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MISERICORDIA PESTIS TEMPORE. ATTITUDES  
AND BEHAVIOUR DURING PESTILENCES IN EARLY  
MODERN POLAND (16TH–18TH CENTURIES)

Charity is a specific attitude towards neighbours. This is not only a moral category or a religious doctrine justifying and recommending the giving of help to the suffering. It is also a social category, for charity is an element of social structures and of the functioning of society. The Jews regarded charity as one of the six pillars on which the world is based. Pestilence drastically impaired social structures, therefore it also impaired moral norms and norms of behaviour. Charity always changes during pestilence, for the moral norms change then and the tasks to be fulfilled by charity change, too.

Pestilences were a frequent phenomenon until the 19th century; they accompanied other disasters, such as wars and hunger. One would have thought they were an everyday occurrence, but this was not so. Despite their frequency, epidemics were not a permanent phenomenon, and each new attack gave rise to fear, anxiety and collateral problems.

Antoni Walawender's specifications show that in the late 15th and 16th centuries great epidemics of the plague occurred in Poland, on an average, every ten years<sup>1</sup>, though weaker ones, of an endemic rather than an epidemic character, were more frequent in some places (Warsaw had 59 epidemics in 1526–1655)<sup>2</sup>. A similar ten-year rhythm of plague attacks was recorded

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<sup>1</sup>A. Walawender, *Obrona przed zarazami w Polsce na przełomie wieków średnich (Defence against Pestilence in Poland at the Turn of the Middle Ages)*, „Archiwum Historii Medycyny” vol. XX, 1957, No. 1–2, p. 18, table 1.

<sup>2</sup>A. Karpłński, *Błędota miejska wobec zaraz i innych klęsk żywiołowych w Warszawie w latach 1526–1655 (Facing the Urban Poor Pestilence and Other Natural Calamities in Warsaw in 1526–1655)*, „Rocznik Warszawski” vol. XVII, 1981, pp. 84–88.

in other European countries from the 16th to the 18th century<sup>3</sup>. Historians of medicine think that this was due to the fact that after each attack people were immune to the plague for ten years<sup>4</sup>. Thus the rhythm was imposed by biology, but this also had social results. Ten-year intervals between the epidemics were needed for a generation susceptible to the disease to grow up. Each epidemic had an enormous death toll, often one-third or even a half of the population died. These losses had to be made up by the natural increase of population and also — especially in towns — by immigration. It took ten years for the demographic gap caused by an epidemic to be filled by people who had not experienced the disease and were not immune to it.

These ten-year or longer intervals between the epidemics were enough for the pestilence to be blotted out of people's memory. After ten years very few inhabitants remembered a previous epidemic. „We are not all aware of what the plague is, for not all of us remember its occurrence here in Lwów”, said one of Lwów's councillors in 1623, the plague having previously attacked the city in 1602<sup>5</sup>. Despite the fact that each attack left a mark in the form of cemeteries, tombstones, statues and chapels erected as a memento, despite the fact that during each successive epidemic the municipal authorities made use of the decrees and regulations issued during previous outbreaks, renewing them and bringing them back to mind, the memory of the disease disappeared from the collective mind of the inhabitants or was but an episode of history; previous experience was no lesson to anybody. Each attack of the plague or of another infectious disease was experienced anew, as a new, unknown dangerous phenomenon, and people tried hastily to adapt themselves to the situation. No measures, services or institutions were prepared in advance and people learned from scratch how to behave.

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<sup>3</sup>J. Delumeau, *La peur en Occident (XIV<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, Paris 1978, pp. 96 ff. (on the basis of J.-N. Biraben's research).

<sup>4</sup>J. Ruffié, J. Ch. Sournia, *Les épidémies dans l'histoire de l'homme*, Paris 1984, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup>Ł. Charewiczowa, *Kłeska zaraz w dawnym Lwowie (The Plague in Old Lwów)*, Lwów 1930, p. 34.

Owing to the helplessness of medicine in the face of all infectious diseases and the low level of medical knowledge in society, deadly fear was the dominant reaction to the outbreak of plague. Any end of life seemed to be milder and better than the death of plague, which was sudden and so frightening that it was not lamented by anybody, wrote Łucja Charewiczowa.

Reaction to pestilence varied. A growth of religiousness, piety and of the desire to extend charity, to people as a compensation for sins and a means of placating God (pestilence was regarded as God's punishment) was but one kind of behaviour. More frequent were other attitudes. Some people manifested full indifference to moral obligations and Christian teachings; they did not challenge them but did not practise them either. They believed that since pestilence was God's punishment for sins, endeavours to fight against it or alleviate its results would have meant resistance to God's will. Other people made the most of life during a pestilence, spending the time in amusements and pleasures. This attitude may have been due to the conviction, backed by medical authorities, that a good frame of mind, humour and joy of life were the best antidote to disease. A fourth group of people regarded the time of pestilence as the best opportunity for making money, even by criminal methods: they rejected all moral principles and respect for the law<sup>6</sup>.

Let us start with moral indifference, rejection of morals, cynicism and criminal acts, that is, attitudes which were negative from the point of view of morals and Christian religion. We will start with them not only because they seem to have dominated during pestilences, but first and foremost because they shaped the conditions in which Christian charity could or could not develop.

