

# Why Polish *Sobótka* , *Palant* and *Jawor* Remained only Local Polish Traditions: Preserving National Heritage through the Traditional Games

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*A good way to explore other cultures  
and learn more about one's own  
is through play.*<sup>1</sup>

Lorrain Barbarash,  
(1997:VII)

## **The Historical Development of National Identity and Patriotism of Polish People**

In the last two centuries Poland has had to overcome hardships of foreign domination, when it was deprived of its identity and divided between three powerful empires – Russia, Austro-Hungary and Germany. Before it re-gained its independence, Poland had to face several insurrections (with the famous Kościuszko's uprising and Wielkopolska's insurrection shortly after World War I), which resulted in the liberation from occupation and re-establishment of Poland on the maps of Europe. The period between the world wars was not long enough to reconstruct Polish identity. Then immediately after World War II communist terror and regime from Stalin's social and economic "revolution" took over and most of the cultural heritage was lost or destroyed as it was in opposition to the political doctrine. The situation lasted until the late 1980s when the Berlin Wall came down and a new political order was introduced in most of the East European countries. This difficult situation, which lasted approximately two centuries, caused damage to almost every sphere of human existence. The occupying forces tried to extinguish Polish culture, Polish language, art, music; anything which would remind of Polish historical and cultural heritage. Some of the most prominent intellectuals were forced to leave the country or were kept in captivity until they died. But various sectors of culture managed to preserve Polish spirit in their work wherever they landed. In literature it was Adam Mickiewicz, whose plays and poems made an enormous impact on understanding of Polish heritage and identity and together with world

famous pianist Fryderyk Chopin; they managed to keep the spirit of Polishness alive in Paris. It was also Juliusz Słowacki in Switzerland who, through his poems, reminded others what being Polish meant and Władysław Reymont, a Nobel-Prize recipient who, in his epic *epopee*, described rural Polish traditions. There were also scientists among them, like the double Nobel Prize-winning Polish chemist, Maria Skłodowska-Curie, not to mention numerous emigrants in the times of harsh communistic regime.

This very brief overview on the development of national identity and patriotism among the Polish population is necessary before taking a closer look at the role of physical culture and sport in this process. It is here that the question could be posed as to how it was possible that Polish art, music and even science managed to convey the message that there was a country in Europe with a long and distinguished history and that this country had its own cultural traditions and scientific achievements. Yet why was this same country unable to do the same in one of the most fundamental of all spheres of culture, namely physical culture?

### **The Initiative of Preserving National Heritage through the Traditional Games**

When in 1788 the Polish Sejm issued a decree on introducing physical activity into schools, Poland was one of the first in Europe to have physical education as a part of mandatory education. It was then believed that physical education should be more concerned with the hygienic side of human upbringing and the theory came from the medical perspective, for example from Jędrzej Śniadecki, a Polish doctor of medicine who published the book *O wychowaniu fizycznym dzieci* [About Children's Physical Education]. He claimed that "We need to make our children learn by playing and having fun, and it is our duty to give them such toys, to engage them using different tools...[...] Educating the body in this way, we educate also their mind (Śniadecki 1990:50).<sup>2</sup> Later this view was turned into a more pedagogical perspective; however there was little emphasis on preserving Polish sporting tradition.

Nonetheless, some time later Polish society tried to cultivate the sporting tradition by following the Czech idea of the Sokol (*falcon*) movement (a youth movement and gymnastics organization founded in Prague in 1862 by Miroslav Tyrš and Jindřich Fügner). In 1867 in Lvov and then in 1885 in Krakow some prominent figures in Polish physical culture managed to establish the first Sokol Associations (among them was Wenanty Piasecki – the father of

Eugeniusz Piasecki). Sokol was primarily a fitness training center, but it also held lectures, discussions, and group outings that provided physical, moral, and intellectual training for the young Polish intelligentsia. Though officially an institution “above politics,” the Sokol played an important part in the development of Polish nationalism, providing a forum for the spread of mass-based nationalist ideologies.

But at the same time, Poland (like the Czech Republic, Slovenia and even Russia), was flooded with Western originated sports (particularly of English origins) introduced to Polish society by specially hired foreign instructors. It was a matter of societal prestige to have such an instructor and to attend classes or private lessons of horse riding or lawn tennis run by one of these instructors (Lipoński 2004).

