

Academy of Historical Arts



“On Customs and Traditions in the Reign of Augustus III” [excerpts]

by Jędrzej Kitowicz (1728 – 1804)

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Translator's Notes:

I have selected the following excerpts from Kitowicz's work because, in one way or another, they refer directly to Polish sabre (szabla) or to Polish stick-fighting (palcaty). Kitowicz presents a very colourful picture of life in 18th century Poland, under the reign of King Augustus III of Poland (reigned 1733 – 1763), who was the penultimate king before the fatal Partitions in 1772, 1794 and 1795, that marked the end of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

We may assume that, although the Commonwealth underwent many subtle (or even not-so-subtle!) changes over almost 230 years of existence, some traditions of sabre-fighting would remain relatively constant – or at the very least, they would be passed down via word of mouth. Whenever Kitowicz speaks of "old-fashioned", he probably means the state of affairs in the 17th century. Kitowicz's unfinished work describes various parts of Polish society (children, soldiers, nobility, peasants, lawyers, priests, etc.) and goes into detail about the customs and traditions typical for these groups. His description of the Polish military is also quite extensive and is an invaluable resource for reconstructing not only the structure of the armed forces, but also the more elusive social and cultural relations within the army.

I have indicated the titles of chapters by a bold font, and the titles of sub-chapters are underlined. There are many more chapters and sub-chapters in the book, but most of them either do not mention sabre at all, or just enumerate it as one of the weapons that formed part of a soldier's gear.

At the end of this translation there is a small glossary of Polish terms with pronunciation notes.

The Polish original is freely available on-line, for instance here: <http://literat.ug.edu.pl/kitowic/> with a short biography in English accessible here: <http://literat.ug.edu.pl/autors/kitow.htm>

*Daria Izdebska,
9th October 2012*

On Bringing Up the Children

On games played by students

Palcaty: The second game during break time [at school] was fighting with wooden sticks called *palcaty* (sg. *Palcat*), where two students would bout with each other. This practice was crucial, especially to the nobility, because it taught and prepared the youths for future use of the sabre, a practice which helped our ancestors achieve great things during various wars. Those fights were truly a sight to behold. When two students started playing with sticks, they would be at it until they became exhausted. They handled their sticks so deftly and with such art, blocking and guarding from all sides, and responding with a blow at their opponent, that neither one nor the other could hit the face nor head nor the sides. And there were already such masters among them that they taught and coached all the others. Occasionally, even the younger professors, both Jesuits and Piarists, would fight splendidly with the sticks. Thus, *palcaty* were in common use by students not only during the time devoted to breaks in the school day, but even in the schools themselves, right before the lesson started. If a student was too frightened and did not have the courage to face another, he had to suffer much abuse and mocking from the entire school, and he would often get bumps on the head or belting over the back.

On the Customs of the Nobility

On attire, or garments

(...) It was not proper for a burgher to go about with a sabre, with the exception of the inhabitants of Kraków, Poznań and Vilnius – because of their age-old privileges. (...)

(...) A nobleman buckled on a sabre whenever he would leave the house, and took a horseman's war-hammer in his hand (pol. *nadziak*, but also *obuch* and *czekan*). It was constructed like so: a shaft one inch thick in diameter, long enough to reach a man's waist from the ground. At the end that would be held by the hand, it had a round silver or brass knob. At the other end there was a flat iron hammer, fixed firmly to the shaft. One of the ends of that hammer, the flat end, was similar to a shoemaker's hammer. The other end, if it was flat like a small axe, was called a *czekan*; if it was pointed and thick and slanting somewhat, then it would be a *nadziak*; and if it would be rounded like a bagel, it was called *obuch*.