Escape from a plague-affected place was a common reaction. All people who had anywhere to go and had the means to do so fled. The king, his family and the court would leave the capital.

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<sup>6</sup>In the above-mentioned paper Andrzej Karpiński distinguishes only a devotional and a hedonistic attitude. Jean Deumeau whose above-mentioned book has a chapter entitled *The Typology of Collective Behaviour in Time of Plague*, does not present a typology, nor does he characterise people's behaviour. Cf. M. Sznajdeman, *Zaraza. Mitologia dżumy, cholery i AIDS (Pestilence. The Mythology of the Plague, Cholera and AIDS)*, Warszawa 1994, pp. 34–74; M. Bogucka, *O mentalności mieszkańca Gdańska u progu ery nowożytnej (The Mentality of Gdańsk Inhabitants at the Threshold of the Modern Era)*, in: *Mieszczanstwo gdańskie*, Gdańsk 1997, p. 216.

The councillors, aldermen and mayors fled from their cities. Bishops, prelates and canons as well as monks and nuns ran away and so did the physicians. The only persons who remained were the poorest people who had nowhere to go and also those who wanted to take advantage of the situation and make money<sup>7</sup>.

An unknown Cracow burgher chronicled the happenings in Cracow during the plague of 1591. He wrote that the king, together with the court, had left for Niepołomice on August 20th and when the plague appeared there, had gone on to Wiślica. The queen escaped to Nowy Korczyn. „From time immemorial never have so many people left the city”, wrote the chronicler. Shops, rich stalls and the cloth hall were closed for a long time<sup>8</sup>. King Sigismund Vasa, Queen Anne and the king's sister Anne Vasa also ran away from Cracow in 1588 to escape the plague<sup>9</sup>. Earlier, in 1472, King Casimir *serpente in Cracovia epidemiae peste ... de Cracovia egreditur ... et in Nyepolomicze una cum consorte sua Elizabeth et omnibus natis suis transgrediens*<sup>10</sup>; two years later the king fled from Toruń<sup>11</sup>. Sigismund the Old and his court fled to Niepołomice in 1529 and 1543 to escape the plague<sup>12</sup>, and in 1547 he ran away from Cracow and „wandered in villages and small towns, having only two chancellors and the voivode of Sandomierz with him”<sup>13</sup>. In 1572 Sigismund Augustus left Warsaw because of the plague and went to Knyszyn (where he died)<sup>14</sup>. In 1625 Sigismund Vasa suspended the debates of the Sejm

<sup>7</sup>Cf. J. Ptaśnik, *Powietrze w Krakowie (The Plague in Cracow)*, in: Idem, *Obrazki z przeszłości Krakowa*, series II, Kraków 1903, p. 63; J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć. Staropolskie postawy wobec zarazy (To Subdue the Black Death. Old Polish Attitudes to the Plague)*, Kraków 1991, pp. 179–212.

<sup>8</sup>*Kronika mieszczańina krakowskiego z lat 1575–1595 (A Cracow Burgher's Chronicle from the Years 1575–1595)*, ed. H. Barycz, Kraków 1930, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup>*Joannis Dlugossii ... Historiae Polonicae libri XII, lib. XII (XIII), Opera omnia*, vol. XIV, Cracoviae 1878, p. 572.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 607.

<sup>12</sup>*Acta Tomiciana* vol. IX, p. 283; *Stanisław Hosii Epistolae* vol. I, Cracoviae 1879, p. 141, no. 139. Cf. also Ł. Górnicki, *Dzieje w Koronie Polskiej (History of Poland)*, in: *Pisma* vol. II, ed. R. Polański, Warszawa 1961, p. 578.

<sup>13</sup>A. Walawender, *Kronika klęsk elementarnych w Polsce i w krajach sąsiednich w latach 1450–1586 (A Chronicle of Natural Calamities in Poland and the Neighbouring Countries in 1450–1586)*, vol. I, Lwów 1932, Nos. 1291, 1294.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibidem*, No. 1486; F. Giedroyc, *Mór w Polsce w wiekach ubiegłych. Zarys historyczny (The Plague in Poland in Past Centuries. An Historical Outline)*, Warszawa 1899, p. 52.

because of the plague in Warsaw and left the capital<sup>15</sup>. In 1652, the Sejm concluded its debates in Warsaw in August and then „everybody ran away from Warsaw because the plague was spreading ... and the king escaped to Łowicz”<sup>16</sup>. In 1657 John Casimir wanted to spend the winter with his queen in Poznań, but when the plague began to rage there, he moved to Boguniewo near Rogoźno<sup>17</sup>.

