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## ERAZM JÓZEF JERZMANOWSKI (1844–1909)

### BIOGRAPHY OF THE GREAT POLISH PATRIOT OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Arkadiusz Stanisław Więch, *Polski Nobel. Działalność Erazma Józefa Jerzmanowskiego i dzieje fundacji jego imienia (do 1938 r.)*<sup>1</sup>.

At the end of 2019, the Cracow publishing house *Historia Jagellonica* published an interesting biography of Erazm Jerzmanowski, one of the best known Polish emigrants of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The author of the book is Doctor Arkadiusz S. Więch from the Institute of History at the Jagiellonian University, who had already dedicated a few studies to Jerzmanowski. Hence, the reviewed book is, as it were, an attempt to conclude the author's research.

Jerzmanowski has often featured in publications devoted to the fates of participants of the January Uprising, Polish immigrants in the USA and patrons of Polish science. That “Polish baron”, after years of hard work, having achieved success, returned to the old country and settled near Cracow, where he died in 1909. His biography, which in the course of time had accumulated a lot of myths and legends, is a perfect contribution to the fates of Poles in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: it shows the plenty

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<sup>1</sup> *The Polish Nobel. The Work of Erazm Józef Jerzmanowski and the History of the Foundation of His Name (Until 1938).*

of challenges faced by the Poles who, having lost the fight, had to redefine their lives.

As A. S. Więch wrote in the *Introduction*, “This is not a typical biography. The main goal of the book is to present the work of Erazm Józef Jerzmanowski, which was an example of a broadminded and very pragmatic approach to the Polish cause in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. [...] An additional goal has been to arrange the facts on both Jerzmanowski himself and his foundation – his magnum opus, and thus to confront reality with myths and opinions. An important reason was also the desire to make Jerzmanowski popular among the general public”. (p. 9) And although these goals seem narrow against a theme which suggests so many possibilities, after reading the book carefully, we can see that the author has not only kept his word, but also frequently gone beyond its scope.

The work has a logical and coherent structure. It is divided into the *Introduction*, six chapters (I *Emigrant*, II *Inventor and entrepreneur*, III *Philanthropist*, IV *Neopolonus*, V *The Foundation*, VI *The Polish Nobel*), and ended with *Conclusions*, two *Annexes*, a *List of illustrations*, *Bibliography*, *Abstract* in English and *Index of names*. At the end of the book, there is also an insert with 20 reproductions of archival and contemporary photographs relevant to Jerzmanowski’s biography, as well as selected documents. Arkadiusz S. Więch’s writing is succinct and his analyses economical, hence all the parts are moderately long and the reasoning precise and coherent.

In the *Introduction*, the author also makes a reference to Jerzmanowski’s presence in literature. It seems obvious that he is partly responsible for his protagonist’s ‘comeback’ to historiography in recent years. However, as the author indicates, the problem with reconstructing Jerzmanowski’s biography results from the fact that the sources on his life and work are scattered around the world. In the book, we can see the results of the extensive archive and press research the author had to perform in Poland, France and the USA. The *Introduction* also explains the intended structure of the book and includes the author’s acknowledgements of the people who had assisted him in completing the publication.

Chapter I *Emigrant* is largely a detailed reconstruction of the main protagonist’s biography against the background of his family. The author shows Jerzmanowski’s story from his birth in Tomisławice near Kalisz in 1844, through his education in a Russian governorate *gimnazjum* in Warsaw and

the Institute of Technology, Agriculture and Forestry in Nowa Aleksandria (Puławy), fighting in the January Uprising, going to France and studying at the School of Engineering and Artillery in Metz, fighting in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, to leaving for the USA in 1871, years of success and finally the return to his homeland in 1896, settling in Prokocim near Cracow, and his death in 1909. The facts presented in this chapter allowed the author to develop numerous motifs from Jerzmanowski's work, without which it would be difficult to understand his industrial success or his role in the Polish community in America.

*Inventor and entrepreneur* is the title of Chapter Two. A. S. Więch attempts here to show, at length, the success his protagonist achieved in America. From the first, failed steps in Buffalo and experiments with syngas, to perfecting the method of Cyprien Tessié du Motay, to work for the Edward Stern company and inventions in the field of gas lighting, to becoming deputy president and from 1890 president of the New York Equitable Gas Light Company. This is an article written with a lot of expertise, which cites the many patents held by Jerzmanowski, which allows us to better understand his role in the world of gas tycoons on the East Coast. It is a shame that the author has not managed to answer the question why Jerzmanowski, who “was able to promptly find himself in [...] the rapidly transforming reality” (s. 55), was not successful in Buffalo, which was developing intensively after the Civil War, growing to be one of the major industrial centres in the USA.

