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SPECTACLES OF LIFE: BIRTH — MARRIAGE — DEATH
Polish Customs in the 16th–18th Centuries

Old–Polish customs encompassed human life within a framework of ceremonial rites endowing daily existence with a more profound meaning thanks to the mystery of the ritual; simultaneously, they offered a colourful and rich pageant that added important variety to the monotony of everyday life.

The mystery of birth was expected with impatient joy combined with anxiety; only in cases of a child born out of wedlock did feelings of shame and contempt prevail. The excited awaiting for the heir of a ruling family, especially a son, is testified by a story about an agreement made between a lady–in–waiting of Queen Bona and Jan Zaremba, a royal courtier: a red sash was to be displayed in a window of the Wawel Castle after the birth of a boy so that Zaremba could immediately gallop across the country to announce the happy event to King Sigismund the Old, at that time visiting Royal Prussia (Summer of 1520)[1]. A similar atmosphere of fascination and joy dominated in magnates', noblemen's and rich burghers' households; a child, and particulary a son, signified here the assurance of the family's continuum because of the arrival of a long awaited heir. Also for wealthy peasants a child guaranteed the continuation of the family's existence and livelihood. Only the poorest residents of towns and village perceived birth as the appearance of yet another person to be sustained, and thus the deterioration of living conditions; hence birth was greeted with mixed feelings while natural instincts collided with fears for the future.

The woman in childbirth was taken care of by older, more experienced female relatives or neighbours; more rarely, and chiefly in larger towns, she was attended by professional midwives or even doctors[2]. The letter were

[1] M. Bogucka, *Bona Sforza*, Warszawa 1989, p. 139.

[2] This subject was discussed in the sixteenth century by Andrzej Glaber of Kobylin in: *Nauka położnic ratowania i leczenia* (*The Science of the Salvage and Treatment of Women in Labour*), cf. *Historia nauki polskiej* (*The History of Polish Science*), ed. B. Suchodolski,

mainly employed by the royal court, magnates or richest burghers; in such towns as Gdańsk, Toruń, Poznań, Lvov and Cracow the number of physicians in the sixteenth century was already quite considerable, and their services, especially since the beginning of the seventeenth century, had grown increasingly popular.

On all levels of the social ladder the birth of a child — a wonderful miracle of the forces of Nature — was surrounded with an atmosphere of uneasiness, mystery and apprehension; the latter was caused among others by the high death rate among women in labour and newborn children. Medical treatment was supplemented by many old customs and "ways" which dated back to pagan days, and whose purpose was to hasten birth and to reduce pain (a sharp knife or bison hide were placed underneath the bedclothes), and to bar the way of demons and evil spirits (the water from the new born infant's first bath was poured out no earlier than after three days, the child was covered by old, tattered linen and carried through a window etc.). The number and nature of those practices differed depending on the region and social group, but they were observed almost everywhere[3].

The new mother, for a certain time unable to resume her normal activity, was visited by female neighbours who brought small gifts; they were served refreshments (cakes, sweets, fruit, beer or wine) which at times changed into a merry bedside feast, chocking the sensibilities of stricter persons. Men were permitted to see the young mother only a few days later and were excluded from such bedroom festivities[4]. Naturally, these ceremonies took place in the prosperous households of the gentry and burghers. Poor women, especially in the villages, gave birth almost without interrupting their chores. Nonetheless, here too it was customary for neighbours to come with assistance if the young mother remained "weak" for a longer period of time.

The return to normal life usually took place some six weeks after birth in a more or less ceremonial form of a so–called purification held in the nearby church. Not everywhere was this custom observed although it was inspired by the Church authorities[5].

Wrocław 1970, vol. I, p. 311; on midwives and physicians in town cf. M. Bogucka, *Das alte Danzig*, Leipzig 1980, p. 163 sqq. Cf. also Z. Kuchowicz, *Człowiek polskiego baroku* (*The Polish Baroque Man*), Łódź 1992, p. 101–102.

[3] Extensive information on this topic is to be found in trial records of municipal and rural courts as well as in *silva rerum* (collections of notes) which are unfortunately insufficiently exploited from the point of view of the subject under examination.

[4] Cf. Z. Kuchowicz, *Z dziejów obyczajów polskich w wieku XVII i pierwszej połowy XVIII w.* (*From the History of Polish Customs during the Seventeenth Century and the First Half of the Eighteenth Century*), Warszawa 1957, p. 15 sqq.

[5] *Ibidem.*

Christening signified the initiation of the new born not only into the Christian community but also into a group which in the future was to constitute his or her natural environment. This is the reason why, despite the recommendations of the Church which advised that newborn children be baptized as soon as possible (owing to the threat of premature death), in many cases the occasion was delayed for months, so that it could be prepared with an opulence and lavishness that would be well remembered by its participants. In instances when the life of the infant was in danger, a hurried "baptism with water" was performed at home, not only without the attending observances but frequently without a priest. Notes about childbirth in the so–called *silva rerum* often added: "privately christened due to weakness".

A strong, healthy child which gave promise of survival became the center of a public ceremony conducted in church and attended by invited family members and friends. An important role was ascribed to the choice of a name — the main concern was to ensure a suitable heavenly protector as well as to bind the child to family tradition. As a rule, two names were given — that of the patron saint of the day birth (the so–called brought name) and a second one which referred to the customs of the family (e.g. the name of a grandparent), to a cult observed by the given family or milieu, and often to a fashion prevalent in this area and in this period. Frequently the infant received the name of an older brother or sister who died earlier, and who in this way was supposed to be brought back to life.

