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SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND CUSTOM IN EARLY MODERN POLAND

Custom can be no worse a guardian of the existing social structures and hierarchies than a legal system. What is more, if the legal system — and also the state apparatus — are weak, custom takes over a large part of the controlling functions by producing what is known as case-law and by determining everyday patterns of behaviour in all spheres of life. The nobility and the Church, the two dominant forces in old Polish society, found in custom an important instrument for defining their position and subordinating individuals and entire social groups to themselves.

The Noblemen's Commonwealth took its name from the estate of the nobility which though accounting for only about 10% of the Polish society, was, according to the then prevailing views, the salt of the earth, the group which not only held the highest position in the social structure of the country, but was simply identified with the Polish nation. The legends which added lustre to the genealogy of the nobility by tracing its origin back to the ancient Sarmatians strengthened the conviction that noble birth was the prerequisite of virtue, courage and patriotism. "Genuine nobility is a peculiar power and a genuine nest of virtue, fame dignity and integrity", wrote Rej¹. "Nobility soars up high with the eagles" and "it would be a wonder if anybody found an owl or a common sparrow in a falcon's nest", he remarked in another place². He was echoed later by Sep-Szarzyński: "The valiant female eagle does not give birth to pigeons"³, and by other poets of the Baroque period. In his *Diary*, Pasek included a poem which said: "People are attached to their likes, an owl does not trade with an eagle"⁴. 17th century *silva rerum* — records kept by nobles — abound in formulations, poems, sayings and proverbs which glorify the nobility as an estate generating virtues and good qualities. This self-adoration left a heavy imprint on the nobility's attitude to other social groups.

¹ M. Rej, *Zwierciadło (The Mirror)*, ed. by J. Czubek and J. Łoś, Kraków 1914, vol. I, p. 159.

² *Ibidem*, vol. II, pp. 238, 383.

³ M. Sep-Szarzyński, *Poezje wybrane (Selected Poems)*, selected and edited by J. Z. Lichański, Warszawa 1976, p. 17.

⁴ J. Ch. Pasek, *Pamiętniki (Diary)*, ed. by W. Zapliński, Wrocław 1968, p. 519.

Already in the 15th century the landowning nobility complained about the “lazy and loath” peasant who did not work properly on his master’s land. An interesting paraphrase of the medieval satire on the peasants’ laziness was written in the middle of the 16th century; it was entitled *The Description of the Peasants’ Artful and Cunning Nature against Their Masters*⁵. Already at the beginning of the 17th century it was given a reply in the form of countless *Peasant Laments* about the Lords and epigrams which called the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth *infernus rusticorum*; they were willingly included in the pages of *silva rerum*, which shows that many owners of manorial estates did not have a completely clear conscience as far as their serfs were concerned. “Nobody has exploited its serfs more than our Poland has”, jotted down Stanisław Albrecht Radziwiłł in 1649⁶. Nevertheless, there was not much pity for the peasants in the theory and literature of Sarmatism, though expressions of compassion can be found there, too (Szymon Zimorowic’s *Idylls*).

It should not, however, be forgotten that in practice the nobility was linked with the peasants by the rural way of life; the two groups formed a certain community based on mutual benefits and duties. A nobleman had to take care of the peasants in his own interest. A serf tilled the master’s land, but the manor succoured him in the event of bad crops, fire or sickness. “It was a hard year [1757 — M. B.] and there was hunger in the spring. The serfs were continuously coming with sacks for bread to the manor”, wrote Matuszewicz and added that finally, irritated by the distribution of grain, he decided to make use of the help-seekers and told them “to work in the garden”⁷ in return for food and some payment. In spite of the chasm separating them, the nobility and the peasants formed part of the same agricultural world, they lived in the same rhythm. The town and its inhabitants were outside the confines of this rural world.

The noblemen’s contempt for the townsmen was therefore as a rule as deep as that for the “ignorant and lazy” peasants, if not even more so, since the noblemen questioned the urban occupations from the ethical point of view. According to the writers of noble birth, who expressed opinions common among the nobility, engaging in urban occupations was shameful and dishonest by their very nature. “A shopkeeper living on toil forgets the truth and the faith”. wrote S. Orzechowski in the 16th century, trying to prove at the same time that “the nature of those crafts is such that they are obscene and stinking”⁸. Rej argued that the art of trade consisted in hoodwinking the client:

⁵ A. Brückner, *Źródła do dziejów literatury i oświaty polskiej (Sources to the History of Polish Literature and Education)*, V. *Wiersze polskiego średniowiecza (Polish Medieval Poems)*, «Biblioteka Warszawska», 1893, vol. I, pp. 260–261.

⁶ A. S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik o dziejach w Polsce (Diary on Events in Poland)*, ed. by A. Przyboś and R. Żelewski, Warszawa 1980, vol. III, p. 218.

⁷ M. Matuszewicz, *Diariusz życia mego (The Diary of My Life)*, ed. and prefaced by B. Królikowski, Warszawa 1986, vol. I, p. 819.

⁸ Quoted after M. Bogućka, *Miejsce mieszczanina w społeczeństwie szlacheckim (The Place of the Townsman in the Noblemen’s Society)*, in: *Spoleczeństwo staropolskie*, vol. I, Warszawa 1976, p. 187.

*He who is called a shopkeeper
Is never a silly weeper.
To sell cloth below full measure
And give short weight is his pleasure*⁹.

