

With the Fury of a Shoemaker?



JANUSZ TAZBIR

Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw
wydzial1@pan.pl

Prof. Janusz Tazbir is an ordinary member of PAS, a historian with the Tadeusz Maneuffel Institute of History, and a scholar of culture and religious movements in 16th- and 17th-century Poland.

Devotees of every craft have their own particular type of passion. Ardent scholars of history and literature share a deep-burning desire to uncover the true meaning of various phenomena and concepts

The Polish word *pasja* “passion” was defined broadly by one Polish dictionary in the early 1900s as denoting – in one sense – a “great emotion, weakness, illness, mania, inclination, proclivity, penchant, custom”. Another dictionary published more than half a century later (Doroszewski’s) is more restrained in this respect, citing just “great, fervent engagement in something, liking for something.”

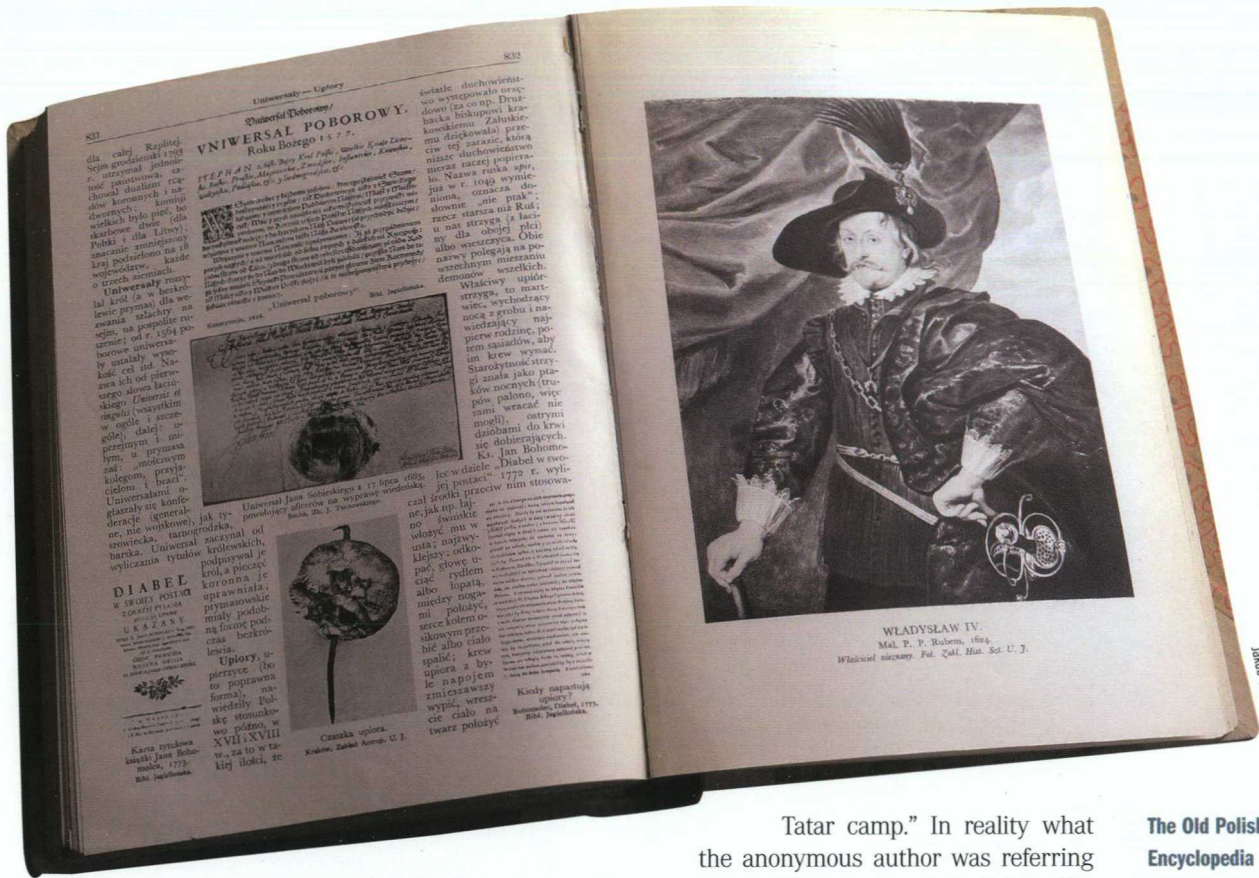
The progression evident in these dictionary entries is possibly indicative, as nowadays the Polish word *pasja* is indeed increasingly being used in a somewhat mundane sense, to describe ways of spending one’s free time, one’s personal interests or hobbies. There are also, of course, specialized religious senses of Polish *pasja* (akin to those of English “passion”), referring to the suffering of Jesus. *Pasja* can also denote the feeling of anger.

