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THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE OLD POLISH WORLD:  
PATRIARCHALISM AND THE FAMILY.  
INTRODUCTION INTO THE PROBLEM

Patriarchalism was the foundation of the old Polish world structure. The family dominated by the father and husband was the basic social unit in all social groups. This patriarchal model was repeated in other larger organisms of the old Polish world, shaping them in a specific way. The whole of this world was built in accordance with the patriarchal schedule. God was imagined as a father who loved his disobedient children, the people, but who would also punish them in justified anger. The king was to be the father of the Polish Commonwealth, the nobleman a father to his serfs who owed him filial obedience and humble respect. The craftsmen's workshops and merchants' enterprises in towns were organized on similar, patriarchal principles. This system formed a strong cohesive whole for it created additional inter-human ties; it strongly attached the serf to his lord and the labourer to his employer while at the same time easing the tensions which might have arisen between them.

In old Polish the word "family" meant at first a community of blood relatives, a lineage or kinship, but already at the dawn of the modern age it came to denote an entity separate from the lineage and kinship, an entity which from that time on was to play an extremely important role in the functioning of society. In the 16th and 17th centuries the family was more expanded horizontally than vertically. It rarely comprised more than two generations (parents — children), but it was spread breadthwise, comprising the usually numerous siblings and crowds of nearer and more distant cousins and relatives. This expanded family, the "large" one, as demographers call it, was the continuator of the medieval lineage. What distinguished and united the nuclear (conjugal) family was life under the same roof and joint housekeeping<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The question of the family in old Poland has recently been discussed by: M. Koczarska, *Rodzina szlachecka w Polsce późnego średniowiecza (The Noble Family in Late Medieval Poland)*, Warszawa 1975; C. Kukło, *Rodzina w osiemnastowiecznej Warszawie (The Family in 18th Century Warsaw)*, Białystok 1991; H. Samsonowicz, *La famille noble et la famille bourgeoise en Pologne aux XIII<sup>e</sup> — XV<sup>e</sup> siècles*, in: *Famille et parenté dans l'Occident médiéval*, Rome 1977, pp. 309–317; A. Wyrobisz, *Staropolskie wzorce rodziny i kobiety — żony i matki (Old Polish Models of Family and Woman — Wife and Mother)*, «Przegląd Historyczny», 1992, no. 3; A general survey of questions concerning townsmen's families has been written by M. Bogucka, *Die städtische Familie in Polen während des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Ehe, Liebe, Tod. Studien zur Geschichte des Alltags*, vol. I, P. Borscheid und H. J. Teuteberg, Münster 1983, pp. 233–244.

The husband, the wife (parents) and their children constituted the core of this nuclear (conjugal) family, but frequently, especially in wealthier groups in town and country, the nuclear or conjugal family also included various resident relatives and servants. Consequently, it is estimated that in the 16th and 17th centuries the average nobleman's family had about 8–15 members (many more in magnatial houses), a wealthy townsman's one 6–8. Poor families in town and peasant families, having no servants and fewer children, were less numerous (the former consisted of 3 and even 2.5 persons on the average, the latter of 4 persons)<sup>2</sup>.

The family performed very broad functions, from procreative to economic ones; it was also the natural environment giving support for the individual, determining his social place and offering the sense of security (mutual aid in need and in case of illness, etc.). Family ties were very strong, especially in the upper social strata in which an important role was played by matters concerning property and the sense of honour linked to the membership of the nobility or the urban patriciate. They were much weaker in families of poor social strata, which were unable to provide an adequate social and material support for their members.

The family had an inner hierarchy determining, to a large extent, the relations between its members. In this respect the most important for a two-generation family was the relationship between husband and wife, which to a large extent depended on the general position of woman in old Polish society.

It is not easy to define this position. The conclusions drawn from old Polish literature, whether written by noblemen or plebeians, may be deceptive, for literature was exceptionally strongly permeated with misogyny. The Renaissance emancipation movement then in progress in the whole of Europe was barely noticeable in Poland. The only exception was Andrzej Glaber, who demanded that women be given access to education, arguing that intellectually, they were not on a lower level than men. This writer from Great Poland asserted in the 1530s that men were afraid "lest women should overtake them with brain power" and were therefore against educating them on a par with boys. "But why should these poor creatures be spurned and treated as more ignoble creatures than men?", asked the writer. According to him: "The girls' constitution is very subtle and their ability to learn and understand all things is sharp and quick"<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Izydorczyk, *Rodzina chłopska w Małopolsce w XV–XVI wieku (The Peasant Family in Little Poland in the 15th and 16th Centuries)*, in: *Spółeczeństwo staropolskie*, ed. A. Wyczański, vol. III, Warszawa 1983, pp. 7–27; M. Koczerska, *Rodzina szlachecka*, p. 90 ff.; C. Kukło, *The Family in 18th Century Warsaw. Demographic Studies*, «Acta Poloniae Historica», vol. XLI, 1990, pp. 141–159; E. Piasecki, *Charakterystyka demograficzna dawnej rodziny polskiej (A Demographic Characterization of the Old Polish Family)*, in: «Przeszłość demograficzna Polski», vol. XIV, 1983, pp. 99–121; I. Waszak, *Dzieńność rodziny mieszczańskiej w XVI–XVII w. i ruch naturalny ludności miasta Poznania w końcu XVI i w XVII w. (The Number of Children in Urban Family in the 16th and 17th Centuries and the Natural Movement of the Population of the Town of Poznań at the End of the 16th and in the 17th Century)*, «Roczniki dziejów społecznych i gospodarczych», vol. XIV, Poznań 1954, pp. 316–384.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted after M. Bogućka, *Nicholas Copernicus. The Country and Times*, Wrocław 1973, p. 142.