Zbigniew Oleśnicki, bishop of Cracow, complained in 1451 that *per saltus lustraque ferarum silvas et nemora declinando aerem hincinde versabar, et plaga divina cessante e vestigio Cracoviam, ad providendum pluribus rebus ecclesie mee huiusmodi mortalitate deformatis, rediit*<sup>18</sup>. In 1527 the Cracow bishop Piotr Tomicki wrote: *Ego ... diverti ad haec bona mea Radlow propter postem*<sup>19</sup> and a year later: *Quam et ego fortasse cum domino castellano Cracoviensi in relinquenda hac urbe [Cracovia] et in aliqua salubriora loca me conferam*<sup>20</sup>. The Cracow castellan mentioned by the bishop was Krzysztof Szydłowiecki, who wrote one year earlier: *Ego pestem fugiens*<sup>21</sup>. During the 1552 plague Sigismund Augustus informed his correspondent, Radziwiłł, that „the Father Archbishop (Mikołaj Dzierzgowski) is running from one place to another to escape the plague”<sup>22</sup>. Because of the plague in Włocławek in 1656 the bishop of Kujawy, Kazimierz Florian Czartoryski, kept far from his episcopal seat and stayed at Smardzewice until the end of the year<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>15</sup>A. Wejnert, *Wiedomość historyczno-statystyczna o morowem powietrzu w Warszawie w latach 1624 i 1625 panującym (Historical-Statistical Information on the Plague in Warsaw in 1624 and 1625)*, Warszawa 1852, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup>S. Namaczyńska, *Kronika klęsk elementarnych w Polsce i w krajach sąsiednich w latach 1648–1696 (A Chronicle of Natural Calamities in Poland and the Neighbouring Countries in 1648–1696)*, Lwów 1939, Nos. 664, 683, 687; A.S. Radziwiłł, *Memoriale rerum gestarum in Polonia. 1632–1656*, vol. IV, ed. A. Przyboś, R. Żelewski, Wrocław 1974, p. 261.

<sup>17</sup>S. Namaczyńska, *op. cit.*, No. 890.

<sup>18</sup>*Codex epistolarius saeculi decimi quinti* vol. III, Cracoviae 1894, ed. A. Lewicki, No. 47.

<sup>19</sup>*Acta Tomiciana* vol. IX p. 320.

<sup>20</sup>*Acta Tomiciana* vol. X p. 391.

<sup>21</sup>*Acta Tomiciana* vol. IX, p. 300.

<sup>22</sup>A. Walawender, *Kronika*, No. 1327.

<sup>23</sup>S. Namaczyńska, *op. cit.*, No. 854; J. Korytkowski, *Arcybiskupi gnieźnieńscy, prymasowie i metropolici polscy od r. 1000 do r. 1821 (Archbishops of Gniezno, Polish Primate and Metropolitans from 1000 to 1821)* vol. IV, Poznań 1891, p. 200.

During the 1464 plague the whole chapter of Poznań hid in villages and forests; it did the same in 1495 and 1568<sup>24</sup>; the Płock chapter went into hiding in 1495 and 1552<sup>25</sup>; the Włocławek chapter in 1541, 1659 and 1661<sup>26</sup>, and the Wilno chapter in 1555<sup>27</sup>. In 1572 the prelates and canons of Poznań *in villis praestimonialibus Posnania propinquioribus auram pestiferam evitantes manebant ... scientes nullum aliud remedium salubrius contra pestem fore nisi inde celeriter ac longe fugere ac illuc non facile redire ... intelligentes ... vicariis perpetuis canonicalibus ... omnem curam in divinis officiis omnibus explendis comittendum decreverunt*<sup>28</sup>. In 1654 at the news of the plague, the canons of Poznań dispersed<sup>29</sup>. In 1659 and 1662 the prelates and canons of Gniezno left the town<sup>30</sup>.

In 1571, Jakub Wujek (author of the first full Polish translation of the Bible), then procurator of the Jesuits' home in Pułtusk and professor at the Pułtusk college, fled to his native Wągrowiec to escape the plague. A year later, when he settled down in Poznań, he boldly organised help for the plague-stricken<sup>31</sup>. The Poznań Jesuits who remained in Poznań in 1572 and helped the plague-stricken, broke down in 1585 and fled to Wągrowiec<sup>32</sup>; they also dispersed in 1653<sup>33</sup>. During the plague which raged in Lwów in 1623 the secular and monastic clergy left the city; the greatly disciplined and enlightened Jesuits<sup>34</sup> were absent from Lwów for two months; later, during the 1653–1654 plague, disregarding the death of some brethren, they helped the afflicted in Wilno, Königsberg, Warsaw and Pułtusk<sup>35</sup>. The Dominicans of Jarosław left the town at the news of the black death in 1651, and in 1652 the Benedictine nuns of Toruń moved to

<sup>24</sup>A. Walawender, *Kronika*, Nos. 906, 1027, 1028, 1061, 1438.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibidem*, Nos. 1030, 1334.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibidem*, No. 1236; S. Namaczyńska, *op. cit.* Nos. 947, 978.

<sup>27</sup>A. Walawender, *Kronika*, No. 1368.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibidem*, Nos. 1485, 1486.

<sup>29</sup>S. Namaczyńska, *op. cit.* No. 78; cf. No. 819.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibidem*, Nos. 948, 995; J. Korytkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 96–97, 111.

<sup>31</sup>A. Walawender, *Kronika*, Nos. 1466, 1491.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibidem*, Nos. 1491, 1553.

<sup>33</sup>S. Namaczyńska, *op. cit.* No. 756.

<sup>34</sup>Ł. Charewiczowa, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>35</sup>S. Namaczyńska, *op. cit.* Nos. 745, 797.

Dźwierzno and came back only when the danger was over<sup>36</sup>. In 1653 Carmelite nuns escaped from Warsaw to Niepołomice<sup>37</sup>. The mishaps of Cracow disalced Carmelite nuns who ran away from St. Martin's convent to escape plague in 1622, 1652, 1662, 1667 and 1710 have been described by Jan Kracik<sup>38</sup>.

