

Kazimierz Maliszewski, *Komunikacja społeczna w kulturze staropolskiej. Studia z dziejów kształtowania się form i treści społecznego przekazu w Rzeczypospolitej szlacheckiej (Social Communication in Old Polish Culture. Studies in the History of the Forms and Content of Social Communication in the Noblemen's Commonwealth)*, Toruń 2001, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 199 pp., index of persons.

Historians and sociologists are attaching increasing importance to the forms of communication, regarding them as the basis of all social relations. Many scholars are categorically asserting that "culture is communication". Polish literature concerning this subject has also been developing intensively during the last 20 years (to mention only J. Puzynina, J. A. Drob and J. Pirożyński). The book under review has enriched this current with valuable data and reflections.

The author has divided his study into two parts. Part I, *Social Communication in Old Polish Culture* (pp. 25–94), consists of three chapters. Chapter I presents the forms and means of the diffusion of information and social communication in the Noblemen's Commonwealth in the 17th and the first half of the 18th century. The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was an extremely vast country with widely scattered noblemen's manor houses, all hungry for information. The author begins with theoretical reflections. His assertion that direct communication via language was the primary form of transferring all kinds of information (p. 27) may give rise to doubts. Gestures, that is a non-verbal form of communication, were

<sup>3</sup> There are some unfortunate mistakes in the book, e.g. Maria Curie-Skłodowska is presented as a Russian woman (p. 347).

probably the earliest form; the sound (word) must have come later. There is more cogency in the author's distinction between the stage of "ear-minded" culture, when information was conveyed directly during personal meetings in squares (the Greek *agora*, the Roman *forum*), in the streets, in inns and other places, and the later stage when it was transferred in a written form. The new technique of communication was necessitated by the economy, especially trade (correspondence between merchants); an important role was also played by the Church and rulers' courts. Of great importance was, of course, the invention of printing, which opened a new period in the development of communication.

As Maliszewski says, the system of social communication in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 16th–18th centuries embraced various circles of the noblemen's society, satisfying their desire to gain knowledge of the world and meeting the requirements of propaganda (political and religious). Information was produced and transferred by various means and in various forms, such as correspondence (public and private), printed and handwritten newspapers (called *avisa* "news"), by copying and distributing documents. According to the author, an extremely important role was played by the postal service and its branch posts, which began to develop as early as the 16th century; the author discusses them exhaustively (pp. 32–35) but he focuses on land services, ignoring the transfer of letters by maritime roads (through Gdańsk to Stokholm, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, London and French ports). According to Maliszewski, in the Commonwealth's vast territories information circulated radially in accordance with the hierarchical structure of society. The most important centre of information was the royal court; then came individual magnates' courts ("great neighbourhood") from which various items of information, frequently distorted, penetrated into noblemen's manor houses (known as "small neighbourhood"). This is a very suggestive model but it ignores large cities (Gdańsk, Cracow, Poznań, Lublin) which, through the intermediary of smaller and even quite small towns visited by the nobility, played a by no means insignificant role in the transfer of information.

Maliszewski rightly points out that the spoken word played an important role in Sarmatian culture. Information was conveyed orally in various places: in courts and manor houses during feasts and social gatherings, during visits to the church and the inn, during the sessions of the *Sejm*, the dietines and the tribunals, and at fairs (see in particular p. 37). Fairs, however, which have been merely mentioned by the author, deserve more consideration in view of the enormous role they played in the diffusion of news and information in oral and written form. Much has already been written on this subject<sup>1</sup>.

Maliszewski says that the oral form of communication ran parallel to the visual transfer of information, a category in which he includes family and private celebrations, Church and political ceremonies (coronations, weddings, funerals, ingresses). Specially erected monuments, inscriptions as well as speeches and literary compositions (the special role of panegyrics) added splendour to these ceremonies. The Church was an important centre of information transfer and social communication; according to the author, it was the largest and hierarchically the best organised propaganda and information structure, which influenced not only the nobility but also the townspeople and the peasants. An important role in this respect was played by the Jesuits and by sanctuaries devoted to the cult of the Virgin Mary. Maliszewski rightly points out that sermons are a good source of information on Poland and the world and that they should be analysed from this point of view.

<sup>1</sup> For studies inspired by the Polish session on fairs see *Studia nad dziejami miast i mieszczanstwa w średniowieczu* (*Studies in the History of Towns and Townspeople in the Middle Ages*), vol. 1, Toruń 1996; fairs were the subject discussed at a conference held in Prato in 2000, cf. *Fiere e mercati nella integrazione della economia Europea secc. XIII–XVIII*, a cura di S. Cavaccioli, Prato 2001.

It was a characteristic feature of old Polish culture, a feature which has for a long time been stressed by scholars, that the influence of the handwritten word was greater than that of the printed word. Maliszewski agrees with W. Weintraub that this was due to the decline of towns and the resulting lack of literary groups, discussions and polemics (p. 45). More stress should perhaps have been placed on Poland's technological backwardness, the small number of printing houses.

The author's reflections on the role of correspondence and noblemen's records in the transfer of information from various fields of life (pp. 46–47) are very interesting and so are his remarks on handwritten newspapers, so characteristic of old Polish culture, a subject to which he devoted a valuable book ten years ago<sup>2</sup>.

