

THE LIFE OF ATANAZY RACZYŃSKI (1788–1874)

Summary

Twelve volumes of diaries covering almost his entire life; a huge body of private and official correspondence about his personal, artistic and political activities; a meticulously kept documentation of art collecting, including letters, bills, notes and excerpts; a few thick published volumes on art and family history; a sizeable collection of his own watercolours and drawings. On these thousands of pages Atanazy Raczyński – rich aristocrat, Pole in the Prussian diplomatic service, participant, observer and critical commentator of political life, connoisseur and art collector of European masterpieces, in short: a great and complex figure of the 19th century – sketches his own portrait, sometimes fully aware of what he is doing but mostly revealing himself *en passant*. At first glance the image seems to be coherent, drawn with a steady hand. After all, Raczyński's texts contain a number of strong declarations, clearly articulated opinions and repeatedly stated ideological credos. Raczyński very early on formed a set of ideas which were to become the main building blocks of his identity throughout his adult life, a compass to guide him in all the activities he would undertake in various fields. These can be summarised in several keywords: aristocracy, loyalism, monarchism, anti-democratic thought, public and legal order. However, a closer look at Raczyński's image reveals flaws and inconsistencies. Under the stress of various situations, sometimes quite unexpected and seemingly irrelevant, the armour of principles, ideals and convictions that Raczyński steadfastly formed about himself for many years would crack and fall apart

It is these cracks that make Atanazy Raczyński an attractive figure for a biographer. They show him as a character entangled in both an external and inner conflict. The former quite often assumed the form of a desperate struggle against the outside world to achieve his aims: to obtain the social position to which he aspired, to become part of the political and intellectual elite in Berlin and Europe, and to fulfil the duties that, as he believed, he had to take on as the heir of a powerful noble family. But it was also an inner conflict, a fight against himself and ideas that both attracted and repelled him, since they could not be easily accommodated in his view of the world.

In some respects Raczyński was a prisoner of his own firm convictions, principles, ideals and clearly stated goals. He needed clear definitions and created them

for himself. He was extremely precise, sometimes even blunt, when referring to his lifetime pursuits, whether in private or professional life. To pursue a career in the diplomatic service, to increase the family fortune, to create a family entail, to contract a profitable marriage, to climb to the top of the social ladder and to win the friendship of the aristocracy and of intellectuals – for Atanazy these were not general guidelines. These were tasks to be executed and indeed he approached them with great perseverance and stubbornness, at times paying a high price for the ultimate success, which occasionally turned out to be illusory.

The conflict, therefore, stemmed first and foremost from Raczyński's personality, it was a part of his nature, and external circumstances added fuel to the fire. As a man reared in the spirit of the Enlightenment and a staunch supporter of its ideals, Raczyński took a great interest in new intellectual currents. Engaged in the heated national debate, he struggled with his Polish identity, seeing it as a burden and a challenge until the end of his life. Although Atanazy believed unconditionally in a specific public and political order, he saw the inevitability of its disintegration. If the aim of this book was to be summarised in one sentence, it would be: an attempt to describe a complicated, rich, versatile and creative personality, a mind entangled in 'history unleashed'.

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Atanazy Raczyński was born on 2 May 1788 in Poznań. From his early years, he was prepared for public service, receiving an excellent education first at the family home in Rogalin, then at the university in Frankfurt an der Oder and from private tutors in Berlin and Dresden. As a man of exceptional mind and character as well as considerable wealth, he devoted most of his adult life to his two great passions: politics and art. He pursued both mostly in Berlin, where he lived from the beginning of the 1830s until his death on 21 August 1874. Although his residence was located in the city on the Spree, he fostered strong, though problematic relations with his home province of Wielkopolska; while participating actively in the life of the European elite.