The only Polish poem glorifying non agricultural work is *Officina ferraria* or *The Ironworks and Smithies for the Noble Work in Iron* written by Walenty Rozdzieński, a poet ironworker, in 1612. Sebastian Fabian Klonowic's *The Raftsman*, a poem about the rafting of goods down the Vistula, written in 1595 and frequently quoted in this context, is more a poem glorifying the occupations of a landowning nobleman than one about the townsman. What is more, Klonowic, who was a townsman himself, rather frowns upon urban occupations, complains about the deprivation brought about by the lust for profit and asserts that "the ship has been invented by sheer greediness". For Klonowic, a shopkeeper is a despicable creature who "weighs his health for profit" and fears "a sudden loss", while a nobleman when he "has stacked up his corn" and "sits down by a pine fire with a salubrious drink, need not envy the townsmen their shopkeeping, need not envy the Gdańsk merchants their riches"¹⁰. In the 17th century, as the economic crisis increased, as monetary disturbances grew sharper and the living standards fell (because of the increase in the prices of industrial goods and the stagnation and even a drop in the income from manorial estates), anti-urban moods grew in force rapidly. An anonymous treatise of 1611 described merchants as extortionists and swindlers and attributed the existing difficulties to their "tricks"¹¹. In 1622 Wojciech Gostkowski reviled against "the cunning people and merchants" who were enriching themselves at the expense of the honest nobility¹². In 1623 Stanisław Zaremba accused merchants not only of demoralising society by the import of luxury goods but also of "tricks and intolerable profits", of raising prices, engaging in money speculation and unbearable usury; "the merchants, like keen bloodhounds and pointers, have designs on our purses", he said. Broad ranks of the nobility were becoming more and more convinced that every townsman was an enemy and a fraud engaged in speculation, sponging on other social groups and ruining the country. "They are destroying and impoverishing Poland and robbing her of wealth while enriching foreign countries and themselves", wrote Zaremba¹³.

⁹ M. Rej, *Zwierciadło (The Mirror)*, vol. II, p. 288.

¹⁰ S. F. Klonowic, *Flis (The Raftsman)*, ed. by S. Hrabec, Wrocław 1951, pp. 28, 32, 43, 47.

¹¹ *Traktat rycerstwu koronnemu, z której przyczyny się tak fałszywej monety namnożyło i czemu towary wszelakie co dzień w większą drogość przychodzą na uważanie i przestrożę przez szlachcica polskiego de Armis Roża wydany (Treatise offered by the Polish nobleman, de Armis Roża to the Polish Knighthood for their warning and consideration and showing why false money has so multiplied and why all goods are from day to day becoming more expensive)*, in: *Rozprawy o pieniądzu w Polsce pierwszej połowy XVII w.*, ed. by Z. Sadowski, Warszawa 1959, pp. 85ff.

¹² Quoted after J. Górski, E. Lipiński, *Merkantylistyczna myśl ekonomiczna w Polsce XVI i XVII w. Wybór pism (The Mercantilistic Economic Thought in Poland in the 16th and 17th Centuries. Selected Works)*, Warszawa 1958, pp. 129ff.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 257ff, 263.

Opinions of this kind were frequently expressed in records kept by noblemen in the form of short pieces of poetry, fragments of treatises, puzzles and replies.

Attempts to bring the estates closer together evoked violent protests from the nobility, which jealously protected its privileges and manifested its superiority in various ways. Particularly great importance was attached to protecting the nobleman's way of life which was linked with the manor house. The prohibition against townsmen owning landed estates, issued as early as 1496, was repeated in 1538 (it made it obligatory on the townsmen possessing landed estates to sell them by 1543). In practice, this regulation was never fully observed, but it was more sternly exacted in the 17th century. The Act of 1611 stated: "Since the *plebei passim*... are infiltrating the worthy Polish nobility, *nullis meritis*, but by buying noblemen's estates, and are thus diminishing the estate of the nobility and curtailing the prerogatives of this noble jewel, we decide hereby that all the towns and their inhabitants in all Polish territories and Prussian lands may *sub omissione bonorum* no longer buy noblemen's estates. And as regards those which have already been bought and given up we give *propinquieribus* the powers to claim and vindicate them *iure refractatus*"¹⁴.

Even the slightest attempt to put a townsman on equal footing with a nobleman always irritated and hurt people of "noble birth". Stanisław Albrzycht Radziwiłł noted in his *Diary* that on February 7, 1633 after the coronation in Cracow, Władysław IV "dubbed knights of the Golden Spur" beginning with noblemen, among whom were members of illustrious houses; when the turn came for townsmen, clergymen and lawyers (to distinguish them from the nobility the king touched them with his sword once or twice, while the noblemen were touched three times), some felt insulted by this conduct, especially the starosta of Ejszysze, Krzycki (Adam — M. B.), a noble man, "who became angry at this simultaneous dubbing"¹⁵. The awarding of the title of Knight of the Golden Spur to townsmen, conceived as a kind of ennoblement, of bringing the townsmen's social status closer to that of the nobility, was repeatedly attacked by the advocates of Sarmatian ideology, who associated this chivalrous custom only with people of "noble birth".