It was a terrible tool in the hand of a Pole, and even more so at the time when there was so much inclination and will for brawls and squabbles. When the nobles would use a sabre, then the matter was different. One would cut off the other's hand, or wound his cheek or dent his head, and so the blood thus drawn from the adversary would hold off further fierceness and violence. But a wound dealt by a *nadziak* would often be deadly, yet without any sign of blood. Thus the one who dealt the blow would not cease in his attack, as he could not see blood, but would beat upon his adversary even more, breaking ribs and fracturing bones, without leaving a trace on the skin. The nobility who used the hammers would often deprive their victims of health and sometimes even life. This is why it was forbidden to appear with a hammer at all the political gatherings (i.e. *sejms*, *sejmiks*, tribunals), which was when the brawls and fighting would take place most often. Also, in the cathedral in Gniezno, there is a sign on the largest door that warns all those who would enter the House of God with such a villainous implement that the curse shall be upon them. It was truly a villainous implement, because if one hit the other with the sharp end of a *nadziak* right behind the ear, one would kill him instantly, driving the fatal iron right through the temples.

The sabre, at the time of King Augustus III (1734-1763), was quite varied. The simple black sabre (that is, in an iron sheath on leather straps) would be most common among the poor nobility. Instead of *cap* or *kursz* [two types of leather used for the sheaths – probably

goatskin and calfskin(?)], it would be bound with eel skin. It did not really matter with what it was bound, because it was the blade (the iron) that was worthy of respect. And not only among the poor nobility, but even among the most wealthy of nobles, the sabre was passed down from father to son, from the father's son to the father's grandson, and further down the line, together with the most precious of stones and jewellery. The black sabre was always carried by all manner of brawlers, night-prowlers and trouble-makers, who found their fun in cutting people or leaving sabre marks on the faces of some foppish youths, or even chasing a German in white stockings right through mud. Most often, however, the black sabre was used in any and all circumstances in which there might be a chance for unrest and fighting. Those who were dressed in a German fashion would usually take a German *pałasz* or a double-edged rapier. Additionally, the black sabre was used for duelling – the most common weapon in these circumstances.

The old-fashioned black sabre always had a curved blade. The best sabres were produced by the Wyszynski sabre-makers. They were tested rigidly. A good sabre should bend so that the tip of the blade can reach the very pommel and then spring back to its original shape. Later, straight sabres became fashionable, as did *staszówki* [sabres made in Staszów] and the straight and light Spanish blades, which did not hang as heavily around the waist but were good for protection and self-defence. The hilts on black sabres had an angular hilt-guard, also known as the cross, and a thumb-ring for the thumb. Later, when *sejms* and tribunals became more and more tempestuous, such hilt for the sabre were developed that could protect the entire hand. Such a hilt was called a *furdyment* or a basket and it consisted of several iron bars that covered the hand like a cage, and a large piece of iron plate.

To balance the proportions of such a large hilt the sheaths were as wide as a plank, even when very thin sabres were put into them, from which the fashion spread to all sabres – even those that did not have baskets. This fashion, which did not last for very long, originated in Lithuania, and the Crowners [i.e. Poles] have adopted it from there. However, there must have been a similar fashion even in the Roman Republic, when the Latin poet – I don't know which one, Horatio or Martialis – wrote this verse: "Grandi in vagina, Pontice, claudis acum", which means: "In your large sheath, Pontic, a needle is contained."

Sabres with wide sheaths and large hilts were mostly used by courtly men, those without prudence or judgement, brawlers, and those who loved to slash at each other with swords in taverns and villages. Whosoever they would beat, they would also rob blind, or

he had to pay a ransom to them if he did not have the strength or courage to fight. Soon, however, because such a weapon is heavy and destroys the clothes, the custom was set aside. Strangely enough, it was set aside when more peaceful times followed after the rough and violent times. Together with more elegant dress one would wear a Turkish *karabela*, a Tartar *czeczuga* or a *pałasik* decorated with silver or gold or oil-blackened. Such swords were most often brought from Lviv and accordingly they were called *Ivovian*.

