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in the Years 1777–79: Volume 2

Nathaniel William Wraxall

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS, &c.

LETTER XVIII.

Journey from Cracow to Warsaw.—Appearance of that capital.—Want of police and regulations.—The Vistula.—Praga.—Signs of decay and ruin.—Jews.—Reflections on the state of Poland.

WARSAW, June 28, 1778.

NO tract of country in Europe can offer fewer objects of information, curiosity, or amusement, in the common acceptation of the terms, than that which extends from the gates of Cracow to the suburbs of Warsaw, a distance of at least two hundred miles through the central provinces of Poland. It may however be justly said, that the appearance of the

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country itself, the aspect of its inhabitants, and the face of every individual, excite reflexions, which if not pleasing, are nevertheless important. In the midst of a soil naturally rich and fertile, they are in want of common necessaries. I could scarcely procure bread in any of the wretched post-houses at which I stopped, except of a kind so black, sour, and execrable, as not to be eaten. Inns there are none which merit the name: but the Jews, who form the majority of the people in the villages, seem to keep alive the little subsisting industry. The Poles, among whom depopulation, oppression, and misery, appear under every possible shape, manifest in their looks and whole appearance the utmost poverty: even the churches are composed of wood, and the hovels of the peasants are of the same materials. I scarcely saw a nobleman's or gentleman's house of any kind; and the roads are either left in their natural state, or are made, where the ground is marshy, by fir trees laid across them close to each other,

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as in Ruffia. The very water is mostly unwholesome and stagnant. It must however be admitted that the posts are tolerably well served; and though the horses are small and weak, yet as numbers supply the defect of strength, a traveller cannot reasonably complain of the want of expedition. As I drew near Warsaw, I saw no marks of opulence, cultivation, or luxury, such as usually bespeak the approach to a capital. A wide open plain, interspersed with little woods of fir or birch, and equally destitute of natural as well as artificial beauty, extends quite to the entrance of the city.

This metropolis itself seems to me, like the Republic of which it is the head, to unite the extremes of civilization and of barbarism, of magnificence and wretchedness, of splendor and misery; but, unlike all other great cities of Europe, these extremes are not softened, approximated, and blended by any intermediate gradations. The middle orders of men, who every where else form the most numerous class

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of citizens, the most useful, and the most industrious, appear hardly to have any existence here. Palaces and sheds, the mansions of the great, and the cottages of the poor, compose exclusively the larger portion of Warsaw. It is like an assemblage of nobles and slaves, of lords and vassals, such as the darkness of the middle ages when feudal tyranny prevailed universally, might have exhibited; but which, happily for mankind, is now no where to be seen except in Poland. Even Constantinople is in this respect far less barbarous; and the genius of the Ottoman government is more favourable to commerce, ingenuity, and the arts that humanize society, than the city from which I am now writing. The despotism of one man, however pernicious, is yet less destructive than the tyranny of a thousand petty despots; and the Turks, though fallen from their antient splendor, do not present a picture of national degradation or humiliation, such as the Poles at present offer to the world.

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As I walk through the streets of Warsaw, I continually imagine myself in some scattered and half ruined village. All the municipal defects of Cracow exist here in a greater degree. I am no longer surprised that a King, in his own carriage, surrounded by guards and attendants, could be seized and carried off in the midst of his capital, as was Stanislaus scarcely seven years ago. In a city where there are no lamps in winter, and no precautions taken for general security, any desperate banditti, protected by the night, may commit the most atrocious crimes. I am not amazed to hear Mr. Wroughton, the English Minister, say, that he has seen Prince Radzivil, one of the greatest Polish noblemen, when coming to court in his own coach drawn by the finest set of horses in the kingdom, so completely stuck fast in the mire at a hundred yards from the Royal Palace, as to make it necessary for him to be taken out, and carried thither in the arms of his servants. At the close of the