The nobility's main prerogative was freedom, which already in the 17th century was frequently defined as "golden" and called the apple of the nobility's eye. Already in the 17th century it frequently degenerated into wantonness, and from there there was only a step to anarchy. "The root of evil lies in excessive freedom or rather wantonness", says an anonymous author in his *silva rerum*¹⁶. "It is difficult to shut the mouth of freedom", said Stanisław Albrzycht Radziwiłł to Queen Cecylia Renata, and in another place he wrote: "We must tame our freedom or rather its abuse"¹⁷. A Frenchman who visited Poland about the year 1660 wrote that the Polish nobleman "fully succumbs to his inclinations and

¹⁴ *Volumina Legum*, vol. III, p. 11.

¹⁵ A. S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik (Diary)*, vol. I, p. 283.

¹⁶ The Czartoryski Library in Cracow, MSS 377, Mf 11652, p. 637.

¹⁷ A. S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik (Diary)*, vol. II, p. 309 and vol. III, p. 220.

does not recognize any other master but freedom”¹⁸. This was an apt observation if Marcin Błażowski had already written at the beginning of the 17th century:

*Freedom means to live securely as one wants to in one's home,
To have no master but God, the laws and the courts o'er one's dome*¹⁹.

Reformers, moralists and preachers sounded the tocsin and warned against the degeneration of this love of freedom into wantonness and various abuses. “It cannot be called freedom if somebody lives according to his inclination; true freedom and liberty means to live according to the law”, warned Łukasz Górnicki in his *Dworzanin (The Courtier)*²⁰. “Everybody defends himself by the nobleman's freedom, everybody puts this coat on his crimes and turns the good golden freedom into disobedience and dissipation”, pointed out Piotr Skarga in his *Sermons to the Sejm*²¹. Probably the most severe opinion of the nobility was expressed in *Reformacja obyczajów (The Reformation of Customs)* by Starowolski, who said: “This is a hapless Polish freedom if one may do what is improper”²².

In addition to freedom, the chief prerogative of the nobility and its most popular slogan was equality. The nobility furiously opposed the use of all titles, whether of a prince or a count (Stanisław Albrycht Radziwiłł described the passionate rows over this question in reporting the debates of the 1638 Sejm²³), and torpedoed Władysław IV's proposal to set up a fraternity of knights on the model of the Order of the Golden Fleece of the Netherlands. In spite of the fact that the king linked his idea with the cult of the Virgin Mary, extremely popular in Poland (this was to be the Order of the Immaculate Conception), the proposal could not be put into effect. The senators, fearing to lose popularity, refused to accept the decoration, and leaflets against “the cavalry”, as the members of the fraternity were called, circulated around the country. The king had to put off his idea *ad calendas Graecas*. How greatly this matter perturbed the noblemen is testified to by the countless references to “the cavalry” in *silva rerum*; they were usually accompanied by outpourings about the danger of “absolutum dominium” in Poland.

An outward expression of the noblemen's equality was their habit of addressing one another as “my lord brother”. Even the magnates, wishing to win popularity among the noblemen, used this expression emphasising the nobility's joint origin when addressing their clients from among the medium and petty nobility. As the clients' dependence on their patrons spread and increased, the noblemen became even more determined to keep up this illusion

¹⁸ *Cudzoziemcy o Polsce. Relacje i opinie (Foreigners on Poland. Accounts and Opinions)*, compiled and edited by J. Gintel, Kraków 1971, vol. I, p. 275.

¹⁹ Quoted after J. S. Bystroń, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce (A History of Customs in Old Poland)*, Warszawa 1976, vol. I, p. 148.

²⁰ Ł. Górnicki, *Dworzanin Polski (The Polish Courtier)*, Kraków 1928, p. 37.

²¹ P. Skarga, *Kazania sejmowe (Sermons to the Sejm)*, ed. by J. Tazbir with the collaboration of M. Korolko, Wrocław 1972, p. 11.

²² Quoted after J. S. Bystroń, *Dzieje obyczajów (A History of Customs)*, Wrocław 1976, vol. I, p. 149.

²³ A. S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik (Diary)*, vol. II, pp. 89–90.

of fraternity. Though kowtowing to a magnate when seeking a post in his house for themselves or their sons, they consoled themselves by repeating that “a nobleman on his farm is equal to a voivode”.

The noblemen’s constant worry was not only the threat posed by the magnates. Even though the social structure was in keeping with the privileges they had won through the centuries, the noblemen were aware of the society’s great mobility. Throughout the 16th century and even in the 17th, more ambitious and enterprising persons of plebeian origin frequently joined the estate of the nobility through marriage, the purchase of a landed estate, military service, practising at the bar or work at a magnate’s court. This induced the noblemen to constantly define and enforce the border between their own group and members of other social strata. Custom was an important instrument in this constant struggle. The best reflection of this state of affairs is Walerian Nekanda Trepka’s notorious *Liber chamorum*, a furious denunciation of “plebeians aspiring to the rank of the nobility”, written in the first half of the 17th century. The author, a nobleman from Little Poland, soured and impoverished after the loss of his landed estate, settled in Cracow in 1630. A litigant and brawler, he filled his time travelling by easy stages from one fair to another, from one dietine to another, nosing about and collecting information and gossip about misalliances, persons born out of wedlock, about peasants, townsmen and Jews endeavouring to conceal their origin and pass for persons of noble birth. Like the majority of the nobility, Trepka did not recognize ennoblement, especially if granted by the king. The king “may offer a village”, wrote Trepka, “but he cannot recreate, for he is not God. He would have to put the man back into the mother’s womb”²⁴. This extremely naturalistic, physical treatment of nobility was intended to drastically restrict the number of “the chosen”. If the king issued an ennobling privilege, “let the man be *nobilis* only for the king, and a peasant for the entire nobility as long as he lives”, argued Trepka²⁵.

