

## THE 19th CENTURY ISTANBUL IN THE EYE OF TWO POLISH TRAVELERS

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**Abstract:** Among the European authors, who in their diaries or books of travel paid a lot of attention to Istanbul one can include two Poles: Jan Potocki – the eighteenth –century writer, traveler and a great connoisseur of the Orient and Władysław Jabłonowski – the nineteenth-century memoirist, a doctor working in Ottoman army, a member of International Sanitary Commission.

Potocki, travelling to Ottoman Turkey and Egypt spent six weeks in Istanbul . In the diary of his journey he described, among other things, Istanbul, its citizens, some customs, holiday celebrations, etc.

Władysław Jabłonowski in his memoirs from 1851-1893 gave meticulous descriptions of places he visited during his almost thirty-year stay in Turkey. His descriptions and remarks refer also to Istanbul, its surroundings, lifestyle of its citizens, etc. Jabłonowski's memoirs include numerous Turkish geographic names and other Turkish vocabulary used by the author to present in details some Turkish realities.

**Keywords:** The 19th century, descriptions of Istanbul, two Polish (Jan Potocki and Władysław Jabłonowski) travelers, memoirs.

### İKİ POLONYALI GEZGİNİN GÖZÜYLE XIX. YÜZYIL İSTANBULU

**Özet:** Doğu, güzelliği, cazibesi ve gizemiyle Avrupaluların dikkatini her zaman çekmiş ve çekmeye de devam etmektedir. Avrupalı seyyahların üzerinde unutulmaz etkiler bırakan şehirler arasında İstanbul'un özel bir yeri vardır. Bu şehir, Avrupa hatıratlarına ve seyahat kitaplarına çok konu edilen coğrafyalardan biridir. Hatıratlarında veya seyahat kitaplarında İstanbul'a büyük önem veren Avrupalı yazarlar arasında iki Polonyalı dikkati çeker: Bunlardan biri Jan Nepomucen Potocki (1761-1815, yazar, seyyah, doğu uzmanı, tarihçi etnograf, Polonyalı ilk arkeolog ve hatırat yazarı), ikincisi ise Wladyslaw Jablonowski (1841-1894, doktor, seyyah, bilim adamı)'dir.

J. Potocki, Osmanlı Türkiye'sine ve Mısır'ına seyahatlerde bulunmuş ve İstanbul'da bir süre kalmıştır. Eserlerinde yaşadığı çağın tarzını yansıtan Potocki'nin günlüğünde (*Voyage en Turquie et en Egypte, Paris 1788; Podroz do Turek i Egiptu* [= Türkiye ve Mısır'a Yolculuk], Varşova 1789) canlı bir İstanbul tasviri ile karşılaşırız. Gördüğü İstanbul'daki, günlük yaşantı, bazı gelenekler, bayram kutlamaları gibi hususları doğru ve canlı bir şekilde anlatmıştır.

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W. Jabłonowski ise bir doktor, seyyah, bilim adamı olarak, çevresini doğru gözlemleyebilen dikkatli bir incelemecidir. 1851-1893 yılları arasındaki hatıratlarında (*Pamiętniki z lat 1851-1893*, Editör: Jozef Fijałek, Wrocław-Warszawa-Krakow 1967) İstanbul'u, semtlerini ve insanları, yaşam biçimlerini titiz bir şekilde eserine yansıtmıştır. Tasvirleri canlı ve eserin sayfaları orijinal Türkçe coğrafi isimlerle doludur. O günkü İstanbul'u ve Türkiye'yi gerçekçi biçimde ve ayrıntılı sunabilmek için yazar, hatıratında Türkçe kelimeler de kullanmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** XIX. yüzyıl, İstanbul, iki Polonyalı seyyah, hatırat.

Since a long time the East has attracted Europeans by its beauty, charm and mysteriousness. One of the cities which used to make unforgettable impression upon Europeans was Istanbul. Istanbul – the capital of Ottoman Empire since 1453 created the object of interest and numerous descriptions for both European travelers and explorers who were interested in the East. Many works written by European writers about the Turkish Empire did not leave this very city out of account. On the contrary, the works of western writers showed special attention, interest and admiration to the charm of Istanbul. Besides, these sources did not only glorified the attractions of the unique city but used to give much detailed information on its location, structure, administration, inhabitants, etc.

Among the European authors who in their diaries or books of travel paid a lot of attention to Istanbul were two Poles: Jan Potocki – the writer, traveler and the great connoisseur of the Orient and Władysław Jabłonowski – political emigrant, from profession a doctor and from the hobby – a memoirist.