The Church authorities tried in vain to check clergymen's flights by forbidding them to leave their diocese<sup>39</sup>.

Councillors, aldermen and mayors dispersed at the news of plague. During the 1543 plague in Biecz, only two councillors and the scribe remained in the town; the others left<sup>40</sup>. It was recorded in the Poznań council acts in 1568 that when the plague began to spread during the fair, *primores senatusque civitatis huius luem hanc contagiosam evitantes alio sese transtulere in locumque et ad offitia sua alios probos et honestos viros, qui hinc manendi voluntario consentiebant, constituerunt et subordinaverunt*<sup>41</sup>. In 1572 two mayors of Poznań and the councillors *hinc alio locum mutarunt*, leaving behind one of the councillors as mayor and three councillors who had agreed to remain in the town<sup>42</sup>. In 1585, too, *maior pars senatus ... antequam e civitate migrasset*<sup>43</sup>. The councillors of Lwów also took to flight in 1623; the notary of the council was ordered to name a deputy<sup>44</sup>.

In Cracow the flight of the mayor and councillors during pestilence was a rule sanctioned by law in the 16th and 17th centuries. The council's order of 1544, the first known to us, defined the regulations binding in Cracow during epidemics; Paragraph 15, the most extensive one, read: *Caeterum ubi maioris periculi fuga d[omini] consules ab urbe secedere coegerit, duo nihilominus ex consulato ad id pro illorum voluntate proposito insuper iuxta veterem morem praemio dilecti, una cum praefecto*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibidem*, Nos. 640, 674.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibidem*, No. 759a.

<sup>38</sup>J. Kracik, *op. cit.*, pp. 181–186.

<sup>39</sup>Włocławek 1515, A. Walawender, *Kronika*, No. 1108.

<sup>40</sup>F. Bujak, *Materiały do historii miasta Biecza (1361–1632) (Materials to the History of the Town of Biecz, 1361–1632)*, Kraków 1914, No. 191, p. 68.

<sup>41</sup>A. Walawender, *Kronika*, No. 1433.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibidem*, No. 1489.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibidem*, No. 1554.

<sup>44</sup>Ł. Charewiczowa, *op. cit.*, pp. 34–37.

*praetorii in civitatis officio remaneant et resideant*<sup>45</sup>. The practice was maintained during successive epidemics<sup>46</sup>. In 1613 *Jacobus Roszkowicz qui proconsulare officium sabbato proximo pareterito ex ordine suscipere debeat, ab urbe ... discessit, and privatim*, that is, informally, named Grzegorz Skrophowicz as his deputy; the councillors therefore elected Łukasz Bohorocki to act as mayor during the plague<sup>47</sup>.

Physicians, too, absconded at the news of plague. The well known Cracow physician Stanisław Picus Zawadzki, professor of medicine at the Cracow Academy and also town's councillor and mayor, left the city twice during the plague which raged there in 1588 and 1599<sup>48</sup>. This did not stop the author of *Equitatis Poloni in Jesuitas actis prima* (1590) from writing that Zawadzki was „an excellent medical practitioner ... whose life embodies ancient virtues”<sup>49</sup>. In September 1707 Onufry Bonligli, a well known physician of Italian origin, escaped from plague-stricken Cracow and was on the run until he reached Opawa. He did not return to Cracow until the beginning of 1709, when the epidemic was over<sup>50</sup>.

This was the usual behaviour of physicians in all European towns during pestilence<sup>51</sup>. It was only in the 18th century that physicians were put under the obligation to remain in their town. A *Medical Law* issued in Gdańsk on April 21, 1703 enjoined

<sup>45</sup> *Prawa, przywileje i statuta m. Krakowa (The Laws, Privileges and Statutes of the City of Cracow)* vol. I, fasc. 1, ed. F. Piekosiński, Kraków 1885, No. 106, p. 130.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, No. 112, p. 184; No. 130, p. 193; No. 177, p. 237; vol. II, fasc. 1, Kraków 1890, No. 778, pp. 8–9; No. 843, p. 81; No. 915, p. 138; No. 1099, pp. 296–297.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, No. 878, p. 111.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, No. 778, p. 9; No. 833, p. 74; J. Krac'k, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted after H. Barycz, *Historia Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego w epoce humanizmu (The History of the Jagiellonian University during the Epoch of Humanism)*, Kraków 1935, p. 438.

<sup>50</sup> J. Krac'k, *op. cit.*, p. 188; E. Sienkowski, *Dżuma w Gdańsku w roku 1709. Studium z dziejów epidemiologii (The Plague in Gdańsk in 1709. A Study in the History of Epidemiology)*, „Archiwum Historii Medycyny” vol. XXXIII, 1970, No. 3/4, p. 395, fn. 49.

<sup>51</sup> See A. Wyrobisz, *Lekarze jako wolny zawód i grupa społeczna w miastach późnośredniowiecznej i wczesnonowożytnej Europy (Physicians as a Profession and Social Group in the Towns of Late-Medieval and Early-Modern Europe)*, in: *Gospodarka. Ludzie. Władza. Studia historyczne ośiarowane Juliuszowi Łukasiewiczowi w 75. rocznicę urodzin*, eds M. Kopczyński and A. Mączak, Warszawa 1998, pp. 70–71.



physicians to remain in town during plague under penalty of losing the right to carry on practice<sup>52</sup>.