Just as important as the selection of the name was that of godparents. Upon many occasions the invitation was extended to eminent person from the top of the social and financial hierarchy. The child's parents counted on winning protection not only for the infant but also for the entire family of which the godparents in a certain sense now became part. The baptism of princes or princesses — a very important event — was determined by dynastic and political reasons. The Vasa dynasty, for example, chose godparents mainly from among the Habsburgs (both Spanish and Austrian) or the popes. Such distinguished godparents were represented at the christening by special envoys. The political gesture was usually followed by an invitation of a second pair of godparents who were closer to the child although also of high rank, for instance dignitaries of the Crown or members of the royal family. In this way, the old Queen–Widow Anna Jagellon became the godmother of the little princess Anna Maria, the first child of King Sigismund III Vasa born on 23 May 1593.

The infant was richly dressed and the church ceremony was followed by a feast which provided a good occasion for admiring gifts offered by the

godparents. Some magnates and members of the nobility, however, resigned from splendid ceremonies and distinguished godparents in order to demonstrate their Christian humility. To assure the heir divine grace they entrusted the function of godparents to beggars or to the poor from a nearby hospice. In such cases, the only baptism gift was a humble prayer, whose effectiveness was judged superior to that of the prayers of dignitaries and the rich.

The opulence of the feast which was frequently accompanied by recitals of poets, praising the child's parents and foretelling its brilliant future, depended on the prosperity and status of the family. In royal and magnate homes the event was particularly magnificent: gun salutes thundered, fireworks sparkled, the people cheered in the streets and special *carmina* were printed to honour the occasion. The birth of the King's son Sigismund August on 1 August 1520 was celebrated with spectacles and illuminations; cries of joy were heard not only in Cracow and other Polish towns but also abroad — in Naples and Budapest. Few decades later an anonymous Cracow burgher depicted the christening of prince Ladislas Vasa, which took place in 1595 in Cracow, in the following words: "The baptism was performed by the Bishop of Cracow, Cardinal (Jerzy — M.B.) Radziwiłł assisted by eight canons. Her Majesty the old Queen–Widow Anna stood at the door together with other godparents. The child was carried to church by an envoy of the Archduchess Anne Catherine (the wife of Ferdinand Habsburg, the Archduke of Lower Austria — M.B.)... Her Majesty the Queen–Widow, various lords, and His Majesty the King walked behind the child... There (in the Wawel cathedral — M. B.) barriers were placed around the baptismal font, creating a large carpet–covered area so that a crowd would not form. After the christening, the prince was placed on the alter of St. Stanislaus. The special ceremony was carried out with the Gospel of St. John and a wax candle. The royal musicians intoned *Te Deum laudamus*, accompanied by a charming tune on the organ. The royal hayduks also did their duty and gave three gun salutes. After these ceremonies His Royal Majesty invited all the senators to dinner"[6]. This tradition was continued in the seventeenth century although royal children were no longer baptized in Cracow but in Warsaw, the new seat of the royal residence. When in August 1650 Queen Mary Louise gave birth to a daughter (who was given the name of Mary Ann Therese) the ceremonies were so lavish that they shocked some of the witnesses. The godfather was the king's brother — prince Charles Ferdinand Vasa — and the godmother was Lady Teodora Krystyna Sapieha, wife of the vice–chancellor of Lithuania. Baptism was administered in the Warsaw

[6] Cited according to: J. S. Bystroń, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce* (*The History of Customs in Old Poland*), Warszawa 1976, vol. II, p. 75.

church of St. John by Primate Maciej Łubieński, and later a sumptuous feast was held in the Warsaw Royal Castle. "Fireworks flared, cheerful shouts rang out, while the applause of the magnates and the roar of the whole populace were heard all night long"[7].

Attempts were also made to add grandeur to christenings of burgher and peasant children, of course *toutes proportions gardées*. The value of the gifts, the quality of the meals as well as the number of invited guests (which in towns was frequently restricted by rules issued by the municipal authorities) depended on the wealth and social status of the parents. Not even the poorest, however, spared meat, sweets and beer on such occasions. Only illegitimate infants were baptized secretly, with shame, usually "with water", and without any church pomp, guests, godparents or gifts[8].

Courtship and wedding both constituted another important moment in human life which became encompassed with extensive, ritual ceremonies. Marriage was, as a rule, the outcome of negotiations conducted more by relatives or friends than by the interested parties themselves. The main criterion of selection was equality of social position, as well as financial advantages and profits resulting from the linking of the two families; beauty, attraction, and emotional inclinations played a very small part indeed in the marriage contract. These reflections pertain to all social groups — from monarchs, and magnates (whose marriages were particularly carefully planned, sometimes in the course of years–long negotiations and mutual agreements) the nobility, and wealthy townspeople to the peasantry. Only in the poorest strata did partners choose each other in a more free way, often as a result of direct contacts and personal predilections. The absence of wealth, family interests and social prejudice produced greater freedom of choice which could become the consequence of individual private likings and decisions.

In all the wealthier milieus a great role in marriage negotiations was played by intermediaries. The social significance of matchmakers, male and female, still remains insufficiently examined by historians. The arrangement of marriages in magnate and gentry circles was usually entrusted to older and experienced members of the family, or eventually to friendly neighbours, while plebeians (burghers, peasants) were familiar with the institution

[7] Cited according to: A. Kersten, *Warszawa kazimierzowska 1648–1668 (Warsaw under John Casimir, 1648–1668)*, Warszawa 1971, p. 245.

[8] In 1732 the parish priest of the village of Jazowsko ordered a peasant child baptized "with water" to be buried in the meadow under a crucifix and not in the church cemetery: "I cannot allow him to be buried near the church because he is imperfectly christened", *Księgi sądowe wiejskie kluczajazowskiego, 1663–1808 (Rural Court Registers of the Jazowsko Estate, 1663–1808)*, ed. by St.Grodziski, Wrocław 1967, p. 94–95.

of professional — usually female — matchmakers who were paid for their services[9].