*Philanthropist* is the title of Chapter Three of the reviewed publication, in which A. S. Więch shows Jerzmanowski's immense engagement in diverse charitable activities, mainly on behalf of Poles in the USA, but also for those under partitions in the old continent. The author describes in detail not only the activity of the New York Central Charity Committee, of which Jerzmanowski was president (and in fact maintained it from his own donations) but also the policy the “Polish baron” applied to the many Polish immigrants who came to the US in the 1880s and 1890s. The rationality of his approach and also the multitude and diversity of activities he took up may seem overwhelming, but at the same time, it shows that Jerzmanowski strongly aspired to the role of a national leader, a kind of “father” of the Poles in exile (NB, the fact of the Jerzmanowskis not having their own children has not been mentioned anywhere in the book). This is how e.g. his generosity towards the Jagiellonian Library should be seen, or to the

Polish Museum in Rapperswil (of which “the Polish baron” was member of the management board and an ardent advocate). Więch also managed to reconstruct the circle of Jerzmanowski’s closer and more distant collaborators, including Polish artists like Helena Modrzejewska or Jan Reszke, but also members of the Catholic episcopate in the USA. It was thanks to them that, in the period of the strong attacks of nationalist Catholic circles connected with *Gazeta Katolicka* and *Wiarus*, Pope Leo XIII appointed Jerzmanowski as the Knight Commander of the Order of St. Sylvester in 1889. Więch is right to have devoted more attention to this issue, at the same time showing the important international connections of his protagonist. He also highlighted what importance Jerzmanowski attached to the role of Catholic Church in the life of Poles at home and abroad: for the “Polish baron” it was the heart of Polishness, which does not mean that he went along with the bigotry and the rule that the clergy exercised on the Polish hearts and minds.

One of the most interesting and best written chapters is Chapter Four *Neopolonus*<sup>2</sup>. To some extent, it is a continuation of the previous chapter, where the author already mentioned conflicts and disagreements that Jerzmanowski’s activity caused. This motif, i.e. extreme reactions his protagonist aroused, is broadened by A. S. Więch in this chapter, especially in the context of Jerzmanowski’s work for Związek Narodowy Polski (Polish National Alliance, ZNP). The ZNP, the largest organization of Poles abroad at that time, whose operation was based on local branches but also affiliated associations, was torn by serious conflicts at the turn of the 1880s and 1890s. The author rightly draws attention to the fact that the disagreement between the New York and Chicago groups over where their main office should be, was in fact a personal conflict between Jerzmanowski and the ZNP censor Franciszek Gryglaszewski, over the influences and rule in the organization. The “Polish baron”, having lost the battle, got involved in the activity of Liga Polska (Polish Union), another organization intended to gather Poles in exile. However, after a few months of being its leader, Jerzmanowski unexpectedly withdrew from the position. It is easy to notice how he used to become enthusiastic about certain ideas, invest his time and money in them, but was not consistent enough to carry them out whenever criticism

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<sup>2</sup> *Polonus*, the word which appears in this title, means an immigrant from Poland in a foreign country, and *Polonia* – Poles living abroad [from the translator].

of his influence and manner was voiced. As the author aptly argues, the majority of Polish diaspora [Pol. Polonia] leaders at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were not very cultured or politically educated, and as the first generation of immigrants, mostly focused on the struggle for survival and becoming known in new circles. The activity in Polish diaspora organizations was, for them, a substitute of influence in the broader American community, which only few of them had fought their way into. Paradoxically, however, it was with them that Jerzmanowski attempted to collaborate; he was not a patron of art or high culture, even if he was against the growing clericalism of the Polish diaspora and influence of national democrats. Jerzmanowski belonged to the generation which, despite remarkable professional and financial success, never got Americanized, hence his decision to return to his homeland, NB, at a perfect time, before the concept of gas lighting gave way to electricity in cities.

