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*Tadeusz Bieńkowski* (Poland)

## RENAISSANCE POLES' SELF-PERCEPTION AS EUROPEANS

More than a thousand years ago, the rulers of Poland embraced Christianity from missionaries of the Roman rite and so entered an area where the Roman Empire of the German Nation spread its influence. At the time the empire ruled western Europe, which meant for those living there, among other things, participation in various European tradition lines and active role in cultural currents common to many nations. As soon as towards the end of the Middle Ages, Poland had become a partner, political, economic, and, to a certain extent, scholarly as well, owing to its University of Kraków, to western European lands. By the late 15th century Poland seems to have been catching up with the others who had left Poland behind on their road of development.

What was the European awareness at that time, and what ties was it breeding? A sense of community of Christian states was the strongest manifestation of social awareness going beyond the borders of one country towards the end of the 15th century, and yet more so in the 16th century, a good point J. Tazbir made recently. The community of western European states, relying on the unity of faith (with differences in denomination being less important in that case) were putting together alliances against Turkey throughout the 16th century, where Poland played the forward line.

Next, there was a sense of state solidarity, a frame of mind extending far beyond the borders of countries, very strong among the nobility and much less pronounced among townspeople. To recall another point of Tazbir's, there was a sense of Slav community there as well. The European awareness, which is the subject of this discussion, comprised a smaller circle of educated people, creative artists ahead of them all – scholars, writers, artists. Let us briefly look at it, to try to highlight the role of Poles in that common mindframe.

It found expression in a sense of continuity of European culture stemming from the Greco-Roman antiquity and a striving to participate in its prolongation and development. There was also a sense of community and cultural unity with all identifying themselves with the European tradition, finding their roots therein and drawing inspiration for their own creative works. What united epochs as well as people then was the Latin of ancient Rome, and, from early medieval times, the language of liturgy and the official language of the western Church and the European diction of school, scholarship, and politics. Latin was refreshed in its vocabulary by the humanists of the 14th century and their successors who reached out back to its roots. Those experts in languages

and literatures of antiquity, who came from different countries, presented themselves as new Latin rhetoricians, poets and tutors of humanist studies their advocates believed were making humans more human and human lives happier and more meaningful. Before long the humanists established a supra-national republic of men of letters and scholars whose chief tenet was to emulate ancient culture with reference to the new times. They deemed themselves heirs to the *dowry of Europe* passing on a valuable cultural legacy to future generations. The myth of Europa, the beautiful daughter of Agenor, the king of the Phoenician town of Tyre, whose beauty made Zeus fall in love with her and, under the guise of a bull, carry her across the sea to the island of Crete to make her the mother of Minos, the powerful ruler on the Aegean Sea, not only gave a patron to that part of the world bearing her name but at the same time witnessed the dawn of the Mediterranean civilisation that bore Greek, and so European, civilisation as well. The myth was very vivid in the imagination of ancient poets and artists (think of the murals in Pompeii) as well as Renaissance artists (Raphael, Paolo Veronese, Titian, or Guercino), as the humanists envisioned *the lady on the bull* as a symbol of Europe both in its tradition and modern history alike.

Poland encountered the humanist movement for a first time in two major international events: the Council of Constance (1414–1418) and the Council of Basel–Ferrara and Florence (1431–1439). Polish participants included bishops, Kraków University professors and courtiers participated. Coming home they brought with them manuscripts and incunabula with works of eminent Italian humanists: Petrarca, Boccaccio, Vergeria, Leonardo Bruni. They were historical, philological and pedagogical works. That was Poland's first step towards developing a humanist, and so European, awareness. A breakthrough came with the arrival in Poland of Filippo Buonaccorsi, known as Kallimach. He was the first humanist, in the strict meaning of the word, working in Poland. Kallimach arrived in Poland in 1469 and soon rose to career. He was given the job of tutor of the king's sons, and he was sent on important diplomatic missions. The excellently educated Italian pursuing a wide range of interests kindled vivid interest in humanist studies in prominent Polish circles – as his patrons included numerous prominent figures, lay as well as religious. He befriended nearly all leading intellectuals of the time and did influence his Polish friends with his Latin poetry, historical studies and philosophical writings. The hospitality he met with among Poles made Kallimach excited about this country, which he saw as promising ground for a rebirth of humanism. In a letter to Arnaldo Tedaldi, a friend of his, he praised Poland for its economic potentials, but did remark that lay Poles hardly ever were knowledgeable about science or literature, let alone the law. That was the situation towards the end of the 15th century (Kallimach died in 1496). Things were soon to change fast though. Leaders and the broad masses of the free, the *szlachta*, understood a better intellectual culture was needed to ensure better government. Humanist studies, which flourish in Italy, were increasingly widely believed to be the best way to preparing individuals for life in the community, for generating culture and enjoying it, and that they open the way to Europe for Poles, up to then rather isolated. More people developed a keenness for