Initial talks which often consisted of animated persuasion as well as attempts to discourage from choosing potential rivals, concerned both material problems as well as the virtues (and faults) of the future husband and wife. The seventeenth–century diarist Jan Chryzostom Pasek wrote: "The voivode of Rawa, Jan Albrecht Lipski wished to marry me off to Lady Radoszowska while Mr. Śladkowski, at that time the standard bearer of Rawa and then the castellanus of Sochaczew, forced upon me Miss Śladkowska, his heiress and only child. In the region of Sochaczew she had a village known as Boża Wola, with no debts and purchased by her father for 70,000 Polish zlotys at a time when one Hungarian zloty was worth 6 Polish zlotys and one thaler was worth 3 Polish zlotys" (i.e. prior to the considerable fall in the value of the Polish zloty — M.B.). Both used their imagination to belittle the rival. "Śladkowski said that his daughter's competitor had a slattern for a mother and warned that the daughter could consequenter become the same; the voivode, on the other hand, described Miss Śladkowska in *haec verba*: 'What if the maiden does have seventy thousand when she has certain *vitia, et praecipue* is as bad tempered as a lizzard and drinks to boot'... Both would not let me out of their sight and whenever they got hold of me I was subsequently compelled to be their guest for three or four weeks"[10].

Courtship itself followed a ritual course in which generous feasts with music and alcohol played a prominent role. This is what Pasek says: "We arrived in the manor of Olszówka... without musicians who would openly mean courtship; but having recognized my honest inclinations, the host himself began to call for music. Therefore I sent to township called Wodzisław and musicians were soon brought over. Now we started to dance. My uncle asked me: 'Did you like the window?' (in the meantime new plans were made for Pasek to marry a certain widow — M.B.). I answered: 'She has captured my heart'"[11].

The procedure of courting often lasted for many months although sometimes decisions were made rather quickly. Pasek wanted to settle the matter immediately by enquiring: "Could I possibly talk to her today and find out if she wants to be my friend?" His uncle answered: "It is not customary to speak with her since this is the first day of your acquaintance.

[9] Cf. *Historia Gdańska* (*The History of Gdańsk*), ed. E. Cieślak, vol. II, Gdańsk 1982, p. 343.

[10] J. Ch. Pasek, *Pamiętniki* (*Diaries*), ed. Wł. Czapliński, Wrocław 1968, p. 401.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 405.

But as regards friendship, I have already understood that she would be your true friend... You do not have to doubt; if you have taken a liking, to her then she will not ignore you. You also have no reason to spurn her for she is an honest woman and a good housekeeper, whose prosperous household is kept in order"[12]. The widow proved to be equally determined as her suitor and did not want to wait until the next day for his "declaration". They both exchanged their intentions in a truly Baroque and affected manner. Of course, their dialogue became even more rounded and learned when it was written down in the diary some years later, but probably it was already originally full of metaphors, courteous expressions and circumlocutions. It is not strange, therefore, that the notebooks of the gentry (*silva rerum*) from the period are full examples of such courting speeches. They were intended as patterns for less sophisticated gentlewomen and noblemen who were incapable of composing flowery orations themselves, in case of need. To be able to speak in ornate style was considered proof of noble birth and good manners. "It would take much space to write down what was said upon this affectionate occasion", declared Pasek, having cited several pages of complicated conversation held during his courtship[13].

The final agreement was sealed with music, songs, toasts and dances. The young couple exchanged rings and asked their parents or guardians for a blessing. Naturally, when the courtship involved a young maiden, and not a widow, her duty was to show more resistance than Pasek's widowed fiancée did. A Polish writer J. H. Haur warned: "For the sake of her virginal innocence and decency, a maiden or a girl should pretend that she knows nothing about the marriage and should give no sign of consent even though her heart would be inclined to do so but entrust herself to the will of her parents"[14].

The date of the wedding was established after negotiations concerning the dowry and jointure and often, among the more affluent nobility, burghers end even rich peasants, following the signing of a detailed marriage contract. The matter–of–fact tone of those talks is vivid and additional proof of the fact that the marriage contract was of a financial nature. Even the terminology which became part of the songs that accompanied the engagement shows this material side of every marital agreement. The song which Pasek ordered his servants to intone after his completed betrothal said: "Let hope

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 405–406.

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 409.

[14] J. K. Haur, *Skład albo skarbiec znakomitych sekretów oekonomiey ziemianskiey* (*Storehouse, or Treasury of Excellent Secrets of Landed Estates*), Kraków 1693, p. 239.

bring to other's mind / various fortunes; / I shall triumph / when I have successfully made my bargain"[15].

As a rule, the wedding was not delayed unless there were special reasons for doing so, for example, if the couple were minors (marriages of royal and magnate children were arranged early on and often the betrothed were mere infants), in mourning or involved in intense seasonal farmwork. Weddings also did not take place during Lent and on Fridays. Refusals were rare since generally the proposal was preceded by a careful survey conducted by third parties. The traditional "black soup" which signified the rejection of the marriage proposal, however, was also sometimes served to an unfortunate suitor.

The wedding ceremony was preceded by ritual "girls" and "bachelors" evenings. This old custom was observed more closely in the villages, both by the petty gentry and the peasants, and was less fashionable among members of the "higher" social groups, especially in the seventeenth century. Girls gathered in the house of the bride, where they made wreaths, sang ritual songs and bade farewell to their friend. She was now becoming a member of the community of married women who enjoyed higher social esteem than young girls. The groom drank with his friends either at home or in the nearby tavern. For him too marriage denoted a transition to a new social group whose different status was connected with new duties and new rights. Although parental authority over children continued after their wedlock, in many milieus, especially urban ones, marriage turned a young person into a fully responsible individual, who, for instance, could now become a member of a guild or be a candidate for municipal citizenship. Among the nobility marriage did not constitute a *conditio sine qua non* for winning full rights, but here too unmarried persons were treated with a certain dose of disregard or compassion; for women the only alternative to marriage was the convent[16]. The work performed by the peasants, and their living conditions, made it, for all practical purposes, impossible to function as as a single person. These circumstances created a situation in which the number of single persons in Polish society during Early Modern Times was small; the most numerous instances occurred among the rural and town poor, servants, household staff, and different types of labourers for whom poverty

[15] J. Ch. Pasek, *Pamiętniki*, p. 410.

