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## THE PRE-HISTORY OF THE POLISH INTELLIGENTSIA

The history of the intelligentsia as a social group can be started in the proverbial times of ancient Greece, but in Poland its history goes back to the 10th century, when a group of people living by their wits, a group consisting mostly of clergymen, appeared in this country. It is doubtful, however, whether the whole clergy of those times, court scribes, let alone itinerant jugglers and minstrels, can be regarded as representatives of the medieval 'intelligentsia'. Let us leave the problem to the medievalists to solve; I would only like to recall that the Polish translation of Jacques Le Goff's book *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge* has, with the author's consent, been given the title *Inteligencja wieków średnich* [The Intelligentsia in the Middle Ages]. In the 16th and 17th centuries this was already a group so distinct that researchers did not have any doubts whether to regard members of the Bar, clergymen of medium and higher rank, school teachers, and especially professors of Cracow University as members of the intelligentsia. This is what they are called by authors of serious studies on Cracow University, such as Henryk Barycz. Seventy-five years ago Marek Wajsblum frequently used the name 'professional intelligentsia' in his extremely interesting study *Nędze złotego wieku* [The Miseries of the Golden Age], even though it is obvious that every educated Pole who lived by his pen would have been greatly surprised to hear that he was a member of the intelligentsia. But after all, even Molière's M. Jourdain did not realize that he had been

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<sup>1</sup> This essay appeared in 1930 in the periodical *1930*, of which only one issue was published. It was reprinted as: Marek Wajsblum, 'Nędze złotego wieku', *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce*, xlvii (2003), 191-4.

speaking prose all his life. Marcin Kromer, Stanislaus Hosius and, especially, Piotr Skarga would have been no less amazed to hear that they were the leading champions of the Counter-Reformation in Poland.

When after reading present-day articles on the state of science and the situation of scholars, I switched to statements made by our Renaissance and Baroque ancestors on a similar subject, I had the impression that the discussions held in the 21st century are a continuation of disputes held centuries ago, the only difference being that such terms as 'budget' (and even more so GDP) were unknown in the 16th and 17th centuries, and patronage was expected of kings and magnates and not of states or rich businessmen. But as in the old days, sponsorship is also now frequently awaited in vain.

Let us see what Henryk Barycz wrote about the financing of science in the 16th century, a century which was to become called the 'Golden Age' by later generations:

What seriously hampered and jeopardized a normal development of science in Poland was the paucity and scarcity of auxiliary instruments, which were becoming increasingly indispensable for research. The poor equipment of libraries (especially public and semi-public ones), the lack of astronomical posts, botanical gardens, anatomical laboratories, museum collections and geometrical instruments, the primitive hospitals, unsuitable for scientific observation, all this contributed to the sad picture of the conditions under which Polish scientists had to work. Because of this specific situation, outstanding scientists had to resort to their own efforts and their own ingenuity in order to create proper conditions for research.<sup>2</sup>

The Jagiellonian monarchy, and after them the elected kings, did not show much interest in the financial situation of Cracow University and its professors. Similar attitudes were held by many magnates, who often had more expensive full blood horses in their stables than books in their libraries. Bequests to the university and its professors were an exception in the last wills of powerful lords. Neither the nobility nor the upper echelons of the clergy

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<sup>2</sup> Henryk Barycz, *Dzieje nauki w Polsce w epoce Odrodzenie* (Warszawa, 1957), 66; *idem*, 'Barok', in Bogdan Suchodolski (ed.), *Historia nauki polskiej*, ii: *Barok i Oświecenie* (Wrocław, 1970), 36.

thought that the University's existence was something indispensable. This went so far that in the middle of the 16th century plans were put forward to turn the University 'into a general education secondary school and transfer university studies abroad, to Italy and France'.<sup>3</sup>

What did it matter that in 1543 King Sigismund I the Old, promised ennoblement to the plebeian professors of Cracow University in reward for twenty years of their work, if this privilege, failing to gain parliamentary sanction and legal force, was never put into effect? The attitude of the owners of heraldic devices to intellectuals of plebeian background was aptly and concisely described by Mikołaj Rej, who said that Cracow University professors did not teach well, but well enough, given the salaries which they received.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the present-day antagonism between private and state universities had its counterpart in the Polish Jesuits' mostly unsuccessful efforts to set up their own school of higher learning to compete with the University. The efforts were undertaken in the 1570s but reached their climax half a century later, leading to sharp written polemics and even to street riots and clashes. In its struggle against the dangerous rival, Cracow University sought support from the royal court and even from the Pope, who in 1634 finally ordered the Jesuits to close down their college which had existed in Cracow for ten years. The dreams that it would be turned into an Academy did not materialize, neither did the Jesuits' intention to establish a similar academy in Poznań (from the remnants of the old Lubrański Academy).<sup>4</sup>

The Jesuits kept appealing to the nobility, explaining that the plebeians at the University were undermining the privileges of the noble estate, preventing noblemen from sending their children to a school of their choice, that is the Jesuit one. 'This subtle slavery is even harder to bear since it is imposed on the nobility by persons not belonging to the noble estate', they wrote. In turn, the defenders of the University pointed to its ancient privileges and services to the State and the Church (the Jesuits

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 67.