Trepka’s boundless hatred of the peasants sounds pathological. “The Wyzłowie [surname meaning pointers — M. B.] and the Kusiowie [surname meaning the skimpy ones — M. B.] must not turn themselves into noblemen; the Wyzłowie should line up like dogs and the Kusiowie should go to the peasants”, he wrote²⁶. He noted with indignation that a certain Brodecki had given his orphaned ward in marriage to a “landless peasant’s son”, hoping that the latter would let him retain the bride’s village, Rudna. But he miscalculated. What upset Trepka was not the guardian’s greed but the fact that “by doggish, roguish cheating a peasant without property has got a wife of noble birth as well as a village... A paltry peasant is unworthy of noble blood, which in addition has been seasoned with a village and wealth for this penniless filthy peasant...”²⁷. Trepka even approved of a crime and rejoiced at it, if an ambitious

²⁴ W. N. Trepka, *Liber generations plebeanorum. Liber chamorum*, ed. by W. Dworzaczek, J. Bartyś, Z. Kuchowicz, Wrocław 1958, vol. I, p. 165, no. 548.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 86, no. 245.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 628, no. 2374.

plebeian was a victim. Stanisław Piorunowski “was killed with a stick on garbage behind the Mikołajska portcullis beyond the wall [in Cracow — M. B.] anno 1626. *Deposit Deus plebeum superbum de sede* [God has deposed the vain plebeian from his seat]”, stated Trepka with satisfaction²⁸.

The carrying out of certain occupations was regarded as proof of a mean character, for this was forbidden by successive acts (1550, 1633, 1677). According to Trepka, Suchodolski’s “low nature came to light” for he married a peasant woman and took an inn on lease²⁹. The widow of a certain Ułański leased a brewery. This is Trepka’s comment: “If she were a woman of noble birth, she would not be attracted by things which are proper to *penitus plebeis* and are forbidden to a nobleman by laws, as improper for him”³⁰. Trepka was very rigorous in this respect: “The nobleman who ally themselves by marriage with peasants should forfeit their nobility”, for “he who combines a fine thing with a foul one becomes foul himself”. According to Trepka, marriage with a townswoman also led to the offspring being plebeian: “a corn cockle, too, even if sown on good soil does not become wheat”³¹.

But how was a true nobleman to be distinguished from a plebeian who pretended to be of noble birth? According to Trepka this was very simple: a man of a low status was betrayed by everything, by his appearance, speech, custom. For instance, Walenty Szymborski, a scribe from the Lublin district, was a “*plebeus*, for both his complexion and his habits are unlike those of a nobleman”. “Pińczowski was betrayed by his peasant language, even though he tried hard to be taken for a nobleman; he spoke with a Mazovian lisp like a peasant and blabbered about his noble birth; if someone, wishing to flatter him, addressed him as a nobleman, he would ceaselessly regale him with wine. And so others, wanting to drink wine free... would flatter him and call him a nobleman”. Smiglecki “courted Miss Gośławska in the Sandomierz region, but they spotted the peasant in him for he lisped like a peasant and had boorish habits”. Stork from Silesia sent Miss Morawiecka “garlands on a platter covered with another one”, which unmasked him at once as a peasant and he was rebuffed. The Żarczyńskis, too, were unmasked, for they did not know how to behave in society: “They were unmasked by their peasant nature, they could neither converse nor talk with the nobility, they hid and shunned [society]”. Stanisław Zbijewski, the leaseholder of Uszwa, protégé of bishop Tylicki, was a simpleton who did not know how to receive guests properly. “This peasant adopts a haughty demeanour”, wrote Trepka. “He decks himself out in rich garments so as to be taken for a nobleman. When he has somebody to dinner he says: ‘eat, my Lord, you wouldn’t have this at home’. However large the number of guests, he will get up from the table and say

²⁷ *Ibidem*, vol. I, pp. 629–630, no. 2379.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, vol. I, pp. 405–406, no. 1535.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 523, no. 1197.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 577, no. 2187.

³¹ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 9.

‘I need to go somewhere’, to get them off his hands”³². Violation of the noblemen’s principles of hospitality invariably betrayed a plebeian.

The denial of nobility — sometimes applied deliberately as a means of confirming one’s possession of this jewel following a simulated rebuke — could however greatly complicate life. Matuszewicz’s diary shows that accusations of this kind were taken extremely seriously; the accused person always vehemently rebuked them, to cleanse himself and his progeny of even the slightest suspicion of plebeian origin³³. Matuszewicz, who with passion and stubbornness prosecuted a “slanderer–hag”, was not an exception. It is not surprising, therefore, that Trepka did not dare to publish the data he was collecting; this would have been too great a risk; maniacal as he was, he had to take into account the revenge of the attacked and defamed people.