But another writer, Andrzej Frycz–Modrzewski, declared himself as a determined anti–feminist. Chapter XXI of the book *On Customs* in his work *On the Improvement of the Commonwealth* bears the significant title “Women should not meddle in public affairs”. This is a brief but terse chapter. “It should be brought about that women, whom God has put under the rule of men, are not admitted to public affairs”, says Frycz. “Shame on those men who, while regarding themselves worthy of public dignities, never do anything but at the suggestion of women... There is no doubt that women are born for the spindle and he who has painted Venus trampling a tortoise indicated thereby that they should be vested with concern for household matters, not public ones. The Roman laws, too, forbade women access to offices”.<sup>4</sup> The nobility, whose way of thinking was similar to that of Frycz’s, sincerely hated the queens who, like Bona in the 16th century and Marie–Louise in the 17th, wanted to carry out reforms beneficial to the state, and interfered in politics, wishing to strengthen royal power. Epithets were cast at them, they were derided in vulgar poems and in anecdotes which nobody would have dared to spread about their husbands. The fact that both queens were foreigners naturally increased the nobility’s dislike.

Marriages were usually contracted without the girl concerned being asked for consent; it was not until she was a widow that a woman acquired a sufficiently independent status to take decisions concerning her fate. To what extent a woman’s fate depended on her age and status can be learned from a playful poem eagerly copied in 17th century family repertories (the so–called *silva rerum*):

*Bread for girls, cakes for married women, marzipan for widows, scraps of food for crones,  
Cheese for girls, milk for married women, cream for widows, and whey for crones,  
Apples for girls, pears for married women, oranges for widows and wild apples for crones,  
Mead for girls, wine for married women, malmsey for widows and slops for crones,  
A cart for girls, a chariot for married women, a carriage for widows and a wheelbarrow for crones,  
The world for girls, paradise for married women, heaven for widows and hell for crones*<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to underlining the advantages connected with youth, which gives a woman good looks and thus embellishes her lot (the sad “scraps” from the table fall to old women, the crones), the poem emphasized the widow’s excellent position, which was better than the situation of a girl or a married woman; it was the widow who ate oranges and drank sweet malmsey.

<sup>4</sup> A. Frycz–Modrzewski, *O poprawie Rzeczypospolitej (On the Improvement of the Commonwealth)*, Warszawa 1953, p. 193.

<sup>5</sup> The Czartoryski Library in Cracow, MS 1657, Mf 9163, p. 146.

The wife's situation depended, to a great extent, on the dowry (the marital dot or the so-called portion) she had brought into her husband's house and on the family she was descended from (preference was given to marriages between persons from the same social strata). The only daughters of rich families were in great demand on the matrimonial market for they frequently brought their husbands large landed estates as portions. Too great a dowry could have been a curse; the tragic fate of the famous Halszka from Ostróg (second half of the 16th century), abducted, married contrary to her will and imprisoned because she was the heiress to an enormous estate, was significant. However, abductions were not a frequent occurrence and were sometimes carried out with the tacit agreement of the girl who wanted to get out of her family's tutelage, marry the man for whom she had a liking and sometimes to escape being sent to a nunnery. For there were cases when the parents did not want to diminish the fortune destined for their sons by the payment of a dowry, and therefore decided to send their daughter to a convent, the admission to which was sometimes cheaper than having her married.

As a rule, however, the son (or sons) were given immovables while the daughters received smaller or larger dowries consisting of movables<sup>6</sup>. These comprised, first and foremost, cash and also silver, jewellery, clothing, bed linen and furniture. This was the practice not only in noblemen's but also in townsmen's families (the son usually received the house and allotments, while the daughter cash and various movables) and in peasant families, in which the dowry usually consisted of livestock (a cow, a calf, a pig, sheep, hens, etc.) as well as of clothes and various household utensils. As if in return for the dowry the husband offered the newly-wed wife a counter-gift (Lat.: *dotalicium*). In richer circles the *dotalicium* (sometimes called morning gift, Polish: *wiano*) was secured by the settlement of some of the husband's property on the wife, as the so-called jointure (Lat.: *reformatio*). In poorer circles in town and country it was listed in a document entered into court records as a safeguard against dispute. After the husband's death, the widow was entitled to take over this part of her deceased husband's property before the settlement of other inheritance claims.

However, it was not only the material situation that determined a woman's position in marriage and in the family. Much depended on the husband's character, and especially on the character, energy and wisdom of the woman herself, on the place which she succeeded in winning in the family. The results varied. There were many marriages ill-matched in age (young girls married to old men, which sometimes had a bad end for the old husband, as is shown by hetman Stanisław Koniecpolski's premature death in mid-17th century, caused by an overdose of aphrodisiacs); or by the husband's character, there were cases

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. Adamus, *O prawie dziedziczenia nieruchomości przez kobiety w najdawniejszym prawie polskim (On Women's Right to Inherit Immovable Property in the Oldest Polish Law)*, «Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne», vol. XI, 1959, no. 1, *passim*; M. Koczerska, *Rodzina szlachecka*, p. 42 ff.

of wives being maltreated by their brutal, sadistic husbands, wives who were too weak to resist such practices. A drastic example is the fate of Katarzyna née Starołęska, wife of the *starosta* of Nowy Targ, Mikołaj Ossoliński. From the day of her marriage in 1649 she was for years treated like a slave, frequently beaten and kicked, kept in isolation, degraded and humiliated. The marriage ended tragically; Katarzyna organized a plot on her husband's life and had him murdered. But there were also shrews and drinking women who were a plague to their husbands and made married life a nuisance. A note in a family book says:

*A painted portrait of my wife  
She's similar, as if alive  
But one big change soon comes to light  
This one is sober, the other tight*<sup>7</sup>.

