

---

**Agata Małolepsza, *Działalność artystyczna i ziemiańska rodu Reszke na przełomie XIX i XX wieku* [‘The artistic and landed-gentry activities of the Reszke family in the late 19th/early 20th century’], Novae Res – Wydawnictwo Innowacyjne [Gdynia, 2010]; 498 pp.**

---

The Polish society’s knowledge of three outstanding representatives of the Reszke family: Józefina, Jan, and Edward – the opera singers who met with great international success in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is regrettably much unsatisfactory. One of the reasons is negligence on the part of existing domestic historiography.

The recent years have fortunately seen a shift of thematic emphases in the historical awareness of nation, with increasing focus on past victories and successes. This makes an enormous difference as versus the once cult of disasters, failed uprisings, and national martyrdom. A historian’s task is naturally to describe the past as it was, without embellishing it; however, he or she can freely select the topics. It therefore seems nobler to choose issues bearing an optimistic mark, enabling to enjoy the history of one’s own country. The exalted sentence written down many years ago by Stefan-Maria Kuczyński is worth memorising: “Every nation willingly focuses its memory on the great days of its past. It is in this past that nations can find an association of thoughts and affinity of experiences reinforcing the sense of national community in the present time; it is them that one draws the strength and uplift for a future. The great works the nation did, often in the very dim and distant past, beamed with legend, persevere in such nation’s spiritual life as creative powers, and are dear to the heart of all its sons.”<sup>1</sup> The thing is that a number of glorious deeds of our ancestors, worth being reminded, remains overwhelmed with the burden of trauma prevailing in history textbooks (particularly, as far as history of 20<sup>th</sup> century is concerned).

The monograph in question is a revised version of a doctoral thesis compiled under tutelage of the Rev. Professor Jan Związek, PhD, as critically reviewed by: Prof. Dariusz Złotkowski, PhD, of ‘Jan Długosz’ Academy, Częstochowa (‘AJD’), and the Rev. Prof. Kazimierz Szymonik, PhD, as defended (in 2009) at the Philological-His-

---

<sup>1</sup> Stefan M. Kuczyński, *Wielka wojna z zakonem krzyżackim w latach 1409-1411* [‘The Great War with the Teutonic Order, 1409–11’], Warszawa, 1960, p. 9.

torical Department of AJD. If describable in a sentence, the study is a fascinating saga of the Reszke family, entangled as it was in the convoluted history of the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Rev. Prof. Jan Związek is author of a preface to the book.

The preface renders the reader acquainted, in a concise and very pithy form, with the most important facts about the Reszke family, evocatively encouraging to read the whole thing. The book consists of six chapters: 1. 'Landed-gentry families in the Radomsko county [*powiat*] in late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century'; 2. 'Aspects of the history of the Reszke family'; 3. 'The artistic careers of Józefina, Jan and Edward Reszke'; 4. 'The Reszke family in Radomsko area'; 5. 'The Reszke descendants in Radomsko area and in the Second Republic'; 6. 'The vicissitudes of the Reszke descendants during the Nazi occupation and thereafter'. Each of the chapters is composed of a few subchapters (three to six each).

The first, rather extensive, chapter focuses on presenting the Radomsko landed gentry [Polish, *ziemiaństwo*] in the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> c., on multiple planes: economic, cultural, political, and social. A considerable amount of interesting news is provided on the period's people and occurrences, inclusive of the daily life in that distant epoch. Of interest is, for instance, the fragment on hunting (one of the nineteenth-century aristocracy's favourite pastimes). The Kruszyna estate, owned by Count Stefan Lubomirski, hosted once a visit of President Ignacy Mościcki himself. During his stay, some 3,000 partridges, hares and rabbits were shot. Yet, hunting was dangerous not only to the game but for the hunters and their accompanying people as well. Miss Maria Tyszkiewicz clearly experienced it as she got shot in 1918, on hunting, by her own brother Edward (p. 61). The Reszke family were also keen hunters: "On 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, and 24<sup>th</sup> October 1902, a hunting session took place at J. Reszke's in Skrzydlów and at E. Reszke's in Garnek. In spite of rain and bad weather, the outcome turned out to be very good. It ought to be added that the localisation did influence the overall result, which is particularly true for Garnek, with its numerous meadows and low-level sites presently unfrosted. The killed game included: stags – 9, hares – 688, woodcocks – 4, pheasants – 4; grouses – 10; rabbits – 29; feral cat – 1, falcon – 1, owl and partridges – 56. The total was 803 specimens." (quote from p. 224)