[16] This is not to say that there were no single women, especially in towns. Cf. on this subject more recently: C. Kuklo, *Kobieta samotna w miastach Europy przedprzemysłowej jako przedmiot badań historycznych* (*Single Woman in the Towns of Pre-industrial Europe as the Topic of Historical Research*), in: *Miasto, region, społeczeństwo* (*Town, Region, Society*), ed. E. Dubas-Urwanowicz and J. Urwanowicz, Białystok 1992, p. 281–294, as well as: A. Wyrobisz, *Staropolskie wzorce rodziny i kobiety-żony i matki* (*Old Polish Models of the Family and of Woman-Wife and Mother*), «Przegląd Historyczny» 1992/3, p. 405–421.

was the prime obstacle for setting up a family. The age of the newly married was quite high: demographers estimate the average for men as 25–29 years and for women as 20–25 years; of course, in praxis there were also examples of fifteen and sixteen year–old girls married to men over fifty or older. The relatively high average age of the bridegrooms resulted from the fact that in order to start a family a young person had to have at his disposal a suitable economic potential (which in the villages often depended on inheriting a farmstead belonging to elderly parents).

Each wedding attracted crowds of guests. It provided an opportunity for demonstrating family and neighbourly ties and solidarity, for interrupting the monotony of everyday life, and for establishing contacts; among the poor, it was a rather rare occasion to eat one's fill from the heavily laden tables. In many towns, communal authorities issued special restrictions as to the number of guests at wedding ceremonies, and especially the feasts, but such rules were universally ignored or outright broken (for instance, food was served for several persons simultaneously on a large platter)[17]. Magnate and gentry weddings were attended by relatives and friends who arrived from all over the country; weddings in towns gathered members of guilds and fraternities, and in the villages they attracted the entire community, together with the specially invited manorial officials, the scultetus or the village elder, the tavern–keeper, churchwarden, teacher and parish priest, in other words, the whole village "elite" which was to add splendour to the ceremony.

Not only the young couple but also the grooms, bridesmaids and all the guests wore on this occasion their best clothes. A virgin bride wore a symbolic flower wreath (which in wealthy families was often replaced by a jeweled crown) placed on loose hair (which after the wedding disappeared underneath a cap, ceremoniously put on during a special rite). Already in the sixteenth century wedding usually took place in church to which the wedding party, depending on its social rank, arrived in carriages, couches, wagons or carts — with music, songs, cheers and gun salutes; the bridegroom and grooms accompanied on horseback. In towns the retinue usually made its way to church on foot. Sametimes, especially among the Protestants, the ceremony was performed at home.

Upon leaving the church, the young couple was showered with seeds; at royal and magnate weddings coins were scattered among the onlookers "for rememberance sake". At home, the young husband and wife were welcomed with a traditional loaf of bread and a pinch of salt. All these customs dated back to pagan days and were to ensure fertility and welfare[18].

[17] Cf. M. Bogucka, *Das alte Danzig*, p. 134 ff.

The wedding was followed by a feast which lasted often several days. Its lavishness depended on the financial and social position of the young couple. Nonetheless, even the poorest families tried to spare no expenses. At royal and magnate weddings huge amounts of delicious food were offered to the guests. During the wedding feast of King Ladislas IV and Cecilia Renate in 1637, 40,000 capons and cockerels were served, as well as 20,000 geese, several hundred oxen, a variety of game and an "endless amount" of wild birds; most of the dishes seemed, however, to have been stolen, since the guests complained of insufficient servings![19] Other courses included fish, fruit, sweets and cakes and, above all, enormous amounts of alcohol. Foreign visitors in seventeenth–century Poland — Mr. Hauteville and Mr. De Beaujeu — claimed that wedding guests ate rather sparingly, despite the multitude of dishes, but drank a lot and made a great number of toasts[20]. To bypass the heavy meals was a custom prevalent only among the affluent; the poor took full opportunity to enjoy large portions of food served at weddings which contrasted with their modest everyday fare.

Sumptuous feasts were held not only at the royal court and in magnate and gentry residences but also in the house of the rich townspeople. The Frenchman Charles Ogier, invited in 1635 to a wedding of a wealthy burgher in Gdańsk, recalled that the feast lasted from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. and have been composed of a considerable number of courses. For the weddings of their sons and daughters the rich burghers of Warsaw, Poznań, Cracow and Lvov often spent 50–80 Polish zlotys, a sizeable sum in the first half of the seventeenth century. Court registers show that in the villages it was customary to slaughter a calf or a cow, for the wedding, and to serve a whole barrel of beer. In 1644 the wife of Iwan Rusinek in the village of Bielanka admitted that "she had killed a cow and brewed a barrel of beer as well as three kegs of spirits for the wedding of that girl (the daughter of her husband and thus her stepdaughter — M. B.); for her son's wedding she had prepared nine eights of a barrel of beer, three kegs of spirits and slaughtered a cow"[21]. We find many such notes pertaining to the wealthier peasants. Tables at the weddings of rural labourers and landless peasants were probably not so heavily laden but they never lacked meat, beer and the customary cake. Even two orphans, children of the late Adam Brus in the village of Kargowa were

[18] J. S. Bystroń, *Dzieje obyczajów*, vol. II, p. 119 sqq.

[19] Albrycht S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik o dziejach w Polsce* (*Diary about Polish History*), ed. A. Przyboś and R. Żelewski, Warszawa 1980, vol. II, p. 51–52.

[20] *Cudzoziemcy o Polsce. Relacje i opinie, XV–XVIII w.* (*Foreigners about Poland. Reports and Opinions, Fifteenth–Eighteenth Century*), ed. J. Gintel, Kraków 1971, vol. I, p. 310–347.