In Lublin even the hangman fled from the town to escape the plague in 1641<sup>53</sup>.

Ordinary townsmen also ran away whenever they could<sup>54</sup>.

There would have been nothing extraordinary or shameful about these flights, had it not been for the fact that the fugitives were people who, on account of their office, dignity, position, profession or mission, were responsible for the fate of other people, for the town and the state and were in duty bound to maintain law and order, prevent disasters, come to people's help and bring them consolation. But this was what medicine (and experience) recommended in those days. *Cito — longe — tarde* is the advice that can be found in all medical books and hints on how to escape the plague: flee quickly and far, come back late. *Mox, longe, tarde — cede, recede, redi.* „Leave early, go far, do not come too early” was another advice.

As a result of a general exodus from plague-afflicted towns, the flight of rich people, and the deadly fear of becoming infected through contact with sick people, charitable activity faded away, for it could not be practised without contact. Father Jan Tomasz Józefowicz, a mid-17th century chronicler of Lwów, wrote that „the sick received little help, for the threat of infection frightened away healthy people, who lived in mortal fear of their lives”<sup>55</sup>.

Another popular and striking behaviour, which however was not recommended by medicine but was a result of human nature, was the desire to take advantage of circumstances and enrich oneself, make a fortune or add to one's possessions. The desire was so irresistible that it overruled fear; the possibility of getting

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<sup>52</sup>E. Steńkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 341. In some Swiss towns physicians were obliged to stay in plague-stricken towns as early as the 16th century. In Brandenburg this obligation was introduced by the statute of 1693. See A. Wyróbiś, *loc. cit.*

<sup>53</sup>W. Froch, M. Kobylńska-Szymańska, *Kłęski moru w Lublinie w XVI i XVII wieku w świetle ksiąg miejskich (The Plague in Lublin in the 16th and 17th Centuries in the Light of Municipal Records)*, „Archiwum Historii Medycyny” vol. XL, 1977, No. 4, p. 389.

<sup>54</sup>S. Namaczyńska, *op. cit.*, Nos. 635, 636, 1002, 1010, 1011; *Prawa, przywileje i statuta m. Krakowa* vol. II, fasc. 1, No. 1214, p. 388; No. 1215, p. 389.

<sup>55</sup>Quoted after Ł. Charewiczowa, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

infected and the risk run by contact with the sick were not taken into consideration.

Though an epidemic usually led to an economic breakdown, that is, to impoverishment, it also created extraordinary opportunities for making a fortune. During the 1555 plague in Cracow, Stanisław Górski, a canon, accused the councillors of the city, saying that *cauponas et tabernas bibarias nolunt interdicare propter lucrum eo quod soli sunt propinatores*<sup>56</sup>. In 1709 many inhabitants remained in Gdańsk and Elbląg only because they wanted to strike lucrative bargains through forbidden contacts with Königsberg, which was a dangerous plague centre<sup>57</sup>.

Prudence was also manifested by the Church which scrupulously exacted payments for funeral services<sup>58</sup>. The authors of all studies on epidemics in modern times emphasise that the Church greatly increased its possessions during pestilences by acquiring many legacies and bequests from dying persons or from pious awe-stricken people who in this way wanted to gain forgiveness for their sins and conciliate God who, as they believed, manifested His anger by the epidemic.

Others got rich by taking advantage of the economic opportunities created by epidemics. A certain Hieronim Wedelski, who in 1602 invented a costly medicine against plague, made so much money that he built himself a house in Lwów<sup>59</sup>. Bartosz Paprocki mentions twice in his armorial three (or perhaps two) noblemen from the Cracow voivodship, named Łapeks, who „had lost their fathers' estates; not knowing what to do, they buried the dead during the great plague which raged in Cracow in 1537 and amassed so much money that, as Church records say, they bought a large estate”<sup>60</sup>. During the 1709 plague in Elbląg there

<sup>56</sup> *Stanslat Hosti Epistolae*, vol. II, Cracoviae 1886, No. 1317, p. 486. Cf. J. Ptaśnik, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> E. Steńkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 331; J. Charytoniuk, *Walka z epidemią dżumy w Elblągu na początku XVIII wieku (The Fight against the Plague in Elbląg at the Beginning of the 18th Century)*, „Rocznik Elbląski” vol. X, 1986, pp. 35–57.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. the legal action before a consistory in 1513 for payment for funeral services rendered during the plague — A. Walawender, *Kronika*, No. 1097.

<sup>59</sup> Ł. Charewiczowa, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>60</sup> B. Paprocki, *Herby rycerstwa polskiego, 1584 (The Coats of Arms of Polish Nobility, 1584)*, ed. K.J. Turowski, Kraków 1858, p. 206, cf. also p. 901.

was no lack of persons ready to work as grave-diggers despite the danger of infection; high earnings were a tempting offer<sup>61</sup>.

Although the drawing of financial benefits from a situation which was a tragedy for many is morally objectionable, there was nothing unlawful or reprehensible in the above-mentioned activities; one can even say that they were useful socially. But not all people stopped at that.