Chapter 2 deals with the Reszke family genealogy. The probable area of the family's origin was Gostyń land in Mazovia, and it seems that the family existed at least in 14<sup>th</sup> century, having developed into 15<sup>th</sup> c. a few lines bearing the Prus 1, or their own, coat-of-arms (p. 102). Fr. Stanisław Reszka was known in 16<sup>th</sup> c. as consummate diplomat. The first full-fledged historic ancestor of the Reszke family line covered in the book is, arguably, Jan-Wilhelm Reszke (18<sup>th</sup> c.).

Chapter 3 portrays Józefina (1855–91) and her no less famous brothers, Jan (1850–1925) and Edward (1853–1917)<sup>2</sup>, with special focus of their artistic achieve-

<sup>2</sup> Emilia was the oldest of all her brothers-and-sisters (as it seems, she was the only one of them with no vocal talents); she was married off to Adam Michalski. The youngest broth-

ments. Their talents were inherited after their highly gifted parents: Jan Reszke (1817–1877) and Emilia, née Unifarska (1826–85). Józefina often appeared on stage outside the Russian Empire – in Italy, France, Great Britain, or even as far away as Portugal. She had the ability to win round the public not just with her singing but with her personality as well. Her charity activities were well known. After a performance in Paris, she gave a precious brilliant bracelet given to her by a devotee to a beggar she came across in front of the Opera edifice; she said on the occasion, “May everyone be happy tonight!” (p. 167). She would also assign the proceeds from her performances to charity. She concluded her career as she got married in 1885 to Leopold-Julian Kronenberg, devoting herself to her family ever since. Her brothers enjoyed an even greater fame. The family tale had it that “Jan was delivered as his mother was singing at the pianoforte” (p. 174). Jan appeared in concerts on two continents – in Europe and North America; initially as a male baritone and subsequently, as a tenor. Valued high at monarchs’ courts, he was friends with the British royal family and was decorated by Queen Victoria who was enthused with his vocal skills. As the queen opined in her diary: “[...] we had a fantastic musical feast at the dinner, which was part of a show whose task was to compensate to us the absence of Jean de Reszke in the staging of Romeo and Juliet. Jean and Edward de Reszke represented all the qualities of youthfulness. It was a gorgeous display of musical skills. The two brothers’ singing was exquisite, their performance shall be memorable, so enchanting and ear-pleasing it was. [...] The depth and powerfulness of Edward’s voice were wonderful; the timbre of Jean’s voice attracted with its amazing tone, worth of listening. [...] There was no doubt that the brothers were gifted with the most eminent voices, and their singing fashion appears perfect indeed. [...] I could be listening to this music longer still, endlessly. This is a real mastery. The voice pure and beautiful added pleasure to our soirée, and I wish it had never ended.” (Quoted/retranslated after the author, pp. 180-1)

Jan has never performed in Germany – this is what he had once promised to Alexandra, Princess of Wales (1844–1925), wife to the heir to the throne and, later, king, as Edward VII (reigned 1901–10); Jan maintained very good relationship with her. He concluded his artistic career at the peak of his fame (feeling that his vocal fitness has become deteriorating), devoting himself to teaching. Edward, the younger brother, also chose a stage career, influenced to this end by his sister and his brother, and with an outcome similar to theirs. He as if played second fiddle compared to Jan, as he more frequently played supporting roles but has earned no less money. As opposed to his brother, he did not get accustomed to pedagogical work and, having quit performing on stage, he settled down at his Garnek estate. In the last moments of his career he consented that his voice be recorded and edited in a record form (Jan

---

er was Wiktor-Emanuel (gifted with enormous talent, he has never chosen an artistic career path).

did not agree to do so, but fragments of the pieces he sang were secretly recorded all the same; pp. 192, 197).