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late reign, in 1763, Warsaw was almost wholly unpaved. Even at present, and in this season of the year, after violent rain, many of the streets are totally impassable on foot, and nearly so on horseback, or in a carriage. The buildings are so irregular, scattered, and disjointed, that great spaces remain unoccupied, and even unlevelled, in the most frequented parts of the metropolis. In front of Stanislaus's palace, so indecently neglected are the sewers, that the smell is pestilential. A nation too indolent to remedy such nuisances, or so accustomed to them as not to perceive how incompatible they are with safety, comfort, and salubrity, seems not far removed from barbarism: yet, by a singular contradiction, Warsaw presents under other aspects all the refinement of Paris, the arts of Florence, and the splendor of Peterburgh.

The Vistula, though considerably broader than the Thames at Windsor, wants beauty, depth, and every artificial aid or improvement.

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ment. Its sides are in general low and sandy; its channel obstructed by banks which continually shift; and the colour of its waters is thick and muddy, like those of the Tyber. The Poles seem scarcely to be conscious that it is navigable; and it is rare to see upon it a vessel of any kind. A bridge of boats laid across the stream, conducts to Praga, a town or suburb on the eastern side. Praga is a wretched collection of cottages or huts, built of wood, and scattered irregularly in the sand without order or plan; such as Tartars, and only Tartars, would construct or inhabit. Yet this is the principal object seen from the windows of the royal palace, which stands on the opposite bank. It is large, but cannot be esteemed a regular, or a magnificent edifice. The two last Kings, Augustus the Second and Third, not chusing to inhabit it, erected another, in which when at Warsaw they commonly resided and held their court, still denominated from them, “the Saxon Palace.” Hardly a
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single public monument of art, taste, or devotion, exists in this metropolis. The very churches and palaces are unfinished, or falling to decay. Among the latter are many which want inhabitants; not more than a fourth part of the great families who resided here at the death of Augustus the Third, being now in a state to maintain their dignity. Prince Radzivil's palace, one of the most superb, is converted into a play-house. Such is the wretched state of the capital of Poland; a country which previous to the late dismemberment, was larger than the nine Circles of the German Empire.

The people accord in their appearance too well with the aspect of every thing around them. I never beheld so many objects of horror or compassion, as present themselves in the streets: many of these are a disgrace to humanity, as well as a reproach to the national police. Warsaw is likewise crowded with Jews, who form a considerable proportion of the inhabitants. They wear

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wear a distinguishing dress, and derive a very precarious subsistence from the arts of fraudulent commerce, most of them being extremely poor. From time to time they are plundered, exiled, imprisoned, and massacred: yet, under such accumulated vexations, they continually multiply, and are here found in far greater numbers than even at Amsterdam.

After this disgusting description of Warsaw, you will be astonished when I add, that notwithstanding the picture of public misery which it displays, I am highly pleased with it as a temporary residence. Many circumstances conduce to render the place more than ordinarily agreeable to a stranger. The King is, of all the Princes whom I have ever seen, the most accessible, easy, pleasing, and even captivating in his manners. I have been in his society; and I am not surprised, when I consider his person and address, at the partiality of Catharine for Count Poniatowski. The Polish nobility of both sexes, whatever may be their essential defects
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of character, want none of the exterior graces of deportment. In the palaces of the Oginskis, Czartoriskis, and numerous others, is still to be found every display of refinement, hospitality, and magnificence. Many of the great families continue to live in a style almost royal, amidst the ruins of their expiring country. In no court or capital of Europe are to be found men more accomplished, nor women more beautiful, polished, and agreeable. As an Englishman, I have the greatest personal obligations to Mr. Wroughton, his Majesty's Minister, who has rendered my stay here at once delightful and informing. His long residence in Poland; his intimate acquaintance, or rather friendship with the King, both before and since his elevation to the throne; his perfect knowledge of this country, whose decline and partition he has witnessed; the variety of curious and interesting anecdotes with which his conversation abounds; these circumstances, added to numerous proofs of his regard, have