Lipoński (1999: 230) states that “in general, in the Slavonic countries, modern sports, based on the British or indeed any other cultural model, have been important to national aspirations during the era of foreign domination or on independence,” and he goes on: “the appearance of modern sport was responsible for the gradual elimination and virtual extinction of traditional sports,” at least in that part of Europe. And such situations remained similar until today, as Lipoński (1999: 207) has reviewed in the edition of *Encyclopedia of World Sports* written by David Levinson and Karin Christensen (1996) where he regrets “no wonder that there is nothing about Russian *narodnyie gulanya*, *kulatshanoie boi*, Polish old sports like *rochwist*, *czoromaj*, *łapa*, *browar*, or *kwadrant* (which is similar to Polish *palant*). Nothing about Bulgarian *djilyak*, *djangur*, *butanista* or *pouplyak*.”<sup>3</sup>

But frankly speaking, the situation could have been identified earlier if the influential work of one significant university professor, Eugeniusz Piasecki, had been recognized and taken into account. He was an outstanding figure for his position in the history of physical education and sport sciences in Poland and his work is still very important today. His enormous collection of traditional folk plays and games came to public light long after he died. It was only in 1959, 12 years after his death when his findings, titled *Tradycyjne gry i zabawy ruchowe oraz ich geneza* [Origins of traditional games and activity plays] were published in the monograph *40 lat od Katedry Wychowania Fizycznego UP do Wyższej Szkoły Wychowania Fizycznego w Poznaniu*. [40 years of the Department of Physical Education of Poznan’s University...].

### So What Precluded it from Happening Earlier?

It was in the late 19th and early 20th Century that Eugeniusz Piasecki received an extensive medical education, which he combined with his previous life experiences gathered in his family. He had grown up in a health related atmosphere, due to his father taking over 'Wanatówka' – a physiotherapy center in Zakopane (the most popular Polish mountain resort), where he ran physiotherapy based on gymnastic exercises in the open air. This experience played a fundamental role in furthering the interests of young Eugeniusz. Helping his father he gained more and more knowledge and practical skills in medicine, becoming aware of the healing and prophylactic power of a healthy life style and physical activity in particular. As a young man he also finished various gymnastic and physical education (PE) teaching courses, which later led him to develop his intellectual potential, allowing him to become one of the most exceptional figures in the history of Polish physical culture. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 1896 he graduated as *doctoris universae medicin* (doctor of medicine). Piasecki's professional training as a Doctor of Medicine and his interests in physical activity and traditional *plays* pushed him towards combining both areas into physical education teaching.

As a health related professional Piasecki had numerous experiences from his visits to other European countries, where he delivered lectures and presentations on the most important issues for physical education in Europe. His fluent command of a number of European languages helped him present his views on physical education and health and the upbringing of children through national and traditional plays and games at conferences in France, Belgium, Germany, England and Scandinavia. As an official delegate of the Hygiene Section of the League of Nations in Geneva he was also asked to visit several European countries to observe and compare physical education systems all over the continent. After this work, he published his well known document *La science de l'éducation physique dans les différents pays de l'Europe* [State of physical education in different countries of Europe, 1928]. His foreign journeys also had other, political and national, dimensions. But his probably most remarkable achievements were firstly, the development of the first Polish University Faculty and degree in physical education (1<sup>st</sup> of April 1919) and secondly, his monumental collection of traditional sport games and folk play activities of Polish origins (and also other Slavic nations).

In the spring of 1919 Piasecki arrived in Poznan; his arrival coincided with Poland regaining independence. But before that on 5<sup>th</sup> of February at the meeting of Sekcja Medyczna Międzyuniwersyteckiej Komisji Stabilizacyjnej w Krakowie [Medical Section of Inter-University Committee in Krakow] Eugeniusz Piasecki was offered a position as an university professor at the University of Poznan, and was charged with the mission to develop a Master Degree course for physical educators (Toporowicz 1988). He was granted a full professorship in school hygiene and theory of physical education on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 1922 and on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1924 became head of an autonomous Faculty of Physical Education (Archives of Department of Olympism<sup>4</sup> and Sport Ethnology).

