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THE POLISH EMBASSY TO ISTANBUL, 1677-78

Documents and Iconography

Few historic events have such an excellent fund of sources as the Polish embassy to Istanbul led by Jan Trach Gniński, voyevod of Chelmno (Kulm), in 1677-78. This was an important diplomatic mission undertaken on the command of King John III. Sobieski and the Polish Sejm in an effort to conclude a peace treaty between the Polish Commonwealth and the Ottoman Empire after a series of wars marked by the Polish victory at Chocim (Hotin) in 1673 and the indecisive battle of Żurawno in 1676. In this embassy Poland was supported by King Louis XIV, who was looking for allies against Austria and Brandenburg. Gniński, an outstanding diplomat, received detailed instructions, the necessary funds, and costly presents for Sultan Mehmed IV as well as for Ottoman dignitaries, and in June 1677 set out on his expedition with a large retinue of some 450 men, 650 horses, and numerous wagons. After a long and arduous trip southwards, crossing territories of the present Rumania and Bulgaria, he reached Istanbul on 10th August 1677, making a splendid entrance, observed by the highest authorities and by the people of the Ottoman capital. However, the reception of the embassy was unfriendly. At that time the Turkish policy was dominated by the Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa Paşa whose attitude was warlike. He proved insensible to pressure on the part of Polish and French diplomats and refused to give back any part of the lands conquered by the Turkish army in the Ukraine and Podolia. Throughout several months, amidst hardships and tribulations, distress and illness, tormented by pests, Gniński and his companions tried to negotiate a permanent treaty, but the Turks limited themselves to confirming the pact made at Żurawno and the release of several hundred Polish prisoners. Gniński returned home late in 1678. A new war was to come, finally to be decided in the Vienna Campaign of 1683.¹

Gniński's embassy documents, written systematically in Polish and

Latin, his letters to King Sobieski and Polish dignitaries, his notes and reports, his speeches in the Sejm, and above all his diary, have survived in various Polish archives, among others in the Czartoryski Archive in Cracow. Some papers, outside Cracow, were burnt in World War II but happily the bulk of them had been published by Franciszek Pułaski, in Warsaw 1907, in a monumental edition of the Krasieński Library.²

Of special interest is Gnieński's description of the ceremonial entrance to the City of Istanbul on 10th August 1677. There were 50 splendid coaches and carriages, each drawn by four or six horses, attendant soldiers in mail armour carrying spears, young Polish noblemen in national costumes, led horses in grand attire of hussar fashion and a detachment of winged hussars, a military band, and a regiment of dragoons with a great banner adorned with an image of the Virgin. There were representatives of foreign embassies, though the Venetian embassy was absent because of difficulty in obtaining suitable horses. Gnieński himself rode in a sable-lined delia, decorated with diamond buttons, and a plumed cap of fur. The cortège was accompanied by one hundred of the Sultan's *çavuş* soldiers in large turbans. They all passed by the Palace of Daud Paşa, at that time in the possession of the Sultan. It was said that from this palace the Sultan secretly observed the entrance of the Polish ambassador. After passing by a huge cemetery they finally approached the main city gate and the double walls of Istanbul. Wrote the ambassador: "The moat was large but not very deep, wall towers very numerous. The city is big, made up of 13 000 streets but they are quite narrow, most of them for one horse only, a few for a pair of horses. There was only one very large street. Houses are mainly single-storeyed, wooden, covered with tiles. There is a strong smell in the streets but they are swept clean, donkeys with baskets taking the garbage away. The streets are very crowded. Mosques superbly ornamented, covered with lead."³

Gnieński's diary, an example of extraordinary experience and deep knowledge of Turkish matters, is excellently supplemented by some illus-

trations preserved in the Czartoryski Collection of the National Museum in Cracow. These are four pictures, about 29,5 cm x 44,5 cm each, painted in gouache on paper glued on panel, in miniature manner, a work of the French artist Pierre Paul Sevin, signed and dated 1679. They were made most probably in Paris to the order of one of the French diplomats, according to the accurate French descriptions of the chosen scenes, written on parchment sheets fixed on the backs of the panels; perhaps it was the contemporary French ambassador in Istanbul, François Charles Ollier, comte de Nointel, who commissioned the work.