learning good Latin (and modern languages, including Italian), rhetoric, history and moral philosophy. The 16th century brought with it a sweeping rush of young Poles, especially the szlachta, going abroad seeking education. Two such waves occurred. A first and more numerous wave went to Italy. Yet as the Reformation was spreading, German and Swiss schools (Königsberg, Wittenberg, Leipzig, Basel) began to attract Poles as well. That international mobility began to give Poland a new image. As early as in 1523, Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote to Jost Decjusz, a Kraków patrician, to congratulate him on the Polish people, who, considered barbarian (that is, isolated from humanist studies) only a short time back, were now growing in knowledge.

The first generation of those travelers to Italy included quite a few outstanding and bright-minded individuals who absorbed the atmosphere of Italian universities and were inspired in the proper manner there and brought back home with them with a desire to participate and produce works as eminent as those they had seen broad. Of the most prominent individuals let us mention, for example, Ciołek, Copernicus, Wapowski, Miechowita, Lubrański, Ostroróg, Tomicki, Paweł Szydłowiecki, Krzycki, Dantyszek, Janicjusz, Hozjusz, Jan Kochanowski, Samuel Maciejowski, the Łaskis, Hussowski. While it is difficult to find an Italian university where there would be no Poles, they went mostly to Rome (priests), Bologna, and above all to Padua. Estimates put the number of Poles studying at Padua in the 16th century at 1,400, mostly those at law faculties. 49 bishops and abbots, 9 provincial and other local governors, 56 provincial officers and deputies to parliament (Sejm), were graduated from Padua's law faculty. So were 30 future judges and treasury officers. Graduates of Padua, as well as Rome and Bologna (as many students moved from one school to another) took prominent positions in royal chanceries, the focal points of humanist culture spreading across the kingdom in the 16th century. Padua at that time also became the favourite foreign centre of medical studies mostly for sons of townspeople.

An interesting document is still available that explains to some extent why so many were eager to study in Padua. Venetian diplomat Giovanni Cornera wrote the Venice Senate saying that of all foreigners he knew none took a liking of Italians, and of Venetians in particular, more than did Poles. That was because there was a similarity between Poland and Venice in their respective forms of government: a republic here, a republic there; a senate here, a senate there; let alone the circumstance that nearly all sons of eminent families go to Padua to study which gives them a lot of satisfaction of that happy season in a young man's life and learning and makes them keep the Venetian republic in good memory.

This description holds several implications. It shows Venice existed as an attractive myth in Poles' minds. The *city amidst the sea* intrigued poets (Jan Kochanowski), and fascinated political writers. The Venetian government was seen to be a synthesis of monarchist, aristocratic and democratic elements, and thus as a type of government embraced by the Polish Republic. The Venetian government's stability, which kept Venice free of political clashes, did impress Poles. Equality before the law of all citizens was brought such stability, Poles believed. Venice's long record of conflict with Turkey could

work for the Polish szlachta, who viewed Poland as the forward bulwark of Christianity, as proof of spiritual affinity between the two countries. Some political writers even played with the idea (as did Łukasz Górnicki in his short treatise *The Way to Full Freedom*) of tailoring the government of the Polish Republic to the Venetian Council of Ten. But suggestions to emulate the Venetian system in Poland were cut down to size by Piotr Skarga, a prominent Jesuit preacher, who writing in his *Kazania sejmowe* (*Parliament sermons*), Let us not be misled by Venice being there for 1,100 years now. For, it is not the common people that rule there, who are consulted on trivial and futile matters, but serious matters are brought before the princes who keep everything in grip. Yet such government is possible to do in one city, as though under one roof. Where you have a state spreading hundreds of miles across, you cannot possibly inquire all prominent citizens to say their minds.