But long before the above achievements (from the early 1900s) Piasecki started to collect old folk plays and games, mostly from Polish areas that currently make up modern-day Poland, but not exclusively. He gathered them also from other parts of Europe and the world. With his passion for Polish traditional plays and games Piasecki began his 'life research' on ludic<sup>5</sup> pieces of Polish cultural heritage. He believed in the long-term reform of physical education based on regional and traditional folk plays and games and supported by the medical authorities, pedagogues, psychologists and philosophers as the only way to create a healthy society. This creative and fruitful period of his scientific career was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I.

However, during the war, when he was forced to move to Kyiv, in 1916 he prepared his first nationwide survey on plays and games called 'Ankieta Kijowska' (The Kyiv survey). Having recorded hundreds of regional *plays* and games he published his first book *Zabawy i gry dla dzieci* [Plays and games for children] in 1916. It was mainly directed to teachers to provide them with resources and practical examples for transmission of national and cultural heritage into the educational system. The book was unique in this sense, as it was published at the time when Poland was still struggling for its independence.

The second national survey (The Poznan's survey), carried out in 1922, brought much more evidence and data on the survival of national plays and games, despite the previous 123 years of foreign dominance.

In 1928 Piasecki started to publish a scientific journal "Wychowanie Fizyczne" [Physical Education], where he announced his third research project, which helped him collect even more unique information on culture and traditions of different, but Slavic nations. He wrote:

We are a nation of rich traditions in all areas of culture. We have, however, little inclination to research such traditions and certainly little interest in nursing these elements which can be assimilated in contemporary life. One of the most striking examples of blameworthy indifference pertaining to the treasures of native civilization is our attitude toward Old Polish play and folk games. Among many Western nations serious scientific works have been made part of national education. Not in our country (Lipoński 1999: 230).

Following his analysis, Piasecki was able to revive several hundred original folk activities, describing them in articles and a series of books. He sacrificed almost a quarter of a century to collecting material for a monograph on Polish origins of folk plays and games. Traditional folk plays and games cultivating local and regional customs and strengthening the sense of national belonging were to be a fundamental part of that program. It was supposed to be published in 1939, but the outbreak of World War II ruined his plans. The monograph contained findings and conclusions of an analysis of 2,800 responses from Polish originating and re-settled citizens from Ukraine and Belarus. The majority of returned questionnaires indicated the common origins of same kind of plays and games with very similar structures or plots, differing only in name.

Piasecki was strongly convinced that physical education should serve everybody in the same way: as an educational tool supporting health with joy and satisfaction. Piasecki claimed that the reform of sports education in schools should be carried out through the introduction of plays and games common for different cultures and traditions thus combining and strengthening international understanding and exchange of cultural traditions.

According to Piasecki, plays originated in four ways, they could be:

- self-originated;
- based on traditional rites, legends and fairytales;
- mimicry and imitation of human habitual activities;
- based on movement expression inspired by the human natural environment.

Following his exceptional and unique international survey of 1922, he established that some folk plays were rooted in the tradition of several nations, and that they originated simultaneously in different parts of Europe. Although they had different names, it seems that

their plots were the same. The most characteristic plays from Piasecki's archives were *Sobótka*, *Palant* and *Jawor* and since he (Piasecki) never had a chance to popularize them in the international context, here are the descriptions of those games, which evolved from folk and religious rituals.

#### Genesis – origins of *sobótka*

*Sobótka* is a type of annual ritual connected with the cult of fire and water, combined with making fires and, frequently, with ritual baths. Its origins go back to pagan feasts and celebrations. In Central European countries in particular, the phenomenon of summer solstice was of crucial importance to the summer ritual cycle, although there were places where it did not fall on the eve of St. John's day. Its form also varied depending on the region of Europe; the difference consisted in occurrence or lack of an element of this ritual. One example is the ritual bath, which was less typical of Polish *sobótka*, whereas among Germanic and Eastern Slavic peoples, the name of this ritual, *kupało*, *kupalnocka* (Kupala Day), clearly points to the existence of this element.

Another example of dissimilarities between the forms is the existence of the important role of evil powers among Anglo-Saxons and Germanic peoples, which could not be observed in Polish rituals. On the contrary, "dairy" magic or beliefs, connected with seeking the fern flower in the light of the moon, were a rather common occurrence. However, in all its forms, regardless of origins and ritual sites, a characteristic role of women in this rite should be emphasized.