The sabre and *karabela* were slung in two ways: the most ancient method favoured broad leather straps with buckles and silver or gold terminals at the end. These straps held the sabre at the waist so that the crossguard would be at waist-height. The straps would go around the waist only on the left side and would be tied in the middle of the small of the back at waist-height. *Rapcie* would be tied in a similar fashion. They were similar to straps, yet not made of leather, but of a silk cord, often plaited with gold and silver, sometimes made entirely of gold and silver. Courtiers, fancy men and young nobles would colour-match their *rapcie* for sabre or *karabela* with their *żupan* (traditional dress of a Polish nobleman). No one worried about the colour of the straps, though.

Later, the sabre would be tied in a "longer" fashion, so that it hung under the knee and it was necessary either to hold it by the hilt whilst walking or to carry it under arm, so that it would not get between the legs and trip the wearer. The straps and *rapcie* went around the entire back like a harness on a horse. This fashion – silly and extremely uncomfortable – did not last for more than five or six years. It was abandoned and men returned to the short and narrow suspension that did not cover the back at all, but just the side. This was also not very comfortable, because the sabre would smack the wearer on the side whilst walking.

On Soldiers

On the Crown Foot Guard

The Crown Foot Guard did not select the men according to their height. They recruited everyone who wanted to serve, even the shortest of people, as long as they were not blind, lame or hunchbacked. The Foot Guard was a haven for all thieves, cheats, wayward sons, wastrels and anyone who was forced to flee because of murder or another serious crime. They also took on various craftsmen from Warsaw, who were not allowed to practice their craft freely by the guild masters because they did not pay their guild fees. Whosoever of these took upon the raiment of the Guard was free from any prosecution or assault. There were good men in the Guard as well, whose parents or relatives recommended them for this novitiate in hope of a future promotion and general improvement. The last type of men were those who were abducted: handsome youths, butlers, ruddy peasants who had drunk a little bit too much in a wayside tavern and allowed a guardsman's hat to be placed upon their heads. After they had put it on, as if they had given the most solemn of oaths, without any other ceremony, they were taken away and brought to command as new recruits. The Crown Guard had the reputation of being the best soldiers, since the regiment was home to the most dangerous and shady of men, the outlaws and show-offs, who were ready for everything and who continually practiced hand-to-hand combat at various tribunals, meetings in Radom, and gatherings in Warsaw. No one was so skilled at putting down a fight, a battle, a bloody carnage, as those guardsmen. However, no other soldier was as quick and ready to look for a fight. The guardsmen would forever wander around all the drinking dens and bad company, looking for someone to taunt, so that they could later beat him up and strip him down – they were not deterred by the regimental fine or the possibility of a change of luck.

They found most leisure in teasing the royal *drabant* guard (a Saxon cavalry regiment that was made up the tallest and most handsome of men). The guards would tail the *drabants* like hunters following prey. Whenever the guardsmen would do battle with them, they would do bloody carnage upon the *drabant*. Most often, they would cut their faces, shamefully disfiguring the handsome men, their noses and cheeks cut through, the ears cut off. The only benefit of this was the doubtful glory for the guardsmen that they, as midgets, could defeat the giants. The king was sorely enraged with the officers of the guard and with their general that they could not keep their soldiers in check, so that his own *drabants* would not be so afflicted. He called upon the officers of staff and the general

himself several times, complaining about the state of affairs and asking for a working solution. The general and the officers did whatever they could; they punished severely whomever they could catch. Finally, when nothing else was working, they decided that the guardsmen needed to be deprived of their *pałasz*, which all the soldiers on and off duty carried with them. At this time, however, the soldiers fixed their bayonets to their flintlocks only during drills and when they were part of a detachment. At all other times they carried the bayonets with them, next to their *pałasz*. So when the guardsmen were deprived of their *pałasz*, they started going against the *drabant* giants with sticks. They put their bayonets on the sticks and scarred the faces of the giants even more. The giants, who very heavy men and not very good at sabre, did not know a single fencing sequence, but always came at the guardsmen from above, as if using flails. In response the guardsmen came in underneath, quickly and smoothly, marked the giants on the face, then retreated.

