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ENGLISH AND GERMAN TRANSLATIONS AND SUMMARIES

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POLISH MASONIC POETRY IN THE XVIII CENTURY, AND AT THE BEGINNING OF THE XIX CENTURY¹

Polish masonic poetry has not, so far, been the object of a reliable historical/literary analysis. The literary output of Polish masonic poetry consists of over two hundred works that have survived. The culmination of its development coincides with first two decades of the XIX century. As a legacy of the XVIII century only few productions have been preserved. The first of them, dating from 1756, was Józef Epifani Minasowicz' es translation of the French *Apologie des Francs-Maçons. Par Frere Procope, Medecin et Franc-maçon*. At the same time, towards the end of the XVIII century, in Western Europe, hundreds of similar poems were written. Anderson's *Constitutions*, from 1723, have already been ornamented with four songs, whereas the first Polish collection of songs appeared as late as in 1811. What was the reason for such delay?

Although the first lodge in Poland came into existence as early as in 1729, the emergence of stable, firm structures of the Fellowship were hindered by organisational confusion, on the one hand, and on the other hand, by the political situation of the country. This political situation absorbed the minds and consumed the strength of the Polish Brethren (who came mostly from social and political elites of the country), distracting them from the Fellowship's activities, which in consequence led even to temporary suspension of the lodges' work.

Under these circumstances Polish masonic poetry, inspired by the lodges, had little chance for development. Moreover, until the 1780's, both the lodges and the guiding masonic institutions in Poland were dominated by foreigners, and the languages of meetings, as well as of rituals were French, and German. The first Polish speaking lodge „The Isis'es Temple” („Świątynia Izis”) was created not earlier than in 1780, and shortly after that the country's down-fall put an end to the activities of the Polish Masonry for many years. The authorities of Austria, Russia, and Prussia partly suspended the activity of Freemasonry. Only in the Prussian sector few German lodges, to which Poles also belonged, kept functioning. Only in the period of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw (1807–1815)

and the Kingdom of Poland (after 1815) turned out propitious for Freemasonry. In 1810 the Grand Orient of Poland was reactivated. These events were conducive to the flourishing of poetry. Poetic output of that time was carefully published in leaflets ornamented with vignettes as well as in larger collections. The first Polish volume of *Freemasonic Songs* („Pieśni wolnomularskie”) was published in 1811. The volume was put together by Józef Elsner, the teacher of Chopin, and the composer of many Polish and German masonic songs, as well as the official of the Grand Orient, a member of the Supreme Council. Five years later *Masonic songs of various authors, collected at the Symbolic Lodge of the Rising Sun in the Orient of Łomża* („Pieśni wolnomularskie z różnych autorów zebrane loży symbolicznej Wschodzącego Słońca na Wschodzie Łomży”) were issued. The year 1817 brought five brilliantly published *Freemasonic songs celebrating the birth [...] of Aleksander I* („Pieśni wolnomularskie na obchód uroczystości Narodzin [...] Aleksandra I-ego”) by Tadeusz Wolański. In 1818 Wolański put a collection of one hundred songs. In 1820 *Freemasonic Songs* („Pieśni wolnomularskie”) by Feliks Gawdzicki, one of the last volumes of Polish masonic poetry, were released. Sources record some other collections of poems which probably have not survived to our times.

Poetic output of the Polish Brethren does not much differ from German, or the French production. It is not so profuse, and so diversified in the number of incorporated motifs, or genres, but the period of the development of masonic creativity in Poland is limited to less than two decades (1805–1821). This poetry was created within lodges, and at the explicit lodges' request. Its main features were limited circulation and functional character, which consequently led to the imposition, on the poetry, of thematic, ideological, symbolic, and linguistic structure characteristic of all spheres of the Fraternity's activities.

In principle, each type of lodge, and some ritual elements of lodges' activities were consorted with, corresponding in theme and symbol, poetic genres (some coupled with music). Probably the most popular type of masonic song was the banquet song, written especially for the table lodges, in which Brethren used to gather after finishing their proper activities at the Temple. These songs thematically referred to feast days i.e. the anniversary of establishing the lodge, or St. John's feast. There were also songs dedicated to Brothers, Sisters and Officials, to whose honors toasts were just proposed, as well as songs eulogizing the Order, its ideas, and works – and songs to encourage common enjoyment. Their characteristic culmination was the raising of glasses, i.e. the „Cannon shot”.

Funeral songs and poems, different in tone and mood, were another type of masonic creativity. Thoughts and feelings conveyed by these poems, though expressed in symbolic structures, did not depart from farewell motifs of worldly poetry.

The opening and the closure of a lodge also had its ritual, which included singing songs, recitation and playing music. One of the most important elements of the lodges' activities completion, was the formation of a circle. All the Brothers held each other's hand to make a circle, which expressed their strength, equality and brotherhood. This part of the lodges' assembly was accompanied by songs referring to masonic ideals of love and unity.

The ritual of collecting money by the Brother Almoner was signalled by a cycle of poems inciting Brethren to help the poor. Masonic creativity comprises also many philosophical and meditative works, which were not devoted to any specific festivity. The subjects of reflection in these poems were often the sense of the Order's existence, its beginnings, traditions, or the canon of its primary values (Love, Virtue, Wisdom etc.), as well as the problem of the Freemasons' relation to God.

Masonic poems dealt also with subjects unrelated to the lodge, such as political events of the country. This type of creativity, though noticeable in Polish masonic poetry, was marginal. One can easily detect in this poetry directions of political fascinations, hopes rested first on Napoleon I, and then on the czar Aleksander I.

Undoubtedly, a crucial factor for this poetry, often translated from French or German, was the fact that its primary destination was recitation and singing. Most works were musical adaptations.

Polish masonic poetry is not an outstanding literary phenomenon; however, ignoring it in historical and literary analyses, will result in an incomplete picture of the cultural situation in Poland. Lodges functioned in Poland as cultural centres, where scientific discussions were initiated, poetic, musical and artistic productions were popularized, and library collections were originated.

About 25% of the XVIII century writers of Polish descent belonged to Freemasonry, and if we add to them musicians, painters and scientists, it turns out that affiliation with Freemasonry (especially in the years 1815-1821) was a widespread phenomenon.

Alexander I's ban on Freemasonry put an end to the lodges' existence, and to the development of masonic poetry.

(Translation by Katarzyna Dyzman)

Przypisy

¹ Polish version see: „Ars Regia”, vol. no 1 (September 1992), p. 48-68.