[21] *Księga sądowa kresu klimkowskiego 1600–1762* (*Court Record of the Klimków Region 1600–1762*), ed. L. Łysiak, Wrocław 1965, p. 168.

each promised "a half of a bushel for bread, a quarter of a bushel of wheat for cakes, a quart of meat, a barrel of beer and much salt as required" (1710)[22].

The feasts were accompanied by music and followed by dancing which usually lasted until late at night. The rule was to repeat this pattern for at least three days; some weddings, however, were longer and would take whole weeks. An important element of the ceremony was a procession which led the young couple to the marriage bed, together with rather bawdy songs and jokes, particularly popular among the petty gentry and peasants. In the seventeenth century in some rich homes the so–called suggar supper for older, more honoured guests was held; they were invited to it by the bridegroom or his relatives to the apartment, sometimes to the bedroom of the newly weds. Here marzipan was served and toasts were drunk in mead or sweet wine to the success of the young couple.

For the upper social strata, beginning with monarchs, a wedding was also an occasion for numerous forms of entertainment. In the sixteenth century it inevitably included tournaments and contests of the young knights; in the seventeenth century tournaments became unfashionable although some competitions were still held; for example, in 1640 a wedding of Katarzyna Radziwiłł, daughter of the mighty voivode of Vilno, with young Jerzy Karol Hlebowicz, the assistant master of the pantry of Lithuania, was enhanced by chases with spears[23]. Evenings and nights were illuminated by hundreds of fireworks and embellished by theatrical spectacles. For instance *The Dismissal of the Greek Envoys* by Jan Kochanowski, the eminent Polish Renaissance poet, was staged during the wedding of the great Polish magnate Jan Zamoyski (at that time the vice–Chancellor of the Crown) with Krystyna Radziwiłł (January 1578). It took place in the summer palace owned by Queen Ann Jagellon in Ujazdów near Warsaw. For many weddings poets composed special *carmina* which praised the splendour of families joined by marriage, lauded the virtues of the young couple and predicted happy wedded bliss. It was a habit not only at the royal court and in the residences of the magnates and nobility, but also in prosperous burgher households for speeches and orations to embellish all stages of the marriage ceremony. Such poems and speeches were frequently printed; on the other hand their innumerable versions were conscientiously included into the *silva rerum* by local noblemen.

[22] *Księga ławnicza wsi Kargowej w powiecie kościańskim 1617–1837* (*Assesor Record of the Village of Kargowa in the Country of Kościan 1617–1837*), ed. A. and A. Walawenderowie, Warszawa 1969, p. 10.

[23] A. S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik*, vol. II, p. 119.

It was customary at all levels of the social hierarchy to present the bride with precious gifts. In 1640 Katarzyna Radziwiłł received a total of 103 gifts, including 20,000 Polish zlotys from the king and a bed with a gold–threaded canopy. When in 1645 Anna Teresa, the daughter of Jerzy Ossoliński, married Zygmunt Denhoff, the starosta of Sokal, she was presented with 150 gifts "of great value", estimated jointly at 150,000 Polish zlotys![24] Among the less wealthy, the offerings were of course more modest but here too they consisted of silverware, jewelry, bales of good cloth and expensive silk etc. Even the poorest members of rural and urban communities followed the custom of giving the young couple small sums of money or offerings in kind. Each guest wanted to outshine the others, especially considering that the gifts were displayed publicly. The generosity of the guests made it possible to cover at least a part of the considerable expenses connected with the wedding.

The end ceremony of a wedding was the ritual procession in which the bride was led to the home of the bridegroom; this was an occasion for another feast, music and dances. Once again speeches, greetings and blessings were addressed to the young couple on the outset of a new stage in their lives.

Not only births and weddings were celebrated; departure from life was also an occasion for social solemnities. The instinctive need for ceremonial burial exists in almost all civilizations but it appears to be more intense in certain periods. Such an inclination can be observed in the customs which came into being in Poland during the sixteenth and in particular during the seventeenth century. This was by no means a typically Polish phenomenon since it was prevalent in all of Europe, in connection with the Baroque fascination with death.

In Early Modern Times death constituted a daily occurrence, not only witnessed on the battlefield or during public executions. The hospitals of the period were few and played mainly the role of hospices for the poor. They did not resemble modern hospitals which effectively conceal the sight of agony and death and eject it from the direct experience of society. People belonging to various strata and groups of Early Modern society usually died in their homes, surrounded by numerous members of the family, friends and neighbours. The fatally ill was therefore spared the stress of being transferred into unknown surroundings, nor did he rely on the assistance of indifferent strangers, even if from the professional point of view they could be regarded as trustworthy. Up to the very last moment the dying person's mind was occupied with preparations for that most important, as religion claimed, moment in the human life: it was time to make decisions about the

[24] *Ibidem*, p. 437.

fate of the property, to bid farewell to the family, to ask for forgiveness and to bless those who remained behind. The whole situation resembled the beginning of a journey — even if it was to be the last one — and the ceremony was similar to the one that had been repeated upon numerous occasions, when leaving home for a travel. The gestures and activities which accompanied the journey "to the other side" distracted both the dying person and those surrounding him or her from the horrors of suffering and approaching physical annihilation.

Death in those times came not only to the elderly. Small children departed from their parents, hundreds of young women passed away because of postnatal fever, wars and recurrent epidemics (the largest took place in 1515, 1523, 1527, 1528, 1529, 1542, 1543, 1549, 1550, 1555, 1556, 1559, 1568, 1571, 1572, 1580, 1620, 1622, 1623, 1624, 1625, 1627, 1628, 1629, 1630, 1635, 1641, 1645, 1652, 1657, 1658, 1677, 1678, and 1695)[25] decimated people in their prime. Consequently, death was not a distant or unfamiliar phenomenon which it would be possible to avoid in conversation and to drive from one's thoughts. Everyone came into direct contact with death's drama and its natural simplicity since the childhood.