A note in another family book is an extensive description of a good and a bad wife in rhymed Latin with the conclusion:

*Mulier mala virorum naufragium*<sup>8</sup>.

The type of woman known as *virago* was quite frequent in the old Polish Commonwealth. In his diary Jan Chryzostom Pasek immortalized Mrs. Sułkowska, who having first reviled King John Casimir, had succeeded in getting 2,000 zlotys from him for a wood worth no more than 50<sup>9</sup>. This type also had some worthy representatives, like the famous Dorota Chrzanowska, who, defended the fortress at Trembowla against the Turks in the 17th century, or her contemporary Teofila Chmielecka, who fought bravely against the Tartars at the side of her husband. The old Polish society respected strong, courageous, energetic women. This is what the diarist Marcin Matuszewicz wrote in the 18th century of Helena Ogińska, the Wilno voivode's daughter: "a beautiful and wise lady, of such great strength that she was able to break a horseshoe"<sup>10</sup>. Many husbands asked their wives' opinion before taking a decision and some not only respected their spouses but were even a little afraid of them. In the house of the famous hetman Jan Karol Chodkiewicz (early 17th century) it was his energetic spouse, who held sway while the dauntless warrior, as is evident in his letters to her, did his best not to offend or anger his dearest Sophie<sup>11</sup>.

Theoretically, it was housekeeping, care of the pantry and the dairy (dairy production), the poultry-house and the garden that was the woman's domain. The women's traditional occupations also included spinning, weaving, sewing and adorning clothes, bed linen and table-cloths with embroidery. But in fact, a woman's world was not so restrained in practice.

<sup>7</sup> The Czartoryski Library in Cracow, MS 1657, Mf. 9163, p. 288.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, MS 377, Mf. 11652, p. 106.

<sup>9</sup> J. Pasek, *Pamiętniki (Diary)*, ed. W. Czapliński, Wrocław 1968, pp. 353–355.

<sup>10</sup> M. Matuszewicz, *Diariusz życia mego (The Diary of My Life)*, ed. B. Królikowski, Warszawa 1986, vol. II, p. 315.

<sup>11</sup> *Listy staropolskie z epoki Wazów (Old Polish Letters from the Reigns of the Vasas)*, ed. H. Małewska, Warszawa 1959, p. 104 ff.

The women's main occupation was the upbringing of children; women were expected not only to look after them but also to shape their character and mind. The mother brought up not only her daughters but also sons; it was not customary then (as it had been in the early Middle Ages) to put the boys under the father's exclusive rule and care when they were seven years old. Despite the patriarchal rule, the mother's influence on the children was enormous in the old Polish home. It was the mother who was their first teacher; it was she who indicated and explained the secrets of life to them, formulated interdictions and commands, and introduced them into the world of norms and principles governing the old Polish society. The woman also played an important role in contacts between the nobleman's manor house and the peasants; she was the person to whom they came for help and advice, she looked after them when they were ill, she taught them and settled small disputes, and she was frequently an intermediary between the serfs and their lord. We do not know much about the women's educational and intellectual level, but recent research has shown that noble women were by no means simpletons. Many of them could read and even write (letters of women from the 16th and 17th centuries have survived) and conducted quite an extensive correspondence. Their mental horizons were of course limited, with matters of the home, the family and the neighbours playing the dominant role, but they were also interested in the outside world and felt the need to gather information on it or even to travel (in addition to visits to relatives, pilgrimages were a very popular form of travel).

Women took an active part in running manorial estates. In this respect their role was all the greater as their husbands were frequently absent, having to attend the dietines, the Sejm, tribunals or take part in a war. In towns, many women participated in retail trade and frequently, as widows, ran artisan shops, inns and tap-rooms or did auxiliary work in various branches of handicrafts and services. Their role in usury and credit operations was also well established. In the countryside women not only did the housework but also worked in the fields alongside men. Their role in the economy was thus enormous, and in many cases it was thanks to them that the family existed. This exerted an influence on women's position in the family and in conjugal life<sup>12</sup>.

But marriage also means emotional ties. What was love like in old Poland? As a matter of fact, we do not know much about it. It is a fact, however, that Poland lacked the tradition of troubadours and courtly love which has left permanent traces in the culture and mentality of Western Europe, from the Tristram and Iseult legend to Petrarch's love for Laura and Dante's love for Beatrice. We would seek in vain for examples of such feelings in 16th and 17th century Poland, except for King Sigismund Augustus' great love for Barbara Radziwiłł, a love which because it was so completely strange on our soil, met

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. Bogucka, *Women and Economic Life in the Polish Cities during the 16th–17th Centuries*, in: *La donna nell' economia secc. XIII–XVIII*, ed. S. Cavaciocchi, Prato 1990, pp. 185–194; A. Izydorezyk–Kamler and A. Wyczański, *La femme et l' économie rurale en Pologne aux XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> s.s.*, *ibidem*, pp. 275–282.

with general misunderstanding and condemnation. Love is almost absent from old Polish family books and when we find in them a poem or an epigram on this subject, it is usually rather primitive and naively sensual. Nor have many love letters survived. Two models seem to have existed in old Polish love: 1. a relationship based not so much on erotism as on common interest and respect, even friendship; hence the frequent description of the spouse, especially the wife, as a “friend”; 2. a model with the predominance of the erotic element, based on sexual attraction. In practice, the two models were frequently mixed.

