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History dormant in people, buildings and the landscape

Review: M. A. Płonka, „Dzieje parafii
w Stryśzowie. Od początku do 1848 roku”,
Kraków 2024, pp. 1022

Mirosław Płonka's book entitled "A history of the parish in Stryśów. From the beginnings to 1848" is an all-round monograph relating the history of the parish community from its inception until the mid-19th century. It makes an inspiring read not only for the inhabitants and enthusiasts of the Stryśów parish but also for anyone interested in local history. The publication may prove of interest both for amateur and professional historians due to the sheer amount of information and author's insights expanding our knowledge of the history of Lesser Poland and the whole country.

The book consists of eight chapters and a comprehensive set of supplements. Among them, we find noteworthy charts containing a wealth of data on village owners, priests, and organists, as well as parish finances, including "Messkorn," i.e. tax paid in cereal to the parish priest for the

Holy Masses. Of particular value to historians are appended historical sources, e.g. a transcript of the evidence given by Reverend Wojciech Rzepecki before a consistorial court and the 1773 inventory of the parish house in Stryków, compiled after Reverend Józef Dembiński's death. The book is supplemented by lists of tables, maps and illustrations, as well as detailed indexes of persons and geographical locations, making it easier for the reader to navigate through the contents.

The opening chapters of the work narrate in detail the early years of the parish and its foundation. This part outlines the historical background, linking Stryków to the history of the Duchies of Cieszyn (Teschen), Oświęcim and Zator. The text also explains the origin of the name of the village and its territorial scope.

The author provides a thorough analysis of the position of the parish community in the structures of state and ecclesiastical administration. The passage on the patronage of the parish and its subordinate villages is particularly interesting. The book sheds light on the complex reality of the clashing influences of the local nobility and clergy. It offers valuable material for researchers studying the relations between the Church and the state in the Kingdom of Poland. In this context, the process of the creation of branches in Marcówka and Zakrzów described in the work logically complements the narrative.

A further subchapter of the book focuses on the period of the Reformation, which left its mark on the area of Stryków, its results visible as late as the 18th century. The author goes on to describe the shift in religiousness and customs of the local community after 1772, i.e. following the first partition of Poland.

The authors presents a number of his own insights and examples, illustrating the changes in everyday life under partitions: from the tax system to the most common religious and cultural customs. The discussion of the course and frequency of bishops' and deans' visits has a prominent role in the chapter. Records of those visits are a precious source of information on the changing moral and economic conditions of the community. Thanks to them, the reader may learn that the parish in Stryków was not an isolated entity but an integral part of the Krakow Diocese.

The next chapter of Mirosław Płonka's book concentrates on the economic life of the parish. A key element clarifying this aspect is a detailed description of the parish property, which consisted of both farmland and specific donations that helped maintain the entire parish community and clergy. The author portrays farmland and the people who worked on the

parish farm. Financial matters invariably generate keen interest; answers to questions starting with “who,” “how much,” “how many,” and “why” are meaningful contributions to historical studies. Readers and researchers will likely take interest in concepts such as “Messkorn,” “redeemable annuities” or “tithe.”

The publication also contains detailed lists of vicars and church fraternities, as well as income and expenditure structure in the parish register. This chapter is a perfect reflection of the realities of the period and demonstrates what our predecessors considered relevant in everyday account-keeping. This perspective is highly relevant for historians conducting research on the microscale, focusing on local communities, and those pursuing a larger scope in terms of broader historical processes.

The third and fourth chapters are devoted to church architecture and housing and utility buildings of the Stryśzów parish church. The author provides a meticulous description of three main places of worship: a wooden church dedicated to St. Nicholas (bishop and confessor), a stonework temple dedicated to St. John Cantius and a filial church in Zakrzów.

Not only does Mirosław Płonka relate the story of their construction but he also describes their interiors and furnishings, such as liturgical vestments. The same chapter contains an account of the fire of the church on 23 December 1739, an event which became entrenched in the memory of the local community. The publication also describes smaller places of worship, which feature prominently in the area’s landscape and history, including the manor shrines in Stryśzów and Dąbrówka or numerous chapels, roadside crosses, and statues, which testify to the deep faith of the local population.