Many Polish travellers saw Venice, and Padua within the boundaries of the Venetian state, as the beginning of a road to, and the only goal and end of, education. Understandably enough, 16th century Polish literature abounds in references and reflections to it.

As language and cultural differences no longer barred them from other nations, Poles felt in Italy and other countries at home. Historian Marcin Bielski enthused in 1555 that *Europe had this friendly freedom in it, so you can journey from one kingdom to another and walk any road you like*. Bielski referred to the open countries of western Europe at the time. When referring to the state of the Russian tsars Polish historians (Decjusz, Wapowski, Kromer) compared it to a gaol. Yet to the Poles had a special sense of gratitude, as the Italians were the first to usher them in to Europe and to be their best tutors. Jan Żółczyński, Polish envoy to the Kingdom of Naples, wrote Florence humanist Francesco Vettori, *Whatever civilisation or learning we have in Poland we owe it all to your motherland and your scholars. Those seeds were sown together with the religion by your forefathers to our ancestors, so if we were to look for origins of religion, culture or learning anywhere at all then we would be looking nowhere except you Italians. It is from you that we have been learning noble skills and models of civilisation. The crowds of young Poles who swarm across so many nations and every year down to your academies are telling evidence of that*.

This does seem to sound a sense of community, Christian and cultural alike. Its author is also aware of the common (European) roots of both nations. Yet if we received so much from a European nation that in the renaissance was considered to be the most prominent straightforward continuator of the Greek and Roman cultural tradition, further reinforced by Christianity, the question arises, what could we give Europe then? Kraków University's great reputation as an international centre of astronomical studies had eclipsed with the end of the 15th century. Few foreign scholars cared to inquire Poles' opinion or to seek council in the following century. The exception was Copernicus. Our astronomer was invited to present his opinion on the reform of the calendar to the Fifth Lateran Council in 1516. It is further known that the main tenets of Copernican theory were a subject of debate at the papal court in 1533, wherefrom he got a letter three years later urging him to publish his

findings. Copernicus then, living in a remotest spot in Europe, was apparently a citizen as anyone else, if he was remembered in the capital of the Christian world.

Copernicus' theory also drew the attention naturalists around Philippe Melanchton in Wittenberg. One of them, Jerzy Joachim Retyk, came to Frombork to study the manuscript of Copernicus' chef-d'œuvre, *De revolutionibus* for a time and to draw up a brief summary that came out in print in Gdańsk in 1540. Retyk's sojourn of course proved to have been the decisive moment for the subsequent publication of Copernicus' work. That was also a good illustration of European scholarly co-operation over religious differences.

The Polish szlachta in talks with foreigners often recalled that Poland's contribution to Europe's heritage went back to the battle of Varna (1444) where Poland stood up as the bulwark of defence against the Turkish threat, apart from another, equally important, part as the granary of western Europe. Those roles, however, did not make happy all and Polish writers and scholars sought to put in their personal contributions to the development of European culture. Jan Dantyszek, a poet writing in new Latin, received a poet's laurels from the hands of emperor Maximilian I in 1516. Klemens Janicki was awarded the title of poeta laureatus at Padua in 1540. Polish authors had their works published in various western European countries, occasionally to substantial success. Erasmus mentioned in his *Adages* that Aldo Manutius, a printer in Venice, received manuscripts by Polish authors for the press as early as in 1506. Maciej of Miechów, Decjusz, Copernicus, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, Józef Struś, Kromer, Goslicki, Andrzej Petrycy Nidecki, or Stanisław Hozjusz, were authors whose works 16th century readers could reach for. However, incomparably more works by foreign authors arrived in Poland, and the educated and the well-off put together large collections of books. While Latin was widely understood in Poland at the time, as Polish (Decjusz, Kromer) and foreign writers acknowledged, we did not nearly catch up with foreigners in literature, the arts, or learning.