As far as politics is concerned, Raczyński engaged in both theory and practice. He worked as a professional diplomat for Saxony (1813–1815) and Prussia (1830–1852), as a member of the Sejm of the Grand Duchy of Posen and (from 1854 onwards) as a hereditary member of the Prussian House of Lords. As a theoretician he created for his own use a refined and coherent doctrine in a spirit of strong conservatism, which is explained in great detail in his diary and correspondence. The position of Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of Prussia, which Raczyński held for many years at the courts of Denmark (1830–1834), Portugal (1842–1848) and Spain (1848–1852), secured his high position among members of the Prussian state administration and the European diplomatic elite. A widespread network of political contacts, excellent knowledge of European matters, keen observation and analytical skills together with a compelling, slightly aphoristic manner of writing made Raczyński's political concepts a valuable and major contribution to European conservative thought. All of this allows one to view Raczyński as one of

the central and certainly most interesting Polish politicians of the nineteenth century, an active and critically thinking, although not hugely influential participant and commentator of political, or more broadly, public life.

As we leave the field of politics and touch on art, Raczyński's position is pre-eminent. There was no other Pole living in the mid-nineteenth century who equalled Raczyński as an art patron, critic and writer; no other who won as much recognition in Europe, who presented such advanced, comprehensive and at times fully original reflections on art and who followed an equally ambitious and sophisticated plan for building up an art collection.

Thus Atanazy Raczyński presents himself as an aristocrat who was aware of the obligations and privileges inherent in his social position; a man who intensively engaged in the cultural and social life of the European elite; a Pole who continued a difficult, dramatic and critical dialogue with his Polish identity throughout his whole life; a high-ranking diplomat who, despite not having much political influence, held a prestigious position in the Prussian administration; a keen observer and intelligent commentator on political events who seldom spoke in public, but who expressed fascinating opinions in his private notes and extensive correspondence; a true conservative thinker who exchanged letters with one of the most interesting and important representatives of anti-revolutionary thought in mid-nineteenth century Europe, the Spanish politician and writer Juan Donoso Cortes; a collector of early and contemporary art and creator of an art gallery of European masterpieces open to the public; a patron, connoisseur, researcher and promoter of art, an active member of the art community, an author of widely discussed pioneering books on German and Portuguese art; finally, a man of great erudition and culture, with a rich personality and keen mind.

The present book, based on a large and for the most part hitherto unknown body of source materials, consists of three parts. The first, titled *Formation*, aims to describe Raczyński's personality, highlighting traits of his character that will help in the better understanding of his work as a politician, art collector and patron. Attention is paid, therefore, to the two men who had the greatest influence on the formation of Atanazy Raczyński's character and mindset: his grandfather Kazimierz and his brother Edward. Further on, the analysis covers Raczyński's educational path (home-schooling, studies in Frankfurt, private tuition in Berlin and Dresden) and his first work experience – the rather sluggish start of his diplomatic career in the institutions of the Saxon Kingdom.

Part two is devoted to Raczyński's initiatives in the field of broadly understood politics, and the political theory he developed. It shows the effect that Atanazy's wealth and high social position, his financial and family policies in particular, had on his life. The example of the portrait gallery, established by Raczyński in the family estate in Gaj Mały in Wielkopolska, demonstrates his method of managing aristocratic symbolic capital. Subsequently, the book follows Raczyński's gradual assimilation into Berlin social circles and the complicated and at times dramatic development of his career within the diplomatic institutions of the Kingdom of Prussia. This part also presents a comprehensive overview of Raczyński's political

thought as a supporter of strong conservatism and an account of his struggle with his Polish identity which continued throughout his adult life.

Part three describes Raczyński's artistic projects and focuses on his activity as art collector, writer and art patron. It begins with a study of Atanazy's own paintings and drawings, which allows for a tentative characterisation of his sensitivity and aesthetic preferences. Lastly, Atanazy's ideas concerning the essence and purpose of art are reconstructed, followed by an analysis of the actual influence he exerted as an author of works on art (the monumental *Geschichte der neueren deutschen Kunst* and *Les arts en Portugal*), as a protector of artists (especially Wilhelm Kaulbach, who enjoyed a complex and close relationship with Raczyński that went far beyond the simple relation between the patron and the artist), as an art collector and as the creator of a public gallery in Berlin.

Translated by Mariusz Listewnik