The researcher paid particular attention to describing cemeteries and other burial sites, highlighting their significance and emotional resonance within the narrative. The inextricable link between life and death enables us to trace connections between historical buildings and real people, adding particular significance—especially for contemporary residents. This part of the work lets us respectfully reflect on past generations’ life, work, and contribution to the growth of the parish. Other buildings crucial to the everyday life of the parish were also described in detail: the parish house and the vicarage, the organist’s house, the parochial school, and the infirmary for the destitute. The section dedicated to those structures is an excellent lesson in history, allowing us to understand and learn more about the village. In this way, the book transforms

into a “time machine,” reviving the hidden histories of the places we pass by every day. It is the perfect chance to soak in the stories hidden within the walls and landscapes of this remarkable place.

The patrons of the parish and the conflicts and clashes between the court and the presbytery are featured in Chapter 5. The author presents consecutive land- and village owners from families such as Słupski, Suski, Lgocki, Łukowski, Milczowski, Wilkoński, Dembiński, and Gorczyński. This is a key part of the publication, accurately illustrating the coexistence of secular and spiritual authorities. Using specific examples of persons and events around them, Mirosław Płonka shows the relations between the two centres of local power. For this reason, the book is an obligatory read for anyone who studies and wishes to learn about the process by which the relations between the Church and the state were shaped, first in the Kingdom of Poland and later, under partitions.

The sixth chapter is devoted to parishing priests and other officers of the church in Stryków, such as sextons, organists, cantors, and bell-ringer. The author makes a distinction between three groups of clergy: priests from the beginning of the 18th century, those who worked from 1716 to 1784 (many of whom were academics at the University of Krakow), and those who arrived in Stryków following the Austrian reforms and who focused mainly on pastoral work and religious education.

The publication succinctly relates the stories, accomplishments and special merits of each clergyman. In addition, the author references a wealth of sources so that the reader can find more detailed information on a particular member of the clergy, which makes the chapter a valuable resource in terms of research.

The seventh chapter is an in-depth characteristic of the social groups that formed the parish community in Stryków. It starts with a general quantitative analysis of the population, citing estimates dating back to the 14th century. All statistical and demographic figures are derived from a broad and reliable set of sources. This part is of particular interest to anyone wishing to expand their knowledge on the social fabric of the area, starting from the Middle Ages through the Old Polish period to the partition period.

Next, the author discusses the social structure of local courts and manors. Particular attention is given to administrators and estate supervisors, household, court and manor servants, craftsmen, publicans, innkeepers, and stall keepers—the so-called “landless tenants.” The chapter also presents the village’s local government. The author debunks the myth that peasants were a voiceless crowd, revealing that their opinion,

especially when choosing village [*sołtys*] or town [*wójt*] administrative officers, did matter. The local reader will be particularly interested in the names of the residents of the parish area. This also makes useful material for genealogists. A description of the rural layout provides additional information on what villages looked like in the past. In summary, the seventh chapter is an invaluable source for researchers and history enthusiasts studying the lowest social strata. The data contained in the text and the footnotes may prove helpful when compiling genealogies of persons with roots in the region.

The closing chapter focuses on religious life and pastoral service in the parish, effectively wrapping up the entire narrative. It presents the most elusive yet crucial aspect of human life, i.e. the relationship with God. The author describes the piety and faith of the local community demonstrated through participation in Holy Masses, taking sacraments, and worshipping saints during indulgence feasts and services. Subchapters titled “Religious instruction” and “Preaching” allow us to retrace the history of the faith and religious knowledge of Stryżów parishioners. The final element which completes the picture of the community’s spirituality is the discussion of fraternities and parochial groups to which the local faithful belonged. The whole chapter is a well-designed closure to the history of the parish, emphasizing its spiritual dimension.