It was daily coexistence with death — although this might appear to be a paradox — which appeased fear by turning dying into an ordinary and well–known fact of life. To a certain extent people grew accustomed to death and learnt to accept it almost as an element of everyday existence. This was particularly typical for inhabitants of the countryside who comprised about 80 per cent of the population of Poland in the period under examination; farmers regarded death as a natural state shared by man as well as by all creatures and plants. Resignation and familiarity were intertwined with a firm belief in life after death. The Church taught from every pulpit that death was but a threshold leading to eternal, better existence. People who believed deeply were expected to show more concern for the salvation of the soul than for the inevitable fate of the body. Hence the prayer rather incomprehensible for twentieth–century mentality (despite the fact that it is still said in church): "Save us from sudden and unexpected death, o Lord" — a request for "ordinary", well prepared death in one's own bed, in familiar surroundings, under the care of one's family and with the possibility of confessions and of putting all matters into order as on the eve of a journey. Hence also the stoic–heroic attitude to death, rather foreign to the contemporary man. Mikołaj Rej, an outstanding Polish Renaissance writer, ends

[25] Cf. A. Walawender, *Kronika klęsk elementarnych w Polsce i krajach sąsiednich* (*Chronicle of Natural Disasters in Poland and Neighbouring Lands*), Lwów 1932, passim. See also J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć* (*To Overcome Black Death*), Kraków 1991, passim.

his *Life of an Honest Man* with these words: "I have lived sufficiently long in this miserable world, / I have seen enough of its intricacies,/ To say together with Solomon that all is *vanitas*"[26]. For another Polish poet Jan Kochanowski, only a person who violates the directives of his conscience could be afraid of death: "My son, it is correct for an evil man to fear death / But it is not suitable for a good man to feel anxiety./ The evil man assumes that he perishes for ages to come/ While the good man knows that he will sail safely into his port"[27].

The intensity of lives in the sixteenth–seventeenth century meant that early death could not obliterate the richness of human experience. "Everything which people desire in this world / This lady experienced in her twelfth year; / She was a child, a girl, a fair maiden/, She married, gave birth and died a mother / Do not blame death for such an early loss / A grown woman lies here although a girl by age", writes Jan Andrzej Morsztyn in his *An Epitaph for a Young Lady*[28]. "It has been decreed / That every man / Must die and suffer his fate" echoed Klemens Bolesławiusz[29]. Wacław Potocki compared life to a chessboard whose black squares are governed by death "while God is the heavenly spectator and judge of the game"[30]. Death was perceived not only as the ultimate, grand force which annulled all differences, including social ones ("both little and great must rest in the grave") but also as a liberator from earthly anxieties and hardships: "The dead, having passed over, are at peace, while the living die at every moment of their lives", wrote Jan Dominik Morolski, a little–known nobleman and writer, in the first half of the seventeenth century[31].

Various metaphorical depictions of death such as departure, disappearance and sleep, which was described as "deep" and "endless" but remained a familiar element of everyday reality, were supposed to alleviate the painful final parting. Frequent use was made of a metaphor, especially close to the population of an agrarian country, of the fallen ear of grain or sowed seed[32].

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[26] M. Rej, *Zwierciadło* (*Mirror*), ed. J. Czubek and J. Łoś, Kraków 1914, vol. II, p. 385.

[27] J. Kochanowski, *Dzieła polskiej* (*Polish Works*), ed. J. Krzyżanowski Warszawa 1972, p. 592.

[28] J.A. Morsztyn, *Utwory zebrane* (*Collected Works*), ed. J. Kukulski, Warszawa 1971, p. 101.

[29] *Poeci polskiego baroku* (*Poets of the Polish Baroque*), ed. J. Sokołowska and K. Żukowska, Warszawa 1965, vol. I, p. 144.

[30] *Ibidem*, p. 29.

[31] *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 330–331.

[32] An interesting presentation of this topic is to be found in: A. Nowicka–Jeżowa, *Siedemnastowieczna poezja funeralna w kręgu tradycji renesansowej* (*Seventeenth–Century Funeral Poetry within Renaissance Tradition*), in: *Przełom wieków XVI i XVII w literaturze i kulturze polskiej* (*The Turn of the Sixteenth Century in Polish Literature and Culture*), ed. B. Otwinowska and J. Pelc, Wrocław 1984, p. 193–210.

Although the seventeenth century, together with its Baroque predilections, offered also a more drastic and dramatic comprehension of death as a menacing and grasping force which destroys the value of human existence, such extreme attitudes were not usual among ordinary people in Poland. The dominant philosophical approach towards death was stoic, and undertakings were made to "tame" it as much as possible through faith. From the end of the sixteenth century, however, there also undoubtedly grew an interest in death not solely as a terrifying end but rather as the crowning of a "virtuous life" and as an inevitable passage to a better eternal existence. Handwritten notebooks — the so–called *silva rerum* of the gentry — include often laconic notes (date and sometimes hour) of the deaths of family members (parents, children, spouses), as well as whole epitaphs, poems and graveside speeches made in honour of the dead. These compositions, however, were written down and copied not only due to a fascination with their contents or the event itself. The reason was a practical one. In the majority of cases, they served as patterns for future speeches to be given during funerals of relatives, neighbours and friends. As a rule, these extremely solemn celebrations corresponded exactly to the social status of the deceased and his family, and the appropriate speech was of great importance[33].

The bodies of distinguished persons (members of royal and magnate families) were embalmed and dressed in best clothes, placed on catafalques and displayed publicly[34]. In the houses of the nobility, burghers or even peasants, it was customary to pay last respects and to keep watch throughout the night (the so–called vigil) which was devoted to prayers and songs. Burials of plebeians took place already on the following day but affluent families delayed this ceremony by weeks, months or even years in order to prepare the funeral properly. The royal dead were transported to Cracow in a ceremonial procession and traditionally buried in the cathedral church on Wawel Hill. The bodies of the deceased magnates and the rich nobility awaited burial because of the delayed arrival of the family members who came from all over the country, or the need to build a magnificent funeral chapel. Sometimes also the bodies of members of the middle–wealthy nobility had to spend long months waiting for the burial; this gave the possibility for neighbours, relatives and acquaintances to pay their respects to the deceased.

