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WOMEN IN POLITICS.
THE CASE OF POLAND IN THE 16TH–18TH CENTURIES

The beginning of the early modern era was a period of women's rule, all over Europe. Even though the Salic law excluded females from succession to the throne¹, in the 16th century France was ruled for many years by Catherine de Medici and in the 17th century by the regents Marie de Medici and Anne of Austria. In England the two Tudor princesses, the Bloody Mary and Elizabeth I, became rulers and in Scotland Mary Stuart succeeded to the throne, even though her reign was short. In the Netherlands Margaret of Austria and Margaret, duchess of Parma became governors general in the 16th century. Margaret of Savoy was nominated viceroy of Portugal in the 17th century. The rule of females provoked vehement disputes among publicists, theologians and lawyers², but the people of early modern Europe quickly reconciled themselves to women's authority. Nevertheless, the explosion of common women's political activity during the English revolution³, and especially during the French Revolution⁴ met with many negative reactions.

¹ J. Portemer, *La femme dans la législation royale des deux derniers siècles de l'Ancien Régime*, Paris 1959, p. 9.

² The regiment of women was vehemently attacked by, among others, John Knox, George Buchanan, Jean Bodin and Bartholomeus Keckermann of Gdańsk (*Sistema disciplinae politicae*, Hannover 1607). In discussions on this subject the critics referred to Aristotle, who criticised the Spartans for allowing women to take part in public life, and to Cato, who accused women of a desire to dominate and disapproved of the "unbecoming" sway they had over their husbands. John Aylmer, Henry Howard, the Earl of Northampton, George Whetstone, John Bridges, Edmund Spenser, John Case and Henri d'Audiguier du Mazet were among those who defended women's right to exercise power.

³ A. Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel. Woman's Lot in 17th Century England*, London 1989, pp. 183 ff., 222 ff., 256 ff.

In Poland, the law excluded women from succession to the throne, but men could inherit it through them. Louis of Anjou had to grant the Polish nobility the privilege of Košice (1374) to gain exemption from this law for his daughters. In Poland a model queen had to keep in the shadow of her husband, be pious and dedicated to charity, but first and foremost she had to bear children to secure an heir for the dynasty. This is why Bona, the Italian wife of King Sigismund I, who had great political ambitions and wanted to base the Jagellonian dynasty on solid economic foundations, was strongly disliked in Poland. This is what Bishop Padniewski wrote about her in his treatise *The Life of Peter Gamrat: Regina Bona Italica femina, mulieribus studiis relictis rebus civilibus administrationeque Reipublicae se inseruerit tantosque habuerit, tantum apud coniugem regem valuerit, ut eius arbitratu omnes fere honores distribuerit et alia pleraque negotia conficeret. De que vulgatum iam erat, quod minime muliebri ingenio esset, occasionem sibi usurpandi sensum imperii studiose initio operam dedit* — “Queen Bona, an Italian woman who despised feminine occupations, was involved in the public affairs and administration of the Commonwealth, and she achieved such great successes in this respect and was so greatly respected by her royal husband, that she exercised control over the distribution of almost all distinctions and exerted influence on many other matters. Not having, as was known, a womanly disposition, she put much effort into public activity, usurping power”⁵. Bona’s activity may have induced the prominent publicist Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski to launch a scathing attack against all women who meddled in public affairs and to put forward a categorical proposal that they should be confined to the home (Chapter XXI of his book on customs in *De Republica Emendanda*, 1555). In the 1580s, Bona’s daughter, Anna Jagellon, had been

⁴ Cf. Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*. Ithaca–London 1988. In 1791, the writer Olimpia de Gouges (real name Marie Gouze) in a treatise *Les Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne*, dedicated to Marie Antoinette, vehemently criticised the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* of 1789, describing it as a declaration of the rights of men; cf. F. Hasauer, *Gleichberechtigung und Guillotine: Olympe de Gouges und die feministische Menschenerklärung der Französischen Revolution*, in: *Weiblichkeit in geschichtlicher Perspektive. Fallstudien und Reflexionen zu Grundproblemen der historischen Frauenforschung*, hrsg. A. A. J. Decker, J. Rösen, Frankfurt/M 1988, pp. 259–261.