Already Mikołaj Rej advised men in the 16th century to seek “a kind-hearted wife raised in the fear of God”, and warned against a love-match; his recommendation was to look for “a comrade” of equal social status and fortune, “with a sagacious upbringing and training, and comely manners”. Nothing was better in his opinion than a harmonious marriage. “Every experience, every illness, every hardship is necessarily lighter than it is to other people when by a graceful admonition they gladden, save and help each other as best they can. Then always a double joy and a double sorrow walk together”.

In Rej’s opinion, in addition to common joys and sorrows, the joint work of a couple gave more satisfaction and the home was cosy and well looked after thanks to the good wife. “The two rake the earth, trim and prune bushes, graft trees and transplant herbs: what a lot to do, but there is the will to see to it and look after everything. And when you come home, everything is nice and tidy; a bite, though small, is well and tastefully prepared. A white table cloth, a spoon, a little bowl prettily adorned, a comely loaf of bread, tastefully seasoned vegetables, groats, fat chickens. Whichever corner you look into, everything is nice, everything seems to be smiling and everything is more graceful than what another man may be offered in three large bowls”<sup>13</sup>. There must have been many such harmonious couples, jointly feathering their nest, with the husband and wife supporting each other by help and advice, and it is they that set an example. One of the married couples in which both spouses constituted a good team and confided in each other were the Chodkiewiczzes, Jan Karol and Zofia. The extant correspondence testifies to the composed feelings uniting them. “My dearest Zosieńka, my only one, my beloved soul”, wrote the hetman to his wife, telling her of his troubles and problems<sup>14</sup>. Another husband, Chancellor Lew Sapieha, writing to his wife, also at the beginning of the 17th century, presented not so much his feelings as the most important events of the war campaign<sup>15</sup>. Several score years later King John III Sobieski sent similar reports from the battlefield to his wife, but his letters were permeated with eroticism<sup>16</sup>. The marriage of the Sobieskis belonged rather to the erotic-sensual model than to the “comradely”

<sup>13</sup> M. Rej, *Zwierciadło (The Mirror)*, ed. J. Czubek and J. Łoś, Kraków 1914, vol. I, pp. 106–111.

<sup>14</sup> *Listy staropolskie*, p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jan Sobieski, *Listy do Marysieńki (Letters to Mary)*, ed. L. Kukulski, Warszawa 1962, *passim*.

model represented by the Chodkiewiczzes, the Sapiehas and many other couples. This does not mean that the comradely model excluded the existence of emotional ties between the spouses; their letters and other documents are proof of deep attachment and even tenderness.

Examples of attachment as the basis of the relationship between husband and wife can be found not only in sources concerning the nobility. As correspondence and last wills show, there was also much mutual tenderness, respect and attachment in townsmen's marriages, even though they were mostly contracted for financial reasons. The spouses frequently made each other legacies and demises, stressing that they were doing this out of mutual love and because of the many years lived together. Such legacies also figure in village court records, testifying to the fact that marital affection was also present under thatched roofs<sup>17</sup>.

And yet widows and widowers consoled themselves very quickly after the loss of their spouse and contracted new marriages, sometimes several times. Albrycht S. Radziwiłł, who so emotionally described the last moments of his wife's life in April 1637 and was broken-hearted during the first few weeks of his widowerhood, confessed with disarming frankness on October 6 of the same year: "Having taken off the veil of grief after the recent demise of my wife, I let myself be persuaded to marry that girl (Katarzyna Potocka — M. B.)"<sup>18</sup>. In many cases life itself made a new marriage a necessity: the lack of the mother and wife made the upbringing of small children difficult. In poorer circles (especially among townsmen) the loss of the father and husband created difficulties in running a business or an artisan shop and so an early remarriage was advisable. Among the peasants every pair of hands counted, for the lack of the wife (or husband) meant an additional work for the other members of the family. But even when there was no specific urgent need, the widows and widowers were in a hurry to remarry. The average length of a marriage was short: 8–10 years. Does this mean that the emotional ties between the spouses were weak and superficial or does it testify to the rational attitude of all the social strata? It is difficult to reply to this question, but it is a fact that, on the whole, people agreed to what was inevitable without greater objection and subordinated themselves to fate without rebelling; this rational reconciliation with fate was undoubtedly promoted by ardent religious feelings which implied that acceptance of all the decrees of Providence was the only proper attitude of a Christian.

Did extramarital love exist and if so, to what extent? Another question which is difficult to answer. In the old Polish moral code faithfulness was absolutely obligatory for women (this severe prescription resulted from the

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, in 1702 Semen Barniak bequeathed to his wife, Oryna, several measures of grain "out of affection and love for her", *Księga sądowa kresu klimkowskiego 1600–1672 (Court Records of the District of Klimków 1600–1672)*, ed. L. Łysiak, Wrocław 1965, p. 344.

<sup>18</sup> Albrycht S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik o dziejach w Polsce (A Diary on History in Poland)*, ed. A. Przyboś and R. Żelowski, Warszawa 1980, vol. II, pp. 31, 61.