The period directly preceding the burial was devoted to numerous vigils; rites were sometimes initiated in several churches simultaneously and

[33] Cf. M. Bogucka, *Śmierć i pogrzeb w staropolskiej kulturze* (*Death and Funeral in Old Polish Culture*), «Tygodnik Powszechny» (Kraków), 3 November 1991, p. 6–7.

[34] Cf. J. Chrościcki, *Pompa funebris*, Warszawa 1974, passim.

accompanied by the tolling of bells. Almost every *silva* contains patterns of special letters with information about the death and invitations to the funeral. Such invitations were extended not only to relatives and acquaintances but also to the clergy whose number on some occasions amounted to several hundred and included bishops and other high ranking Church dignitaries; their presence at the burial testified to the high social status of the deceased. The lay participants of the funerals were obliged to wear special clothes made of black, stiff and thickly woven fabric.

The funeral rites for monarchs and dignitaries lasted from two to four days and were inaugurated by gun salutes and the tolling of bells in all the local churches. At the same time Holy Masses were said and sermons praised the virtues of the deceased; they included panegyrical biographies as well as consolation for the closest family.

In a manner of speaking, the deceased attended the ceremonies himself because the tin coffins used in the sixteenth and seventeenth century were outfitted with a glass window at the level of the face. From the end of the sixteenth century an extremely realistic portrait retaining all the characteristic facial features, even deformations of the deceased with no attempt to flatter, was attached to the coffin. This type of funeral paintings became an important achievement of the Polish Sarmatian art. Scholars tend to connect its beginnings with the burial of the Queen Barbara Radziwiłł in the middle of the sixteenth century; it was then that "King Sigismund August ordered her portrait to be placed on the coffin so that he could gaze at his beloved wife in the course of the journey from Cracow to Vilno where she wished to be buried. This custom of portraying the dead person became soon very popular among the magnates and, subsequently, among all Polish noblemen[35].

The dead were buried according to their rank — the most eminent in churches, and the lesser ones — in church cemeteries. Only the victims of suicide, certain criminals and children baptized only "with water" were buried in unconsecrated soil, in meadows, alongside roads, or underneath a roadside shrine or cross. At times of epidemics in the environs of some larger towns, special cemeteries were established on the spot for the victims of the plague. The deceased buried in a church or in its close vicinity in some way continued to be members of the religious community; their proximity meant that during Holy Mass and other religious services the congregation of the living constantly "coexisted" with their dead.

The funeral itself, especially in the upper social strata, constituted an elaborate theatrical pageant. A magnificent architectonic construction, the

[35] Cf. M. Bogucka, *Śmierć i pogrzeb*, p. 6–7.

so–called *castrum doloris*, was raised around the catafalque. On the day of the burial special panegyrics (often beautifully printed) were handed out in church or at the cemetery. Symbolic ceremonies were carried around the coffin. During royal burials and at the funerals of dignitaries of the Commonwealth and even of the lower ranking military an archiminus, playing the role of the deceased, rode into church on horseback and collapsed from the saddle near the catafalque[36]. This custom could lead to accidents: in 1646 at the funeral of Hetman St. Koniecpolski held in the township of Brody, the horse bolted and trampled the nearby spectators[37]. The funeral ceremony contained many other dramatic gestures. Weapons and symbols of power such as lances, batons, maces and staffs (depending on the offices held by the deceased) were broken, seals were shattered, and standards were torn. During the funerals of monarchs royal coats of arms and symbols of authority of the gathered dignitaries were destroyed. The coffin of a king or magnate was followed to the grave by a procession of thousands, including the clergy, the family, military detachments, urban guilds and fraternities as well as students of local schools. They held depictions of the genealogical tree of the deceased, led horses clad in black canopies with the coats of arms of the family of the deceased, and brandished lit candles and torches. As a rule the funeral procession passed through several splendid triumphal gates which featured religious–heraldic symbols and were designed by famous architects and sculptors.

Once the coffin was deposited in the grave, hours–long farewell–laudatory speeches were given by priests, relatives and neighbours. Numerous examples of such orations are retained in many *silva rerum*. After the funeral, generous alms were handed out to the beggars; it was time to invite in ornate speeches the participants of the funeral to the feast, which was usually a luxurious meal with numerous glasses of wine to alter the solemn mood.

A funeral of a wealthy nobleman, although by no means a magnate, can be recreated thanks to the notes made by Marcin Matuszewicz who at the beginning of 1755 "busied himself" in order to "hold on 10 March a handsome funeral of his father and benefactor of blessed memory". He writes: "I brought over 324 priests *ritus latini* and 150 *ritus graeci uniti*. First day four priests: Father Buchowiecki the canon of Łuck, the custodian of Brześć, and the surrogate of the Janów consistory celebrated High Mass, while the sermon was given by Father Kamiński, a Jesuit from Lublin". This sermon, extremely lengthy, panegyrical and bristling with Baroque erudi-

[36] J. Chrościcki, *Pompa funebris*, p. 141 sqq.
[37] A. S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik*, vol. II, p. 493.

