

From the annals of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

For Peace and Freedom

AGATA ROĆKO

Institute of Literary Research, Warszawa
Polish Academy of Sciences
agaroko@poczta.onet.pl

In the eastern borderlands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century, there were certain aristocratic courts that implemented and developed modern European social thought and ideas, setting examples in the fields of economy, science, culture, and art. The Szczorse palace was one such center

The estate in Szczorse [*sh-CHOR-seh*], although now ruined and forgotten, was the ancestral home of the Litawor Chreptowicz [*h rept-TOH-vich*] family – an important monument to Polish culture in the borderlands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, with close ties to Western European social thought, architecture, and art. Picturesquely situated on the Niemen River, the estate rose to prominence in Lithuania owing to the socio-cultural activities of Joachim Litawor Chreptowicz. The estate and its owner refuted the stereotypical impressions that foreigners frequently held about Lithuania and its inhabitants, as preserved in their travel accounts, where Lithuania often figured as a wild forested expanse purportedly rife with child-stealing bears. Chreptowicz built a residence on his estate that became an important cultural center, implementing many Western European solutions in promoting science and applying it to many aspects of life. All of this was due to the magnate's comprehensive education, further augmented during his travels to Paris, Vienna, and Rome.

Forgotten reformer

Joachim Litawor Chreptowicz (1729-1812) was considered one of the most outstanding thinkers of the Enlightenment age in Poland. Aside from his achievements in the political field, he was one of the founders of the National Education Commission, which strove to fundamentally reform the Polish schooling system. He was also well-known as a publicist, poet, and translator. Moreover, he was the author of several articles on administrative and economic topics, having gotten to know the French Physiocrats in Paris and having been a frequent guest at

the salon of Mirabeau. He also traveled to England, Holland, Switzerland, Germany, and the Czech lands, “everywhere making acquaintances with learned people, benefiting from enlightened discussions,” which led him, after his return, to implement modern solutions in many fields of administration and to propagate new European

Drawing upon his experience, Chreptowicz published an economic treatise in an effort to promote modern management

socio-cultural thought. He applied the enlightened ideas of the Physiocrats, who aimed to reform peasant relations, in practice at his own estate, eliminating serfdom and granting the peasants their personal freedom. He also eliminated all servile labor and obligations, replacing them with paid labor. Chreptowicz was the first to introduce crop rotation in Lithuania; he set up an iron foundry on his estate, as well as a famous brewery in Szczorse. He also engaged in horse breeding and horticulture.

Chreptowicz's estate was described in numerous articles, which held it up as a model of modern administration and



Joachim Chreptowicz in a miniature by Wincenty Lesseur

Polish Museum in Rapperswil



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Rear façade of the palace in Szczorse, 1894

European-style management, benefiting both its owner and its other residents. The rural population living on Chreptowicz's properties was extraordinarily prosperous for Lithuania, and peasant runaways simply did not occur. There were, on the other hand, well-known cases of peasants escaping to Chreptowicz's estate, which was situated right along the border of the first partition of Poland, from nearby cordoned-off properties that had been allotted to Russian dignitaries. Such incidents even led to an exchange of diplomatic notes between the courts in St. Petersburg and Warszawa. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Mirabeau called Chreptowicz "one of the best practical economists, due to this intellect and the goodness of his heart."

The garden of science and arts

The Szczorse estate was famous for more than its socio-economic activities, since Chreptowicz was a great lover and promoter of art. A manor house was erected in Szczorse in 1770-1776. Chreptowicz spared no effort to ensure that his residence should emulate those he had known in France in terms of artistry and tasteful design. The builder was the Italian Giuseppe Sacco, architect to Polish King Stanislaw August Poniatowski. The Szczorse palace bore traits of exquisite French architecture of the Louis the 15th era. The top floor of the palace, bearing the Latin inscription *Paci et libertati* on the pediment, was specially set aside as a library. In accordance with the spirit of the age, Chreptowicz collected highly valuable Polish and foreign tomes, archival documents, and maps at his palace. Aside from such old prints, the Lithuanian chancellor also acquired the more valuable publications of then-contemporary authors and reprints of old publications, amassing an impressive collection of works by French and Polish authors of the 18th century and ancient classics. He also set up a gallery of paintings in his palace. The Szczorse park was considered to be one of the largest and most beautiful in

the region. It is no surprise that when returning from Nieśwież to the Grodno Sejm in 1784, King Stanislaw August Poniatowski put up at Szczorse thereby recognizing Chreptowicz's court as an important and beautiful center of culture, worthy of royal attention.

But the great Lithuanian chancellor was not just a keen bibliophile and art collector - he also acted as a sponsor of culture. He invited painters, scholars, and lovers of science and art to his residence, took young artists under his protection, made his library available, and sponsored many scholarly projects of the Vilnius Academy.

Outstanding architects, painters, scholars, and lovers of science and art made the residence an important center of culture

After Joachim Chreptowicz's death, his work was continued by his son Adam Chreptowicz (1768-1846). He expanded his father's library to 15,000 volumes, and also continued his father's social activities, founding schools in his estates and implementing social reforms.

The Chreptowicz collections have now been scattered and the palace has fallen into ruin, but the surviving archives of letters, books, engravings, editorial works, and articles constitute an important monument to Polish culture in the eastern borderlands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, strongly tied to French social thought, to Western European art and philosophy. ■

Further reading:

- R. Aftanazy (1992) *History of residences in the former eastern borderlands of the Republic of Poland, vol. 2, Brzesko-Litewskie and Nowogrodzkie Voivodships*. Ossolineum, Wrocław (in Polish).
 P. Ettinger (1916) *Joachim Chreptowicz as a patron of the arts*, Moscow (in Polish).
 A. Jobert (1941) *Magnats polonais et physocrates français (1767-1776)*, Paris.