Sevin, born in 1650 in Tournon, studied painting in Rome; active in Lyon, and in Paris as the *peintre du Roi*, he specialized in depicting historical and current events (documentary painting playing the role of today's photography).⁴ Among other occurrences he illustrated the embassy of the French diplomat Chaumont to Siam. We have no evidence of his indirect relations with Poland and it is improbable that he took part in Gniński's expedition. Nevertheless, his work is based on good information and some knowledge of Turkish political life and the ceremonies concentrated in the Grand Seraglio, some schematic features, however, especially in representation of the Turks, being notable in the pictures. The cycle was acquired by the Czartoryski family, possibly in the second half of the 19th century in Paris.

Three serial pictures show the culminating episode of the embassy: the visit in the Grand Seraglio, on 13th (?) September 1677. According to ancient Turkish custom, the audience was granted on the day of paying off the janissary troops, to display both the military and financial powers of the State.

The first picture (ill. 1) represents the Hall of the Divan, the *kubbe-altı*. Money in sacks, set on the floor, is taken up by a military official and carried away to the soldiers. The Divan dignitaries presided by the Grand Vizier are sitting all around; at the side there is a place for the Polish ambassador and his suite.

Here is the description of the moment in Gniński's diary: "Before

the audience I was led to the Divan of Kubbe-viziers, in front of the Emperor's window, who watched the scene by the window with his mother and with sultanas, as I noticed. The army and the Court were given the quarterly pay, each one being called up from a list. One thousand purses were given which is 500 000 thalers. It all took two hours but before the ceremony the *çorba* (soup) was served to the janissaries."⁵

The Hall of the Divan, situated in the Second Court of the Seraglio, was damaged by fire in 1574 and then rebuilt by Murad III; it was subsequently repaired by Selim III and Mahmud II, but its general shape was unchanged from the late 15th century: a covered portico with vaulted roof, enclosed by handsome wrought-iron gates and railings, lent a sense of importance and dignity to the whole. The principal point of interest was the little grilled window opposite the door, built high up above the Grand Vizier's seat. Originally flush with the wall, made at the order of Sultan Süleyman, it was rebuilt in the 18th century, when the room was decorated in rococo style, and then projected like an oriel. Early Sultans attended the Divan personally but Süleyman discontinued the practice and built this little window, into which he could creep unobserved without the Council's knowing if he were there or not.⁶

The members of the Divan were as follows: The Grand Vizier and other Pasha viziers, the two *cadî leschieri* (Kaziaskers) of Greece and Anatolia, who were the heads of all the Kadis of these two provinces (the *kadi* being men who professed the law and who governed by special grant as rulers in all places and cities of the Emperor), the three *Defterdars* (who resembled the Roman *quaestor*) whose duty was to collect the Royal rents and pay out all the money to the militia and other salaried people of the Porte, the *Nişancı*, who was the Grand Chancellor and sealed the orders and letters with the Royal seal, the secretaries of all the Pashas and other grandees, together with a vast number of notaries who always assisted at the door of the Divan, and the *Çavuş Başı*, who was the chief of the ushers and who carried a silver staff in his hand. Almost all these are recognizable in our

picture. There are also the janissary soldiers and officers, the janissary cadets (*acemi*), no different from those we find in the famous Codex Vindobonensis 8626 (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna) made probably by the painter Giendrofsky, who was sent about 1590 with the ambassador Bartholomäus Pezzen by Emperor Rudolph II to Sultan Murad III.⁷

In the second painting (ill. 2), in the same hall, dinner is being served to the embassy. Wrote Gniński: "After the paying a banquet for five tables was given according to the custom of this nation. I was sitting with the Grand Vizier, my secretary (Michał Florian Rzewuski, starost of Kulm) and my sons (Jan and Ladislas) with Kubbeviziers, and other dignitaries, altogether about twenty persons. For other courtiers and for the young dishes were served under the balconies, placed on the ground on rice mats. However, seeing that they turned their backs and did not want to eat, so dragoons and grooms took these dishes. Afterwards the janissary troops marched away; they were about 5 000 soldiers."⁸

