

Ulrich von Werdum on His Journey to Poland in 1671/72

Abstract

The East Friesian nobleman Ulrich von Werdum (1632-1681) took numerous trips to Western, Middle, and Eastern Europe in 1670-1677 and wrote a detailed travel journal about them. During these trips, he traveled as an escort to various employers and was accompanied by his brother Alexander. His trip to Poland in 1671-72 was part of a secret diplomatic mission. The following description of manners and customs, for example, religious practices, social relationships, residential building styles, but also eating habits provided a cultural touchstone, whereby Early Modern travelers could use their accounts to describe not only foreign life in foreign environs, but also their own lives in foreign environs, and thus to explore the countries visited for themselves.

Source

The Poles who belong to the Roman Catholic Church are as popish as any Spaniard or Irishman might be, and in their devotions more superstitious than spiritual: if they pray or hear a mass, they snort and grunt while sighing so that it can be heard from afar, they fall down, bang their heads against the wall and benches, box their own ears, and engage in more of the same unruly behavior that is laughed at by the papists from other nations. On Fridays they not only do not eat meat but also no eggs, butter, cheese, or milk. The fish and vegetables which they then use must not be prepared with anything but oil. With regard to the fast days, which they by order of the Roman church have in common with other papists, there is almost no one who does not fast for special devotions on an additional day in the week, just as in Poland they also eat no meat during the vigils on all the feast days for the Virgin Mary, which is not observed by other nations. The Polish physique is uniformly robust, tall, and heavy-set, and although children are raised more neglectfully than anywhere else, there are few Poles who are feeble or lame by nature. Nor do they lack mental ability, but they are frivolous, fickle, and excessively given to all lusts. When they are afraid and are weakest, they know how to act humble and unctuous, but when they find the weak side and take charge, they are defiant, boisterous, and cruel, so that they “aut humiliter serviunt aut superbe dominantur” [either serve humbly or dominate haughtily], as Livy describes such temperaments. In their everyday life and conversations with one another they use many compliments and flattering speeches which several other nations do not do easily, and in Poland, no beggar on the street is so low that he is not called “Pan oiczicz,” Honorable Father, and his wife, “Pani Matreo,” Honorable Mother. People of the same class fall into each other’s arms and kiss one another on the throat when they greet each other. People of a lower class circle around and kiss their superiors’ knees or even their legs and feet. When ordinary people greet a cleric, they put their heads on his chest and kiss it; in Podolia and Ukraine, the cleric gives the other person his hand; the latter kisses it and then presses it to his forehead. The greatest caressing in words and gestures is found in Russia, especially among women; the Russian language also serves that purpose, as its sound is not as harsh as that of Polish. For that reason, the Poles themselves say that the women living in Russian Lemberg are as beautiful, tender, and deceitful as in any other place on the entire earth. I met an upright woman there who, when I wanted to buy something from her, was able to make me a graceful compliment in Latin and to express herself in very flattering terms. Otherwise the Polish nation is thoroughly lax and lazy; it only takes care of what is most necessary in all things and leaves the rest along the way. That is the reason most of their houses and churches are built of wood, even though they otherwise have an excess of quarry stone and also good clay for bricks. But they use wood, which they always have on hand in abundance, for everything, with the consequence that entire houses can be found in which,

except for a few earthen containers and some clothing rags, nothing but wood can be found, all the household goods and equipment, from top to bottom, both the structure of the house and otherwise. On their plows, wagons, and sleds there is nothing but wood, and they make harrows by tying round poles over each other and skillfully screwing wooden tines with turned threading into the corners. When it comes to agriculture, they are rather attentive; in small fields they are able to plow the ground very well in straight furrows; then they tie two harrows together at the corner, which then cover an entire field, and each hangs down to the furrow on its side and has a horse hitched to the front, walking in the furrow, so that neither man nor animal again steps on the plowed field, and the sower also walks in the furrow. The Poles also use wood instead of lead in windows and for their beehives, as mentioned previously on pages 51 and 54. Polish laxity also results in many peasants leaving their hay in stacks in the meadows, out in the wind and weather, until they need it in winter, when they must bring it home a little at a time in the snow. They have the richest soil they could wish for and very pleasant air temperatures, but outside the big cities they plant almost no orchards except for plums and the like, which nature herself plants for them. When it comes to cole crops and vegetables, they are even stranger; they devote a lot of work to them, and have a very large quantity of them. Cabbage or sauerkraut, which they call “capusti,” is extremely common. They have a kind of radish, which they call “buraki,” with the characteristic that it is very red when raw but turns snow-white when cooked, and tastes very good. They also often eat cucumbers, not only pickled and prepared as salad, but also with a piece of bread, with the skin on and all eaten with their hands, like an apple. In all of Poland almost no bread is to be found that is baked until it is completely done, and they also eat boiled meat half raw, but if it is fried, they burn it. Meat is not sold by the pound, but by the cut, in pieces, and in cooking, the Poles are, as in all other things, very dirty. They do not carry all their food to the table at the same time, but one dish after another, and because there are sometimes ten, fifteen, or twenty courses, and they present each dish separately, their meals last many hours. They like to eat fat and served us fried fresh cheese in butter and peas with a great number of bacon cubes mixed in; with it, as with all their food, they eat very little bread. No other nation uses salt and herbs in such abundance as the Poles, and the food is salted so much in the kitchen that no salt container is necessary on the table. All the necessities of life are abundant and cheap in Poland, especially meat, and I saw eighty pounds of good beef sold at Mlava in Masuria for one Reichsthaler. After the salted and spiced food, the Poles enjoy a good drink, and imbibing by high- and low-born, man and woman, is as common as anywhere in the world. They are especially fond of brandy, which they call “grzolka” in Polish, “horilka” in Russian, and “crematum” in their Latin. Even the most prominent people carry it along in their pocket flasks and must drink it almost every hour. For that reason, so much is consumed that a Jew in Zolkiew paid three thousand Reichsthaler a year for the exclusive license to distill brandy in the town and the nine or ten surrounding villages. They do not distill any from wine [grapes] but distill it all from grain and the worst from nettles.

Source: Silke Cramer, ed., *Das Reisejournal des Ulrich von Werdum (1670-1677). Kritische Edition eines Reiseberichtes*. Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main and New York, 1990, pp. 107-11.

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

Recommended Citation: Ulrich von Werdum on His Journey to Poland in 1671/72, published in: German

History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/migration/ghis:document-45>> [April 26, 2024].