<sup>4</sup> Janusz Tazbir, 'Jezuici między Rzeczpospolitą a Rzymem', in Irena Koberdowa and Janusz Tazbir (eds.), *Szkice z dziejów papieżstwa* (Warszawa, 1989), 115.

also questioned these, recalling that many heretics had graduated from the University). But the noblemen's dietines backed the University, sparing no expenses. Powerful enemies of the Jesuit Order, such as the talented publicist Jan Szczęsny Herburt, and Prince Jerzy Zbaraski, well known for his animosity against the Order, also took the University's side.

The failure of the Jesuits' efforts can hardly be regarded as a triumph of progress, for the Cracow Alma Mater was experiencing a period of stagnation, while the Jesuits had at their disposal many highly qualified lecturers from various European countries. The establishment of a rival school would have probably helped the University, for what it defended was a medieval teaching monopoly. This was the opinion held by Aleksander Brückner, although he did not express it in a definite way. At first he wrote that 'science was probably the loser' since a Jesuit school in Cracow might, by competing with the University, have reached the level of the Order's academies in Ingolstadt or Gratz. He added, however, that the loss was probably not so great for the Order's schools confined themselves to theology and philosophy. Anyhow, 'the University, having used up its resources on this wrong issue, fell asleep and lay in a deep sleep until Father Hugo Kollataj woke it up a century and a half later'.<sup>5</sup>

I cannot refrain from quoting here the apt words of Janina Bieniarzówna (d. 1997), professor of Cracow University, a Cracovian to the core. She said that Cracow was rightly called 'the cradle of sciences' in the 17th century for all sciences were asleep there. As has been said above, partly to blame were the low salaries of Cracow professors who therefore did their best to supplement their earnings, even at the cost of lowering the level of teaching.<sup>6</sup> However, as regards the professions, only lawyers were often accused of taking bribes.

The opinions of satirists and preachers were frequently exaggerated. Of course, there were corrupt judges but the Bench also included many serious persons who observed the principles of justice. But there was a way of getting around this difficulty for

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<sup>5</sup> Aleksander Brückner, *Dzieje kultury polskiej*, 4 vols. (Kraków, 1931), ii, 522-3.

<sup>6</sup> However, in the 17th century medical practice and astrology ensured material independence and even affluence; cf. Barycz, *Dzieje nauki w Polsce*, 82.

one could always summon dishonest, paid witnesses.<sup>7</sup> Waław Potocki (ca 1621–96), a judge but also an eminent poet, wrote:

Paid witnesses will say all you want them to say  
If you remunerate them with a good pay.<sup>8</sup>

It is obvious that the lower a man's place on the social ladder, the easier it was to bribe him. A magnate was usually given several thousand Polish zlotys or oranges on a plate of pure gold. Jędrzej Kitowicz, author of an excellent picture of Poland under Augustus III, says that a drink in a nearby 'pub' was probably enough for a ragamuffin. In consequence, practically every lost case was thought to be the result of a corrupt judge's partiality.

The adversaries of Jews, who accused believers in the Mosaic faith of ritual murders, asserted that the perpetrators of ritual crimes frequently enjoyed impunity because they bribed Tribunal judges, especially barristers. There was a special name in Polish for a bribe from a Jew, *reboch*. In Rzewuski's *Pamiętki Soplicy* [The Memoirs of Soplica] Prince Karol Radziwiłł asks a dignitary who judged a case brought by the Nowogródek commune, a man he disliked: 'Tell the truth, dear lord, how much was the *reboch* you took from the Jews?'

Like the complaints about the corruption of judges and witnesses, complaints about the overproduction of intelligentsia are not the products of our times. The overabundance of young people without means existed in the 16th and 17th centuries, the only difference being that in those days the young people usually did not have any education. Secondly, they came, to a large extent, from the nobility, which meant that they had high ambitions which exceeded their parents' financial possibilities. Years ago, Władysław Czapliński, a historian specializing in the history of early modern Poland, wrote about 'the excessive growth of the nobility in Poland' which, let us add, coincided with the development of picaresque literature. It was said in *Votum szlachcica polskiego* [Votum of a Polish Nobleman], a booklet published in 1596, that

<sup>7</sup> Jędrzej Kitowicz, *Opis obyczajów za panowania Augusta III* (Warszawa, 1985), 120.