The third picture (ill. 3) shows the most important moment of the audience given by Sultan Mehmed IV in the Throne Room, the *Arzodası*. In the corner of the room, under a splendid canopy adorned with eight tassels, the sultan is seated on the throne, in front of which are standing the Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa accompanied by four viziers of lower rank. Five members of the embassy are held by chamberlains: Gniński, his two sons, a French diplomat named Perrier (a person shown in each picture, always in western style costume), and probably secretary Rzewuski (forced to make a deep bow). Gniński is delivering his speech, immediately translated by the chief interpreter of the Porte, Alexander Maurocordato, Scarlet-Oğlu (a man of the Greek Phanariote family, who studied in Rome and graduated in Padua as *medicinae doctor*). Through tall windows servants show the gifts brought by the Poles. Gniński's speech included greetings sent to the sultan by King Sobieski and expressed his desire to make peace between the two countries. Mehmed answered in Turkish very briefly, his words

being translated into Latin: "*Pax, quae conclusa, erit stabilis, utque sacrae capitulationes scribantur mandatur supremo vesirio.*" (Peace which is set will be permanent, and for this a sacred treaty will be written down, being ordered to the Grand Vizier).⁹

About this moment the Polish ambassador wrote in his diary: "At the time of the audience the gifts, taken from the hands of my people by the *kapıcıs* in the First Court, were now presented through the windows. They were: a casket of silver decorated with pieces of gold and precious stones, two caskets of amber, a large mirror framed in amber, a silver fountain, to be carried by four men, which expelled by the wind, poured out perfumes for half an hour seven ells high, a silver tub, still more beautiful than that given to the Grand Vizier, silver jugs, 120 ells of colourful cloth, excellent guns, two mastiff dogs, four spotted pointer dogs, and two packs of Kurlandish hounds, all in collars and velvet cloth ornamented with silver."¹⁰

The Throne Room, *Arzodası*, located in the Third Court, behind the Gate of Felicity (*Bab-i Seadet*) was erected by Mehmed II, about 1467, when he founded the Grand Seraglio. It is a rectangular single-story building with an overhanging roof supported by a pillared marble colonnade running completely round the building. The gentle slope of the ground away from the Gate of Felicity necessitated steps at the far side of the *Arzodası*. They descend in a double flight of some dozen steps each. Although the building underwent restoration during the reigns of Mustafa II, Ahmed III, and Abdülmeçid, the general scheme of the structure as built by the Conqueror has been preserved, and portions are said to date from his time. The interior is divided into two unequal parts, the larger, on the Harem side, being the actual Audience or Throne Room, the smaller one, originally panelled with sheets of gold and silver, apparently served as an anteroom for the use of ambassadors and important personages seeking audience with the sultan. The walls contain good tiling, and attention should be drawn to the lovely chimney-piece, once entirely covered with sheets of silver and gold. There is also an interesting cascade fountain,

so arranged, according to Palace tradition, that the sound of the water falling from one basin to another should cover conversations not meant to be heard by the attendants. The sultan's throne always looked like a low four-poster bed with a canopy, heavy with gold and jewels, and with elaborate jewelled silk tassels, which hung down over the sultan's head. It was situated in the left-hand corner of the room. According to the tradition there were eight separate coverings for the throne, all kept in the treasury until they were wanted. The first was of black velvet embroidered with pearls, the second of white velvet with rubies and emeralds set in collets, the third of purple velvet with turquoises and pearls, the next three of velvets of other colours embroidered in gold, while the last two were gold brocades. The particular covering chosen varied with the status of each ambassador.¹¹

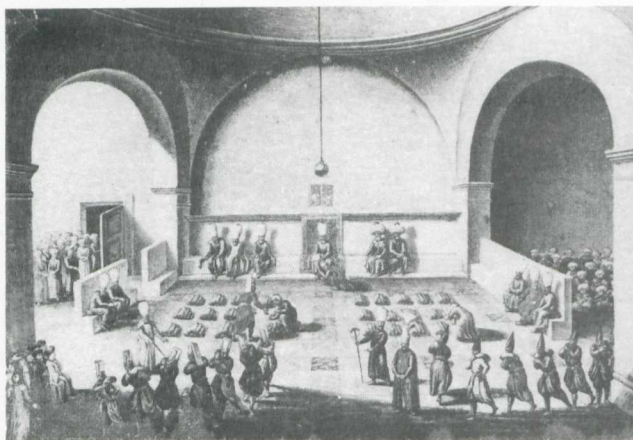
The fourth picture (ill. 4) concerns the event of March 11th, 1678, when Gniński, before leaving Istanbul, visited the grand vizier once again in his palace, close to the Et Meydanı. The building no longer exists. In a large audience hall, with sofas all around the walls, a rather imaginary view of the city is displayed behind the windows. Kara Mustafa is sitting in the middle of the room on a dais, while Gniński, in front of his host, has a lower seat. Coffee is being served to the embassy members and honorary caftans (*hil'at*) brought in for them by servants. Gniński complains in his diary that they were not of good quality.