Chapter II (pp. 50–67) portrays the Catholic religious orders and congregations in Royal Prussia during the post-Tridentine period as centres of religiousness and social communication. The material presented by the author is extremely interesting but its territorial scope is limited (to one region of the Commonwealth, a region which was unrepresentative of typically Sarmatian culture). Moreover, the author does not discuss Protestantism, which played an extremely important role in Royal Prussia. Chapter III (pp. 68–94) concerns the forms and methods of social communication in the large cities of Royal Prussia in the 17th and 18th centuries. The author says that the system of communication between large cities was well developed and was connected with the Polish and European postal network (connection through fairs could be added), thanks to which Gdańsk and Toruń occupied an important place in the transfer of information between Poland, Russia, Sweden and the countries of Western Europe (circulation of private and official correspondence between towns, the role of permanent residents and their relations, Gdańsk and Toruń as centres of printing houses and of the publication of periodical and non-periodical papers). It would perhaps have been worth while to draw attention to the ambiguous role played by Gdańsk in the creation of Poland's image abroad (e.g. the presentation of King Stephen Batory as "a Turkish governor", the insinuation that many Turks fought at Gdańsk in his forces)<sup>3</sup>. In addition to the printing trade, an important role in the transfer of information continued to be played by the oral form; in this connection the author mentions family gatherings, coffee and tea houses, and bookshops. I would add artisans' guild houses, and in particular Arthur's Courts<sup>4</sup>.

Part II of the book, entitled *Old Polish Stereotypes and Ideas of the World. The Nobility's Mentality during the Baroque Period* (pp. 97–188), deals with social psychology, a sphere which has not yet been sufficiently researched. In Chapter I the author presents the Poles' image of the states and nations bordering on Poland, taking as his examples the stereotype of the German and the Poles' image of German countries (pp. 97–142). In looking for the mechanisms which helped to create this stereotype, the author goes back to the Middle Ages, to the xenophobic attitudes which arose at that time ("as long as the world exists a German will never be a brother to the Pole"); he describes how the pictures of the "alien" neighbour overlapped the picture of the Lutheran, who differed from the

<sup>2</sup> K. Maliszewski, *Obraz świata i Rzeczypospolitej w polskich gazetach rękopiśmiennych z okresu późnego baroku. Studium z dziejów kształtowania się i rozpowszechniania sarmackich stereotypów wiedzy i informacji o "theatrum mundi"* (*The Picture of the World and of the Commonwealth Presented by Polish Handwritten Newspapers during the Late Baroque. A study in the formation and diffusion of stereotyped Sarmatian knowledge and information about "theatrum mundi"*), Toruń 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J. Pirowski, *Z dziejów obiegu informacji w Europie XVI w. Nowiny z Polski w kolekcji Jana Jakuba Wicka z Zurychu z lat 1560–1587* (*The Circulation of Information in 16th Century Europe. News from Poland from the years 1560–1587 in the collection of Jan Jakub Wick of Zurich*), Kraków 1995, pp. 131, 221–222.

<sup>4</sup> This is a subject discussed not only in P. Simon's old studies but also in Stephan Salzer's recent publication entitled *Artushöfe im Ostseeraum: ritterlich-höfische Kultur des Preussenlandes im 14. und 15. Jh.*, Frankfurt/M. 1996.

Pole by his faith. He then shows a collective picture of entire countries, that is, of the *Sacrum Imperium* of the Habsburgs, a stereotyped German Reich and the Brandenburg-Prussian state, whose picture was the most negative. According to Maliszewski, these pictures were formed mainly under the influence of differences in religion and the political system. He points out that, surprisingly, the Polish nobility thought well of the Polish-Saxon union, especially of the period of Augustus III's reign.

Chapter II (pp. 143–188) presents the Baroque *theatrum mundi* regarded by Maliszewski as an important element which shaped the attitudes, mentality and sensitivity not only of Polish people in the 17th century. The author analyses it on the basis of handwritten newspapers, a source very characteristic of old Polish culture. These papers contained diverse information from the Commonwealth and the world concerning history, politics, geography and natural science. Maliszewski says that the picture formed on the basis of this information was strongly Eurocentric with a Christian tinge. Rome was the capital of this world and the Pope was the highest authority. Protestants of all denominations were severely condemned; they were called sectarians or heretics and were blamed for the destruction of the Christian world's unity. Many items of information concerned political life, armed conflicts, diplomatic activities, events from the life of royal courts and dynasties. They reflected full approval of the existing estate structures and monarchic rule. The picture of the world presented in them was marked by deep religiousness and faith in Providence, which was manifested in its direct intervention in the world's events. The handwritten newspapers also reveal people's strong dependence on the forces of nature in the 17th and 18th centuries and his interest in all natural disasters and abnormal, mysterious and miraculous events as well as astrological and astronomical phenomena. It is a pity that these interesting fragments of Maliszewski's study are based on just one type of sources; they could have been supplemented by noblemen's records, diaries, letters and leaflets. The conclusion drawn by the author from his analysis is that the Sarmatians were prone to believe all alarmist rumours and that fear, combined with interest in wonders and oddities, also in sensational and criminal events, was always present in their collective imagination. Was this, however, a feature characteristic only of the Sarmatian Baroque? It would be worth while to compare the Polish *theatrum mundi* with that in Germany, England and France. Literature shows that they had much in common. Most probably this type of mentality was part of mass popular culture, which even today takes pleasure in the sensational reports of the gutter press.

Maliszewski's book is based on his earlier studies which were published in various collective works and periodicals. The author has gathered and re-worked them, and this new version is a valuable contribution to the discussion on old Polish culture and mentality, on the "Sarmatians" attitude to other nations and denominations, to the world and the rules governing it.

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