The Reszke family was extremely proactive in landed-gentry developments, as described in chapter 4. Owing to a chronic scarcity of time, related to their stage-appearance obligations, they would often entrust the management of their estates to their relatives or kinspersons, or experts hired for the purpose. With considerable funds at their disposal, they increased their investments and purchased new real properties from time to time. The family came to possession of estates in the localities of: Borowno, Bartkowice, Chorzenice, Garnek, Kłobukowice, Nieznanice, Skrzydlów, and Witkowo, among others. Edward Reszke funded the construction of a magnificent manor in Garnek, designed by French architect François Arveuf. Although the final result appeared disappointing, it was certainly the most splendid residential building in the area.

Chapters 5 and 6 present the vicissitudes of the following Reszke-family generations, those living in the two decades between two World Wars, during the Nazi occupation and shortly after WW2 ended. They have been through numerous, and diverse, experiences – from success to enormous tragedy. The Second Republic was a ‘silver’ period in the history of the family which however was facing increasing hardships with time. During the wartime occupation, the Reszke fulfilled their civic obligations, including a tribute of blood. A shadow over the family’s reputation was cast by the fate of Wanda Kronenberg, daughter of Józefina’s son Leopold-Jan Kronenberg: she was sentenced to death by the Polish Underground for alleged collaboration with the Germans (the case still arouses controversy – it is not determinable unambiguously whether she was actually guilty). She was executed during the Warsaw Uprising, in August 1944 (pp. 375-7). Being landed gentry actively involved in actions of the Home Army, they were later on persecuted by the communists.

The gripping narration may sometimes conceal minor errors appearing the book’s text. There are some content-related errors – e.g. ‘extended’ lifetime of Tsar Alexander III (p. 186)<sup>3</sup> or altered birth date of Frédéric (Fryderyk) Chopin (p. 191)<sup>4</sup>. Some errors can be regarded as ordinary printing errors (as e.g. on pp. 199 or 323)<sup>5</sup>, as ‘normally’ appearing in a number of reliable publications.

---

<sup>3</sup> “In November 1897, he arrived in Warsaw, together with Edward. The reason for their visit was a stage appearance before Tsar Alexander III. On this occasion, the brothers had prepared and then sang Acts 1 and 3 of *Lohengrin*. The accounts say that the tsar, enchanted by Jan’s singing, confirmed his patent as a nobleman.” In fact, since 1894, Alexander’s son Nicholas II was the tsar.

<sup>4</sup> “In February 1919, on Fryderyk Chopin’s one-hundredth birth anniversary, students of Jan Reszke’s sang during a solemn mass celebrated at the Polish church of the Assumption (*L’Assomption*)”.

<sup>5</sup> “Their sister Józefina has for ever joined the pantheon of the world’s greatest operatic stars, albeit her career lasted 100 years only, and this singer was not chasing renown and

The book's outward look is excellent, with its hardback format, interesting graphic design (cover design by Paulina Radomska-Skierkowska), and considerable volume. Its text is furnished with final footnotes, mostly source ones; explanatory footnotes follow each of the chapters. Importantly, there is also a name index which proves extremely useful, given the scholarly nature of the study. However, there are a number of deficiencies, like e.g. numerous erroneous page references. A family tree of the Zimorowice-based Reszke line has also been prepared, spanning the family's seven generations (pp. 418-9), enabling one to easier find their way around the abstruse genealogical matter. Pages 421-436 (unnumbered) contain a number of illustrations, doubtlessly enriching the textual content. Photos of the main characters and of their properties can be found among them.

The book no doubt deserves our attention. Many of its fragments are extremely interesting, albeit longish digressive passages, loosely connected with the core narrative, appear here or there within it. There is a number of interesting anecdotes on the life and realities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The author has admittedly put a lot of effort into acquiring the relevant materials, scattered around the world, as she herself admits. As she puts it: "This present study has resulted from long-lasting archival quest made across various scientific or research institutions at home and abroad, a penetrating source and press query, as well as innumerable memoirs or diary publications referring to the subject-matter hereof directly or indirectly." (p. 417) There are some disputable findings, though. The family's origins have by far remained not satisfactorily explained. The book is certainly recommendable to anyone interested in history, culture, music, or even agronomy.

---

was reluctant to share information on her aristic or private life"; "On November 12, 1918, Jozef Piłsudski received therein representatives of all Polish political parties of the Kingdom of Poland. Deliberations over formulation of a new government were going on at the palace all the time." (Underlined by D.K.)