Travels of Leszno residents in the 17th and 18th centuries

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ABSTRACT
The paper discusses travels of selected residents of the town of Leszno in 17th-century and 18th-century Poland in the social, cultural and religious context. Leszno, a town in western Poland, was inhabited by religious refugees from Silesia, Bohemia, Moravia, German duchies and Scotland. The refugees together with the local population formed a multicultural, multidenominational and multilingual community. The origins of the majority of Leszno residents also determined their attitudes toward travelling. The article discusses selected examples of foreign trips taken by Leszno residents on the basis of published travelogues in view of travelling purposes (education, business, diplomatic missions, money collections). In particular it focuses on the travels of Jan Jonston, Adam Samuel Hartmann and Daniel Vetter. Their trips were well documented and the sources show the Leszno residents as conscious travelers. The article is a review paper and indicates the need of further research.

KEY WORDS
travel, Leszno (Poland), 17th century, 18th century.

The 17th century and the 18th century constitute a period in Poland and elsewhere that witnessed a growing popularity of travelling that can be regarded as forms of tourism, i.e. trips for various learning, health and recreational purposes. Along the rising prosperity and level of education of some social classes, curiosity of the surrounding world and the need to visit faraway places developed as well. This development was a long-lasting process of various intensity. In Poland, a large part of population, especially the gentry, expressed specific views connected with the Polish ethos of national struggle, political independence and religious freedom – all coupled with strong Roman Catholicism. Negative features of this ideology included xenophobia and infatuation with one’s own culture and traditions. The Polish landed gentry extolled rural life and often expressed no need to see the world outside their own country. A common opinion in 17th-century Poland was that Western Europe had nothing to offer to the Poles [1]. Such views were not, however, commonly held by the magnates and some groups of aristocratic youth. The proponents of development of contacts with foreign lands were – especially in the second half of the 18th century – magnates’ wives and affluent noblewomen, who craved for lavish costumes, good literature and sophisticated pastimes.

Foreign influences were visible in the western and northern frontiers of Poland. The development of a distinctive urban culture in those areas was mainly influenced by the proximity of foreign cultural patterns, business exchanges and transfers of information. A significant role in this process was played by religious immigration, in particular during the Thirty Years’ War, and the settlement of Czech and German Protestant refugees (Lutherans, Calvinists, Bohemian Brethren) in Polish cities. The strong economic position of these cities as well as the religious, linguistic and customary distinctiveness of their inhabitants became a cultural counterbalance to the traditional models of Polish noblemen. One of such distinctive centers was Leszno – a city in western Poland. Leszno was founded in 1547 and reached its heyday in the first half of the 17th century, following the influx of religious refugees from Bohemia, Silesia and Germany as well as individual settlers from Scotland and Hungary. Thanks to the acceptance of these newcomers by the town proprietors – the Leszczyński family – the town soon became a leading cultural, religious and scholarly center [2]. Within two centuries, the Leszczyńscy became a formidable magnate family. It cultivated the image of an enlightened, cultured, well-mannered and Eurocentric family. The greatest achievement in the family’s political career was the coronation of Stanisław Leszczyński as King of Poland. The Leszno proprietors’ open-mindedness, religious toleration and approval for scientific endeavors were exemplary, and many town residents regarded them as role models. The contacts of the Leszczyńscy with Europe were mostly of educational and political character, but they also involved some typically tourist activities.

Members of the Leszczyński family studied at German, Swiss, Dutch and Italian universities. A renowned Polish politician, parliamentarian, and province governor Rafał Leszczyński (1579-1636) [3] studied in Heidelberg, Strasbourg and Basel, and then spent five years in France, the
Netherlands, England and Italy where he was tutored in Padua by Galileo. Rafał Leszczyński’s sons pursued their college education in Frankfurt am Oder, Leipzig and Geneva. The governor’s younger son Boguslaw (c. 1612-1659), who would later become the landlord of the family estates [4], went on a four-year journey combining studies and sightseeing, accompanied by his private tutor Jan Jonston. He visited Holland, England, France and Italy. Also Stanisław Leszczyński in his teens was sent on a two-year journey to Germany, Italy, France and the Netherlands. His visits to a number of European royal courts were regarded as an important component of his political education. The future King of Poland visited Vienna and then was received by Grand Duke Cosimo III de’ Medici in Florence, Pope Innocent XII in Rome and Louis XIV in Versailles [5].