Let us name several data concerning these very authors:

Jan Potocki was born in 1761 in a small village in the eastern part of Poland. At present this territory belongs to Ukraine. He was educated in Geneva and Lausanne in Switzerland. Despite the fact that he was brought in a Polish aristocratic family the language of his education and the language of his later literary output was French.

In 1784 he went to the East for the first time. He stayed six weeks in Istanbul and then, after unexpected quarantine due to fever he went to Cairo (Egypt). In twenty letters, he used to send from the journey to his mother, he presented his impressions and opinions with also some descriptions of the places he visited. These letters became the basis for the book he wrote in French and published in Paris 1788 under the title *Voyage en Turquie et un Egypte*.

In 1789 this book was translated into Polish and published in Warsaw.<sup>1</sup> However, Potocki is famous not for this very book but for *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* [= A manuscript found in Saragosse]. This work was published partly in Petersburg in 1805 and Paris 1814, but as a whole, only in Polish translation in 1847 in Leipzig.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, his life did not last very long. Being depressed he committed a suicide in 1815 at age of 54.

In Potocki's *Voyage en Turquie et en Egypte*, in the letters from number IV to X we can find some passages concerning Istanbul. By the way, in reference to Istanbul Potocki uses its historical name, that is Constantinople<sup>3</sup>. However, in Polish translation of his work the name of Constantinople is translated to the rather rarely used form - Carograd.<sup>4</sup> This form is not in use in present Polish.

In the letter IV<sup>5</sup> written in the moment Potocki just saw Istanbul from the board of ship he travelled, he gives very short but how remarkable impression. His words can be translated as: *I put aside a pen, since the view I see goes beyond possibility of description.*

As we see, this is very emotional opinion, full of admiration to the city he heard about, but now he saw for the first time. After all, his later reports on Istanbul are definitely more informative than emotional.

In subsequent letters he writes short comments on places or phenomena he noticed.

Among other things, he describes the ceremony of circumcision he was invited to. He also mentions places where visitors used to drink alcohol or use drugs, especially opium, though it is forbidden by the Islamic law.

He had a chance to visit places famous for their illegal character and houses of ill fame, which addresses are only distributed in a secret way. In the letter VI<sup>6</sup> he describes coffee houses, which are so popular that the vizier, high rank officers and even the sultan himself used to visit.

During his stay in Istanbul he also visited two *tekke* – *Mevlevi* and *Rufai*. In the letter IX he describes ceremonies he observed during the visit in both orders<sup>7</sup>. In the last letter<sup>8</sup> from Istanbul he wrote before he left to Egypt he tries to characterize Turkish people and their national features.

In this description he pays attention to such features of Turkish people as love to animals and affection to nature. However, on the other hand he also points out inclination to glamour and etiquette especially among people from the high classes of the society.

Another Polish writer, who in his memoirs paid much attention to Istanbul was Władysław Jabłonowski.

He was born in 1841 in Grodzisko in north-eastern part of Poland. After a medical education which he completed in Krakow he went to Turkey in 1866, where he spent almost thirty years. Besides this long stay in Turkey, once in 1861 he visited Istanbul travelling in political purposes through Moldavia to Italy. In 1866, when he arrived to Turkey he registered himself to the military

service, exactly, to the service in the garrison in Bagdad. However, soon he abandoned military service in order to open in Bursa balneological enterprise.

After a short period of this activity, he again joined the Turkish army and later on Turkish authorities appointed him to a post of a member of International Sanitary Commission. Having this function he visited many regions of vast territory of Ottoman Turkey, from where he wrote reports on sanitary and health conditions of Turkish citizens.

As a doctor, he rendered a service in the struggle against plague and other severe diseases. He died in Burgas (in nowadays Bulgaria) in 1894.

As it was already mentioned, Jabłonowski used to write memoirs. Spending in Turkey almost thirty years he left, in a form of manuscript, six thousand pages of memoirs. Only part of it was elaborated and edited<sup>9</sup>

As it was mentioned, his first visit to Turkey in 1861 was very short, nevertheless, gave him first impressions on this country and especially on its legendary capital – Istanbul. Just as Potocki, in his work Jabłonowski also used traditional, historical name for Istanbul, that is Constantinople.

The first contact with this city, in 1861, gave to Jabłonowski first occasion to confront his expectations and stereotypes referring to Istanbul. Since this visit was short indeed, only four days, he visited in Istanbul the most recommended places to see, such as: sultan's palace, *Aya Sofya*, *Bayezit*, *Suleymaniye* mosques, *Mısır Çarşısı*, *At Meydanı*, *Bin bir direk*, *Galata Kulesi*. As Jabłonowski writes<sup>10</sup> the time of his visit to Istanbul was the time of sultan Abdülmecid's reign. Jabłonowski was especially interested in knowledge concerning the achievements of the sultan's administration. In a very short passage<sup>11</sup> he reports the list of some attainments from that time, among other things: closing the harems, distribution of back pay for soldiers and clerks, introduction new paper money – *kajmy*<sup>12</sup> to the currency circulation.

