

MICHAŁ HAAKE

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

E-Mail: [michalhaake@gmail.com](mailto:michalhaake@gmail.com)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6929-0953>

MICHAŁ MENCFEL,  
*ATANAZY RACZYŃSKI (1788–1874). BIOGRAFIA* \*  
(2016), 532 P. ISBN: 9788323231233

Among the humanistic studies published in recent years in Poland, a biography of Atanazy Raczyński, written by the art historian prof. Michał Mencwel, from the Institute of Art History at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, is one of the most outstanding. The book, *Atanazy Raczyński (1788–1874). A biography*, published by the Adam Mickiewicz University Press, has 532 pages and 114 colour illustrations.

Atanazy Raczyński was a descendant of the nobility of Great Poland, who became a wealthy Prussian aristocrat. Honoured with the title of ‘Count’, he was a diplomat serving the Prussian kingdom. He was a man of wide intellectual horizons and broad interests. Although, in public life, he represented the idea of radical conservatism, he followed new intellectual currents, treating them, however, with a certain reserve. In the history of Poland and Germany, however, he is remembered mostly as a collector of old and contemporary painting, the founder of a widely-acknowledged collection of painting, open to the public, which is now part of the National Museum at Poznań. As a scholar, he is remembered as the author of innovative books about German and Portuguese art, well-known in Europe. Up to now, Raczyński was first mentioned in the biographical lexicons: *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle Larousse’a* (1875), *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (1888), *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* (1986). Some more detailed

---

\* *Atanazy Raczyński (1788–1874). A biography.*

studies have been written, mostly by art historians. Neither his diplomatic career, his political theory, his position in the Berlin society, nor his family life, have become, however, the subject of detailed research. A monograph written by Mencfel is the first (apart from a small, popular book written by Joaquim de Vasconcelos)<sup>1</sup> attempt at describing his long and rich life and the diverse work of Count Atanazy Raczyński.

The monograph takes into account the vast and diverse archive material. This consists of: a hand-written diary of Raczyński in many volumes, abundant private and official correspondence, documents regarding the diplomatic and collecting activity, and various iconographical sources. Altogether, the material archives over twelve thousand documents, a large number of which have been used in research on Raczyński for the first time. Consequently, knowledge about Raczyński and his society, as well as the institutions he was bound to, has grown significantly. Thus, the possibility of analysing Raczyński's life and work in a deeper, more trustworthy and careful way, has been opened. The book consists of three parts, beginning with an introduction and ending with an afterword.

In the first part – entitled *Formation* – the personality of Raczyński is described, since, as Mencfel insists, his personality is the key to understanding the political, collecting and art-sponsoring work of the count. We are introduced to the young Raczyński: his education, upbringing, early journeys, the beginnings of his court and diplomatic career. First of all, we learn about his relationships with the people who influenced his personality in the most decisive way, especially his grandfather, Kazimierz Raczyński. The aforementioned had shaped the world-view of the young Raczyński, based on keeping up the good name of the family, respect for authority, absolute loyalty to rightful rule, and fidelity to religion. Being accused of treason by his compatriots, Kazimierz had taught his grandson, Atanazy, distance towards the Polish national community and its ideals. Mencfel skilfully draws a psychological portrait of Atanazy, growing up in the shadow of his grandfather's personality and ideals. However, he also shows its historical background. The count is presented as an aristocrat aware of his privileges, and a participant of the cultural and social life of the European elites. Raczyński's conviction, that there is a possible way of combining public duty with a penchant for pleasure, is analysed by Mencfel

---

<sup>1</sup> J. de Vasconcelos, *Conde de Raczynski (Athanasius): esboço biographico*, (1875).

within the wide panorama of the European aristocracy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Aristocracy was then not restricted in many ways, and the young Atanazy took advantage of this fact. According to Mencfel, Raczyński's life, which had been full of love affairs, deepened his emotional sphere and shaped his emotional, positive attitude towards art.