King August seeing that at each drill there were more and more *drabants* with faces marked with signs [*paragrafy* – lit. articles of the law], sent them back to Saxony, and called on a regiment of *karwanierzy*, equally tall and massive as the *drabants*, but not as handsome. He did not care about them as much, and the guardsmen were not as eager to fight them as the previous ones.

On the Lawyers

On tribunals

(...) To prove that you were of noble birth you did not need a genealogy. An old sabre would do, often covered with eel skin instead of a sheath.

[after some mocking and jokes] (...) sometimes the dispute would move outside the town, with sabres drawn to resolve it. But because it happened amongst friends and since those youths were not likely to hold grudges for very long, it was mostly hats and coats that suffered, not the bodies. And such duels often ended with glasses of wine, or jugs of mead, to toast the honour of knightly hearts.

On beating each other with sticks

Various lawyers and advocates would often meet outside the city hall after the tribunal was concluded. There they would fight each other with sticks, one-on-one, within a circle formed by the others. Those sticks were of various shapes and sizes, for young and for old, thinner and thicker, made of dogwood or oak – the thinnest (the thickness of a finger) were for young boys, and the thickest were for those who already had their moustache. These were thick as a staff or a peasant's cudgel. All of them were called *palcaty*. When everyone had their turn, the one who won against everyone else, or the one who was thought to be the best "player", became the Marshal of the circle; the second one in line, close in his art to the first one, became the Vice-Marshal; the third became the Instigator; the fourth became a Vice-Instigator [all those are names for the highest officials in the Commonwealth]. Thus, when they finally had their newly appointed officials, the entire noisy rabble went to the Jews (wherever those were). The Jews would then need to find special gifts for those newly-appointed officials and throw a feast for the entire band. The Jews did so instantly, not daring to disagree, and wishing to avoid the attack from those hotheads who, if not satisfied, would not let any Jew appear in the market without dragging him through the spokes in a wheel and lashing him on his cap and back. After the gifts and having feasted to the full (usually with mead, bagels and small breads), the band came back to the town hall. There the "stick jurisdiction" began, which lasted as long as the town's officials were debating and there was still daylight.

This jurisdiction spread over everyone who was equal in status to the members of the Circle, but sometimes even those who were above them in station, and who just happened to walk nearby the city hall when those of the Circle were showing off with vigour. Whenever a passer-by would thus imprudently pass next to them, he would be dragged into the circle and one of the members of this circle would come up against him. If the member of the circle managed to score a bump on his head or a welt on his face, then the passer-by was no longer forced to fight with anyone else. He would be congratulated that he became their brother, a guild-friend, and he lost simply by an unfortunate accident which happens even to the best of fighters. After that, he would no longer be dragged into the circle, but if he ever wanted to take part voluntarily, he had the right to do so at any time. If he managed to win against the first member of the circle, he was faced with a second, and then third, or fourth, always from the pool of the least skilled, until they got bored with him or he successfully implored to not fight again, or he gained the privilege of friendship and brotherhood. If the passer-by would not wish to fight at all, he would be beaten with a stick on the head, lose his neckerchief or cap or a sum of money, with which he would buy himself out from this vexation. He would be free from the Circle's plays from then on, but he would not be granted the honour of camaraderie. Instead, he would gain an offensive title/name.

If the passer-by asked for the Marshal at the very start, the Vice-Instigator stepped forward saying that he was not allowed access to the Marshal until he first fought his way up the ranks. If he was beaten by the first, second or third official, then he could no longer ask to fight the Marshal. If he did manage to defeat the first three, the Marshal would have to accept the challenge. If the current Marshal won, he would be applauded by the entire Circle and gain even more fame, but his opponent, after having defeated the lower-ranked members, was not the lesser for it and could, if he so wished, take up the rank of the one he had defeated. If he actually managed to defeat the Marshal himself then he would be proclaimed the new Marshal by the entire Circle, and if he wanted to take up the office then they would all go to the next feast at the Jews (although it would be not as lavish). If he did not wish to take up the office, the previous Marshal would remain in his position, and the victor would leave, but graced with honour, fame and respect. He could also be invited to a customary drink by the defeated Marshal, after which they would sometimes play with sticks once again, and – as it often happens in these adventures when fortune turns around – the Marshal would regain his lost fame. Oftentimes, it would so happen that important courtiers, or great fencers of other sort would pretend to be cowardly or without skill, just for