⁵ Quoted after M. Bogucka, *Bona Sforza d’Aragona*, Warszawa 1989, p. 261.

crowned Queen of Poland in return for conveying enormous Jagellonian dynastic estates to the Commonwealth. Satisfied with the arrangement of her marriage with the Transylvanian Prince Stephen Batory, a candidate for the Polish throne, she renounced all royal power to him without resistance; the possibility of her sharing rule with her husband was not even taken into consideration by her or her contemporaries. Nevertheless, it was Anna who played an important role during the first three *interregna* and influenced the election of Henri de Valois, Batory and Sigismund III; but she was inspired by personal emotions, not by political calculations. Her sister, Sophie Jagellon, who because of ill health could not leave Wolfenbüttel, where she had lived since her marriage to the duke of Brunswick, tried to interfere in Poland's internal affairs after the death of Sigismund Augustus, the last king of the Jagellonian dynasty. The Commonwealth's dignitaries invited Sophie to come and were ready to hear her admonitions⁶. In both cases the political influence of the two ladies was due to their being members of the powerful Jagellonian dynasty, then on the brink of extinction. Neither Anna nor Sophie knew how to make use of this situation and this is probably why they were not disliked by their contemporaries, who focused their antipathy on their more gifted mother.

In the 17th century the Polish nobility felt a similar animosity against Marie–Louise, a French woman, who guided her inept husband, King John Casimir Vasa, and planned farreaching state reforms, including a *vivente rege* election⁷. Both Bona and Marie–Louise were attacked by the nobility and became the target of many critical, even obscene, works (lampoons about Bona circulated in many copies, obscene verses about Marie–Louise were inserted in many noblemen's records in the 17th century). Less dislike was manifested towards the beautiful wife of John III, Marie–Casimire, also a foreigner (xenophobia greatly influenced the Poles' attitude to Bona and Marie–Louise), even though she,

⁶ M. Bogucka, *Anna Jagiellonka (Anna Jagellon)*, Wrocław 1994, pp. 121 ff. J. Pirotzyński, *Księżna Brunszwicka Zofia Jagiellonka wobec starań Habsburgów o polską koronę w czasie pierwszego bezkrólewia, 1572–1574 (The Attitude of the Duchess of Brunswick, Sophie Jagellon, to the Habsburgs' Endeavours to Take the Polish Throne during the First Interregnum, 1572–1574)*, *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego MCXLV, Prace Historyczne*, № 121, 1997, pp. 53–70.

⁷ Z. Wójcik, *Jan Kazimierz Waza (John Casimir Vasa)*, Wrocław 1997, pp. 179 ff.

too, meddled in politics and played political games on the international scene to promote her family⁸. This testifies to the fact that between the first half of the 16th century, when Bona played her political game first in Cracow and then in Mazovia, and the second half of the 17th century, when Marie-Casimire ascended the throne, something had changed in the place assigned to women in Poland and in the opinion on the roles suitable for females.

It is significant that Bona chose only men as her collaborators. She arranged good marriages for her maids-of-honour, looked after them, but she never tried to use them to form a political coterie; she may have realised that women's possibilities were limited in Poland at that time. It was Marie-Louise who struck upon the idea of taking advantage of the marriages of her beautiful maids-of-honour and female friends for forming a strong group of supporters of her political plans, and she implemented this idea with great vigour and consistency⁹. One of the Queen's "agents in skirt" was Marie-Casimire, *primo voto* Zamoyska, *secundo voto* Sobieska, twice married by the Queen to an influential magnate. Let us add that in the middle of the 17th century, owing to progress in Polish women's education, the

⁸ M. Komaszynski, *Piękna królowa Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien Sobieska (The Beautiful Queen Marie-Casimire d'Arquien Sobieska)*, Kraków 1995. The author holds the view that the years 1674–1690 were a period of a harmonious co-operation of the royal couple, a period in which Marie-Casimire played an important role in the decisions taken by John III. In the years 1691–1696, when the ailing King was incapable of fulfilling his duties, it was Marie-Casimire who ruled (p. 379). Komaszynski repeats Z. Wójcik's opinion that Marie-Casimire was "one of the most intelligent and most prominent women to have shared the Polish throne in the early modern era"; cf. Z. Wójcik, *Jan III Sobieski, 1629–1696*, Warszawa 1983, p. 403.