The second part of the book, entitled *Politics*, is devoted to the political activities of the count. The author had to deal objectively with a fact that Atanazy had been remembered – and soon forgotten – in Polish patriotic circles, as a traitor. Future generations honoured Atanazy's older brother Edward, whose suicide contributed to the creation of his legend. Atanazy had the predisposition for being a devoted patriot. He took part in the Napoleonic campaigns on Polish territory, in 1806 and 1809. Finally, however, he abandoned this path. In 1836, he left the Polish territories and moved to Berlin. He strived to become a part of Berlin society and to build his social and political position there. He built a sumptuous house and an impressive palace in the Prussian capital, and he regularly visited the court. He tried hard to gain a position in the Prussian diplomatic corps and to keep his position of plenipotentiary ambassador and minister in Prussian missions to Denmark, Portugal and Spain. Regarded as 'an absolute German', he offended his compatriots with his assiduousness in confirming his new identity. Not negating such an opinion, Mencfel tries to analyse Raczyński's political activity, not in terms of patriotic duties, but as an expression of his conservative world-view. Raczyński attributed a key role in social and political life to the aristocracy, granting it an almost civilizational role: aristocracy, in his eyes, was a mainstay of the monarchy, which, in turn, could guarantee the stability of a lasting social and political order.

Raczyński, as described by Mencfel, wanted to save mankind from revolution. A fear of revolution was the basis of Raczyński's concept of politics, the key words of which were: aristocracy, loyalty, monarchy, anti-democracy, the legal order. One may wonder, however, if the defence of these values was the main motivation of Raczyński. Judging from his family and matrimonial policy (regarding both Raczyński himself and his children, all getting married strictly within their own circles), one can assume that, as a matter of fact, Raczyński, first of all, wished to keep his family's position within the state order. A change in the research attitude has to be acknowledged, even if the proposed understanding of the conservative ideas seems rather oversimplified. Mencfel likes the political activity of the count, and esti-

mates his efforts to give up the local perspective, and take up a global one, highly. He approves the idea that the existence of a country, or even that of a nation, should be sacrificed in the mortal game when mankind is at stake. “This conviction of Raczyński was radical, but nevertheless inevitable, from the point of view of his ideals. He was, indeed, an idealist – no doubt about that” – Mencfel concludes. According to the author, Raczyński had been wrestling with his national identity and, throughout his life, he perceived his being Polish as both a stigma and an obligation, a burden and a challenge. Such a statement, however, resembles too much of the left-wing press propaganda of today, and that is why it is open to suspicion. The leading figure of neo-Marxist journalism, Adam Michnik, constantly repeats a thesis about his own struggle with being Polish. A critical reader will not be deceived by the emotional descriptions of the careers of Poles in the administration of the Prussian (?) occupiers. In the end, one has to notice that Mencfel’s opinion on Atanazy Raczyński comes close to justifying the treason of one’s own nation.

The third part of the book comprises of an analysis and interpretation of Raczyński’s connection with art. Mencfel describes Raczyński’s own attempts at painting and his activity as a collector, writer and sponsor. A parallel analysis of the count’s drawings and water-colours, and his literary descriptions of nature, has allowed Mencfel to reconstruct the role played by the categories of the picturesque and the sublime in Raczyński’s perception of nature. As a collector and art historian, Raczyński worked out a consistent programme of perception of ancient and modern art. He made the first the subject of his reflections in the book, *Les arts en Portugal*, the latter – especially German painting – he analysed enthusiastically in a book entitled, *The newest history on German art*, and supported art financially by commissioning paintings and displaying them to the public. Mencfel is right when he notices that this activity was also a part of Raczyński’s desire to gain himself a reputation as a connoisseur and propagator of art, which he perceived as being an important element and a valuable opportunity for promoting his family’s image.

Raczyński, as portrayed in this book, appears to the reader as an energetic man of many talents and complex personality: proud and self-critical, ambitious and doubting his own achievements, trying to subordinate his life to the consistent control of reason, but yielding to his own bodily temptations. Raczyński deserves being brought back to Polish and Europe-

an historiography. It is not he, however, who is an icon of the aristocrat in Polish culture and memory. This place is taken by Prince Józef Poniatowski, half-Pole and half-Austrian, who died in the Battle of Nations, and whose last words are said to have been: “God has entrusted me with the honour of Poles, and only to God can I give it back”.

