

*Andrzej Wyrobisz*

## SMALL TOWNS IN 16TH AND 17TH-CENTURY POLAND

The outline of Poland's urban network was shaped in the late Middle Ages. This is especially true of large towns whose number and distribution did not change in its essentials for the next several centuries, apart from a few exceptions; only the age of industrialisation and development of capitalism in Poland, i.e. the 19th and 20th centuries, brought changes into the pattern: the fall of many old, small and big towns, and the emergence and development of entirely new cities in connection with the advances of big industry. But in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries the urban network remained more or less the same, although the period was not one of utter stagnation for even then new towns were born, although not as many as in the preceding period. While on the territory of the Polish Crown, excluding Ruthenia, Pomerania and the lands annexed in 1569, i.e. only in Great Poland, Little Poland and Mazovia more than 500 towns were founded up to the end of the 15th century (102 in the 13th century, 211 in the 14th century, and 196 in the 15th century), the 16th century witnessed the emergence of 123 towns in those territories, and the 17th century only 46. This means that some 75 per cent of towns existing in those regions before the partitions were founded in the Middle Ages, and only 25 per cent in the modern times. Naturally, things differed in various regions of the country. For instance, in Great Poland only 18 per cent of pre-partition towns were founded after 1500,

while in Little Poland 28 per cent and in Mazovia 35 per cent ; for Podlasie the relevant figure is nearly 70 per cent of towns which received their charters only in the 16th and 17th centuries or even later.<sup>1</sup>

Among those towns founded and given charters in Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries the vast majority was made up of small towns. This is true both of private towns (owned by the gentry or the clergy) and the already dwindling number of royal boroughs. No new large cities were founded in that period. Apart from Zamość it would be difficult to find an example of the foundation of a big town or, Warsaw excluded, to point to the expansion of a formerly founded small town into a city. Thus, the 16th and 17th centuries in Poland could be called the age of small towns.

And herein lies a problem : is the fact that no new large cities emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries, and only small or, sometimes, medium towns were founded, to be considered the result or the symptom of the crisis of urban life in Poland, a crisis which made itself felt for the first time in the 16th century and which prevented the development of new major towns ? Should this phenomenon be considered a regular feature of Poland's economic, social and structural development, *viz.* an answer to the demand for such modest urban centres ? The fact that not only the newly-founded towns were small and remained small but that old ones did not develop into major centres might point to the crisis as the reason as well as does the fact of many failures in town-founding. On the other hand, the normalcy of the situation might be attested by the fact that no attempts were made at the time to found big towns, presumably because no need was felt for them while the addition to the existing urban network of small centres with determined economic, social, cultural and political functions may have been considered necessary. I point out this question as a desirable subject of future historical studies.

But before undertaking any such studies it is necessary to settle certain preliminaries, primarily concerning a more accurate

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the list of the number of town locations in my article : *Rola miast prywatnych w Polsce w XVI i XVII wieku* [The Role of Private Towns in Poland in the 16th and 17th Cent.], "Przegląd Historyczny," vol. LXV, 1974, No. 1, table 1.

definition of their subject. What is a "small" town? What are the criteria for determining "small", "medium" or "big" towns? The use of adjectives "small" or "big" as scientific terms suggests the acceptance of some quantitative criteria which are measurable and can be expressed in terms of statistics: for instance the population criterion which would distinguish between "small" and "big" towns according to the number of their inhabitants. This would be extremely convenient because of its clarity and precision. Unfortunately, as concerns old Polish towns we simply lack the sources for establishing the population of particular towns.<sup>2</sup> The information at our disposal is of a very general nature and based on estimates; although we have figures, well-grounded in sources, in respect of some towns yet because of their very scarcity they cannot be used for comparisons on a national or regional scale. Moreover, one should note that the population criterion, despite its assets, would not fill many requirements of the historians, for the number of inhabitants does not reflect all the aspects of the history of towns which are of interest to a student of the past. Apart from strictly demographic studies and certain quantitative aspects, the population figures are of interest to a historian only when they enable him to explain the relationships between the number of the inhabitants of towns and their social structure or their economic, cultural and other functions.

The area of a town could constitute a measurable criterion of its size: the area of the market place, the streets, the built-up area. But such a criterion is deceptive. Often townships of practically no economic importance and with a small population, definitely belonging to the group of small towns, had huge market places (such spatial concepts were quite frequent and, one might say, characteristic of towns measured out in the later part of the 16th and the early part of the 17th century, which presumably was due in a certain measure to the influence of the ideas of Renaissance town planners) and a very large area destined for building (not always used up in practice).