Several pictures have been preserved, miniatures or in larger sizes, mainly from the 16th and 17th centuries, depicting embassies held inside or outside Europe. Among these we should mention two examples not very different from Sevin's work: the picture of an embassy, probably the Polish one to the Czar of Moscow in the Kremlin at the end of the 16th or in the early 17th century, kept in the Nemzeti Museum in Budapest,¹² and the other, the miniature depiction of the embassy of Bartholomäus Pezzen of about 1590 to Sultan Murad III, found in the Codex Vindobonensis, referred to above. Of them all Sevin's series

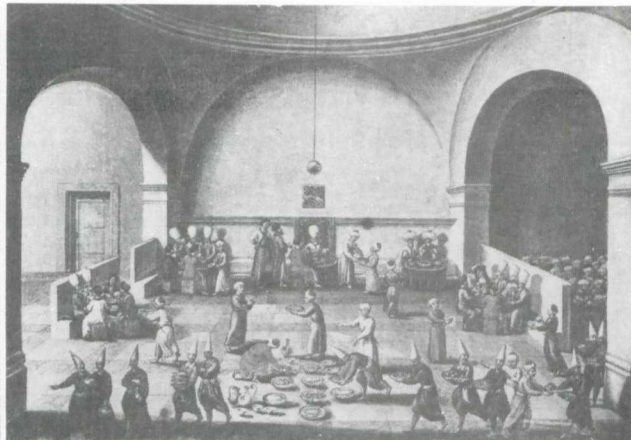
in the Czartoryski Collection in Cracow occupies an exceptional place with its consistency and indirect connection with written sources. I think these pictures are worth recalling today, after exactly 300 years, at this important congress devoted to Turkish culture.

NOTES

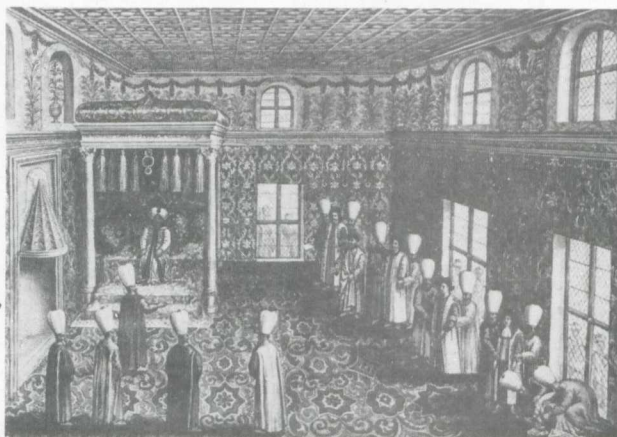
1. Z. Żygulski Jr. "Turkish Trophies in Poland and the Imperial Ottoman Style", Armi Antiche, numero speciale, Torino 1972.
2. F. Pułaski, Źródła do poselstwa Jana Gnińskiego wojewody chełmińskiego do Turcji w latach 1677-1678, Biblioteka Ordynacji Krasieńskich vol. XX-XXII, Warszawa 1907.
3. Pułaski, op. cit., p. 29.
4. L. Charvet, "Les Sevin", Réunion de Société des Beaux Arts 18.1894. 135-203.
5. Pułaski, op. cit., p. 38.
6. N.M. Penzer, The Harem, London 1936, p. 101-102.
7. A. Arbasino, I Turchi. Codex Vindobonensis 8626, Parma 1971; see also: K. Teply, Kaiserliche Gesandtschaften ans Goldene Horn, Stuttgart and Hamburg n.d.
8. Pulaski, op, cit., p. 38.
9. *ibid.*, p. 37.
10. *ibid.*, p. 38.
11. Penzer, op. cit., p. 107.
12. G. Rózsa, Selected Paintings of the Historical Gallery, Budapest 1977, ill. 3-4.



Ill. 1: Cracow. National Museum,
Czadoryski Collection, Paul Sevin, gouache 1679:
Paying of the janissary troops in the Hall
of the Divan



Ill. 2: Cracow. National Museum,
Dinner served in the Hall of the Divan



Ill. 3: Cracow. National Museum,
Czadoryski Collection,
Paul Sevin, gouache 1679:
The Audience given by Sultan
Mehmet IV in the Throne Room



Ill. 4: Cracow. National Museum, Czadoryski Collection, Paul Sevin, gouache 1679:
Paying visit to the Grand Vizeer