The book boasts a skilfully crafted narrative structure. The author writes about all key issues, allowing a profound insight into the community of the local parishioners. He outlines the broader cultural and historical context, enabling the reader to appreciate the mindset of the people of the periods portrayed. The content of the work is interdisciplinary in nature—whoever decides to read it may find something of interest. The publication is elaborately illustrated with photographs and figures, which perfectly supplement its substantive content. Additional resources include diverse types of statistics, tables, and charts, which do not disrupt the flow of the narrative; on the contrary, they enrich it. The author’s effortless style makes his book accessible to a wider audience: professional historians and local history enthusiasts alike. Many passages captivate the reader, compelling them to turn the page in anticipation of what lies ahead; it is an informative read, and the story it tells becomes a personal experience for the reader.

The book has many strengths, which, aside from the content itself, include exceptionally extensive references to sources and studies, lending the publication a unique, scholarly character. In his work, Mirosław Płonka used material from several institutions. More specifically,

he retrieved multiple resources from the Parochial Archive in Stryków (APS), including vital records (of christenings, marriages and deaths), documents, cartularies and folders, inventories, memoranda and varia, parish announcements, collections and priests' legacies, maintenance records, bills and lists of fraternities and communities. Other sources included the parish archives in Zakrzów, Wadowice, Bochnia, Brzesko, Chocznia, and Minoga.

The author also based his work on comprehensive resources found in state and Church archives such as the Archive of Historical Records (AGAD) in Warsaw, National Archive in Lublin, Central National Archive of Ukrainian History in Lviv (CPAHU), Bernardine Province Archive in Krakow, Jagiellonian University Archive and Jagiellonian Library, Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Krakow. A considerable portion of the resources originate from the National Archive in Krakow (ANKr.), including the archival records of Krakow City Files, Municipal and Land Records (Krakow, Oświęcim, Sącz, Zator), the Galician Cadastre and the Files of Antoni Schneider. Other queries were conducted in the Cathedral Chapter Archive in Wawel (AKKK) and the Metropolitan Curia Archive in Krakow (AKMK) regarding records of episcopal and chapter visits, dean's records, *Acta Episcopalia & Officialia*, as well as the Załuski Tables.

Furthermore, worthy of note is the use of privately owned sources, including interviews with the inhabitants of Stryków and its surroundings in the years 2009–2018 and the village chronicle kept by Mr Sitarz. In addition to the above, the bibliography lists numerous other sources, which enrich the narrative and provide more detail.

Płonka's impressive collection of archival references is supplemented by printed sources, source publications and studies. The entirety of the reference material testifies to the author's excellent research methodology. His inquisitiveness and determination to reveal the facts shrouded by the mist of time led to a publication that provides a comprehensive account of the history and function of the Stryków parish. "Although its length (1,022 pages) may seem daunting to less tenacious readers, the book offers rich insights for anyone eager to explore some fascinating aspects of life in earlier eras. This publication is a solid step forward in studying our history, both on the micro and macro scale, as well as a perfect foundation and departure point for further research on the history of the region. In many respects, the ultimate monograph on the parish, not only does Mirosław Płonka's book sheds light on the material and spiritual side of the community and paints a broad historical and cultural background from the early years of the parish until 1848. Offers valuable information

and author's insights on the relations between the Church and the state, social structure in historical Poland, sacred architecture, everyday life of the lowest social strata, and folk piety.

The author uses a language accessible to both professional scholars and enthusiasts of local history. On a sprawling thousand pages, the historian penned a compelling, multi-faceted description of numerous factors which shaped the life, mentality, and faith of the parishioners in Stryków.

To conclude, Mirosław Płonka's book entitled "A history of the parish in Stryków. From the beginnings to 1848" is a robust, comprehensive monograph containing a thorough account of the history of the parish community in Stryków. The author performed an in-depth analysis of a number of pastoral, social, and economic factors which shaped the lives of the residents over the centuries. This publication should be found in the collection of anyone studying the history of Polish society in the Middle Ages, early modern period, and the 19th century. Because of its versatility, I can highly recommend Mirosław Płonka's book to professional researchers as well as those interested in local history.