---

<sup>2</sup> I. Gieysztorowa, *Źródła i szacunki w badaniach osadnictwa i demografii Polski XVI i XVII w.* [*Sources and Estimates in Studies on the Settlement and Demography of Poland in the 16th and 17th Cent.*], "Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej," vol. X, 1962, No. 3/4, pp. 589-590, and literature quoted there.

But we have other criteria for the classification of towns according to their size. They are all the more valuable as they have not been introduced by historians but are to be found in sources. I have in mind the division of Polish towns into groups for tax purposes done in the 16th and 17th centuries. The first such classification was made as early as in the 15th century, in 1458, when the number of infantry to be provided for the Malbork expedition by the particular towns of Great Poland was being determined. The contingents were clearly worked out in accordance with the size and wealth of the towns.<sup>3</sup> The systematic division of towns into classes for tax purposes dates from the Act on the poll tax of 1520. This act distinguished four categories of towns. In the first called *civitates maiores* it classed only Cracow, Poznań and Lwów. The mayors of those cities paid a poll tax of 4 or 5 zl. each, the chief officers 3–5 zl. each, the assessors 2–4 zl each, the elders of guilds—12 grosz, rich merchants and clothmakers—3 zl., poorer burghers—1 zl., artisans—1–6 gr., other burghers—4 gr. In second category towns (*civitates et oppida secundi ordinis*) the mayors were to pay 15 gr. each, chief officers and assessors 4 gr. each, artisans 1/2–2 gr. each, burghers owning houses and holding municipal rights—4 gr., suburban dwellers and cottagers holders of municipal rights—2 gr., those lacking municipal rights—1 gr. In third category towns (*oppida habentia fora annua et septimanalia*) the mayors paid 8 gr., chief officers and assessors—2 gr., burghers—1 gr. In towns belonging to the fourth category (*oppida non habentes fora*) municipal officials paid 2 gr., all the others 1 gr.<sup>4</sup> We would apply the term “small town” only to the third and fourth categories although as far as the latter is concerned it is just possible that they may not have had a charter. Similar divisions were applied in later tax laws in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>5</sup> Though historians are justly sceptical of fiscal-type

<sup>3</sup> *Kodeks dyplomatyczny Wielkiej Polski [Great Poland's Diplomatic Code]*, ed. by E. Raczyński, No. 129. pp. 181–183. Cf. Z. Kulejewska-Topolska, *Oznaczenia i klasyfikacje miast w dawnej Polsce, XVI–XVIII w. [Markings and Classifications of Polish Towns in old Poland, 16th–18th Cent.]*, “Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne,” vol. VIII, 1956, No. 2, pp. 256–257.

<sup>4</sup> *Corpus Iuri Polonici*, vol. III, No. 241, pp. 591–602. Cf. Z. Kulejewska-Topolska, *op. cit.*, pp. 262–263.

<sup>5</sup> Z. Kulejewska-Topolska, *op. cit.*, pp. 263–264.

sources, yet the aforementioned classification of towns should not be entirely ignored. Taxation of particular groups of towns had to be related in some way to their size, economic potential and solvency, and thus should be of interest to a historian who tries to isolate the category of townships from the whole body of Polish towns. Contrary to some entrenched notions the gentry which had a decisive voice in matters of taxation and always tried to shift the tax burden onto other classes, did not do it thoughtlessly. It follows from the discussions at regional conventions that the gentry was perfectly aware of the fact that excessive taxation of towns might result in their insolvency and this in turn would affect the receipts of the treasury and in the long run cause the economic deterioration of towns and prevent their paying taxes at all.<sup>6</sup> Still, it is a fact that the fiscal classification of towns cannot fully satisfy a student: even if the size of the tax was suited to the town's paying capacity, the latter could have rested on various foundations such as hoarded resources, trading, manufacture, money-lending etc. So, other, more differentiated criteria of division must be looked for.

I have mentioned several times the structure and functions fulfilled by small towns as a subject research. I think that here, too, one might look for criteria distinguishing big and small towns. Did some structures and functions typical of small towns exist, differing from the structures and functions characteristic of big urban centres?

We know very little about the social structure of minor towns in pre-partition Poland for we do not have such sources as have for instance some Czech and Slovak towns.<sup>7</sup> But we know that a considerable percentage of population earning its living, either exclusively or partly, from farming was a characteristic feature of the socio-economic structure of Polish townships. True, there were towns which we would classify among the small ones, where

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Akta sejmikowe województwa krakowskiego* [Files of Cracow Voivodship's Conventions], vol. II, ed. by A. Przyboś, Wrocław 1955, p. 201.