desire to ensure the legitimacy of the offspring), but the code was more indulgent for men. Hence the spread of paid prostitution in towns, and even its legalised forms tolerated by the municipal authorities (brothels run by an executioner, the obligation imposed on prostitutes to wear distinguishable clothing and perform some services for the communes, e.g. participate in the extinguishing of fires). Dozens of “wanton” women always followed army troops, visited the towns where the *Sejm* or an election was held (Warsaw, Cracow, Lublin) and where markets and dietines took place, attended fairs and came to large port towns (Gdańsk, Elbląg) during the navigation season. In the countryside, where control over the individual was strong because of the small number of inhabitants and the closeness of neighbours, prostitution *sensu stricto*, that is, professional, was rare. Punishment or even the expulsion of girls of easy virtue from villages is of course mentioned in court records, but such cases were rare. More frequent was punishment for the “sin” of cohabitation, but this cannot be regarded as professional prostitution. Young people, who for material reasons were able to contract a legal marriage rather late in life, succumbed to the call of nature. This happened particularly frequently among farm hands and hired wenches, who often slept in the same room. It also happened that the farmer took advantage of his servant or that the farmer’s wife betrayed her old husband with a young farm hand. If caught, the adulterers were punished by flogging (20–30 lashings) or were fined; sometimes they also had to offer wax to the church for candles and during the confession the priest would impose on them additional fasting e.g. on Wednesdays or Tuesdays. The parents of licentious young people were also punished. For instance, in 1702 Maryna and Fenia, the daughters of Mitrycha from Leszczyny, were sentenced to get 30 lashings each for “the indecorous sin” and Iwan Czychranik who had slept with them was sentenced to 20 (a milder sentence for the man) while the mother was to give a pound of wax to the local Orthodox church for “having badly trained her daughters”<sup>19</sup>. When it was discovered at Jazowsk in 1748 that a farmer’s wife had been sleeping with a farm hand, the husband was punished, alongside the culprits, for not having kept an eye on his wife<sup>20</sup>. Some extramarital unions continued for years; in the same Jazowsk a yeoman was called to account in 1748 for having slept with his servant for 16 years<sup>21</sup>. A more severe punishment than flogging and a moderate fine was meted out only if the sin of adultery was combined with other offences (e.g. infanticide, suspected intention of killing the legal spouse, incest); in such cases the accused was sentenced to the block or stake<sup>22</sup>.

Offences against marital faithfulness were much more frequent in towns, where in view of the greater number of inhabitants there was more sexual

<sup>19</sup> *Księga sądowa kresu klimkowskiego*, pp. 356–357.

<sup>20</sup> *Księgi sądowe wiejskie klucza jazowskiego 1663–1808 (Village Court Records of the Jazów Demesne 1663–1808)*, ed. S. Grodziski, Warszawa 1967, p. 154.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 153.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79–81, 90–92.

freedom since life was more anonymous and the possibility of social control smaller. But such control did exist (inquisitive neighbours) and sexual offences were quite frequently tried by municipal courts. Female servants were often taken advantage of by their employers and the fact of illegal cohabitation was revealed only when the girl became pregnant and gave birth to a child. In such cases the responsibility as a rule fell on the girl, who would lose her job and the roof over her head and would often end as a prostitute. A wealthy merchant or craftsman would escape punishment.

Extramarital relations also occurred among the nobility, but they must have been greatly hampered by the expanded social control over morals. At a mag-natial court a young courtier might take liberties with a maid of honour (such a pair is mentioned by A. S. Radziwiłł: “having promised each other marriage, they frequently got ahead of the marriage ceremony in the hope that they will get married”)<sup>23</sup>, but it was difficult to conceal this for a long time. In manor houses, young girls were too closely watched to be seduced without abduction. Noble married women guarded their virtue quite well of necessity, though cases of marital infidelity did of course occur; W. Łoziński mentions them quite often in his book on the basis of court records. A faithless wife exposed herself to her husband’s cruel revenge, which was approved of by public opinion, only to mention the fate of Mrs. Falbowska, referred to with satisfaction in Pasek’s diary: “But the circumstances of the suffering are not fit to be described here, in particular the suffering inflicted by specially prepared spurs, deliberately fastened somewhere round the knees. *Sufficit*, that this was a significant and famous example of how to punish profligate persons and bring them to their senses”<sup>24</sup>. Of course an unfaithful husband escaped punishment, but the lover of a noblewoman risked the danger of revenge from a member of the family (husband, brother, father) whose honour had been impaired.

A harmonious marriage, based on mutual respect, was the ideal. “And if you want her to be faithful to you, modest, sober and accountable in everything, be the same towards her, show her how to behave and do not set her a bad example. For this is an old saying: do not do to others what you would not like to be done to yourself”, wrote Rej<sup>25</sup>. The law, that is, the village court, unchangeably advised quarrelling peasant couples to live in concord and love. It did happen, of course, that a husband left his wife and vice versa. Formal separations and divorces were known among magnates and the more prosperous nobility; in poorer circles, in both town and country, ill-matched couples simply parted. This seldom led to a case in court. In 1621, for instance, a woman from Warsaw stated that she had not lived together with her husband for 11 years for he “lives in debauchery with apes” (prostitutes) and that she had left the house “so that he should not completely remove me from this world, for he has already

<sup>23</sup> Albrycht S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik*, vol. II, p. 451.

<sup>24</sup> J. Pasek, *Pamiętniki*, p. 304.

<sup>25</sup> M. Rej, *Zwierciadło*, p. 117.

ordered to maim and blind me”<sup>26</sup>. Cases of desertion also figure in village court records. In 1743 a case was heard at Jazowsk on “the rupture” between Jakub Wielowski and his wife Zofia née Czajczonka. “And since the mentioned Wielowski couple, though admonished in courts for not living in concord, have not come to their senses, and since in particular the wife Zofia abandons her husband for a trivial reason and stays away for several weeks leaving a little child at home, forgetting the oath she took not to leave him until death etc., and since even a beast does not forget its offspring while she, acting against nature, has dared to leave her husband and child, it is ruled that for such fickleness and violation of God’s commandments the said Zofia should be given 30 lashings, that she should live with her husband in concord and love, and that the husband should honestly dwell with her and not reproach her under pain of 60 lashings and that he should give the court a fine for its work”<sup>27</sup>. Poor people’s marriages in towns broke up the most easily and the most frequently; nobody controlled the cohesion of such marriages and their break-up did not impair anybody’s interests, except those of the parties concerned.