During the plague which raged in Cracow in 1588, a certain Bieniasz, a municipal grave-digger, made a large fortune by murdering, together with accomplices, dying rich men and appropriating their property, and by robbing the municipal powder depot; he was beheaded in the Cracow Market Square near St. Mary's church in 1589<sup>62</sup>.

Bieniasz activity cannot be regarded as an isolated case, for similar stories can be found in many sources in various parts of Europe, including such well known extensive and discerning accounts as the diary of a Barcelona tanner, Miquel P a r e t s, who described the plague of 1651, and the *Diary of the Plague Year* by Daniel D e f o e, a literary work written under the impact of the news about the plague in Marseilles in 1720, but describing faithfully, on the basis of documents, the plague in London in 1665<sup>63</sup>. It shows that the norms of law and morality were rejected during plague.

Four grave-diggers were also hanged in Warsaw in 1625; Łukasz Drewno, mayor during the plague, wrote: „by burying the dead indecorously they stunned people with their conversation and by selling clothes ... they behaved indecorously in the houses of the plague-stricken, making fun of the deceased and stuffing themselves with food”<sup>64</sup>.

In 1711 three grave-diggers, accused of deliberately spreading plague for profit, were brought to court in Lublin, sentenced to death and executed. But that was a different case. The men

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<sup>61</sup>J. Charytoniuk, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>62</sup>*Kronika mieszczanina krakowskiego*, p. 73.

<sup>63</sup>*A. Journal of the Plague Year: the Diary of the Barcelona Tanner Miquel P a r e t s, 1651*, ed. J.S. Amelang, New York-Oxford 1991; D. Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, London 1772.

<sup>64</sup>A. Wejnert, *op. cit.*, p. 30; A. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-116.

were probably innocent, but the inhabitants, who had a deadly fear of plague, suspected them of practising magic<sup>65</sup>.

Unrestrained greed naturally did not promote charity during pestilences.

What was then the behaviour of people who, faced with disaster, wanted to keep moral rules and the religion-instilled norms of conduct towards the neighbour?

There is not much source information on charitable activities, apart from information on the growth of religiousness expressed in intensified devotional practices and an increased number of legacies for Church institutions<sup>66</sup>.

In 1568 the canons of Poznań gave the mayor 20 marks *ut provideat infirmos et mortuos sepeliri curet*, and in 1571 *pauperes infirmos in domum suam in Ostrów sitam recipiendis decreverunt, hoc tamen conditioe ne sint peste aut hispanica lue suspecti*<sup>67</sup>. In 1571 the Włocławek chapter gave a subsidy to the priests who remained in the town to look after sick and dying persons *tempore pestis*<sup>68</sup>.

During the plague in Warsaw in 1624–1625 King Sigismund Vasa offered the city 5,600 zlotys for the indigent sick. However, this was rather a state donation, not the king's personal generosity. Aleksander Wejnert, who described the epidemic, wrote approvingly of the generosity of the Lithuanian Marshal Krzysztof Wiesiołowski, well known for his charity and endowments to various institutions (probably due to the fact that his only daughter, Gryzelda, had died and he had no other direct heirs) who offered the city 138 zlotys and 6 groschen for the poor. Wejnert wrote harshly about other magnates who came to Warsaw at that time and contributed together no more than 316 zlotys 19 groschen (in another place he mentioned the sum of 614 zlotys 25 groschen; on the basis of the same source, that is, Łukasz Drewno's *Register of the Death*, Karpiński had calculated that the sum amounted to 637 zlotys 19 groschen).

<sup>65</sup>Z. Klukowski, *Sprawa o szerzenie dżumy w Lublinie w r. 1711 (Lawsuit for Spreading Plague in Lublin in 1711)*, „Archiwum Historii i Filozofii Medycyny” vol. VI, 1927, pp. 12–21.

<sup>66</sup>S. Flis, *Dżuma na Mazurach i Warmii w latach 1708–1711 (Plague in Mazuria and Warmia in 1708–1711)*, „Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie” 1960, No. 4 (70), pp. 510–511.

<sup>67</sup>A. Walawender, *Kronika*, Nos. 1435, 1464.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibidem*, No. 1465.

„The most painful fact for the posterity”, went on Wejnert, „is the information, based on authentic evidence, that among the clergymen who gave an offering for the disabled there is not a single bishop or archbishop, not even the primate of the kingdom”. Of Warsaw’s burghers only Paweł Giza, a rich merchant, gave 160 zlotys. But, as Wejnert says, the Warsaw Charity Brotherhood assigned a sum of 9,000 zlotys, which must have come from the contributions paid by the members of the Brotherhood or from other donors<sup>69</sup>. These were not large sums, considering that a bushel of rye was worth 4 zlotys 15 groschen in Warsaw and the weekly pay of an unskilled worker amounted to 2 zlotys<sup>70</sup>.

The shortage of hospital beds made the situation extremely difficult. Poland had quite a large number of hospitals at that time, especially after the Trent Council which recommended the establishment of hospitals, but they were charitable rather than medical institutions; they seldom had a qualified medical staff and secondly, they were small, capable of accommodating a few or about a dozen persons, rarely more<sup>71</sup>. They could not meet the needs during pestilence when hundreds of persons had to be hospitalised in large towns. Special hospitals for plague-stricken people and people suffering from smallpox (*Pestilenzhaus*, *Pochenhau*, *Pestbude*) were set up in Gdańsk in 1454 and in Elbląg in 1624. In Lwów an old leprosorium functioned as a pest-house from 1495 on. Pest-houses were set in motion during epidemics; when the epidemic was over they were closed down or served other purposes. But even these hospitals could not receive more than 60–80 patients. Additional sheds were therefore built in emergencies, and neighbouring buildings were taken over to

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<sup>69</sup>A. Wejnert, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 27–28, 34–38; A. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–104.