<sup>7</sup> See A. G á c s o v á, *K sociálnej štruktúre východoslovenských miest v prvej polovici 16. stor.*, "Historický časopis," vol. XIII, 1965; F. K a v k a, *Majetkova, sociálni a triedni štruktúra českých měst v první polovině 16. století ve světle knih a rejstříků městské dávky*, "Sborník Historický," vol. VI, 1959; J. M a r e k, *Společenská štruktúra moravských královských měst v 15. a 16. století*, Praha 1965.

the number of craftsmen was quite high and which sometimes were even known for some specialised industry, but most often more than two-thirds of the population earned their living by farming. In my studies on the economy of some small towns I rated townships where one-third of the population was made up of craftsmen as relatively well "industrialised", capable of meeting the demand of the local market in industrial products.<sup>8</sup>

If the industrial functions of small towns could be ranked as a phenomenon of secondary economic importance because they could be easily replaced by village crafts or by the import of industrial products from abroad or from big towns, their trading functions were much more important by being specific and irreplaceable. I shall not discuss here the rare but nevertheless known facts of small-town merchants engaged in big trade,<sup>9</sup> because this rather reflected attempts at taking over some of the functions of big towns. But townships fulfilled specific commercial functions. Firstly, they played the important role of middlemen between the big trade conducted by large towns and individual producers or consumers. It is precisely through them that the purchase of home products for the big trade was done and it is through them that the distribution of commodities traded by the big merchants was effected. This is clearly shown not only in the trading contacts between small and big towns and the travels of merchants from large cities in order to conclude contracts and purchase goods,<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> A. Wyrobisz, *Ludność żydowska w Tartowie* [Jewish Population in Tartów], "Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego," 1974, No. 1(89), p. 5; idem, *Rola miast prywatnych...*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. the Bieniasz family at Solec on the Vistula. See A. Wyrobisz, *Handel w Solcu nad Wisłą do końca XVIII wieku* [Trade at Solec on the Vistula up to the End of the 18th Cent.], "Przegląd Historyczny," vol. LVII, 1966, No. 1, p. 43. New source mentions about the Bieniasz's trading activity have been found by H. Samsonowicz, Lublin Voivodship State Archives, *Advocatialia*, No. 3, year 1529 (Adam Bieniasz).

<sup>10</sup> J. Małecki, *Związki handlowe miast polskich z Gdańskiem w XVI i pierwszej połowie XVII wieku* [Trade Connections between Polish Towns and Gdańsk in the 16th Cent. and First Half of the 17th Cent.], Wrocław 1968; M. Bogucka, *Gdańsk jako ośrodek produkcyjny w XIV-XVII wieku* [Gdańsk as Production Centre in the 14th-17th Cent.], Warszawa 1962, p. 169 ff; idem, *Gdańskie kontrakty zbożowe w pierwszej połowie XVII w.* [Gdańsk Grain Contracts in the First Half of the 17th Cent.], "Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej," vol. XVII, 1969, No. 4, pp. 711-718; A. Chruszczewski, *Kupcy zbożowi i handel zbożem w Kazimierzu Dolnym w drugiej połowie XVI wieku* [Grain Merchants and Grain

but also in the time-tables of small-town fairs according to which these fairs were either held a few days ahead of, or a few days after city fairs; in this way the small-town fairs could be used for preparing big commercial gatherings or for making use of their effects.<sup>11</sup> Without those small fairs it would have been impossible to trade on a big scale, hence the expansion of the network of townships in 16th- and 17th-century Poland was of essential importance to the development of home trade. Secondly, the small towns were to serve the big trade and transport by providing the travelling merchants (and not only merchants) with food and lodgings, services, the hire of coaches and horses, provisions for the journey, etc.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, as J. Wyrozumski has justly pointed out, at fairs in small towns goods were exchanged not only between town and country but also between various rural producers. When in the 16th and even more so in the 17th century rural crafts were developing in Poland and reaching a certain degree of specialisation and marketing potential, such a goods exchange was of big economic importance. So, although the number of merchants in small towns was negligible, and the inhabitants, generally speaking, did not engage much in trading, the role of small towns in the functioning of trade was quite significant.

A specific function of small towns was their role as administrative and economic centres for big landed estates. Such a role was played primarily by private towns which were most often founded expressly for this purpose.<sup>13</sup> In connection with the re-grouping of large estates, which occurred in the 16th and 17th

---

*Trade at Kazimierz Dolny in the Second Half of the 16th Cent.*], "Roczniki Humanistyczne," vol. VI, 1958, No. 5, p. 132 ff; A. Chmiel, *Rzeźnicy krakowscy* [Cracow Butchers], Kraków 1930, pp. 113, 120.

