

BOOK REVIEWS

Katarzyna Kabacińska, *Zabawy i zabawki dziecięce w osiemnastowiecznej Polsce (Children's plays and toys in 18th-century Poland)*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2007, pp. 193.

It is not common today to find a scholarly publication dedicated to such “trivial” issues as children’s plays. Therefore, I was particularly surprised when I found one, whose author Katarzyna Kabacińska, is not an expert of physical culture but a Polish philologist.

In the era of globalisation, where pop culture and cheap China-made products have dominated all spheres of human life, there is a danger that Poland can be only associated with classical music, literature or art. Studying the phenomenon of children’s play can greatly facilitate the promotion of our own national heritage. According to Johan Huizinga, play is a part of human culture; at the onset of human social life, any human activity was based on engagement in play. He also claims that culture evolves from the ways people experience play.¹ And play as a particular field of human life and science has been long neglected. It is difficult to uncover the reason(s) why modern scholars have failed to study play, both from the educational and recreational perspectives. Instead, researchers have placed a greater emphasis on debating the cost of fuel in view of the global economic crisis, but certainly not on the popularity of traditional types of play or sports in different regions of Poland or Europe. That is to say, we tend to disregard our origins, our culture and our national heritage.

This remarkable book reveals to us that our proper development depends on plays and toys we use in childhood – a period of life paramount to our social growth. It also shows that children should be regarded as human beings with their own dignity and rights.

The author makes an attempt to reconstruct the historical context of traditional Polish recreational activities and toys from the 18th

century. Kabacińska employs a pedagogical approach to evaluate the significance of play in a child’s life in the long life perspective. More specifically, her work examines the functional purpose of children’s plays and toys in Poland at that time, by collecting information on methods and ways of playing, the role of play in childhood, playing partners, and using toys and other tools necessary for children’s educational, social and moral development. The author uses a theoretical approach to these issues based on the social and moral cognitive development and the general theory of play classification from the 18th century until today.

The book is of interdisciplinary character and it contains valuable historical and pedagogical material, used for the study of play as a field of social history. Kabacińska writes that “Both the 18th-century play and literature had a didactical function. They contributed together to the development of the moral and socially-aware citizen, with their patriotic, moral and ethical principles being delivered to young people deliberately from the very early childhood through playful activities” [p. 67]. This extract demonstrates the social awareness of the Polish society of the Enlightenment era. Later on, under hostile jurisdictions and divided between its three powerful partitioning neighbors determined to axe Polish history and tradition, the Poles tried to preserve their national heritage in simple activities, such as Easter or Christmas customs and plays. The above quote from the book also shows the author’s thorough and painstaking analysis of the historical context, for which she can only be admired and congratulated for. The proper understanding of the profound transformations of Poland in this dramatic period of our history is important for any reader of this book.

Kabacińska discusses a few major theories on the origin of human play. However, she fails to mention the oldest theory of play formulated by an 18th-century German poet, Friedrich Schiller.

¹ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Zabawa jako źródło kultury* (Homo Ludens. A study of the play element in culture) translation into Polish: M. Kurecka, W. Wirpsza, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1985.

Schiller's work was closely related with play as a form of culture, therefore its inclusion in the discussion would have been appropriate for the author's description of the historical epoch. Nevertheless, the scope of literature covered by Kabacińska deserves a high appraisal, in spite of the author being a specialist in a field different than physical culture. Kabacińska focuses on Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* but is also well-aware of Eugeniusz Piasecki's *Zabawy i gry ruchowe dzieci i młodzieży – ze źródeł dziejowych i ludoznawczych, przeważnie rodzinnych i tradycji ustnej* (Plays and movement games of children and adolescents – on the basis of historical and ethnological sources and local oral traditions). And although Kabacińska incorrectly indicates the year 1919 as the publication of the first edition of Piasecki's book (it was, in fact, published first in 1916 and Piasecki had written a few works on traditional plays before), she displays an impressive knowledge of the topic.

She also gives us some background on the functions of plays and discusses various typologies of children's toys. We can learn that some toys were designed out of necessity to develop household skills. The second category of toys were the ones handcrafted by parents for the family use (having fun together as a family). It is very likely that the most skilled toymakers started manufacturing them for others. This gave rise to the third category – manufactured toys; which would later develop into the fourth category – mass produced toys. Although an entire chapter is devoted to various approaches to classification of toys from different perspectives, it can be argued that these categories can also pertain to physical movement and plays. I know traditional plays and games do not need much equipment, and I am also aware that most of the sporting activities and plays in Poland at that time were of foreign origin, but there were quite a few traditional Polish games such as "kręgle polskie" (Polish skittles) or "plinie" which call for some recognition in such a book.

Chapter 2.1. devoted to movement games concentrates rather on various forms of horse-riding (calling it a game is rather awkward), dexterity games such as "bierki" (Mikado) or chases like

hide-and-peek. Fortunately, more attention is given by the author to movement games in Chapter 3.4. In other chapters, Kabacińska describes plays for younger and older children, such as nature games, gambling, and mental-skill games. Some of the categories of plays are described in a chapter on younger children and a separate chapter on girls. It is unclear why there are only activities for girls in Chapter 3 and not for boys. Perhaps the author's intention was to discuss the games for boys in Chapter 4 – *Zabawy uczniowskie* (Games of school pupils); however, the chapter title refers to boys and girls alike. Whilst somewhat confusing, this does not spoil the overall positive impression that the book conveys.

The final chapter is concerned with varieties of toys' shapes and uses of everyday tools, indicating their ties with nature, for example, how bees or frogs became a source of inspiration for toymakers but also authors of children's fables and stories.

Kabacińska's book is in a sense a unique work, and it should be made freely available to all Poles. Every Polish grandparent should have a copy of it, so that they can pass on the rich Polish heritage to their grandchildren, from generation to generation. For some, it would certainly bring back their childhood memories, and these would be the most likely ones to hand down the traditions to their children. For others, it could simply serve as a catalyst to pass on new stories and plays of the past as a way of promoting national identity and patriotic awareness. I certainly recommend the book to all social sciences students. The knowledge of children's plays now and then provides a potentially good pedagogical insight into the most difficult and at the same time most fragile human obligation: upbringing of children.

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