High offices of the state held Polish noblemen also involved diplomatic missions to foreign countries. One of the Leszczyński family members, Grand Treasurer of the Crown Rafał Leszczyński (1650-1703) went on a mission to Turkey in 1700. His 500-member cortège undertook the journey to Istanbul away from the busy trade routes of the time, risking attacks from Nogai Horde Tartars from the Black Sea steppes. Travels to the Balkans off the contemporary tourist routes were particularly dangerous. Most well-travelled routes went through present-day Ukraine (Lvov, Mariampol, Sniatyn) and Romania (Iasi) and Romania (Iasi). The diplomat’s spent most of their time sightseeing in Istanbul. Rafał Leszczyński divided his time between diplomatic duties and excursions to the Black Sea and the Island of Heybeliada. He admired the Maurimonts monastery and made two visits to Hagia Sophia. On his way back to Poland he visited the fortress of Kamieniec Podolski abandoned by the Turks, in present-day Ukraine [6].

The sources related to the subsequent proprietors of Leszno – the Sulkowski family – provide a far greater deal of information about their travels, in particular, about the educational trips of Aleksander Józef Sulkowski’s sons [7]. The documents reveal the complexity of problems with trip preparation, e.g. high costs, supplies. These problems affected even the most affluent of Polish magnates. Aleksander Józef Sulkowski attached great importance to his children’s education. Before they were sent to Western Europe the boys had been given special instructions prepared by their father which emphasized the noble aims of scientific research. In 1782 he started working for the British Museum, where he studied Egyptian antiquities.

Young physicians from Leszno also made frequent trips abroad. Having attained their degrees in medicine, Caspar Gottfried Goldammer (1673-1700) and Johann Daniel Arnold (1671-1709) went on a trip to England [11]. In the years 1668-1671, Elias Nitschke (1645-1711), the future court physician to Rafał Leszczyński, visited Leyden, Amsterdam, London, Oxford, Ghent, Brussels, Antwerp, Bruges, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Berlin [11, p. 155]. His son Elias Gottfried (1676-1718) was sent to Kraków after his graduation to acquire proficiency in the Polish language, and later to Western Europe [12]. Gottfried visited many German and Dutch cities. After studying for a long time in Leyden he attained the doc-
Having returned to Rome they went on a trip to Loretto, the crater of an extinct volcano named Sybil's "hell". Worthy attractions such as the ancient Caligula Bridge, Bajas area around it provided the travelers with a number of note-...
ous environment. Sea voyages were perceived as hazardous, and sailors, mariners as well as sea merchants were regarded often as desperate persons. On the other hand, overseas voyages of diplomats and pilgrims were met with understanding. The common fear of death in the depths of the sea resulted not only from the enormity and mightiness of the sea but also from the imperfection of navigational instruments of the time and widespread activities of privateers. The most famous sea voyager from Leszno was a Czech, Daniel Vetter (1592-1669) [17]. After finishing his theological studies in Heidelberg and Leyden, Vetter settled in Leszno in 1620. In 1632 he managed a local printing house, and at the age of 21 he completed a bold expedition to Iceland. The fruit of his voyage was the first ever description of the island and its inhabitants in the Polish language titled Islandia to jest opisanie wyspy... (Iceland. A description of the island...) published in Leszno in 1638. The book is not a traveler’s diary but rather a comprehensive monograph on Iceland, with a separate description of the sea voyage itself. The fourteen thematic chapters of the book provide readers with an orderly panorama of Icelanders’ life starting with the explanation of the etymology of the island’s name. This unusual text of the 48-page volume often stresses differences between life in the European mainland familiar to the author and the distant island in the far north.