<sup>11</sup> A. Wyrobisz, *Polityka Firlejów wobec miast w XVI wieku i założenie Janowca nad Wisłą* [Firlejs' Policy Towards Towns in the 16th Cent. and the Foundation of Janowiec on the Vistula], "Przegląd Historyczny," vol. LXI, 1970, No. 4, pp. 595-596; idem, *Rola miast prywatnych...*, p. 26; idem, *Handel w Solcu nad Wisłą...*, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> A. Wyrobisz, *Handel w Solcu nad Wisłą...*, p. 44; H. Łowmiański, "Wchody" miast litewskich ["Wchody" of Lithuanian Towns], "Ateneum Wileńskie," vol. I, 1923, p. 407; vol. II, 1924, pp. 17-18; S. Alexandrowicz, *Miasteczka Białorusi i Litwy jako ośrodki handlu w XVI i w 1 poł. XVII w.* [Byelorussian and Lithuanian Townships as Trading Centres in the 16th and First Half of 17th Cent.], "Rocznik Białostocki," vol. I, 1961, pp. 97-98.

<sup>13</sup> A. Wyrobisz, *Rola miast prywatnych...*, pp. 27, 28.

centuries, the emergence of new big demesnes, the process of concentration of property, particularly in the first half of the 17th century,<sup>14</sup> it became necessary to found new private towns as administrative and economic centres serving the landed estates. This was also connected with a tendency towards the self-sufficiency of big estates, towards their becoming economically a closed unit, and also with attempts at economic activation of landed property dating from the end of the 16th century. But similar functions were also fulfilled by royal boroughs in starosties (*starostwa* —royal estates allocated to the Court or granted to big nobles for life) with the difference that they were usually much older, dating from the Middle Ages, as the starosties most often formed around the already existing towns.

Another characteristic function of the townships was their serving as residences of big nobles. This applies to both private and starosty towns. A small town where the starost (head of starosty) or a big noble resided provided the economic facilities needed by their courts. This was quite an important function. At the end of the 16th and in the 17th centuries aristocratic courts in Poland numbered several hundred, sometimes several thousand persons ; sometimes the magnate's private army numbered a few thousand, while a banquet may have gathered as many as several hundred. A township, whose population may not have exceeded a few hundred, would, on such an occasion, be entirely taken up with providing services to the court, and based its existence on such services.<sup>15</sup>

There was yet another feature of the small towns : their cultural functions. Unfortunately, little is known about them. For a better knowledge of them it would be necessary to study both the part played by small-town communities in creating culture, in supplying new cultural values contributing to the sum total of national culture, and their position as recipients of Polish and European culture as well as of middlemen helping disseminate culture. This was not only a matter of primary and secondary

<sup>14</sup> For this question see A. Wyczański, *Polska Rzecz Pospolita szlachecką [Poland a Gentry Commonwealth]*, Warszawa 1965, pp. 207–208.

<sup>15</sup> A. Wyrobisz, *Rola miast prywatnych...*, p. 35 ; idem, *Les cours aristocratiques de Pologne aux XVI<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles et la consommation de biens non-agricoles*, in: *Domanda e consumi: livelli e strutture secoli XIII–XVIII. Atti della Sesta Settimana di Studio*, (under press).

schools (here it is worthwhile to recall the role of heretical schools founded in small towns) but also, and on a wider scale, of cultural life of the burghers, their intellectual level, their interests and intellectual horizons. There is a general feeling that since the 19th century a small town has become the synonym of backwardness and prejudices. Was it always the case? Where is the cause of such a negative opinion of small-town culture? Was the cultural level of inhabitants of small towns in Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries so different from the level of the rest of the middle classes? I have already said that we do not know much about these matters. There are many indications (as, e.g., the memoirs of burghers which have survived like the famous but still incompletely analysed *Dziejopis żywiecki* [*Historian of Żywiec*] by Andrzej Komoniecki), that the level of culture in 16th- and 17th-century small towns was not low at all. Perhaps a study of the cultural activity of guilds and religious brotherhoods in townships would be rewarding.<sup>16</sup> It is worth finding out whether the placing of the "Vision of St Theresa" by Procaccini, brought from Italy by Jerzy Radoszewski, castellan of Wieluń, in the collegiate church at Wieluń was a form of popularization of Italian painting in Poland by making it accessible to wide circles of the population.<sup>17</sup> The splendid stucco work in the church at Tarłów, the work of an unknown artist, is not the product of a local craftsman but was probably done by an outstanding artist from a big cultural centre.<sup>18</sup> Putting it in a small town for the public to see was a form of giving a small community a taste of great art. The engagement by great nobles of prominent architects for the building of palaces, churches and monasteries in townships contacted the inhabitants and the surrounding villages with big architecture. The placement of valuable works of art—paintings, sculptures, buildings—in small