laughs. When they were dragged into the circle, they would beat the Instigators and the Marshal thoroughly and meticulously. The members of the Circle would quickly learn never to drag similar men into the fight again.

The Instigator and Vice-Instigator had several responsibilities. They would invite those youths and older men who passed by the city hall or looked upon the circle, dragging them into the circle, by force if necessary, with help from other members of the Circle. They would also act as seconds in the fights between the members of the circle, whether serious or in play, or with a new arrival. They also made sure that one would not cause too much harm to the other, nor use foul play or treachery. Additionally, they had to make sure that the fierceness born out of the stick fighting would not grow more serious and transfer to quarrels solved with more dangerous weapons outside the circle, but that the fierceness always ended within the circle by way of a mutual apology. The Marshal's duty was to arbitrate the more difficult feuds that were passed on to him by the Instigators. When the Marshal was not present, the Vice-Marshal took his place.

The custom of stick-fighting was not used solely at the tribunals, but also at regional and magistrates' courts (...)

Glossary (with pronunciation notes)

czeczuga	/cheh-ˈchu-gah/	A type of sabre, Tartar or Kirgiz in origin, with a very slightly curved blade. Ornamental and worn with the Polish-style clothing just like a <i>karabela</i> .
czekan	/ˈcheh-can/	See <i>nadziak</i> .
furdymnt	/foor-ˈdyh-mehnt/	An equivalent of a basket.
karabela	/car-ah-ˈbel-ah/	A type of sabre, originally brought over from Turkey, it later became a typically Polish sabre, often heavily ornamented and used as part of a nobleman's dress. It could be used as a weapon by removing the precious stones and the more flashy hilt.
nadziak	/ˈnah-jiak/	This is explained quite well by Kitowicz himself. There doesn't seem to be a well-established English equivalent (the translations available on the internet range from war-hammer to horseman's pick).
obuch	/oh-booh/ <h as in Scottish loch>	See <i>nadziak</i> .
Palcat (plural: palcaty)	/ˈpahl-tsa-t/ or /ˈpahl-tsa-tyh/	A stick used for play-fighting and training-fighting that prepares for proper sabre-fighting later on.
pałasik	/pah-ˈwah-sheek/	A smaller, lighter version of a <i>pałasz</i> .

pałasz	/ˈpah-wah-sh/	Normally, this word refers to a backword/broadword type of weapon (a straight blade with one edge), like the Hussar <i>pałasz</i> (with a straight blade, but a hilt like the Hussar sabre), but the word in Old Polish could sometimes mean a sabre or a dussack as well, which causes a lot of problems with interpretation. For instance, the well-known Hussar sabre was sometimes called a “curved <i>pałasz</i> ” but is not to be confused with a Hussar <i>pałasz</i> (!)
rapcie	/ˈrahp-chi-eh/	Elegant silk straps that held the sheathed sabre at the waist.
sejm	/sejm/	A political gathering equivalent to a parliament.
sejmik	/ˈsejm-eek/	A smaller, more local version of <i>sejm</i> .
staszówka	/stah-ˈshoof-ka/	A sabre made in Staszów.
szabla	/ˈshah-blah/	A generic word for ‘sabre’.
czarna szabla	/ˈtschar-nah shah-blah/	The ‘black sabre’ – seems to correspond to the Hussar-type sabres.
żupan	/ż-uh-pahn/ [<i><ż></i> as s in measure]	The typical long dress of a Polish nobleman (with long sleeves and buttons). Often quite colourful.