⁹ Z. Kuchowicz, *Wizerunki niepospolitych niewiast staropolskich XVI–XVIII w. (Images of Outstanding Polish Women in the 16th–18th Centuries)*, Łódź 1972, p. 243; Z. Wójcik, *Jan Kazimierz*, pp. 179 ff.; K. Targosz, *Sawantki w Polsce XVII w. (Bluestockings in 17th Century Poland)*, Warszawa 1997, esp. pp. 66 ff. The whole country spoke about the Queen's dominance over John Casimir; this fact was pointed out by foreign diplomats and Polish publicists. In the Wawrzyniec Rudawski's picturesque contemporary comparison, the French woman led her husband as "a little Ethiopian boy leads an elephant"; the same thought was expressed less elegantly by a writer Joachim Jerlicz, who stated tersely that the Queen "like a she-bear, leads the King by the nose" (Z. Wójcik, *Jan Kazimierz*, p. 179). Father Adrian Piekarski confirmed this opinion in a funeral speech, saying that the deceased Queen had "replaced John Casimir's head by her own", *ibid.*, p. 192. As regards the Queen's personal policy, see W. Konopczyński, *Kiedy nami rządziły kobiety (When We Were Ruled by Women)*, Londyn 1960, p. 17.

development of their intellectual horizons and, consequently, the widening of their interests in public matters and issues outside the home, more and more women, especially in rich noblemen's and magnates' families, wanted to influence events, including political ones, to shape them according to their interests and opinions. In neighbouring Bohemia this occurred even earlier, at the end of the 16th century¹⁰, and in western Europe, e.g. France or England, as early as the first half of the 16th century¹¹.

In Poland women took an ever greater interest in the debates of the Sejm from the beginning of the 17th century, but they could not, of course, become Sejm deputies. Many of them watched parliamentary debates from the gallery, a fact which was criticised by some contemporaries:

She will not miss a Sejm debate on anything,
 And should her husband have a quarrel with the King,
 Having nothing but her private affaire in mind,
 She will do her best a deal with the Queen to find.
 When the King and her husband in agreement act,
 They'll sit and talk in the galleries, it's a fact.
 They'll discuss all views and criticise all advice,
 They're long-haired but short-witted, though they think they're
wise.

This is a shame and disgrace for the whole nation

— wrote Wojciech Stanisław Chrościcki¹². Women's political activity irritated also Krzysztof Opaliński:

She will always have news and announcements to make,
 Her tongue turns like a spinning-wheel, a chatter-box.
 The King violates our freedoms, she says. Good,
 That's what he should do, for you have too much freedom.
 She keeps discussing wars, hetmans and Sejm debates,
 Forgetting the spinning-wheel and her needle¹³.

Many people realised that the views and opinions of women could carry weight in political life. Jan Sobieski, who later was elected

¹⁰ J. Janaček, *Białogłowy rozważnej żywot w czasie burzliwym (A Prudent Woman's Life in Stormy Times)*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 130 ff., 162 ff., 284 ff. Janaček writes about the great political role of Poliksena née Bernsztejn, widow of Wilhelm of Rožmberk, and of the political salon run by her mother and sisters in Prague; this was a meeting place of diplomats and politicians, a place where opinions were formulated and alliances concluded. During the period of defeat at the White Mountain women also played an important political role in Bohemia.

¹¹ M. E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 239 ff.

¹² Quoted after K. Targosz, *Sawantki*, p. 148.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

King, asked in his letters to his sister what the ladies in the capital were saying about public matters¹⁴, regarding this as an important thing. However, women did not always use their influence in the proper way, for public good. Some, like their husbands, pursued their private interests, and often with greater effect. In March 1672 the Sejm which was to discuss how to defend the country against Turkey, was nearly broken by a noblewoman, Mrs. Kunicka, who demanded that the voievode of Sieradz, Feliks Potocki, be thrown out of the Senators' Chamber, for he had detained two of her fugitive serfs and refused to give them back despite a court verdict. "This is not the justice that Your Royal Majesty promised **us**" (emphasis mine — MB), she shouted, turning to the King¹⁵. Her words clearly indicate that Mrs. Kunicka, considered herself a full-fledged member of the nobility, and believed that the Polish legal and political system guaranteed equal rights to its male and female members. Wishing to get out, Potocki joined a group of bishops, but Mrs. Kunicka caught up with him and demanded that the debate be suspended, which means that she wanted to use the right of *liberum veto*. It was only when the King and the senators had persuaded Potocki to come to terms with Kunicka (he pledged to pay her 2,000 złotych damages and to cover the costs of the trial) that the debate could be resumed. Two days later a certain Mrs. Blomberg, encouraged by Kunicka's example, came out against Marshal Radziwiłł¹⁶.