The otherwise frequent travelling to western Europe complete with the enjoyment of art and monuments did not ease the dearth of indigenous artists in Poland who could stand side by side with Renaissance European authors. Pilgrimages and tourist trips were quite common in the 16th century, as the following passage from poet Sebastian Klonowic (from his *Flis* 8) shows:

*Our Polish people are keen in their hearts  
For pilgrimage, for ever they would stroll, and roam  
Once the Pole finds himself on the road to Rome  
Nothing will stop him, the cold or the heat,  
So he calls, way ho! In Compostela we meet,  
To see the towns, the abbeys, the infirmaries, the cells.*

Polish students and travellers helped Italianise, and so to Europeanise, Polish culture as much as Italian artisans and artists who created great works in out country. Wrote Marcin Kromer in his *Polonia*, a book published outside Poland and quite popular there, in 1575, *As German merchants in the previous century built themselves spacious edifices in stone and brick, Poles now also have the same interests and are trying to outdo those others. Not only in*

*towns but also in the countryside, they crave to have vaster homes, mostly hiring Italian builders for their outstanding work and skills.*

As Reformation ideas were sweeping Poland, especially in 1540–1570, travelling to Italy subsided, and more Polish students sought study at German or Swiss universities (Königsberg, Wittenberg, Leipzig, Basel), wherefrom books were coming into Poland. While Italy was the cradle of European humanism, German lands were the homeland of the Reformation. Those were the gates to Europe for Poles.

Learning was an integral component of Renaissance education, which spread among the better-off szlachta and bourgeois already in the early 16th century. Its main subject was Latin, the language of school, politics, and the Catholic Church. Anyone speaking Latin could communicate with contacts in western and central Europe, giving straightforward proof of being an educated person at the same time. A first humanist gymnasium in Poland was founded by bishop Jan Lubrański in Poznań, and another school in Gdańsk in 1551 (based on Sturm's humanist curriculum) worked as a Lutheran gymnasium churning out hundreds of students from the land of Pomerania through to 1772. In 1554, efficient organiser J. Hoppe changed a parish school in Chełmno to a gymnasium, and in 1558 the same Hoppe another school in Gdańsk to a humanist gymnasium. In 1580 the school expanded to embrace classes with university curriculum and changing its name to Academic Gymnasium which came gained renown for its accomplishments as a centre of education. In Toruń, a local parish school was converted to a humanist gymnasium working on Melanchton's curriculum in 1568. In 1583, Henryk Strobant adopted the Sturm curriculum for the school to lead it as an Academic Gymnasium. Schools in Pomerania were always good in quality, open to the world, and maintaining vivid contacts to central Poland as well.

With humanist schools of European standard and relationships should be classed Jesuit schools, which started to grow in Polish lands in Braniewo in 1565, next in Pułtusk. Such schools gave their wards solid tuition in Latin, among other subjects, which opened their graduates doors to cultural accomplishments of contemporary Europe. In Zamość, Jan Zamoyski, a former *Paduan rector*, founded a university preparing young men to public service. The school had a humanist curriculum – Latin, Polish, rhetoric, history, moral philosophy, Roman law, Polish law. The curriculum of the school, known in Poland as the Akademia Zamojska, provided of course for foreign trips to supplement the education obtained at home.

To conclude the above observations, it is clear, first, that Poles' European awareness in the 16th century was formed above all by Italians and relations in Italy of the time. The imbalance in cultural advancement of Italy versus Poland accounts for the fact that there can be no meaningful talk of any *two-way* cultural exchanges between both countries. Learned Italians were aware of Poland, yet they thought of Poland as a remote exotic country, and Poland's cultural accomplishments were attributed to Italian influences. But were all Polish views and values Italianised then? Young Polish szlachta were known to have watched closely in their journeys and studies (mostly accompanied by experienced tutors and advisers) political events abroad, to compare what they

saw with deliberations about good and bad government they found in Greek or Roman writers, or with the Polish situation. The szlachta, who were so proud of their political freedom they enjoyed, were prepared to accept that for them a *pass* to Europe involved learning foreign languages and obtaining humanist education, but they were loath to identify themselves with political relations in other countries. As for Italy, Poles were rather critical of state institutions they found on the Appenine Peninsula. They disliked the *enslavement* Spanish rule brought on the Kingdom of Naples, they were suspicious and indeed, if they were Protestants, openly hostile towards relations obtaining in the Church State, they criticised the absolutism of rulers of other Italian lands. Much the same is true of religious tolerance 16th century Poles valued highly, not least because of their own religious differences at the time, and they deplored its lack among foreigners. So papal nuncio Fulvio Ruggieri justly pointed out in 1665 that Poles, always willing to imitate others, did appreciate whatever were their indigenous values. The viability of European versus indigenous values, their interplay, has been showing prominently in Polish history. It deserves a mention now that so much is being said about European unification.

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