Chapter Five *The Foundation* is a broad and erudite presentation of the circumstances around setting up the Jerzmanowskis Foundation and also the functioning of the Akademia Umiejętności (Academy of Learning) in Cracow in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The author has skilfully collected the achievements of historiography and – on the basis of archival sources – tried to once again present the difficulties the Academy had with carrying out the provisions of the last will of the “recluse from Prokocim”. Despite citing multiple legal regulations, the author managed to create a very interesting narration here, telling the complicated history of the implementation of an idea which Stanisław Tarnowski called “the Polish Nobel”.

No wonder that the last chapter of the reviewed publication is an attempt to address the legend that the Jerzmanowskis Foundation had become. The chapter has an apt title *The Polish Nobel*. A. S. Więch shows the secrets of granting the Jerzmanowskis Award and its gradual decline (until 1938). He highlights the award winners, but also the persons and circles behind its granting, as well as the whole economic and political background of the Second Republic of Poland, which was largely responsible for its prestige.

In the short *Conclusions* chapter, the author gives an account of the important values in Jerzmanowski’s life and the guidelines of his activity: Polish patriotism, work for the nation, the role of men and women and the Roman Catholic Church. What is more, he disposes of the myths around Jerzmanowski, which are difficult to support with sources (his

alleged friendships with Brother Albert Chmielowski or the poet Adam Asnyk).

From a reviewer's point of view, I would like to emphasize that if anything is missing from A. S. Więch's book, it is not facts. He could probably have found some more information about Jerzmanowski, which might have helped us to know his life and work better. Would it have contributed significantly to the main theme, though, or changed the image created by the book? I do not think so. However, what the publication seems to lack is some broader contexts, particularly regarding the significance of New York and the USA after the Civil War. Indeed, the author does properly present the main phenomena on the American continent in the period of increased industrialization but – as is typical of him – does it in a very economical manner. Jerzmanowski's phenomenon consisted in his ability to combine business success with being an internationally recognized philanthropist. Więch has beautifully proved this, but forgot to add that it was not only a realization of the Polish positivist model, but also the American one. More on the phenomenon of New York and its residents can be found in e.g.: Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and on social, industrial and political relations among the economical elite of the city: Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). Of course, in that reality, with such large German, Italian and Irish immigration, the Poles had little to say with regards the distribution of authority in the city, but if – as the author wrote himself – Jerzmanowski's fortune and accomplishments had the attention of English-language press, his New York period should have been given more attention in the book. One may get the impression that there is much more on Jerzmanowski's journeys to European health resorts and on his final years than on the pivotal period of his life. Regarding the life of the Polish diaspora in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it would have been appropriate to consider e.g. monographs by Donald Pienkos on ZNP, which may only briefly mention Jerzmanowski, but which broadly present the whole background of the functioning of the organization.<sup>3</sup> The lack of American contexts is

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<sup>3</sup> D. Pienkos, *A Centennial History of the Polish National Alliance of the United States*, (1984); idem, *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow. The Story of the Polish National Alliance*, (2008).

all the more surprising, as the author showed them almost perfectly when describing the process of setting up the Jerzmanowskis Foundation, indicating to what extent it was a result of a certain trend and to what extent the founder's original idea.

The spelling of names should be uniformed throughout the book. While it is mostly correct, on p. 65 we can come across Tomasz Edison and on s. 76 Eugeniusz Kelly or Jan Tay. When mentioning a city, it is often worth adding the name of the state it is situated in. What with the fact that Americans use the same toponyms all over the country, the name of the state gives the reader a better idea of which place is meant.

In the footnotes, apart from the titles of dailies and weeklies, the author sometimes includes the date of their publication and sometimes only the number of the issue. He fails to include page numbers, which in the case of daily newspapers as substantial as the Cracow's *Nowa Reforma*, *Gazeta Lwowska* or *Dziennik Chicagowski*, let alone *The New York Times*, makes verification of the information given very difficult.

The reviewed publication deserves to be evaluated highly and any critical comments concern minor issues. The author may (partly because of scattered sources or lack thereof) leave the reader not fully informed about Jerzmanowski's characteristics, avoid clear answers as to the reasons for the constant conflicts he stirred up in the USA, but yet has been very successful in completing the gaps in the biography of one of the most interesting Polish figures after the January Uprising. Więch's Jerzmanowski is a flesh and blood person with his passions and beliefs, a high achiever with a well-deserved place in the history of Polish patrons of philanthropy and science, but at the same time, a person prone to conflicts and prematurely withdrawn from public life. Perhaps, this is why the book is a superb read.