<sup>16</sup> See H. Ruciński, *Bractwo literackie w Koprzywnicy jako obraz struktury społecznej miasteczka w latach 1694–1795* [*Literary Brotherhood at Koprzywnica as an Image of a Township's Social Structure in 1694–1795*], "Przegląd Historyczny," vol. LXV, No. 2, and literature quoted there.

<sup>17</sup> Z. Ciekliński, *Obraz "Wizja św. Teresy" z kolegiaty wieluńskiej i jego domniemany twórca G. C. Procaccini* ["*Vision of St Theresa*," *Painting in the Collegiate Church at Wieluń and Its Supposed Author, G. C. Procaccini*], "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki," vol. XXX, 1968, No. 2, pp. 244–245.

<sup>18</sup> *Katalog zabytków sztuki w Polsce* [*Catalogue of Monuments of Art in Poland*], vol. III, No. 2, Warszawa 1957, pp. 24–25; T. Dobrowolski, *Sztuka polska* [*Polish Art*], Kraków 1974, p. 404.

towns created conditions for their influence spreading over far wider and different social milieus than just the court elite and the communities in big cities. And there were also attempts at forming creative cultural centres in small towns by bringing interesting artists and writers. Andrzej Glaber of Kobylin, a Cracow graduate, translator of the great scholar Maciej of Miechów (Miechowita), related how Vice-Chancellor Mikołaj Oporowski invited him in 1532 to Wieluń "promising big benefits if I decided to stay there" because he wanted scholars to "stay not only in Cracow but also in other towns in Poland for the good of the community."<sup>19</sup>

When studying the functions of small towns it is impossible not to consider their ownership. Although I have often voiced the opinion that there was no vital difference between private gentry towns and those belonging to the clergy or to ecclesiastical institutions, just as there was no difference between private towns and those belonging to starosties as the latter were really in the hands of the noble office holders yet certain functions were exclusively connected with towns belonging to some definite owner. King Sigismund the Old founded the township of Milejczyce in the region of Podlasie purposely for assuring lodgings for the royal court travelling from Mielnik to Brześć.<sup>20</sup> When in 1580 King Stephen Báthory founded the town of Lipsk on the Biebrza, he wanted not only to breathe some life into the economy of the royal lands there and establish a river port for floating logs from the royal forests and grain from the farmsteads, but also to establish a staging post between the Crown and Lithuania and between the arsenal at Tykocin and the area of hostilities in Livonia in connection with his plans for further campaigns against Muscovy.<sup>21</sup> A private township could not fulfil such transport or strategic functions.

<sup>19</sup> B. Nadolski, *Geografia życia literackiego w Polsce za Renesansu. Próba wprowadzenia do problematyki* [Geography of Literary Life in Poland During the Renaissance. An Introduction to the Question], in: *Problemy literatury staropolskiej*, series II, Wrocław 1973, p. 244.

<sup>20</sup> A. Wawrzyńczyk, *Rozwój wielkiej własności na Podlasiu w XV i XVI wieku* [Development of Large Estates in the Podlasie Region in the 15th and 16th Cent.], Wrocław 1951, p. 231.

<sup>21</sup> J. Wiśniewski, *Dzieje osadnictwa w powiecie augustowskim od XV do końca XVIII wieku* [History of Settlement in Augustów District from the 15th to the End of the 18th Cent.], in: *Studia i materiały do dziejów Pojezierza Augustowskiego*, Białystok 1967, p. 149 ff.

So far the history of small towns has been treated as local history. Such studies have supplied a mass of facts but rarely revealed the connections between small towns and the development of the region and the country at large. Yet the fact that in the 16th- and 17th-century Poland there were relatively many small towns and their inhabitants made up a considerable percentage of the Polish middle-class caused that they were bound to play a considerable part in the country's economy, social patterns and culture. The emergence of specific functions discharged by small towns and their taking over from cities of certain of the latter's functions were characteristic of the situation in pre-partition Poland and this fact deserves the close attention of historians.

*(Translated by Krystyna Kępicz)*