Craftsman and scholars

So which profession involves the greatest *pasja*? If we look to Polish phraseology for an answer, English readers may be surprised by the resulting conclusion: shoemaking! In Polish, *szewska pasja* “the passion of a shoemaker” is a phrase widely used in colloquial speech, to denote when someone truly loses their temper, flies off the handle, or launches into a fit of rage. A quick look into Julian Krzyżanowski’s *Nowa Księga przysłów i wyrażeń*

przystawionych polskich [New Book of Polish Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions] turns up quite a wealth of examples drawn from Polish literature of various calibers – all the way from top-notch writers such as Żeromski and Reymont, to middle-shelf writers such as Bałucki and Makuszyński, down to others whose works have long gone out of print. Many Poles will be familiar with the oft-cited line by the frequently irreverent Tadeusz Boy-Zeleński: “*Ciotka na to w pasji szewskiej / Znoś ten łajdak Przybyszewski!*” – here a prudish old aunt is driven to exasperation by the “modernist” nephew she ardently tries to educate, who playfully twists her words in uncouth ways, until “the aunt mutters back, seething with a shoemaker’s rage / it’s that good-for-nothing Przybyszewski who’s to blame!”

Surely, though, such an association with this particular variety of “passion” is far from complementary for cobblers themselves. So how might they acquired such a bad reputation? It seems we would be in error to conclude that was the Romantic poet Krasiński, after all, who infected Polish literature with such a hotheaded portrayal of shoemakers in his well-known love letters to his muse Delfina Potocka, when he complained about the rudeness of such a craftsman in Warsaw. Likewise, we would surely be wrong to seek the initial inspiration for the Polish phraseologism in a well-known painting hanging in the Warsaw National Museum, *Szewski poniedziałek* “Shoemaker’s Monday” by Wacław Koniuszko. Doroszewski’s dictionary, published one hundred years later, explains that the title means “spending time idly; not tuning up for work on Monday.” I was unable to find any plausible explanation for this little riddle of Polish phraseology (why are shoemakers linked to passion, and yet also idleness?) in various erudite compendia, even though many other, sometimes seemingly obscure, aspects of Polish literature have become the topic of separate, even sizeable treatises. For example, the world of birds in the Polish Romantic drama “*Balladyna*” and even the furniture depicted in the 19th century novels by Eliza Orzeszkowa



are topics that have been meticulously analyzed by researchers. Marian Szyjkowski's book *Dzieje polskiego upiora przed wystąpieniem Mickiewicza* [The History of the Polish Ghost before Mickiewicz] became a figure of fun for readers, except of course literary scholars who highly appreciate the author's works. In any event, whatever the origin of the "shoemaker's passion," what is clear is that cobblers are far from being depicted (in Polish art or language) as being devoted, ardent, reliable practitioners of their craft.

I will not venture any precarious attempts at etymological hypotheses of my own, even though Adam Mickiewicz himself, in his notes to his masterwork *Pan Tadeusz*, quite seriously clarifies the Polish phrase *wyrwać się jak Filip z konopi* "(lit.) to jump out like Filip from the hemp" as originally referring to a dim-witted deputy with the surname Filip from the village of Konopie, who once blurted out an ill-thought-out comment. Yet in Old Polish the word *filip* turns out to have referred to a hare, and so the origin of the phrase is apparently much more mundane. In fact we need not look so far back in history to find similar cases, as numerous such "explanations" abound in history and literature. In one anthology of counter-reformationist satire published in 1968, we find an explanation that the Polish phrase *rzezać się w koszu* "(lit.) to cut oneself in a basket" used to mean to "subject oneself to castration in a

Tatar camp." In reality what the anonymous author was referring to was a test applied to suspected witches. The woman was given a knife and placed within a basket tied up into a tree, hanging over a river. When she had enough of her uncomfortable position, she could simply cut the rope. Then she would fall into the water: her drowning would entail her undisputable guilt.