<sup>8</sup> Jan S. Bystroń, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce. Wiek XVI–XVIII*, 4th edn (Warszawa, 1994), 313.

<sup>9</sup> Henryk Rzewuski, *Pamiętki Soplicy*, ed. Zofia Lewinówna (Warszawa, 1961), 72.

'there are enough people in Poland, so many in fact that people of noble blood have to go to Turkey in search of employment, and they are either ill-treated there or become Turkicized'. 'So many exceptional sons have been born in noblemen's houses', goes on the anonymous writer, 'that they have not got enough to live on ... the lords do not want to engage them, you must beg them to employ you and say prayers'. On the basis of the results of demographic research, Czapliński said that since 'the natural increase was higher among the noblemen than among the peasants and even townsmen' (and this was an increase of people with rather high aspirations), and since the younger generation did not move on to trade or well-paid office jobs, for not many existed in towns, 'we must come to the conclusion that it was the nobility that was the hardest hit by this high natural increase'.<sup>10</sup> This subject was developed and described in detail by Antoni Maćzak, who in his outline of the history of Polish society from the 16th to the 18th century pointed out that it was the lack of a strong army 'which would have absorbed noblemen's sons', the weak development of the civil service, in comparison with the states of absolute rule, and the low level of urbanization that made it impossible or difficult for young people to switch over from the noble estate to some other occupation.<sup>11</sup>

Service at the courts of great lords, in magnates' private armies or participation in the colonization of Ukraine or in false Dmitri ventures offered a partial solution. But all this made it necessary to leave Lesser Poland (including Cracow), which thanks to the University was really a large centre of employment-seeking 'intelligentsia', not only of plebeian origin. A careful study of the biographies of 17th century Arian intellectuals born into the houses of noblemen of moderate means in Lesser Poland will show that most of them (including Andrzej Wiszowaty and Samuel Przykowski) looked for employment at both Calvinist and Catholic magnates' courts in Lithuania or Ukraine. The centres of political, cultural and economic life moved clearly to the east and north, one of the symptoms being the actual transfer of the country's capital at that time (1611). Lesser Poland, including

<sup>10</sup> Władysław Czapliński, *O Polsce siedemnastowiecznej. Problemy i sprawy* (Warszawa, 1966), 168–9 and 172.

<sup>11</sup> Ireneusz Ilnatowicz, Antoni Maćzak, Benedykt Zientara, Janusz Żarnowski, *Spoleczeństwo polskie od X do XX wieku* (Warszawa, 2005), 225.

Cracow, lost its dominant position in the multiethnic Commonwealth. The consequent moods of frustration are reflected also in picaresque literature written by persons who, in another system of socio-political relations, like the one which existed under the Habsburgs or the Bourbons, could have joined the power elite or live in plenty by serving it.

It was not only the University itself, but also the lack of prospects in Lesser Poland and the excessive congregation there of ambitious noblemen endowed with a literary passion (and a certain satirical talent) that contributed to the development of picaresque literature in Lesser Poland, a development which was accompanied by the growth of landowners' poetry. The former spoke about the lack of prospects in life or about the hardships one had to suffer on a badly paid post, the latter sang the joy of living on one's own plot of land. But land was possessed by a rather small (and constantly decreasing) percentage of the nobility. The rest had to content themselves with a small part of the legacy left by a poor parent.

Writers of the Baroque period boasted of the lack of emigration to other countries from Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They failed to see that many Polish craftsmen, artists, church scribes and poets were settling deep in Russia. Particularly welcomed were organists and stringed instruments makers, for the art of building musical instruments was on a much higher level in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth than in the country bordering it in the East. Architects and painters were also appreciated; their works adorned not only the tsar's court but also boyars' houses. In time, the ancestors of these Polish immigrants lost their national identity and sometimes even increased the ranks of Poland's enemies, to recall the works of Gogol or Dostoievsky, who presented Polish noblemen and their contemporaries in dark colours. The search for work in the East was a phenomenon which at the end of the 19th century was called 'emigration of talents' and would now be called 'brain drain'. Whereas emigration to Russia assumed mass proportions, only single individuals held a chair at a Western university (mainly in Germany and Switzerland).<sup>12</sup>

In search of a class genealogy, People's Poland turned to picaresque literature which was believed to have fanned the fire