The question of parent–children relationship has for some time been attracting the interest of historians, especially in France and Great Britain. It has recently been frequently asserted that because of the high death rate of infants and small children, parents were cold towards their offspring and were not emotionally involved<sup>28</sup>. Polish evidence seems to deny this theory. To begin with, it was not customary in Poland to give infants away to peasant houses for upbringing, as was practised by the aristocracy and rich gentry in France and England. As a rule, Polish women breastfed their children; wet nurses were called in only if the woman had no milk or died. The very fact that the infant was given personal care and that the stages of its development were watched from the day of its birth would indicate that maternal and paternal feelings must have arisen in the parents in the natural way. We have lots of direct evidence to prove this. Rej, who was very rational and by no means sentimental, praised the joys of parenthood: “What joy and delight it is when the kids, these born little clowns, come in, when running round the table they twitter like birds and play pranks. One of them will take something and hand it to the other rejoicing all the time and laughing like the best clown. And when the child starts speaking it will say whatever comes to its mind... And looking at their offspring how can they (parents — M.B.) fail to praise God? How can they fail to thank Him?”<sup>29</sup> The diarist Pasek, describing the ups and downs of his marital life, says that he took an interest in a widow because of her daughter, hoping that God would bless his union “with a boy”; his longing for offspring, his tender attitude to

<sup>26</sup> Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw (henceforward referred to as CAHR, section Stara Warszawa (Old Warsaw) 545, k. 369a.

<sup>27</sup> *Księgi sądowe wiejskie klucza jazowskiego, op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800*, London 1977, pp. 100 ff.

<sup>29</sup> M. Rej, *Zwierciadło*, vol. I, p. 111.

children is clearly evident here<sup>30</sup>. The death of a child was of course a “normal” thing in the old Polish family, as far as frequency was concerned. The parents accepted this as they accepted other decrees of Providence, comforting themselves with the maxim of deeply religious people: God has given, God has taken. But this does not mean that they felt no grief at the child’s death. 17th and 18th century hand-books for confessors include a characteristic question which was to be put especially to women: Did you not grieve excessively over the death of your child? Did you not rebel against God on that account? References to a child’s death in family books or at the end of prayer books are as a rule very laconic, but such was the style of all family notes at that time, also those concerning joyful events, like births or weddings. This was simply a convention stemming from lack of skill in expressing personal feelings, a convention which was also connected with the way the notes were made: the entries on the last pages of a prayer book or the Bible had to be short because of the limited space. This convention was then adopted in family books and repertories (*silva rerum*).

The death of a child was felt painfully, as is testified to not only by the Renaissance poet, Jan Kochanowski’s famous stanzas devoted to his deceased daughter. The presence of children in epitaphs, the development of portraits of children among the nobility and townsmen, show that parents felt the need to immortalize the look of the lost child, its individual unrepeatable features. The epitaph of Adelgunda Zappio, who died at the age of 10 in Gdańsk in the mid-17th century, expressed the hope of the bereaved parents that they would meet their child on the day of the Last Judgment. The parents often grieved over the death of their small offspring as is proved by the popular poem *Epitaph to Children* put down in many family repertories for comfort:

*Father and mother, there is no need to cry,  
We are in heaven, so let your eyes be dry,  
May the Parcae lengthen your life as much  
As they’ve shortened ours by the scissors’ touch*<sup>31</sup>.

It was probably only in the poorest families where the struggle for life was very hard and each child meant an additional mouth to feed that the death of a child was viewed with relative indifference. But in village court records one can find such phrases as “out of love for their children”<sup>32</sup>. It would therefore be wrong to think that the peasants, even though they lived in extremely hard conditions, were devoid of natural feelings for their children.

Parental love does not however mean that the upbringing of children was not strict. Strictness was part of the model of the patriarchal family; father had to personify severity and spare no punishment, for this was believed to be necessary to bring up a valuable individual. Corporal punishment was spared neither at home nor in school and it seems to have been more frequent and more

<sup>30</sup> J. Pasek, *Pamiętniki*, p. 406.

<sup>31</sup> The Czartoryski Library in Cracow, MS 377, Mf 11652, p. 110.

<sup>32</sup> *Księga sądowa kresu klimkowskiego*, p. 221.

painful in the 17th and at the beginning of the 18th century than in the 16th. Jędrzej Kitowicz, author of an 18th century book on customs, devoted much space in the chapter dealing with upbringing to what was used for flogging boys (scourge, whip)<sup>33</sup>. His contemporary, M. Matuszewicz, a diarist, recalling his boyhood, speaks of excessively severe educators who so tormented him and his colleagues that some of them committed suicide<sup>34</sup>. If the upbringing of noblemen's children was so rigid, it is obvious that the children of townsmen and peasants were chastised even more cruelly. Andrzej Komoniecki, mayor of the small town of Żywiec, in his chronicle speaks repeatedly of the brutality of educational methods in schools and even says that in 1676 a pupil set the school on fire "out of anger at having been beaten" and that a teacher from Żywiec (who had tried to rob a church) had the death sentence commuted to banishment from the town, for "when teaching boys in the Żywiec school he never beat the children but confined himself to imposing on them various penitential measures" (1652)<sup>35</sup>. This would indicate that this prospective robber was an exception in those days. It is known that commercial and craftsmen's apprentices were sometimes gravely injured by beating; village records contain complaints about cruel beatings of shepherd boys and children gathering blackberries and picking up dry twigs or helping with the harvest. And let us remember that only extremely drastic cases were brought to municipal and village courts. Flogging was regarded as a normal everyday educative means and its use was thought to be the duty of the adults to whom children were entrusted. It was thought improper to show leniency and tenderness, it being believed this may distort the character of the child.