<sup>70</sup>A. Wejnert, *op. cit.*, p. 33; A. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, p. 96. For other examples of the care extended to the poor by the queen, bishops and monks see *Prawa, przywileje i statuta m. Krakowa* vol. II, fasc. 2, No. 1098, p. 295; A. S. Radziwiłł, *op. cit.*, p. 348; S. Namaczyńska, *op. cit.*, Nos. 952, 968, 1077; A. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, p. 101, fn. 95.

<sup>71</sup>The history of hospitals and the way they gradually changed in modern times from purely protective into protective–medical institutions has been presented by Z. Podgórska-Kławe, *Od hospicjum do współczesnego szpitala. Rozwój historyczny problematyki szpitalnej w Polsce do końca XIX wieku (From the Hospice to the Contemporary Hospital. Historical Development of Hospitals in Poland to the End of the 19th Century)*, Wrocław 1981; the book contains a bibliography. Cf. eadem, *Szpitale warszawskie 1388–1943 (Warsaw Hospitals 1388–1943)*, Warszawa 1975.

accommodate the sick. A provisional pest-house was organised in Poznań in 1572 by Jesuits who had collected alms for this purpose. A pest-house for poor people existed in Olsztyn even before 1581. During the 1623 plague in Lublin a large shed was built outside the city walls and 200 patients were placed there. A similar solution was applied at Braniewo in 1709. In 1713 the bishop of Wilno, Konstanty Kazimierz Brzostowski, built a pest-house dedicated to St. Roch and set up the congregation of St. Roch Charity Brethren, who were to look after the sick. But these hospitals did not have enough financial means to look after the patients and feed them<sup>72</sup>.

The physicians and barbers permanently or intermittently employed in large towns were obliged to ensure medical attendance gratuitously to the poor. In Gdańsk a decision was taken in 1639 to employ a special physician in times of plague; the *Armenchirurgus* engaged there in 1709 was obliged to visit indigent sick persons. But physicians were not always able to fulfil their duties for during an epidemic they had their hands full<sup>73</sup>.

A gratuitous distribution of medicines was a rule<sup>74</sup>. The agreement concluded in 1585 by the council of the city of Poznań

<sup>72</sup>*Prawa, przywileje i statuta m. Krakowa*, vol. II, fasc. 1, No. 1098, pp. 295–296; A. Walawender, *Kronika*, nos. 1491, 1545; E. Sienkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 349–355; J. Charytoniuk, *op. cit.*, p. 49; Ł. Charewiczowa, *op. cit.*, p. 17; W. Froch, M. Kobylińska–Szymańska, *op. cit.*, p. 387; Z. Kropidłowski, *Z dziejów miłosierdzia chrześcijańskiego w średniowiecznej Polsce (From the History of Christian Charity in Medieval Poland)*, „Miesięcznik Diecezjalny Gdański” vol. XXX, 1986, p. 458; M. Bogucka, *Health Care and Poor Relief in Danzig (Gdańsk): the Sixteenth – First Half of the Seventeenth Century*, in: *Health, Care and Poor Relief in Protestant Europe 1500–1700*, ed. O. P. Grell, A. Cunningham, London–New York 1997, pp. 204–220; S. Flis, *op. cit.*, p. 511; S. Pelczar, *Zarys dziejów miłosierdzia w kościele katolickim (An Outline of the History of Charity in the Catholic Church)*, Kraków 1916, p. 174. But the seven bungalows built in 1624–1625 on Polkowska Kępa on the Vistula in the region of Warsaw cannot be called a hospital, not even in the 17th century meaning of the word, for they were used to isolate plague-stricken persons. See A. Wejnert, *op. cit.*, p. 19; idem, *Opis historyczny trzech kęp na Wiśle pod Warszawą (Polkowska, Belk, Saska) od najdawniejszych czasów do 1850 r. (An Historical Description of Three Holms on the Vistula near Warsaw (the Polkowska, Belk and Saska Holms) from Ancient Times to 1850)*, Warszawa 1850, pp. 4–6. Cf. A. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>73</sup>*Prawa, przywileje i statuta m. Krakowa* vol. II, fasc. 1, No. 917, p. 141; No. 1098, p. 296; No. 1386, p. 511; No. 1407, p. 525; F. Giedroyc, *op. cit.*, p. 91; S. Namaczyńska, *op. cit.*, No. 678; Ł. Charewiczowa, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 21; A. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, p. 93; E. Sienkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 339–340, 344; J. Charytoniuk, *op. cit.*, p. 48; S. Salmonowicz, *Toruń wobec zarazy w XVII i XVIII wieku (Toruń Facing the Plague in the 17th and 18th Centuries)*, „Rocznik Toruński” vol. XVI, 1983, pp. 250–251.

