

A Jewish Act of Homage in Poland in the 18th Century

Submitted by Dr. N. M. Gelber.

[*translated by Michael Aylward*]

The French engineer Jean-Claude Pingeron, who was employed in the fortress of Zamość 1760-1763, describes the following Jewish ceremony in a letter*) dated 19 September 1763.

Celebrations were being held at the residence of Prince Czartoryski in Zamość. At three o'clock in the afternoon a large crowd of Jews appeared in front of the palace gates headed by a Jewish man on horseback carrying a large doll, another Jew "dressed like a Turk" and with a sword in his hand and 6 more Jews accompanied by music and bearing a cake.

The man acting as the representative of the Jews carried a silver basin and drinking vessels, while five other Jews carried silver bowls filled with sugar, coffee and lemons. This entourage was accompanied by numerous Jewish men and women.

On reaching the centre of the palace courtyard, the first Jew dismounted from his horse and began to dance with his doll, performing incredible leaps and bounds in time to the "Jewish music". Following this, the Turk performed a solo dance and then a dance with his friend.

After a short while a spokesman stepped forward and began to deliver a speech in Hebrew (discours hebreu), to which the crowd of Jews responded with great cries and much applause, followed by a song. Once they had finished singing, they performed Jewish dances, Polish "Cossack dances" and "majouques".

Later on they went into the palace to hand over the gifts - this was accompanied by a second speech (in Polish, Latin and German). After the gifts had been handed over they retired.

According to Pingeron this was a Jewish religious ceremony, which is of course impossible. At the most this must have been some kind of act of homage, which raises the question as to whether it was ancient and merely local in origin. Can anyone shed any light on this?

*) This letter was published by Salomon Reinach: *Un Episode de la Vie des Juifs Polonais aux XVIII siècle*. Paris 1891.

[*Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Jüdische Volkskunde [Neue Folge] - 1919, 21. Jahrgang. 1. C 2. Heft, page 32*]

COMMENTS

[Michael Aylward - 25 February 2008]

As can be seen, this article is a summary by Dr. N. M. Gelber of an article by Salomon Reinach which in turn would appear to be a summary of a letter written by Jean-Claude Pingeron. I should soon be obtaining a copy of the article by Salomon Reinach in the hope that it sheds more light on this report.