Kunicka was not the first woman to rise to speak in the Sejm. As early as 1662 the widow of hetman Gosiewski, surrounded by other ladies, demanded that the murderers of her husband be brought to justice¹⁷. Ten years earlier at a Sejm session in 1652, three women from Radziejowski's family stood up in defence of Hieronim Radziejowski, who had been outlawed and sentenced to exile¹⁸. This shows that Polish women in the 17th century did not always content themselves with the passive role of viewers and listeners of Sejm debates but sometimes played an active part

¹⁴ Quoted after *Polski Słownik Biograficzny (Polish Biography Dictionary)*, vol. 30, N^o 3, 1987, p. 393.

¹⁵ Quoted after R. L. Polkowska, *Jak energiczne kobiety sejm zrywały (How Energetic Women Broke Sejm Sessions)*, "Mówią wteki" 1961, N^o 3, p. 14.

¹⁶ K. Targosz, *Sawantki*, p. 150.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

in them. However, they intervened only in family or private matters, not in public ones. Such broader political activity was to come later.

The ladies who had gone through Marie–Louise’s “school” soon began to take an interest in royal elections, picking out their favourites, establishing contacts with foreign diplomats and trying to influence the choice of candidate to the Polish throne. Anna Stanisławska, wife of the voievode of Kiev, who had been stewardess at Marie–Louise’s court, took an active part in the preparations for the election in the winter of 1673/74. In a letter to his sister of December 24, 1673, Jan Sobieski asked: “who does (the voievode’s wife) want to side with now”¹⁹. Sobieski’s sister, Katarzyna Radziwiłł (*primo voto* Ostrogska–Zasławska), wife of Michał Kazimierz Radziwiłł, also took an active part in politics. She always accompanied her husband when he wanted to attend a dietine, a Sejm debate or a meeting of the Tribunal (this was quite a widespread custom in the second half of the 17th century); her political abilities must have been significant, judging by the frequent visits and gifts she received from Sejm deputies and foreign diplomats. During the 1669 election, Katarzyna supported her husband who favoured the Neuburgian candidate, and they both suffered a defeat. When her brother became Polish King as John III Sobieski, she took up residence at the royal court, gaining ever greater influence. A conflict then developed between her and Queen Marie–Casimire, who suspected that her sister-in-law wanted to secure the throne for her son²⁰, to the detriment of Sobieski’s sons.

Women’s political role grew very quickly during the Saxon times, probably because of the apathy, drunkenness and lack of any serious interests (and also a drop in education) of the male part of the Polish nobility. Women often influenced the debates of provincial dietines and General Sejms, meddled in the functioning of Tribunals. In 1726 a special law forbade women to “set up residence” near the Tribunals²¹. During the reigns of Augustus II and Augustus III, many women exerted great influence at the royal court and were engaged in various political intrigues.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

²⁰ Cf. the biography written by J. Jaroszek in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 30, № 3, 1987, pp. 392–396.

²¹ W. Konopczyński, *Kiedy nam! rzędziły kobiety*, p. 12.

Augustus II's mistress, Marianna Denhoff née Bielińska, later (from 1718) Lubomirska, contributed to the conclusion of the treaty of friendship between Augustus and Louis XIV and repeatedly acted as an intermediary between the Polish King and the French monarch (e.g. in the matter of the proposed French marriage of Augustus' son, the young Frederick Augustus). Wishing to win over such an influential personage, the Austrians suggested that they would confer large estates and an hereditary princely title on her in Bohemia²². Joanna Lubomirska née Stein (she was Saxon by origin) a favourite both of the powerful minister of finance Heinrich Brühl and of King Augustus III, was a political plotter on a grand scale. Lubomirska's Warsaw palace was a meeting place for prominent persons; it was visited by diplomats and foreign envoys who realised how important it was to win over her support at the royal court²³.