Jabłonowski also mentions the contribution of Polish engineers (Przeździecki, Sokolski, Machnicki) to the regulation of the streets in Istanbul<sup>13</sup>.

Although his first remarks from the first visit are short, nevertheless they are full of information.

Jabłonowski also concentrated his attention on Turkish cuisine, mentioning dishes such as: *baklava*, *leblebi*, *pilav*, etc.

His second visit to Turkey began in 1866. This time he stayed in Turkey longer – not only four days, but almost thirty years. Due to the function he was appointed to Jabłonowski visited many places in Turkey. However, for these thirty years he spent there, Istanbul was the place he frequently dropped in, sometimes staying there for a longer period.

This time, Jabłonowski's attention concentrated not only on places he visited – he already knew Istanbul well – but also he paid attention to the people, Turkish lifestyle, some ceremonies, customs, etc.

Having the post of a doctor of Turkish army he should have known the Turkish language in order to be able to communicate with people.

His memoirs confirm that he gained linguistic skills in Turkish. With reporter's accuracy he registered names of Istanbul districts, names of some villages from Istanbul vicinity and other important and informative details. In his memoirs one can notice numerous Turkish vocabulary, written however, in Polish orthography. It happened also that sometimes he used to give wrong explanation to the objects he described, as for example: *Mısır Çarşısı* he explains as *European market* not Egyptian one.

As well as Istanbul, Jabłonowski used to describe also the flora from Istanbul's vicinity. With botanic passion he prepared of a hundred pages description of plants from the surrounding of Istanbul entitled: *Materiały do flory Konstantynopola i jego okolic* [= Materials for flora of Constantinople and its vicinity]. This manuscript, still unpublished, is kept in the collection of the library of Polish Academy of Sciences in Krakow.

He also prepared herbarium of many species of plants and herbs he collected in Turkey. His herbarium belongs to the collection of Vienna museum.

As we see Potocki and Jabłonowski - two Polish writers and travelers visited eastern countries with passion and deep interest, registering with journalist skills everything they saw.

Jabłonowski had a chance to get acquainted very well with all Ottoman Turkish territories, almost from border to border. First, he spent in Turkey almost thirty years and secondly, due to his function he was obliged to visit even very remote places and corners of Ottoman country.

Potocki's visit to Turkey was considerably shorter – only six weeks spent in Istanbul and its vicinity. However, he traveled a lot, not only in Europe but also in the Middle and Far East. Among other things, he visited the Caucasus, Siberia, Mongolia. He also planned to visit China, however he could not manage to do so.

Both writers are characterized by inquiring disposition, reporter's objectivity and needs to reach places which were not easy to be visited.

Thanks to Jabłonowski, Potocki and their works we receive variety of detailed information concerning Ottoman Turkey, its capital, lifestyle, some unknown, historical facts and data which in days both writers lived were probably unknown for average Europeans.

As for Istanbul, their works gave valuable and detailed information about the city and could be helpful for those who planned to visit this place.

There is also another, emotional, and at the same time, esthetic aspect that could be emphasized here. Although the difference of time between their visits to Istanbul was almost hundred years, both Potocki and Jabłonowski were concordant in their opinions and impressions. Istanbul has its *genius loci*. It is the city never-to-be-forgotten.

It is just magic city. This opinion holds good until now.

## FOOTNOTE

- 1 Polski Słownik Biograficzny, Warszawa 1984-85, vol. XXVIII, p. 36-42.
- 2 ibidem, p. 36-42.
- 3 Jean Potocki, Oeuvres I. Éditées par Francis Rosset et Dominique Triaire, Louvain-Paris-Dudley, MA, 2004, passim.
- 4 Jan Potocki, *Podróż do Turek y Egiptu*, Warszawa 1789, passim.
- 5 ibidem, p. 13.
- 6 ibidem, p. 22-23.
- 7 ibidem, p. 70-73.
- 8 This was the Letter number X
- 9 Władysław Jabłonowski, *Pamiętniki z lat 1851-1893. (Wybór). Z rękopisu dokonał wyboru, wstępem i przypisami opatrzył Józef Fijałek*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków, 1967.
- 10 ibidem, p. 96.
- 11 ibidem, p. 96-97.
- 12 Jabłonowski notes Turkish words using Polish orthography.
- 13 ibidem, p. 96-97.

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