarseness. The authoress of the letters was an enlightened woman, interested in everything: in diseases, births, weddings and funerals in the families of her acquaintances and friends, in gossip concerning both political and social life, in the arrivals of famous personages in Warsaw, in information on extraordinary events: wonderful rescues and miraculous recoveries, disasters (such as fires). Even such sensational news as the baptism of a black woman in the Holy Cross Church, is mentioned in one of her letters (p. 99). Religious celebrations and carnival revelries (pp. 80–85, 120–121, 174) are described side by side with information on the rise in crime in Warsaw (the number of burglaries, robberies and thefts; even the Nuns of the Visitation were robbed of their sheets which were drying in the garden). Rafałowiczówna is not blind to the poverty and cruel spectacles in the streets of Warsaw; her descriptions of public executions are often tinged with a macabre humour (the story of a hangman

who refused to hang his confrere). We also read about passages of military troops, contributions, the spread of plague and the flight of town-dwellers from the epidemic-threatened city to the countryside (pp. 9–10). Thanks to the authoress' painstaking descriptions we become better acquainted with the mentality of the people of that period, with their ways of thinking, their fears and joys, with the realities of their daily life. The letters of Rafałowiczówna change our opinions of some problems. They refute the stereotyped belief that woman in old Poland was a narrow-minded person interested only in her nearest relations, that she was a person who could not participate in public life, and was indifferent to public events. Rafałowiczówna herself and many women mentioned by her do not fit to this pattern. The letters also disprove the stereotyped view of a female convent as an island isolated from the world, with its members dedicated to piety only and having nothing to do with the matters of this world. Rafałowiczówna was not a nun, but the convent of the Nuns of the Visitation always had a dozen or so lay residents. A lively social life was going on at the convent's gate, and many persons, not only women, seem to have been meeting there to settle various things. The nuns were of necessity drawn into this hubbub; hence their rather ineffective attempts to impose some restrictions on the lay residents, described in one of the letters (p. 61). But visits and conversations could not be ruled out. It seems that the convent was an excellent place of contacts and observation. The women living there — from sick persons requiring a shorter or longer period of care and nursing, to girls who took refuge here to escape an unwanted marriage (p. 72) — contacted their family and friends, settled various matters, conveyed information, in short, took an active part in life. And the nuns were not devoid of natural human traits; sometimes they were even vain and envious, as is shown in the story about rivalry between the Bernardine nuns and the Nuns of the Visitation to attract French preachers and arrange in their church French sermons (p. 78).

Like a mirror, the letters reflect the mentality of the epoch and its negative as well as positive characteristics. In Rafałowiczówna's letters, xenophobia and anti-Semitism are intertwined with unexaggerated religiousness and patriotism. A strong sense of family ties and group bonds, sensitivity and empathy are accompanied by realism in the assessment of the situation and by common sense. What is most striking is the people's curiosity about the world, their thirst for information. It is surprising how quickly and efficiently all information was circulated, how greatly it was appreciated, and what efforts were made to pass it further on. As regards this aspect, Popiołek rightly puts Rafałowiczówna's letters in the context of their time (*Preface*, pp. I–III), discussing the circulation of information in Old Polish culture and quoting the results of other authors' research. It is a pity that she has omitted such important studies as those by K. Zawaadzki and J. Pirożyński. Popiołek's reflections on hand-written literature in Old Poland should have included also an important aspect of this issue, namely the weakness of towns and the town-dwellers in the old Commonwealth, which resulted in the underdevelopment of printing (few printing-houses, small printing capacity and a narrow market, a result of the low level of literacy; in this respect we were far behind France, Germany, and England, in practice behind the whole of Western Europe).

The advantage of the book, which is a source publication, is that the letters are furnished with notes identifying the persons mentioned in them. Most of the identifications are correct, but some persons have not been fully identified. Piotr Raocourt, a Warsaw banker of French descent, was a well known Warsaw patrician (1694–1768), a town's councillor, owner of a magnificent Rococo palace in Miodowa Street, erected by famous Fontana; he was granted ennoblement in 1764 (see his biography by M. Karpńska in the *Polish Biographical Dictionary*, vol. XXXI/2, № 129, 1988). He married the daughter of Franciszek Witthof, not Wittow or Witos, as is wrongly stated on pp. 175, 176, 227, 229; i.e. he did not marry Miss Witosówna or Wittowówna (cf. pp. 175–177, 227, 228) but Miss Witthofówna. The Witthofs were a well known patrician family in Warsaw; at the

beginning of the 18th century they owned a splendid palace in Długa Street (cf. *Warszawa w latach 1526–1795 (Warsaw in 1526–1795)*, ed. A. Zahorski, Warszawa 1984, pp. 199–200). Some doubts arouse when one reads Popiołek's reflections on the author of the letters, Jadwiga Rafałowiczówna. Popiołek suggests that she was probably a noblewoman from Mazovia or the Cracow region, because she knew so much about the local families there (*Preface*, p. X). Information about Rafałowiczówna can be found in Warsaw's municipal books. The Rafałowiczes were a well known polonised Armenian merchant family which settled in Warsaw in the 17th century. Volume XXX/3 № 126, 1987 of the *Polish Biographical Dictionary* contains several biographies of the family members, among them those of Andrzej (1736–1823) and his brother Stanisław (1747–first half of the 19th century) by K. Ziencowska. Andrzej was an important merchant (member of the Warsaw merchants' confraternity), a banker and large-scale businessman, and also a member of Warsaw's municipal authorities. Rafałowiczówna's Warsaw roots would explain her good knowledge of relations in the city, her ability to settle Sieniawska's financial and economic matters, her wealth (rich gifts to the convent) and her familiarity with Warsaw society.

The book is equipped with a very useful index of persons. It is a pity that it has no index of places. It would be worth while to explain to whom belonged the village of Morzyczyno (p. 10) where Rafałowiczówna took refuge during the plague. This might throw some additional light on her origin, her family ties and her ties with friends.

The author says on p. XX (*Preface*) that the manuscript which served her as the base of her publication contains 286 letters; she admits that she has left out one letter which was "inessential from the point of view of our publication" (?) and has added one letter, written by Marcybela Ciszewska to Denhoff. But the publication contains 186 letters (including the one written by Ciszewska). What is more. When checking in the Czartoryski Library, I found out that the manuscript used as the base of the book contains 192 letters. The discrepancy is alarming.

During the last few years Bożena Popiołek has presented us with two books dealing with the history of women in the Saxon period: the biography of Elżbieta Sieniawska née Lubomirska (*Królowa bez korony (The Uncrowned Queen)*, Kraków 1996) and now the collection of J. Rafałowiczówna's letters. Both books contain a great deal of important information and unknown facts from the field of gender studies. We hope that Bożena Popiołek will continue her useful research in this direction.

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