Alongside good, polished manners, that is familiarity with the nobility’s *savoir vivre*, education, too, distinguished a nobleman from a plebeian, according to Trepka. Adam Bronicki was “an idiot, who could neither read nor write, an ordinary peasant”, stated the author of *Liber chamorum*³⁴. Paradoxically, latest research has shown that the townsmen were for a long time better educated, though this is not what the public believed. According to W. Urban’s research, townsmen held the dominant position in primary education in the 16th century: 70% of the patricians and 40% of the plebeians in the towns of Little Poland could write, while only 31% of the nobility of the Cracow province had that skill³⁵. It seems that the results of this research can also be applied to other regions of the country. As regards secondary and higher education, the townsmen may also have been superior, in any case nothing indicates that they were on a lower level in this respect. As late as the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th, townsmen accounted for some 40% of all students at the University of Cracow, and for nearly 90% of the pupils at the academic schools of Gdańsk, Elbląg and Toruń³⁶. It was probably only in the second quarter of the 17th century that the level of education in towns lowered, and this, together with the development of Jesuit schools catering mostly for noblemen’s sons and with the drop in young townsmen’s departures for studies abroad, led to the clear victory of the nobility in this field in the second half of the 17th century. Of course, in the countryside representatives of the nobility and the clergy were the only educated persons in the entire period of interest to us; the peasants, but for a few exceptions, were illiterate.

³² *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 472, no. 1785; p. 404, no. 1531; p. 497, no. 1887; p. 645, no. 2433; p. 655, no. 2466.

³³ Cf. M. Matuszewicz, *Diariusz (Diary)*, vol. I, pp. 473ff.

³⁴ W. N. Trepka, *Liber chamorum*, vol. I, p. 69, no. 181.

³⁵ W. Urban, *Umiejętność pisania w Małopolsce w drugiej połowie XVI w. (The Skill of Writing in Little Poland in the Second Half of the 16th Century)*, „Przegląd Historyczny”, 1977, No. 2, p. 251.

³⁶ Cf. M. Bogućka, H. Samsonowicz, *Dzieje miast i mieszczaństwa w Polsce przedrozbiorowej (The History of Towns and Townsmen in Pre-Partition Poland)*, Wrocław 1986, p. 555.

Nevertheless, it is a fact that the nobility thought highly of education. Rej, who in his youth did not willingly apply himself to books, set a high value on “honest learning and constant exercises” in his *Life of an Honest Man*, but he understood these more as reading and free conversations than as specific studies of, for instance, grammar “which only teaches to prattle and twist obscene words” or logic “which only teaches how to quibble”. What was useful in Rej’s opinion was to adopt virtues and acquire general wisdom which in his view meant common sense and not a theoretical knowledge of individual fields of learning. “What will be the use of refined grammar-painted words if the truth and effect depart far from them... Or of what help will geometry be, when a person has learned to measure the world or other people’s land, if he is unable to evaluate himself honestly?... Or of what use will it be to a person to learn astronomy, that is, to be able to [discover] impending things, and not to be able to use and recognize those he has in front of his eyes?”³⁷ (It is interesting that Rej identified astronomy with astrology.) This practical sense in the field of education was typical also of the generation following Rej. “It is a bad thing in the world to be a simpleton, and such a man cannot have a worthy place among wise men, nor will he attain any dignity. What I need is that you should not neglect the German language, for not only is it needed in foreign countries but also here, at the court of the king, our Lord; he who is at the court can by no means do without it”, wrote Aleksander Ługowski in July 1639 to his son studying abroad³⁸. The school, especially the Jesuit colleges, taught a young nobleman Latin and elements of history, and acquainted him with classics; the point was to give the young nobleman a humanistic polish, to prepare him for appearances at dietines and in parliament (hence the important role played by oratory), to awaken his civic spirit, as it was understood by the noble estate. Many of these young noblemen also gained some experience in magnates’ courts where they attained polish and learned good manners, but unfortunately also acquired the ambition of getting on in life and servilism, as was noticed by Simon Maritius, a pedagogue from Pilzno, already in the first half of the 16th century. The sons of magnates and prosperous nobility also travelled abroad. These travels gave them the knowledge of the world and foreign languages (praised by all foreigners visiting Poland), but often yielded no fruit as regards solid studies in a specific field. A young Pole usually enrolled for a semester or two at a famous university in Italy, the Netherlands, Germany or France, attended about a dozen lectures by some celebrity, met a few people and went on. Very few men, among these especially townsmen, decided to undertake thorough studies and gained academic titles. The noblemen were more interested in sight-seeing, in the course of which they acquainted themselves with architecture, in particular with fortifications, with the art of war and historic

³⁷ M. Rej, *Zwierciadło (The Mirror)*, vol. I, p. 59–62.

³⁸ *Jasia Muszyńskiego podróże do szkół w cudzych krajach 1639–1643 (Jaś Muszyński’s Journeys to Schools in Foreign Countries 1639–1643)*, ed. and prefaced by K. Muszyńska, Warszawa 1974, pp. 102–103.

monuments which expanded their humanistic knowledge of the Antique. These study travels were more like tourist peregrinations and they were frequently combined with pilgrimages to holy places.

Travels were inscribed in the world of ideals and patterns forming part of the Polish nobility's mentality. Rej had already warned against an excessive fondness of home life: "Try not to be too encumbered by home life", and he encouraged noblemen: "And when the young master grows up... it would not be amiss for him to visit foreign countries now and again, especially those where the people are reliable, sound, moral, where they are guided by reason and are engaged in honest learning"³⁹. Conversance and familiarity with foreign countries were part of the nobility's custom, although until the middle of the 17th century townsmen were not inferior to the nobility in this respect.