tion, is fully cited by Matuszewicz. "I myself — continues the author of the diary — gave a speech inviting to the meal... Afterwards, I went with all the guests to the manorhouse for dinner which, owing to the prolonged service that had started at 1 a.m. was served at 2.30 p.m. I treated everyone lavishly...". The feast was rich and apparently the mourners did not shy away from alcohol. "Everyone was in such high spirits that tables were too small during supper" (i.e. only a few persons were still capable of sitting at the tables by the evening — M.B.). Yet this was not the end of the celebrations. "On the following day", continues Matuszewicz, "the second day of the funeral, service began at 1 a.m. High Mass was celebrated by the Marist General Rector, Father Kanobrodzki, and the sermon was given by Father Ludwik, another Marist clergyman. Once again I invited all the present guests and clergy to the manor for dinner. After the meal, I began paying the monastic orders and the secular clergy as well as the Uniate presbyters. On the first day I gave *gratitudinis ergo* five half–zlotys for the Holy Mass and one Hungarian florin for the vigils sung by the monks. The lay prelates and the parish priests received each *pro dignitate* a sum of Hungarian florins appropriate to his rank, and the Uniate presbyters — three half–zlotys on the first day. On the second day, the Latin priests were paid three half–zlotys for Holy Mass, and a single Hungarian florin for the vigils, while the Uniate presbyters got two half–zlotys. When I had no more money, I borrowed from my brother, the Colonel, some 80 Hungarian florins. Mereover, I had to pay for the food and drink of the guests and their servants, and treated everyone to the utmost of my abilities. I also made arrangements to provide bread, vegetables, beer, oil and herrings for the monks staying in town and for their servants, as well as hay and oats for their horses. I paid the receipts given to my tavernkeepers. In this manner, I held a two–day funeral for the greater glory of the Lord God and for the salvation of my most beloved father and special *benefactor*, second only to God. Various guests stayed for another several days, and *tandem* departed"[38].

Ostentatiously simple funerals were a rare occurrence and they were always the result of special postulates formulated in the testament. Exceptionally pious magnates requested to be buried without needless ceremonies, speeches or costly architectonic constructions, and at times wished to be dressed for the coffin in a humble monastic garb. On 21 July 1633 Albrycht S. Radziwiłł noted down with approval: "The funeral of the voivode of Vilno (Lew Sapieha) was truly Christian. The bier was covered with black cloth. Also the church of the St. Michael nuns (the Bernardine nuns, in Bernar-

[38] M. Matuszewicz, *Diariusz życia mego* (*The Diary of My Life*), ed. B. Królikowski, Warszawa 1986, vol. I, p. 476–504.

dyńska Street — M.B.) was decorated with identical cloth, which reached all the way up to the windows; there was no catafalque, no numerous candles, nor was a horse led into the church. These are barbarian inventions, borrowed from foreign funerals". Nonetheless, there were gun salutes and trumpeters played a "mournful tune". A feast was also held[39].

The anniversary of death was marked by ceremonies whose grandeur frequently equalled that of the funeral. The first anniversary was particularly opulent. The memory of the dead was commemorated by magnificent tombstones or epitaphs placed in churches if the latter were the site of the burial[40]. Coats of arms, portraits and inscriptions removed from coffins were usually installed on church walls. In this way, sacral buildings often turned into mausolea, with a gallery of portraits and sculptures depicting members of local magnate and noble families.

The splendour of magnate and gentry funerals was imitated by wealthy townspeople; only Protestants observed greater moderation limiting the decoration of the catafalque and the number of candles, as well as prohibiting flowers.

The splendour of an urban funeral depended greatly on the position held by the deceased and his family in the social structure of the town — it decided about the number of churches in which the bells were to toll, the number of congregations (fraternities, guilds) which took part in the procession, the number of priests and monks attending, the alms for the poor, and, finally, the number of guests and the type of the feast to which they were invited. Even the not so wealthy tried, however, to prepare their funerals ahead of time by, for example, making the necessary payments to the guilds whose members would enhance the procession by their presence; special sums were mentioned in testaments for the school boys who were to sing during the ceremonies, and decisions were made as regards alms to be paid to the poor in return for watch kept during prayers and vigils[41]. The more prosperous peasants were also greatly concerned with the observation of the traditional funeral ceremonies (the vigil over the deceased, mass in church

[39] A.S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik*, vol. I, p. 321–322.

[40] Cf. K. Cieślak *Kościół — cmentarzem. Sztuka nagrobna w Gdańsku (XV–XVIII w.)* (*The Church as a Cemetery. Funeral Art in Gdańsk. Fifteenth–Eighteenth Century*), Gdańsk 1992, passim; B. Rok, *Zagadnienie śmierci w kulturze Rzeczypospolitej czasów saskich* (*The Problem of Death in the Culture of the Polish Commonwealth under the Saxon Dynasty*), Wrocław 1991, especially p. 162 sqq.

[41] Cf. M. Bogucka, *Tod und Begrabnis der Armen. Ein Beitrag zu Danzigs Alltagsleben im 17. Jh*, «Zeitschrift für Ostforschung», 41 Jg., 1992, Heft 3, p. 321–331; eadem, *Śmierć niezamożnego mieszkańca miasta u progu ery nowożytnej* (*The Death of a Non-wealthy Town Resident at the Threshold of the Modern Era*), in: *Czas, przestrzeń, praca w dawnych miastach* (*Time, Space, Labour in Old Towns*), ed. A. Wyrobisz and W. Tymowski, Warszawa 1991, p. 285–290.

and, of course, the feast which had to include meat, bread and beer). Magnates spent entire fortunes on funerals — tens and hundreds of thousands of Polish zlotys; in the poorer strata the entire inheritance was sometimes used to cover the costs of the burial. Everybody wished to embellish this important passage from earthly existence to a better, eternal one. The thought about death itself was probably less horrifying to the people of Early Modern Times than the possibility of a hurried burial without appropriate ceremonies and crowds of participants.

Human life in the Polish society of the Early Modern Times was thus framed by three great breakthroughs which, similarly to the *rites de passage* in all cultures, became surrounded with rituals and elevated to the rank of great spectacles. Baptism denoted access to the two types of community — to the Christian religious unity as well as to the local society of a village or a town; marriage signified a transition to a group of mature people and funeral completed earthly existence, at the same time inaugurating eternal life. Ceremonies which accompanied these breakthrough moments were basically similar in all social groups; of course, the scale of their cost and the degree of their opulence varied, but their essence was identical. It came down to a ritual initiation of consecutive stages in life which despite all the social differences, determined the bare rhythm of human existence.

(*Translated by Aleksandra Rodzińska–Chojnowska*)