<sup>74</sup>A. Wejnert *Wiadomość*, p. 20; A. Walawender *Kronika*, No. 1553.

with the barbers engaged to look after plague-stricken persons stated: *medicamenta omnia ... ex aerario civitatis publico persolventur*<sup>75</sup>. The medicines used at that time were divided into more expensive ones for the rich and cheap ones for the poor<sup>76</sup>. The distinction was of little significance for both were ineffective, as was admitted by a 16th century Swiss physician, Konrad Gesner: *Remedia certe adversus pestem nulla habemus*. A Gdańsk physician using the cryptonym D.J.G.K. wrote in 1709: *Contra pestem non datur specificum. Quo pauciora quis medicamenta assumit, eo mellus*<sup>77</sup>.

The municipality paid for the funerals of persons who died of plague. It hired porters and grave-diggers remunerating them highly<sup>78</sup>. This was not an act of Christian charity but rather an indispensable measure resorted to out of fear that decomposing bodies might pollute the environment and cause a further spread of the disease.

Another problem was care of the poor who survived the disease or managed to escape it. Poverty areas greatly increased during an epidemic<sup>79</sup>. As a result of the high death rate, the number of orphaned children and destitute widows rose dramatically. Weiss, a municipal scribe in Olsztyn, stated in 1738 that many infants and juveniles had been left without any protection and were reduced to starvation<sup>80</sup>. The usual relief measures applied by the municipality or by guilds and fraternities were not enough. During the 1709 plague in Gdańsk some 3,000 widows, orphans and cripples had to be supplied with food; 120 orphaned children were placed in the pest-house in the Lower Town, 30 orphans were taken in by Gdańsk burghers, 100 infants were placed with wet nurses<sup>81</sup>. This probably met only a small part of the actual needs. In Cracow in 1677, a period unfavourable for the city, the councillors adopted a resolution which stated that

<sup>75</sup>F. Giedroyć, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>76</sup>For example, P. Umastowski, *Nauka o morowym powietrzu (Precepts on the Plague)*, Kraków 1591; S. Petrycy, *Instrukcja albo nauka jak się sprawować czasu moru (Instructions or Precepts on How to Behave during Plague)*, Kraków 1613. Cf. J. Ptaśnik, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>77</sup>S. Flis, *op. cit.*, p. 521. Cf. F. Giedroyć, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–22.

<sup>78</sup>W. Froch, M. Kobylińska-Szymańska, *op. cit.*, p. 385.

<sup>79</sup>Cf. A. Karpiniński, *op. cit.*, pp. 102–107.

<sup>80</sup>S. Flis, *op. cit.*, p. 477.

<sup>81</sup>E. Sienkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

indigent plague-stricken persons would not be fed at the cost of the city „for it is impossible to sustain so many people; such persons, especially unemployed people, should be at once expelled from the city”<sup>82</sup>. There were limits to Christian charity.

In presenting the attitudes and behaviour of people during pestilence in the 16th–18th centuries I have confined myself to material from the territory of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, to be more precise, from Poland. But the situation in other European countries was similar. The attitude of people standing face to face with plague was determined mainly by natural factors, by instinct, by fear of death. Social and cultural factors were of lesser significance, but they too were similar everywhere. The level of medical knowledge was low in all countries, medicine was helpless, man was greatly dependent on natural forces, there were vast areas of poverty and misery, and an almost identical state of minds, mentality and ideology everywhere; it was characterised by a deep faith in God’s omnipotence and, irrespective of the professed religion, by man’s submission to His will, to His chastising arm.

A historian should exercise restraint and use caution when he evaluates the attitude of people in time of plague in the 16th–18th centuries, when he assesses the irrationality of their behaviour, lack of respect for human dignity and suffering, moral indifference, cynicism, people’s readiness to enter the road of crime, and the decline of all social ties. Attitudes of this kind are known to have existed in all epochs and civilisations, from the time of Thucydides, who was the first to describe an epidemic in Athens in 430 B.C.<sup>83</sup> to the present day. Such attitudes are not an exception even today, despite the enormous progress achieved by medicine during the last two centuries and despite the fact that medicine now has at its disposal much more powerful means to prevent and fight epidemics and their consequences than it had in Old Poland. Let us only recall the attitude of local communities, representatives of the authorities, not excluding the Ministry of Health, high ranking clergymen, health service workers, including physicians and professors of medical academies, to HIV-positive persons and people suffering from

<sup>82</sup>*Prawa, przywileje i statuta m. Krakowa* vol. II, fasc. 1, No. 1369, p. 496.

<sup>83</sup>See: J. Ruffié, *J. Ch. Sournta, op. cit.*, pp. 78–82.



AIDS in Poland and other countries<sup>84</sup>. Fear of a deadly disease is timeless and is felt irrespective of cultural differences and social position; it can destroy humanitarian feelings and common sense, deform the feeling of mercy. This is something historians should reflect on; not all events and phenomena are linked to time and place; some elements of the historical process seem to be timeless and universal.

(Translated by Jantna Dorosz)

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 111, 198–199; A. Wyrobisz, *Mytologia czasów zarazy (Mythology during Pestilence)*, „Biuletyn. Stowarzyszenie na Rzecz Humanizmu i Etyki Niezależnej” No. 2, 1993, pp. 14–15; M. Sznajderman, *op. cit.*, pp. 112–127; S. Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, s.l., 1991.