But travels were only one side of the nobility's life pattern. Its most eulogised base was rural life, a landowner's life in the bosom of his family and among friends, a life comprising multifarious farming occupations. Rej had already praised the joys and benefits of a landowner's foresight, and this theme was taken up by many Renaissance and Baroque poets and writers from Jan Kochanowski to the two Morsztyns, to Twardowski and Zbylitowski. Entire volumes have been written about the patterns of a landowner's life; let us emphasise but two characteristic traits. First of all, this was a practical approach: the pleasure derived from living in the country, from cultivating one's garden, from attending field work was linked with the crops reaped, with a well stocked larder and a table groaning with food, with an almost sensual delight of consumption. Secondly, this ideal rural life also meant moderation, modest requirements; excessive ambitions were condemned in favour of a secure existence, of contentment with the little field-patch inherited from one's ancestors. Many scholars regard this as a dangerous tendency towards quietism and inertia. On the other hand, if we take a look at the records of the law courts, we see that they are full of court cases over bequests, dowries, grabbed acres, that they are swollen with information on forays, neighbours' squabbles over a piece of forest, a field, a meadow, and we come to the conclusion that the road from the ideal of moderation, from modesty in one's requirements to its implementation in everyday life was very long.

In the nobility's ideology, the pattern of a good landowner was closely linked with that of a good citizen and soldier. An ideal nobleman was expected to participate in the country's political life, attend dietines and elections and if elected a deputy, take an active part in the work of the Sejm. The noblemen were genuinely interested in political life as is testified to by the records kept by them, 70% of the contents of which consist of notes and entries connected with political events (copies of speeches delivered in parliaments and at the meetings of dietines, deputies' instructions, letters concerning political matters, poems and songs connected with political events, etc.). The nobility, which in

³⁹ M. Rej, *Zwierciadło (The Mirror)*, vol. I, pp. 120, 68.

the 16th century was constructing the model of a noblemen's state and in the 17th feared all the time for its golden freedom, was really the most politicised group of old Polish society, a group highly interested in public matters. It was not only its numerical strength, but also the degree of its politicisation that distinguished it from the nobility of other European countries.

The nobility's privileges were attributed to its chivalry, to its duty to shed blood in defence of the country. A landowner was always to be ready to become a soldier, to exchange the plough for the sword, as the ancient Cincinnatus had done. Courage was regarded as an inborn trait of every nobleman, who was said to be a descendant of the militant Sarmatians. The 16th century, a period so rare in her history when Poland enjoyed peace, provided few opportunities for testing the noblemen's martial virtues; only in the eastern borderlands did the noblemen have to be constantly ready to fight and seal their nobility with their blood nearly every day. The inhabitants of the safe centre of the country were at that time exchanging their helmets for straw hats, replacing their armour by comfortable garments and unlearning the hardships of soldiering. It was the 17th century which with its ominous threat to not only the frontiers but even the very existence of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth reminded the nobility of its soldierly duty. The noblemen fulfilled this duty sometimes better, sometimes worse; they gave proof of greatest courage and self-sacrifice, but there were also cowards and persons avoiding all effort among them. Nevertheless, the ideal of the defender of the motherland and the Catholic faith (the invaders were mainly people of other religions — Swedes, Turks, Tartars) was inscribed in the canon of Sarmatism as its main watchword.

As Sarmatism adorned the nobility's genealogy with increasingly splendid colours, eulogised its real and imagined virtues, its way of life and political role, making it the only representative of the nation, the townsman was being pushed ever more clearly to the fringe of social life. The weak urban population was unable to produce its own ideology and custom which could have successfully competed with those of the nobility. Urban literature with a plebeian tinge (Biernat of Lublin, Sebastian Petrycy of Pilzno and others), rich even as late as the 16th century, weakened visibly in the 17th. The output of Władysławiusz, Jan of Kijany, Rożdzieński and various anonymous minstrels and epigramists was but a margin of the main current of the 17th century literature proclaiming the victorious world outlook of the nobility. Already in the 16th century some townsmen had gone over to the nobility's camp. Łukasz Górnicki, a townsman by birth, demonstrated the superiority of the nobility over the other estates in his *Courtier*: "And this is why it nearly always happens that in a battle or a place where people can win respect, a nobleman manages better and is more prominent than a man of another descent; for nature has into everything sown this hidden seed which has the property and power taken from the first seed and it transfers these to the seed it generates and makes it the same as it is. We see this not only in the herds of horses and other animals but also in trees, the branches

of which are always similar... to the trunk..."⁴⁰. From the end of the 16th century writers began to express the nobility's ideology and opinions ever more strongly to the exclusion of other views: they glorified the government system of the Commonwealth, extolled the ancient origin of the Sarmatians, shaped the pattern of the hero, presenting him as a knight from the borderlands defending his country and his faith, and praised the joys of life in a manor house. This was done by writers of both noble and urban origin. "Even townsmen when they they reached for the pen, put on a nobleman's mask", wrote A. Brückner⁴¹. At the beginning of the 17th century, Jan Jurkowski, a teacher from Pilzno in Little Poland, included by some scholars in the plebeian current (because he demanded the strengthening of royal power), sang the glory of the old Sarmatians, thus glorifying the nobility in spite of some criticism, extolled the nobility's virtues and courage and even took over the xenophobia characteristic of the nobility. He was fascinated by the vision of the knight defending his country and faith and colonising the borderlands, and approved of the nobility's social programme, keeping the soldierly occupations for people of noble birth, leaving the tilling of land to the peasants, and exertions over profits to the merchants and Jews. In *Choraqiew Wandalinowa* (*Wandaline Banner*) Jurkowski says:

*It's the gentry's craft to engage in soldiery
And leave crops to boors addicted to drudgery
Let yeomen till land, grow wheat for the daily bread
Let women count profits from spinning a fine thread
Let merchants have gold, let the Jew count his treasure
You stick to the soldier's prize, your only measure,
But not at home...*⁴²

Józef Bartłomiej Zimorowic, the son of a bricklayer from Lwów and later mayor of the town and owner of an estate in its neighbourhood, glorified the nobility's bravery in the battle of Chocim, praised gardening and land cultivation and adopted the nobility's point of view in condemning the peasants' rebellions⁴³. Such examples can be multiplied.

An important role in the adoption of the Sarmatian ideology by townspeople was undoubtedly played by their Polonisation, which was very rapid in the 17th century. The German, Armenian and Italian nationality groups, losing their distinctiveness and fusing together, adopted what was the fullest expression of Polishness, namely, the culture and custom created by the nobility. At that time the nobility not only identified itself with the nation; it was indeed the leading section of society, a section which was the most awake and therefore fit to take a conscious, mature part in national life. In these conditions, Poloni-

⁴⁰ Ł. Górnicki, *Dworzanin* (*The Courtier*), ed. by K. J. Turowski, Kraków 1858, pp. 35–36.

⁴¹ In the preface to K. Bałucki's *Literatura mieszczańska* (*Townsmen's Literature*), Lwów 1925, p. IX.

⁴² Quoted after M. Bogucka, *Miejsce mieszczanina* (*The Place of the Townsman*), p. 189.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

sation naturally meant subordination to the nobility's custom and culture and acceptance of Sarmatism. This was usually accompanied by the consolidation of the influence of Catholicism and the Counter-Reformation. It is worth pointing out that only the circles which retained their ethnic and religious distinctiveness were resistant to Sarmatism and its patterns in ideology and custom. A characteristic example in this respect was provided by the Jews who in the 16th and 17th centuries constituted large groups in many towns and villages and were hermetically closed to other cultures, customs and religions. Pomeranian townspeople are an even more characteristic example. Because of their size, prosperity and weak Polonisation (a result of their Lutheran or Calvinist religion and their close contacts with Dutch and German towns), the towns of Royal Prussia were culture-forming centres with specific original characteristics. The Prussian townspeople always displayed great independence, also in ideology, which manifested itself in their frequent criticism of the nobility and its socio-political programme. This was reflected in the well known *Tragedy about the Rich Man and Lazarus* with its bold anti-nobility and anti-magnatial undertones. Researchers (T. Witczak) have lately expressed the opinion that the *Tragedy* was written by Marcin Gremboszewski, a musician and poet in the service of the Gdańsk council. One should not, however, forget that the same Prussian urban milieu also created dozens of historical and political poems, eulogies and incidental verses tinged with the ideology and emotional tones of Sarmatism and frequently dedicated to individual magnates and rulers. Thus, even the culture of Royal Prussia, an exceptionally urbanised area for Polish conditions and different from the rest of Poland in its social and nationality structure and customs, combined elements characteristic of townspeople's culture with those of the nobility's culture, so that one can hardly speak of the formation and functioning of two equal cultural models; this was rather a model which was an interesting symbiosis of various elements.

At the end of the 16th century, the townspeople, especially the upper strata, being unable to create their own model, began to succumb to the influence of the nobility's culture and customs. This was connected with their fascination in the lustre of the noblemen's treasure and their aspiration not so much to level the estate barriers (which was evident as late as the first half of the 16th century) as to find themselves on the other, "better" side of these barriers. This was sought by the entire city of Cracow which by virtue of the privilege of 1493, confirmed in 1513, acquired the nobility's rights; as a result, its deputies participated in the debates of the dietines and the Sejm (with a vote only on urban matters), took part in elections, and the inhabitants of Cracow had the right to purchase and own landed estates. Similar rights were acquired by Wilno in 1568 and Lwów in 1658 (Poznań and Warsaw tried hard to acquire them). In practice also the largest Prussian towns, Gdańsk, Toruń and Elbląg, had the status of the nobility, though not quite formally (participation in dietines, the right to own land, the right to send representatives to the Sejm with the status of observers). Ennoblement was the life ideal of the individual townsman. It

meant not only social but also cultural promotion and was the condition *sine qua non* for gaining social esteem in one's own eyes and in the eyes of others. Those who failed to be ennobled tried to at least imitate the noblemen's customs, regarding them as a better, ennobling style of behaviour. The result was that the nobility's code of conduct, custom and mentality penetrated into towns. It was, above all, the upper, prosperous strata of the inhabitants of towns which spurred by ambition, tried to become similar to the nobility in various ways; they were the only urban strata which could afford this.