Upbringing was to implant the principles of Christian ethics in the child, and prepare him or her for a pious life concordant with the principles of religion. Civic and patriotic virtues were inculcated in noblemen's sons, for it was from their ranks that future *Sejm* deputies and defenders of the country were to be recruited. Girls were prepared to become housewives and mothers, free of laziness and useless vanity. This required special endeavours, for the fair sex was thought to be very weak and prone to sin. In the 16th century Rej instructed: "Mothers should keep a watchful eye on their girls for they are a feeble sort, ready to indulge themselves in everything. For do believe me, a sensible upbringing in youth can in everybody produce many good habits in old age"<sup>36</sup>. Idling in particular was regarded as dangerous and distorting a girl's character. In a testament drawn up on December 1, 1620, Stanisław Niemojewski, castellan of Chełmno, advised his daughters "never to be idle and always spend their

<sup>33</sup> J. Kitowicz, *Opis obyczajów za panowania Augusta III (A Description of Customs during the Reign of Augustus III)*, ed. R. Polak, Wrocław 1970, pp. 68–69.

<sup>34</sup> M. Matuszewicz, *Diariusz*, p. 84.

<sup>35</sup> *Chronografia albo dziejopis żywiecki... ofiarowany roku pańskiego 1704 przez sławnego Andrzeja Komonieckiego, wójta na ten czas żywieckiego (The Chronography or History of Żywiec... Offered in the Year of Our Lord 1704 by the Famous Andrzej Komoniecki, Wójt of Żywiec at That Time)*, ed. S. Grodziski and I. Dwornicka, Żywiec 1987, pp. 230, 188.

<sup>36</sup> M. Rej, *Zwierciadło*, vol. I, pp. 46–47.

time attending a religious service or sewing and taking part in other honest maidenly occupations"<sup>37</sup>. He also counselled them to dress modestly without excessive luxury. Old Polish literature upbraided women for vanity and squandering large sums of money on clothes, but contemporary research into inventories and iconography shows beyond doubt that in those centuries it was not the women but men who overdressed.

In towns great attention was paid to practical preparation for work in trade, handicrafts or the financial sector; general refinement attracted the attention of only the upper strata, the patriciate, especially in large ambitious cities (Gdańsk, Cracow, Lwów, Poznań). Peasant children were above all trained in humility, in the ability to be modest in their requirements and reconcile themselves to the will of Providence, which created the positions of serfs and lords. They took over their parents' methods of farming, repeating the traditional unchangeable exertions over the livestock, in the garden, in the fields, and learning by practice how to repair tools, fences, pieces of furniture in the way sanctified by tradition and age-long experience.

Childhood lasted a very short time, real life began early, taking away the few privileges which the youngest ones enjoyed in the family. Between the age of 10 and 14, the noblemen's sons were sent to school, to magnatial courts to gain refinement and connections or to a foreign country to acquire knowledge at a famous university. The daughters from wealthier families were sent to a convent or to the courts of friendly magnates where they could be taught good manners. Townspeople's children were sent away from home to learn commerce or a handicraft already at the age of 8–10. This meant hard work and frequently food rations at almost starvation level. Peasant children helped their parents in the fields, or grazed livestock, collected dry twigs, brought in water, in short worked hard from dawn to dusk.

The plight of orphans was of course the hardest. The officially appointed guardians frequently took advantage of their position to draw material profits. For instance, they sometimes impeded a girl's marriage in order not to have to account for her property which they administered. At a dietine held at Sądowa Wisznia in 1638, the nobility adopted the following resolution: "Since many orphaned noblemen's daughters are, because of their guardians' greed, not given away in *matrimonium*, it should be stipulated that a 25-year old girl whose appointed guardians *intuando ipsius bona* (keep her property — M. B.) and do not want to give her away in marriage, may choose a tutor and *cum scitu ipsius statum eligere* (with his knowledge to choose marriage for herself — M. B.)"<sup>38</sup>. Attempts were made in testaments and instructions concerning property to secure the fate of orphans and half-orphans, especially in the event of a new marriage, through a detailed enumeration of all the mobiles and immobles due

<sup>37</sup> Archiwum miasta Torunia (Archives of the Town of Toruń), księga ławnicza (Assessors' book) IX 23, p. 144 b.

<sup>38</sup> W. Łoziński, *Prawo i lewem* (By Hook or by Crook), Kraków 1957, vol. I, pp. 235–236.

to them. In towns the municipal authorities saw to it that trustworthy people were chosen as guardians. In the case of orphans from less prosperous homes, all their parents' belongings were sold and the obtained capital was invested at an interest which was to cover the costs of the orphan's upkeep, clothing and education. When the child reached maturity, a settlement of accounts was made. If the guardian spent more money on bringing up the child, the latter was obliged to pay it back out of future earnings. "The guardian is to protect the orphan and be careful not to cause any harm through some deceit", says a document in Warsaw court records from the beginning of the 17th century<sup>39</sup>.