Another remarkable woman was Elżbieta Sieniawska née Lubomirska, educated at the Warsaw girls' boarding-school of the Nuns of the Visitation, later for many years maid-of-honour and confidante of Queen Marie-Casimire, who used her in diplomatic missions. In 1687 Elżbieta was married to Adam Mikołaj Sieniawski. Like many unions in magnatial circles, the marriage abounded in conflicts and tensions for financial reasons (Elżbieta defended her property and income from her husband's interference, she wanted to be independent financially) and also because Elżbieta spent all her time in Warsaw, instead of being closed in her husband's residence in the country (such behaviour was a frequent reason for marital quarrels at that time). In Warsaw Elżbieta Sieniawska felt like fish in the water; she carried on a large-scale political activity and different personal intrigues, and had well-known scandalous love affairs (e.g. with Jan Stanisław Jabłonowski, son of hetman Jabłonowski, and even with Prince Aleksander Sobieski), Politics was her element; she knew how to change camps skilfully (e.g. she left Prince Conti's camp in order to establish contacts with the Saxon elector, who later became King of Poland as Augustus II). During the Northern War she played an important role in the plans of French diplomats by

²² Cf. her biography written by J. Gierowski in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 17, № 4, 1972, pp. 632–633.

²³ See her biography written by H. Dymnicka in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 17, № 4, 1972, pp. 629–631.

supporting an anti-Habsburgian uprising in Hungary and its leader Ferenc Rakoczy (her support was also motivated by emotional reasons). While trying to preserve her position in Augustus' camp, she did not hesitate to discreetly establish contact with the Swedes (in order to protect her estates from pillage and contributions) and also with the Tsar (to solicit her husband's career). She was a shrewd, unscrupulous politician, trying to direct events and use them for her own aims, to her own benefit²⁴. Emercjanna Pocij née Warszzycka, wife of the Lithuanian Hetman, and Anna Wiśniowiecka née Chodorowska (secundo voto Princess Dolska)²⁵ also meddled in politics.

The camp of Stanislaus Leszczyński, Augustus' antagonist, also included women. Leszczyński's candidature for the Polish throne was supported by Joanna Jabłonowska, née de Bethuné, a French woman; after the battle of Poltava she joined her husband in conspiratorial activity and after his arrest fought bravely to have him released²⁶. Another supporter of Leszczyński was Maria Zofia Czartoryska (née Sieniawska), who long after the capitulation of the city of Gdańsk and Leszczyński's departure for France, refused to recognise Augustus III as King of Poland²⁷.

The first political salon was set up in Warsaw in 1736. It was founded and conducted for many years by Izabela Czartoryska née Morsztyn. Her salon was a venue of politicians and a place where the Czartoryski family and their supporters²⁸ met for consultations in which women played an important role.

No wonder that in 1752 Frederick the Great expressed the opinion that in Poland reason had been transferred to women, that it was women who were engaged in political intrigues and solved all matters, while their husbands got drunk²⁹.

²⁴ B. Popiłek, *Królowa bez korony. Studium z życia i działalności Elżbiety z Lubomirskich Sieniawskiej, ok. 1669–1729 (The Crownless Queen. A study of the life and activity of Elżbieta Sieniawska née Lubomirska, ca. 1669–1729)*, Kraków 1996, *passim*.

²⁵ W. Konopczyński, *Kiedy nami rządziły kobiety*, p. 17.

²⁶ See her biography written by J. Gierowski in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 10, № 2, 1963, pp. 212–213.

²⁷ See her biography written by W. Konopczyński in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 4, 1938, pp. 248–249.

²⁸ See her biography written by S. Sidorowicz in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 4, 1938, p. 241.

²⁹ Quoted after W. Konopczyński, *Kiedy nami rządziły kobiety*, p. 11.

The election of Stanislaus Augustus, Poland's last King, was preceded by a political campaign conducted by women, not all of them, however, favouring Poniatowski. For instance, Zofia Lubomirska (née Krasieńska, primo voto Tarło), despite her good relations with the Czartoryskis, supported the Saxon candidate for family reasons, her niece being the wife of the Saxon Prince Charles. Zofia Lubomirska also deserves attention as an author; two treatises written in 1770 are attributed to her: *Remarks on the Noble and Burghers' Estate in Poland* and *Proposal for Public Order*, both with some critical remarks about the nobility and the discrimination of burghers³⁰. If these treatises were really written by her, this would be additional evidence of women's growing interest in social and political questions.