In the long introduction to the book, which takes the form of a memoir, Vetter described his sea voyage on a merchant ship from Bremen and his route on the island. On their arduous voyage to the north the ship crew and passengers experienced a number of misadventures: meeting privateers, a storm, sea-sickness and death of two people. The destination was Helgafell on the western coast of Iceland. On reaching it the travelers rented horses and went to attend a session of the Althing as well as to view Hekla from a safe distance. The following four days the travelers spent in Skalholt, where they were guests of an Icelandic bishop. As farewell gifts each trip participant received some Icelandic specialties: 20 ells of local cloth and two pairs of spoons made of sheep horn and whalebone. They were also given new horses and a guide who led them back to the port. Daniel Vetter noted that no one travelled in Iceland on foot but always with horses burdened with all the equipment necessary in the barren country with no roads or inns.

Vetter began his description of Iceland with the religious situation. He found it striking that Icelandic preachers used printed collections of sermons, which greatly facilitated their work. Vetter also described differences in services and outlined the structure of the Icelandic church. In his analysis of the political system in Iceland the author focused on the description of the parliament and the island’s dependence on Denmark. Other chapters dealt with the natural environment and inhabitants of the island. Vetter pointed out such natural wonders as the polar day and night – unknown in central Europe – which determined the Icelandic lifestyle. He then described such physical features of Iceland as barren rocky landscapes, terrifying volcanoes, bogs and desolate plains. The inhospitable interior of the island, deprived of woodlands and vegetation, was affected by fierce winds, snowstorms and bitter cold. He described Icelandic volcanoes, in particular, the fearsome Hekla, adding that the people still vividly remembered its last eruption in 1613.

Another Icelandic peculiarity noted by Vetter was the abundance of fish and large marine mammals, that provided Icelanders with food, fat, skins, as well as the lack of small land mammals. These conditions, in Vetter’s view, influenced the Icelanders’ lifestyle, in particular, their daily diet dominated by fish, mutton and beef. Vetter found Icelandic food tasteless. He complained about the bland diet, lack of bread and poultry. He also observed that the islanders used wind drying for food preservation, and washed their clothes in hot springs without soap, for which they also had many other uses. Vetter appreciated the construction of spacious Icelandic huts, partially sunk into the ground with their roofs covered with turf, which ensured warmth and relative comfort to the dwellers. Vetter’s stay in Iceland was too short to make any detailed observations of Icelanders’ daily life. He understood the hardships of the life in an inhospitable climate and pointed to a number of positive sides, e.g. the Icelanders knew no servitude. In Vetter’s opinion, the wholesome air in the island explained the absence of many diseases among the Icelanders and their longevity. Fishing, according to Vetter, was a light recreational activity. Most likely, Vetter drew this idyllic image of the island on the basis of his observations of his hosts, who represented the upper classes of Icelandic society. The noted peculiarities of Icelanders served in no way as the grounds of Vetter’s valuation of their behaviors, but rather gained his acceptance and understanding.

The aforementioned travels of Leszno residents followed the typical travelling patterns of the 17th and 18th centuries [18]. Most of the journeys abroad were taken for a specific utilitarian purpose such as receiving a good education, accomplishment of a mission or doing professional business. Sightseeing and tourism were merely some extra activities on the way. By today’s standards, the real tourists were only Vetter and Hartmann, who honestly displayed their curiosity and people they visited. Finally, they were astute observers capable of objective assessments of facts, events and people. Sightseeing trips aimed at visiting specific places, gaining experiences unavailable back in one’s own country as well as fulfilling dreams became more and more popular in the 18th century. Leszno residents such as Vetter, Woide or Zugehör had fully enjoyed these aspects of tourism earlier.

Considering the prevalent Polish attitudes discussed at the beginning of the paper, which served as a starting point for the endeavors of Leszno travelers, Daniel Vetter’s Islandia is a favorable testimony of tolerance and open-mindedness, so rare in old Polish travelogues. In the same context, all the other reports of Leszno residents from their travels visibly stand out in the historical reality of Poland of the mentioned period.

References

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