In the countryside the guardian was appointed by the lord or the commune; it was his duty to look after the orphan's interests, among other things, to keep the clothes of the orphan's parents so that they should not rot, and when the orphan reached maturity, he was to pay him or her the inheritance left by the father or mother and usually specified in a respective document. The guardian was instructed "to see to (the orphan's) needs and honest upbringing"<sup>40</sup>. Did the guardians always fulfil their obligations conscientiously? Village court records contain a great deal of evidence to the contrary. The 1664 verdict of the court of Klimków says: "First the orphan was taken to Uście with everything left by her deceased parents and for about a dozen years remained in the service of these Blaszczyks without any pay or remuneration. The court also took account of the fact that many of the things and the seed-grain which the Blaszczyks had taken to Uście with her, remained with them at Uście. Moreover, throughout those dozen years the Blaszczyks sowed her field every year and always took the crops to Uście. The court also took account of the fact that the brother of the said Mikita Blaszczyk from Uście, named Hnat, had held her field for a dozen years or so and used it at his will, turning everything to nought, in particular he devastated all buildings, as a result of which the orphan suffered great damage"<sup>41</sup>. This was probably the usual plight of a village orphan "gravely wronged and harmed" by the guardians. The same records contain another characteristic entry made in 1668: "Concerning the case of Oryna Klimkowska who complains about the wrong done to her son, Iwan, by his uncle, Waśko. That he after the death of his brother, Iwan's father, having taken his modest possession under his care, used it for his own benefit... while Iwan, staying with his mother, never received anything from his uncle and by doing service for other people, earned money for his clothes and food"<sup>42</sup>. This kind of the exploitation of orphans must have been widespread in the countryside. The step-father and step-mother also frequently earned ill-fame for themselves.

Harmony between the siblings was a postulated principle in old Polish families, but in practice brothers and sisters did not always live in a seemly fashion with one another, especially when competition for the parents' favours

<sup>39</sup> CAHR, Old Warsaw 545, k. 369a.

<sup>40</sup> *Księga sądowa kresu klimkowskiego*, pp. 124–125.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 195.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 207.

or disputes over property were at stake. Some diaries, e.g. the one by Matuszewicz, speak of evident coldness and even squabbles among siblings. Łoziński in his book cites numerous examples of bloody conflicts between closest relatives but, judging by the records of criminal courts, this could not be the average norm. Family repertoires and correspondence contain many references to fraternal and sisterly love, and in spite of everything, such affection was certainly not rare. The same can be said of townsmen's and peasant milieus. Village court records show that quarrels between brothers were as a rule punished more severely and the court would remind the squabbling sides of the duty of brotherly solidarity. Of course there is no lack of references to fisticuffs and fighting, of court cases between siblings for patrimony; bad sisters were sometimes disinherited and the entire property may have been bequeathed to good neighbours in return for their care during illness<sup>43</sup>. As is usually the case, the customary norms and demands were not always observed in practice.

The relationship between generations, especially the attitude of children to their parents, was of fundamental importance for the functioning of the old Polish family. This attitude was to a great extent due to the great respect for old people, typical of patriarchal structures, old people being regarded as the embodiment of worldly wisdom, experience and knowledge of past events. Already Rej lauded "the third age" in *The Mirror*. As a result of this attitude and material dependence on parents, children, even in adult age, were submissive to parents in all matters; even marriage did not release them from compliance. Such a relationship was typical of the magnates, noblemen and also wealthy townsmen's circles. The situation was different among poorer townsmen and peasants. The old people in these milieus, also parents, having lost their strength and being incapable of work, were as a rule in a difficult situation, they were a burden to the family, which was unable to keep up unproductive individuals. Old parents could not always rely on their children's care and assistance and had sometimes to vindicate their rights in court. "Everything I got from people, I spent on this wedding (of the daughter — M. B.), hoping for solace and help in old age... and now instead of solace, I feel deep grief and sorrow", complained a widow in Warsaw in 1623 about her bad son-in-law and daughter<sup>44</sup>. Sometimes a decrepit father or mother gave their son or son-in-law their house and an artisan shop in return for a small room, food and promise of lifelong care. The fact that such agreements were entered in municipal books means that the promises were not always kept.

The situation was even more difficult in the countryside, where old age meant the necessity of putting the farm in the children's young, strong hands. As a rule, the parents tried to secure the promise of food and a corner of their own. "Hanis is to keep father and mother until their death and every year give them a quarter of rye and a bushel of barley towards their food and sow two

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 316.

<sup>44</sup> CAHR, Old Warsaw 546, k. 344 ff.

field-patches of turnips for them”, says an act drawn up in 1620 in connection with the transfer of the farmstead and fields to the daughter and son-in-law<sup>45</sup>. “Jan, son of Grześ, is to keep his mother, Bieta, until her death; together with his cows, he is to raise a cow for his mother and she will milk it herself. His mother may raise a pig on her own. He is to give her every year 2 quarters of rye, two bushels of barley, two measures of wheat, two measures of buckwheat, two measures of peas, two field-patches of turnips; his mother may keep bees till her death”<sup>46</sup>, put down a village scribe in 1621. The son Adam “shall nourish his dear father at his table in the same way as he, his wife and his household will be provided for by God; and as long as he is strong, the father will willingly help his son in work”, stipulates an agreement of 1626<sup>47</sup>. As we see, the patriarchal system of relations broke down in peasant families under the pressure of economic necessity. When it was discovered in a village in 1694 that the son had been regularly beating his father, both were to be punished: the son for violating generally accepted norms of behaviour, the father for concealing this misdemeanour<sup>48</sup>. It was only due to the intercession of the entire commune that the two men “shackled together” were not sent to the castle prison at Wiśnicz. Several years earlier (1685) a much milder sentence was pronounced for irreverence towards the mother: a one-mark fine and a pound of wax for the church (with the threat of lashings in case of relapse)<sup>49</sup>.

As we see, the old Polish model of the world and of the family had its social limits; reality did not always correspond to the patterns and norms, even though they were generally accepted and approved of.

*(Translated by Janina Dorosz)*

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<sup>45</sup> *Księga ławnicza wsi Kargowej w powiecie kościańskim (The Assessors' Book of the Village of Kargowa in the District of Kościan 1617–1837)*, ed. A. and A. Walawender, Warszawa 1960, p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

<sup>48</sup> *Księgi sądowe wiejskie klucza jazowskiego*, pp. 51–52.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.