During the election of Poland's last King, women's voice was for the first time heard in the electors' acclamation; Stanislaus Augustus himself noted this as a novelty³¹. Women were actively engaged in politics from the beginning of his reign. This has been described with irony, amusement and a certain distaste in the 20th century by the historian Władysław Konopczyński in his booklet *When We Were Ruled by Women*, kept in an old-fashioned, misogynic tone. Konopczyński writes: "All creatures wearing many-storied coiffures and powdering their pretty faces, soon split into a faction of fanatic supporters of the King and a faction of his equally fanatic adversaries. The former, consisting mainly of members or clients of the Czartoryski family, were concentrated in the capital. The circle of Stanislaus' closest lady-friends could be clearly distinguished: Mrs. Schmidt, wife of the Councillor³², Mme L'Huillier³³, mistress of Prince Kazimierz, the Chamberlain, Mrs. Elżbieta Sapieha née Branicka

³⁰ See her biography written by W. Konopczyński in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 17, № 4, 1972, pp. 636-638; idem, *Kiedy nami rządziły kobiety*, pp. 169 and 171.

³¹ *Mémoires du roi Stanislas Auguste Pontiatowski*, Petersburg 1914, vol. I, p. 506.

³² Karol Franciszek Schmidt directed the erection of royal buildings. He married Anna Fries whom J. Dygdala describes as a person of "great charm, intelligence and learning, a person thought to be a friend or even mistress of Stanislaus Augustus", cf. her biography by J. Dygdala in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 35, № 4, 1994, p. 546.

³³ Simon Antoine Jean l'Huillier was a mathematician, author of a handbook for Polish schools; he was a member of the Society for Elementary Schoolbooks and was employed as a private teacher by the Czartoryskis and Lubomirskis. He married Marie Cartier, cf. his biography by Rostworowski in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 17, № 2, 1972, pp. 267-270.

Korczak, wife of Jan, the voivode of Mścislaw, Miss Elżbieta Szydłowska who was about to marry Mr. Grabowski, Mrs. Strutyńska, wife of the starost of Opole; among the wellwishers were also Izabella Branicka from Białystok and Teresa Poniatowska née Kińska, wife of Andrzej, mother of the two-year-old Prince Joseph, who would drop in from Vienna; the ladies near to the old princes, headed by Elżbieta Lubomirska and Izabella Flemming Czartoryska, would turn away from them with growing dislike. The other, clearly oppositional, faction, being unable to stand the Warsaw atmosphere of servility and sycophancy, left for their husbands' residences in the provinces, launching a Fronde, to use the French expression. Two ladies had sworn to bring about the ruin of Poniatowski, strengthening their families' resolve in this matter: Katarzyna Kossakowska née Potocka and Amelia Mniszech née Brühl³⁴. In a primitive and simplified way Konopczyński then explains women's political activity ("in order to see some sense in what these women were doing") by complexes which stemmed from their unsuccessful conjugal life and magnatial position, which secured them a special financial and social footing. The latter reason cannot be denied; only women from magnatial circles had enough freedom and understanding of the world, as well as enough opportunities, to try to influence the course of public events.

Konopczyński says that from the Saxon times on "the Baroque ladies threw themselves ever more passionately into politics, at best into election politics, but usually into factional politics concerning the family, the Sejm and the Tribunals. They were divided according to external orientation into French, Saxon, Austrian and Russian supporters. On the whole, they rather fomented conflicts than smoothed them. It is characteristic that whole groups of these Egerias clung to the mace (as a symbol of Hetman's power — MB), to Sieniawski, Potocki and Branicki, and showed little liking for civilian ministries"³⁵. But these are probably not the specific traits of women politicians but of the way politics were pursued in Poland in those days.