The interesting and extremely important question of peasant culture in old Poland is still to a large extent a puzzle. The simplified picture of exploitation and poverty presented by economic historians in the 1950s has already been largely corrected. In the 16th and even in the first half of the 17th century, the Polish village seems to have still been relatively rich, especially as regards its upper strata, the rich farmers. The degree of this prosperity depended on the region. The records of law courts present peasants as active, enterprising economic activists who bought and sold land, buildings and cattle, divided their property, extended loans, owned large amounts of cash, to say nothing of cattle and grain, drew up their last wills, ensured the future of their wives and children in the event of their death, etc. A drastic impoverishment and the consequent reduction of the peasants' economic activity and mobility seems to have occurred on a larger scale in the second half of the 17th century, as a result of wars and the elementary disasters linked with them (fires, epidemics).

Nor were the serfs reduced to the role of passive working animals and deprived of all traits of human dignity. Flogging is no proof for in those years it was a generally accepted educative means also among the nobility and the magnates, and was not regarded as a specially humiliating punishment. An important role in the life of villages was played by the self-government, which was still in operation. Although restricted in its rights and dependent on the landowner, it fortified the dignity of the peasant community as a whole and developed its internal solidarity. It also allowed its richer and more energetic members to take part in a kind of public life. The village self-government was headed by the *wójt* or *soltys* (lat. *scultetus*; this was frequently a hereditary post) and assessors (the so-called jurors); a village usually had six assessors and they were either elected by the community or appointed by the landowner. They held their functions for several and sometimes even several dozen years. The assessors were chosen from among the more prosperous farmers who enjoyed authority in the village and the confidence of the manor house; sometimes the sacristian, the inn-keeper or the miller became an assessor. The function frequently passed from father to son. This led to the emergence of a group of village "dignitaries" and to the establishment of not only a financial but also a social and consequently a cultural hierarchy. When taking over office, the assessors took an oath; this was to ensure their honesty and enhance their authority; the assessor was obliged to maintain the dignity of his position so as to set an example to the entire village; in case of a misdeed, he faced severe

punishment⁴⁴. The assessors were not only to set an example; they also took an active part in shaping the moral pattern binding on the village; the self-government was empowered to pass judgment for misdemeanours and watch over all the affairs of the village, that is, take care of orphans, secure bequests, appoint guardians, settle all matters concerning property, such as division of property, inheritance and marriage contracts, and also collect money for the construction or repair of the church, collect the poll-tax, etc. The existence of the self-government with the entire ritual of its functioning could not but exert a great influence on the development of cultural life and custom in villages.

To what extent was this development spontaneous and independent and to what extent was it shaped by the manor house? There is no doubt that the peasantry, oppressed by serf-labour and hardly having the time or strength to work in their own fields and their own farmyards, did not have enough strength to create independent cultural values on a large scale. They also found it difficult to continue the tradition inherited from the previous epochs. Nevertheless, the villages were not a cultural and moral desert. We have stressed above that life within the same agricultural rhythm created a certain community between the nobility and the peasants, in spite of all the differences between them. The manor house to which the peasant went for advice, for help in case of sickness or in the event of a disaster, was not something abstract for him; it was of necessity the source of various inspirations and sometimes even a model to follow in some respects. On the other hand, the way of life of the noble small holders who tilled their land themselves (a very numerous class in Mazovia but one which also existed in other regions) did not differ much in practice from that of the peasants. This means that culture and custom flowed not only from the top down but also in the other direction. Besides, with all their contempt for the peasants, the inhabitants of even rich manor houses did not demur from making use of folk medicine or peasant recipes against pests, and sometimes, though in great secrecy, they would send for a peasant woman skilled in the use of magic.

The influence from the top was naturally more varied and stronger, playing the dominant role in shaping village customs. This was in keeping with the inborn instincts governing imitation processes and with the natural inclination to seek ways of social promotion. It was at that time that the nobleman's manor, eulogised by poets and writers of different backgrounds, became in a way the centre of cultural life in Poland. It provided the patterns of conduct, opinions, customs and even fashions which were accepted and imitated by all the other social groups. The townspeople and peasants, dominated by the nobility and unable to create their own independent culture, imitated the patterns set by the nobility zealously, to the best of their ability. This is how a uniform custom arose in old Poland despite deep social differences and the nobility's endeavours to turn custom into a guardian of social hierarchy. This helped to diminish

⁴⁴ Cf. *Księgi wiejskie sądowe klucza jazowskiego 1663–1808 (Village Court Records of the Jazow Demesne 1663–1808)*, ed. by S. Grodziski, Wrocław 1967, pp. 44, 73, 108.

regional and even ethnic differences. The unification of customs was favoured by the Church, which was playing an increasingly important role in cultural life as the Counter-Reformation developed, and which regarded custom as an important controller and guarantor of the implementation of the commands and interdictions of religion (sexual life, the rules of consumption, etc.). The old Polish customs were thus a result of frequently contradictory actions, a manifestation of the differentiation of society, though at the same time they were the foundation of its unity, for they strengthened the links between the estates and the regions.

The best proof of the triumph achieved by the manor house in the field of culture and customs was the adoption of the noblemen's pattern by magnates and even the monarch. The court of John III Sobieski at the king's favourite residence at Jaworów, where no strict ceremonial was observed, was, in fact, an enlarged replica of the seat of a typical Polish medium-rank nobleman: in behaviour, tastes and way of life, the Sarmatian king was well within the canons of the noblemen's manor houses.

(Translated by *Janina Dorosz*)