I may appear to have digressed far from the issue at hand, but only seemingly so. Errors of this sort have for years been the target of Prof. Henryk Markiewicz in *Dekada Literacka* and Dr. Adam Wierciński in *Indeks* (a journal published by the University of Opole), who are passionate at tracking them down and condemning them. But we should be honest: how many people systematically read both of these two very valuable, yet low-circulation periodicals?

My objective here is not to merely add to the existing piles of scholarly anecdotes, but to take up the defense of the scholarly notion of passion (*pasja*) before it ends up being eradicated by the notion encapsulated by the foreign, English word *hobby*. The prominent Slavic scholar Aleksander Brückner listed *pasja* in his landmark *Etymological Dictionary of Polish*, but what Poland's last great polyhistor primarily focused on was the religious connotations of the term. After noting its origins in the Romance languages (Latin and Italian), he does not deny himself the pleasure of informing readers that *pasja* means "great emotion, anger, fury." Faced

The Old Polish Encyclopaedia (published by Trzaska, Evert and Michalski) is one of the many works of Aleksander Brückner - Poland's last great polyhistor (man of many scholarly talents, encyclopedist)

In defense of scholarly passion for unearthing the truth

with this highly unfavorable depiction, I feel it is my professional duty to defend "passion" in the scholarly sense.

Vacations? Only in archives!

In the scholarly world, one long-circulating anecdote tells about a prominent 20th-century historian who lost the sole manuscript of one of his works, at the same time as his beloved wife passed away. When condolences were offered to him, he is reported to have responded: "Yes, indeed, it was a great loss. And on top of that, my wife died." But the truth is, without true passion no truly great work of scholarship is ever created. The Polish literary historian Julian Bartoszewicz, now thoroughly forgotten, lived in an apartment overlooking the attractive Castle Square in Warsaw - which he allegedly never looked out at, because he simply never had the time.

The aforementioned Aleksander Brückner, who resided in Berlin, opted not to accept a literary prize from the city of Łódź (1930), even though it came with 10,000 złotys, quite a sum back in those days. He wrote back that he preferred to turn down the prize than to waste time travelling to Łódź. "I have the strong suspicion that Brückner had his most moving encounters with the beauty of nature... whilst reading Żeromski's *Ashes*" the literary critic Stefan Kołaczewski wrote affectionately in his recollections about the recluse from Berlin. While Brückner's vacation trips to pre-war Lwów, Kraków, Wilno, and Kórnik sometimes lasted several weeks, he spent them almost exclusively in the local libraries and archives. Such a lifestyle might seem quite odd to many young humanists today, but his devotion did yield quite a rich harvest for scholarship. Indeed, Brückner's work is still largely pertinent today, as is evidenced by the numerous reprints of his books.

It is sometimes said that a person who truly loves their work will die with the conviction that they did nothing their whole life. And vice versa: it once proved to be a great misfortune for the Polish state to have a monarch whose true passion was not ruling, but something completely different. King Stanisław August Poniatowski was very much engrossed in art and literature, and was undoubtedly the best minister of culture our country ever had. These were passions that, back in the 16th century, would have earned him the moniker "the

Great," but he quite ineptly handled his most important duty, defending the independence of the Commonwealth. The ruler on the French throne at the same time, in turn, was very much fond of mechanical tinkering. As Jan Baszkiewicz writes, if the guillotined monarch had instead been born into a poor craftsman's family, he would have become a celebrated watchmaker or metalworker, but coping with the French Revolution proved beyond his capabilities. This is why the word *rien* (nothing) appeared so frequently in the diary of Louis XVI, even under the date of 14 July 1789. This quite simply meant that on the day the Bastille was torn down, the king did not have any time at all to devote to his passion - hunting.

Led astray

In today's research world, it has unfortunately become fashionable to assert that one is more than pleased to read and study the work of one's colleagues, but cannot stand the act of writing itself. Brückner engaged in both with true passion, even abandonment. His malicious colleagues (everyone has them) claimed that in his rare moments of free time he would scribble out theatrical reviews and notes for schoolroom lectures, which his bibliographers neglected to list out of a sense of shame. As a great scholar of Slavic culture and language, he did sometimes know how to own up to his own mistakes, but he also sometimes stuck tenaciously to them. A staunch advocate of the view that literary Polish emerged from the Wielkopolska province, he clashed against Kazimierz Nitsch, who argued in favor of Małopolska. The dispute was so sharp that years afterward Nitsch would write that Brückner had harmed Polish scholarship: "People questioned whether Brückner was a good Pole. Perhaps he was a good Pole, but a good linguist he was not." Jokesters quip that the real dispute between the two men was over the etymology of the word *pchła* "flea," to which Brückner had devoted so much space in his *Etymological Dictionary of Polish*.