Women (e.g. Maria Radziwiłł) had a hand in the organisation of the confederation of Radom (1767). According to the Russian

³⁴ W. Konopczyński, *Kiedy nami rządziły kobiety*, p. 19.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

ambassador to Poland, Nicolai Repnin, the Confederation of Bar (1768), this controversial, though undoubtedly patriotic and noble, movement for independence, was provoked by women; it is they who "sowed discord in the Commonwealth"³⁶. Following this trail, Konopczyński enumerates several women who, according to him, were the architects of the Confederation. He mentions Katarzyna Kossakowska, Amelia Mniszech, Anna Jabłonowska, Maria Radziwiłł, Genowefa Brzostowska, Zofia Lubomirska, Franciszka Krasińska and Teofila Sapieha³⁷. Their participation and contribution was not, of course, equal. The idea was launched by the learned Anna Jabłonowska; it was in her residence at Kock that the concept was formulated and a programme of action developed. Jabłonowska later supported the Confederation financially and supplied it with soldiers³⁸. Maria Radziwiłł conducted a propaganda campaign in France in support of the Confederation³⁹. The other women also assisted the confederates financially and conducted a propaganda campaign to win over supporters and combat adversaries. Konopczyński's reproach that women did not take up arms against the enemy is rather absurd⁴⁰.

The first partition of Poland was undoubtedly a great shock for patriotic women. In the spring of 1773 Anna Jabłonowska tried, through her supporters, to break the dietines held before the General Sejm in order to prevent the partition of Poland⁴¹.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 11

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 15. The contribution of each of those women is extensively and objectively described in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, cf. in particular H. Dymnicka's biography of Urszula Lubomirska née Branicka, vol. 17, № 4, 1972, pp. 634–635.

³⁸ Cf. her biography by J. Berger in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 10, № 2, 1963, pp. 210–212.

³⁹ Cf. the biography by E. Rostworowski in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 30, № 3, 1987, pp. 402–409.

⁴⁰ W. Konopczyński, *Kiedy nami rządziły kobiety*, p. 13. The book cannot but bring to mind publications about women from the beginning of the early modern era. Like these publications, Konopczyński's book resounds with the firm conviction of male supremacy; the way he presents women is designed to ridicule them; like the authors of early modern publications, he is motivated by the desire not only to inform the reader but also to amuse him, hence his hapless endeavours to be funny. At the end of his book Konopczyński reconstructs a fictitious dialogue between supporters and adversaries of women, a dialogue which seems to be taken out literally from 16th and 17th century publications. Was this a deliberate pastiche or a spontaneous presentation of rather old-fashioned views?

⁴¹ Cf. her biography by J. Berger-Mayerowa in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*,

Bitter reflections on the national calamity can be found in the letters of Teofila Morawska née Radziwiłł⁴². It is not to be wondered at therefore, that in the years that followed a large group of women joined the reform work, co-operating with the activists of the Four Years' Sejm, creating an atmosphere of fervent support for its debates and enthusiastically welcoming the adoption of the Constitution of May 3rd (Anna Teresa Potocka née Ossolińska, Izabela Czartoryska née Flemming, Rozalia Lubomirska née Chodkiewicz)⁴³. There are indications that female politicians supported Kościuszko and the Kościuszko Insurrection both financially and by propaganda work (Anna Jabłonowska, Izabela Czartyrska), though some women were pessimistic about the chances of the uprising (e.g. Anna Lubomirska née Hadik)⁴⁴. Many women attended in depressed silence the debates of the Partition Sejm in Grodno in 1793.

The third partition was a bitter experience for all patriotic women; in her diary Wirydianna Fiszerowa writes about female landowners in Great Poland who fell into despondency or developed a mental illness after the third partition⁴⁵. Some, like Anna Jabłonowska, did not reconcile themselves to the loss of national independence and supported conspirators and secret plots, which emerged in Poland as early as 1795–1797⁴⁶. Izabela

vol. 10, № 2, 1963, pp. 210–212.

⁴² A. S a j k o w s k i, *Staropolska miłość (Love in Old Poland)*, Poznań 1981, p. 331.