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Barycz, 'Barok', 50 ff.

of anti-feudal rebellion. However, doubts about the correctness of this statement will arise if we thoroughly analyze picaresque literature. For if this literature really reflected the protest of intellectuals who could not find appropriate well-paid jobs that would have suited their aspirations and education, why did this process coincide with a flourishing development of elementary education, which occurred in the 16th and the first half of the 17th century, and why did it lapse into silence in the middle of the 17th century, when elementary education began to decline, and when the possibility of getting a job shrank rapidly? What were the reasons why teachers, those 'unfinished students', church servants, clergymen and minstrels stopped their fruitful literary activity and did not respond to a rapid deterioration of their living conditions by a satirical attack or a complaint? After all, the same people without the disguise of a pseudonym wrote panegyrics which reached the limits of obsequiousness and mendacity, and their dependence on their patrons assumed 'forms which would now be regarded as shameful'.<sup>13</sup>

Did the group of creators of picaresque literature really consist only of 'plebeians, petty bourgeois, peasants, court servants or even people outside the pale of feudal society, such as rascals and beggars?'.<sup>14</sup> They could just as well be young people of the noble estate in whose view even the best equipped parish school was beneath their dignity and aspirations, people who regarded the post of a clergyman or a village organist as a blind alley. This would explain the contempt and dislike of physical work which is always present in satirical works. ('I was not taught at school how to spread dung'.) What is more important, it was in fact their social declaration.

Besides, lecturing at a university did not increase the plebeian intellectuals' prestige in society either. In the 17th century even the most erudite plebeians were outside the pale of the nobility, a class which, however, included even manual servants who could boast of a coat of arms. This is why a servant in Poland was to a much lesser extent the target of attacks by satirists and comedy writers than in France or England, where people of that walk of

<sup>13</sup> Wajsblum, *Nędze złotego wieku*, 192.

<sup>14</sup> Stanisław Grzeszczuk, *Cyganeria sowizdrzalska. O staropolskiej literaturze plebejskiej z przełomu XVI i XVII wieku* (Kraków, 1980), 13. Cf. also Tazbir, 'Sowizdrzalskie zagadki', in *idem, Szlaki kultury polskiej* (Warszawa, 1986), 66 ff.



life were frequently plebeians. Physicians enjoyed a certain respect and some of them were even ennobled. But representatives of the legal profession were held in higher esteem, especially as solicitors and barristers, to say nothing of judges, came from the Polish nobility. The work of lawyers was indispensable for the functioning of the state machine, and so was the work of a paid, not a titular, official, though there was a gap between the secretary of the royal chancellery and an ordinary scribe. The work of a member of the Bar was thought to be suitable for a nobleman, and the nobility in turn added luster to the profession.

Conservative circles regarded the theatre as a source of evil; in the 17th century Joachim Jerlicz wrote in his diary that the sums spent on it are 'simply an offering to the accursed devil'. It would have been better to spend them on hospitals or churches.<sup>15</sup> There was a general contempt for actors, who before their death had to do penance for having practiced such a vile profession.

The average nobleman did not hold sculptors and painters in high esteem, save for such great artists as, for instance, Rubens. One gets the impression that this must have been due to the lack of appreciation of the visual arts. Sensitivity to architecture, perspective, colours and the play of light can be seen rather in landowners' poetry, which is full of admiration for the natural scenery, but not for paintings. If masters of the brush were ennobled because of their achievements in art, this was usually due to the initiative of the patrons, especially the royal court. The ennoblement of typographers and writers during the Renaissance (e.g. Szymon Szymonowicz) because of their services to national culture was something exceptional.

Our ancestors would be surprised to read that university professors rank first among all professions, that writers are held in high esteem, even worshipped, and that a man who for some time was an actor held the highest position in the Catholic Church. It seems, however, that attitude to science has in many respects remained unchanged, compared with the 17th century, and that the material situation of the intelligentsia has not improved much. This has been pointed out by Marek Wajsblum, unemployed for a considerable part of his life, who ended the article mentioned

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<sup>15</sup> Joachim Jerlicz, *Latopisiec albo kroniczka*, 2 vols. (Warszawa, 1853), ii, 175-6.

above with the words: 'The splendours of the Golden Age have overshadowed its tragedy: the tragedy of professional Polish intelligentsia. This tragedy took place not only in the 16th century; the misery it experienced during the Golden Age is but a fragment of the misery which Polish culture has been experiencing until the present day'.<sup>16</sup>

*(transl. Janina Dorosz)*

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<sup>16</sup> Wajsblum, *Nędze złotego wieku*, 194.