True passion can, indeed, sometimes lead scholars astray. Historians have long ago noticed that biography writers, after a certain point, start to swerve from an objective scholarly approach towards a purely emotional attitude. Many examples could be cited, even if we opt not to mention the names of professional popularizers of history who write with equal nonchalance (and incompetence!) about



Museum Narodowe w Warszawie

Wacław Koniuszko's painting "Shoemaker's Monday" – Witold Doroszewski's dictionary of Polish explains the title of the canvass as meaning "spending time idly; not tuning up for work on Monday"

various figures from different centuries. I was recently astounded, when reading in the foreword of a book on Maria Kazimiera Sobieska (the Polish queen known by the nickname "Marysienka") that I was asked to review, to find an assertion that there are many useful studies presenting her in favorable light. There are also critical ones, after all, which may also contain interesting formulations. On a similar note, Władysław Pocięcha wrote a four-volume work about another Polish queen, which runs more than 1700 pages but still fails to cover the entire life of Bona Sforza. Although Pocięcha is an otherwise excellent historian, his love for this sole Italian woman ever to sit on the Polish throne quite simply radiates from nearly every page. Ksawery Pruszyński, likewise, fails to find any flaw in his portrait of Aleksander Wielkopolski. Under this same umbrella category, which might be dubbed "publicist passion," can be placed both Karol Zbyszewski, who simply abhors Stanisław August Poniatowski, as well as the very same king's admirers Stanisław Mackiewicz and Józef Hen.

Words that conceal, words that reveal

A significant share of the historical novels that were published in the former Soviet Union and communist-era Poland were written with a very astounding kind of passion, painting a picture of highly current issues projected onto the sometimes distant past. Where could we find as a vivid a depiction of the quandaries and suffering of the "progressive Catholics" (read: the supporters of Bolesław Piasecki and PAX) as in Jan Dobraczyński's *Niezwyciężona armada* [Invincible Armada] (1960), ostensibly a

study of the Spanish fleet's invasion of the British Isles (1588)? Who permitted themselves such a critical evaluation of the revolution (the French one, of course), as Tadeusz Łopalewski in *Zatańczmy w karmaniołę* [Let's Dance the Carmagnola] (1973)? Who, in the times of terror, even prior to Solzhenitsyn, so openly and so sharply condemned dictatorship as the Soviet authors of stories about Ivan Grozny: political trials and confessions obtained through torture were easier to discuss as 16th-century examples than as contemporary events surrounding the authors.

Pasja can sometimes be dangerous, when it turns into aggression and spills out in the kind of unseemly vocabulary that was once relegated to beer-hall discussions. Long gone are the times when even such Polish phrases as *jasna cholera* (roughly: "holy smoke!") and *świństwo* (roughly: "nastiness") were considered obscene (even Boy-Żeleński still wrote them only with the first letter, censoring the rest: ś....). Yet when the prudish *Czas* crossed out the word *dziwka* ("whore") from his feuilletons from Paris, the writer sued the conservatives' mouthpiece with much sensation. Despite the frequently reiterated fears against an invasion of English influence on the Polish language, the real threat Polish faces is in fact vulgarization. It is the result of the kind of passion that overcomes certain politicians, who overstep the limits of good taste and political correctness. The euphemisms used by the *grande dame* of Polish sociology, Maria Ossowska, are frequently cited as anecdotes – she once famously asserted: "one then accused the other of having a mother who had engaged in erotica in exchange for money." Yet nowadays the word *kurwa* ("whore") and its ilk have come to be treated as simple interjections, giving the speaker time to gather thoughts. And it makes no difference whether they are uttered in a fit of passion, or just in a normal conversation between two seemingly cultured individuals.

And so we can see that passion (*pasja*) has many facets, many of which are admirable and behoove literary and historical scholars, but many of which are best considered a last resort. That does not mean, of course, that I myself do not fly into a "shoemaker's passion" when I read all the nonsense that gets reported in the mass media. For as Rochefoucauld once warned, after all, "there is nothing men are so generous of as advice." ■