⁴³ It is worth saying a few words about her. Rozalia Lubomirska, wife of the castellan of Kiev, was an ardent admirer of Prince Józef Poniatowski, and one of the most energetic activists during the Four Years' Sejm. In 1792 she left for France where due to her political temperament, she got involved in counter-revolutionary activity (she established contact with the Girondists). She was guillotined in June 1794; cf. her biography by A. Z a h o r s k i in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 17, № 4, 1972, pp. 633–634. At the end of the 18th century a cross and a tombstone with the dates of her birth and death were put up in Warsaw's Praga district, which at that time belonged to the Lubomirskis (in fact Rozalia was buried in a common grave in Paris). This symbolic grave at the corner of Wileńska Street and Czyszowa Street still existed during the Nazi occupation of Warsaw. I am adding this as information for the fact is not mentioned in the *Polish Biographical Dictionary*.

⁴⁴ Cf. her biography by K. W i e r z b i c k a - M i c h a l s k a in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 17, № 4, 1972, pp. 624–625.

⁴⁵ A. C i e ś n s k i, *Pamiętnikarstwo polskie XVIII w. (Polish 18th Century Memoirs)*, Wrocław 1981, p. 190.

⁴⁶ See fn. 41 and also M. K u k i e l, *Próby powstania po trzecim rozbiórce 1795–1797 (Attempts to Launch an Uprising after the Third Partition 1795–1797)*, Kraków 1912.

Czartoryska tried to save the Polish national spirit by collecting historical relics and by prompting devotion to the past. But there were also women who under the influence of cosmopolitan feelings, fashionable at the end of the 18th century, were indifferent to the national tragedy. Some even had love affairs or set up friendship with Russian diplomats and subordinated themselves to the invaders (Anna Teresa Potocka née Ossolińska, Helena Radziwiłł née Przeździecka, Zofia Potocka, *primo voto* Witt, the famous "Greek lady")⁴⁷. After the defeat of the Kościuszko Insurrection even Izabela Czartoryska, having the future of her family in mind, sent her sons to the Russian tsarist court. Like the whole society, women represented a wide range of attitudes and reacted in various ways to the events, trying to find solutions to their own and their families' problems in the new reality.

It is not the purpose of this study to pass moral judgements. Its aim is to show Polish women's growing activity in public life, which could be observed in particular from the middle of the 17th century. In the 18th century, women's activity in diplomacy, personal intrigues and political games on an international scale reached vast proportions. This activity could, of course, only be conducted by women from magnatial circles; a noblewoman of medium means or a townswoman had no possibility of playing the role of a politician, unless she made a stunning career through marriage, like Zofia Witt (later Potocka). Women from magnatial families had the best education, they moved among decision-makers, travelled frequently and had the opportunity to get familiar with many Enlightenment currents. This is testified to by the fact that female masonic lodges were established in Poland in the second half of the 18th century. Anna Potocka née Ossolińska, founder and chairwoman of the adoptive lodge at the "Virtuous Sarmatian" (1768), was a prominent masonic activist⁴⁸. It is not to be wondered at therefore that women from elitist circles acted as inspirators, participants and propagators of many political ventures, that they were in contact with foreign diplomats, were guests at French, Austrian, Prussian and Russian royal courts, acted as intermediaries and undertook various

⁴⁷ Cf. J. Łojek, *Dzieje pięknej Bitynki (The Story of a Beautiful Bithynian Woman)*, Warszawa 1972.

⁴⁸ Cf. her biography by M. Czeppe in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 27, № 4, 1987, pp. 732–734.

diplomatic missions. The motives for these activities varied: from the desire to promote their own family and the interests of their members (promotion of the husband's or son's career, obtainment of decorations, and positions, increasing the family's property)⁴⁹ to fulfilment of their own ambitions and aspiration for self-fulfilment, which could be achieved if they acquired influence and position. No less important was the desire to make oneself known outside the home, to win fame, receive tributes, be in the flare of searchlights. But some women were also motivated by non-egoistic reasons, by genuine patriotism and the wish to serve their country. All these motives were not gender-restricted, they also animated men and must therefore be regarded as general rules of human behaviour.

(Translated by Janina Dorosz)

⁴⁹ In his book *Korespondencja elit Polski stanisławowskiej. Analiza wybranych kręgów politycznych* (*The Correspondence of the Polish Elites during the Reign of Stanislaus Augustus. An Analysis of Selected Political Circles*), Bydgoszcz 1992, W. Jurkiewicz expresses the view (in particular in Chapter III), that family interests were the main motive of the Potocki women's political activity.