It is difficult for researchers in the field of these rituals to determine the historical beginnings of the festival. Polish written records, such as sermons, chronicles or documents issued by the King Kazimierz IV Jagiellończyk [Casimir IV Jagiellon] from 1468, who banned folk plays and games performed on the eve of *Zielone Świąta* [Pentecost], and a number of other literary sources dated back to the 16th and following centuries, allow for the conclusion that this ritual was vigorously and regularly performed in the Middle Ages. This resilience was maintained constantly until the end of the 19th century, when it started to decline gradually. According to Helena Kapelus (1984), with the exception of the Wielkopolska region and a part of the Silesian region, *sobótka* covered almost the entire area of Poland. It has been reported that a particularly great importance was attached to this celebration (Kapelus, 1984). *Sobótka* has survived into the present day in Southern Poland,

where remnants of this tradition are still evident. Here is how Franciszek Kotula described the *sobótka* celebration in Rzeszów region:

Dir Sir, I wish you'd arrived here on the eve of St. John the Baptist day and saw it all...! On that night, as far as the eye can see, bonfires are set here, there, and everywhere, but in Chełm! There they set *sobótkas* before the forest. Here come flames of thousands of bonfires, from the very Chełm and reach the sky! You would think it's the huge forest that is on fire or as if it was the whole village. Also, the puffs of smoke are swaying so much, as the men add fresh cut pine trees, as though the mountain itself was shaking and vibrating. You can't help gaping. Yes, dear sir, every year since I remember!"(Kotula, 1974: 131).

This ritual must have been firmly set in collective consciousness, seeing that it has survived through the centuries, albeit only in residual form.

A considerable role in maintaining the tradition of *sobótka* was apparently played by Jan Kochanowski, a Polish poet of the era of the Polish Renaissance, who, in his *Pieśń świętojańska o sobótce* gave this celebration an importance of a festive custom. It is in the initial part of this poem where the reader encounters clearly prominent scenery of *sobótka*, where twelve "maids, clad alike, tied around with 'altamisa', form a circle who, holding hands, spin around the burning fire to the rhythm of the music" (Piasecki 1959: 114). A similar circle moved around the bonfires according to the direction of the movement of the Sun in Celtic ceremonial. It is also likely that Shakespeare, inspired, among other things, by this ritual, referred to the folklore of St. John's night while creating his *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Referring back to what was mentioned before about Polish *sobótka*, it is a pity that Kochanowski did not leave anything like ethnographic descriptions of the ritual in question, and that in his poem he passed over such elements as: the ceremony of striking sparks, jumping over the fire or setting the candlelit wreaths afloat in the river. Yet, Oskar Kolberg, a Polish ethnographer, folklorist and composer of the nineteenth century described a *sobótka* celebration he had witnessed in Radom region in 1886 with these words: "Maids then hold their hands and circle around the fire singing (...). Let me mention that when one of them holding hands is to begin singing, all the circle stand so that the singer gets before the fiddler

who strikes up the tune. The singer sings a suitable song and then, when she's finished, all the circle starts spinning again" (Kolberg 1887: 111-112).

Finally, we learn from Piasecki about the ancient nature of this ritual play. Occurrence of this ritual was explained by the author in two ways: firstly, it might prove a long lineage of the procession, while the author emphasizes that this event occurs exceptionally rarely. Secondly, the primitivism of *sobótka* could somehow result from retarding or slow disappearance of this ritual as the years went by, which might have been caused by a failure to maintain tradition, which had led to the decline in any activity, however maintained in the area of Poland to different extent. Furthermore, Piasecki found some analogies to *sobótka* in a number of foreign folk plays and games. For instance, the Russian *hailki*, as an ancient pagan vernal cult, has survived into the present day since it 'took shelter' in the Orthodox Church. This ritual is celebrated in all three afternoons of Easter. Other examples include Slovenian *zeleni Jurij* or English *Jack in the green* (Piasecki 1959).

Also in Poland, remnants of this activity, celebrated during St. John's day, can sometimes be observed. However, its rite is considerably impoverished. It is mostly limited to setting the candlelit wreaths afloat in the rivers on St. John's night.

#### Genesis – origins of *jawor*

Undoubtedly, *jawor* is a play of ritual origins. The first mention of this play appeared in Italy in 1328 and its long history is proved by numerous examples. One of them is a shape of bridge formed by the participants, which partially resemble bridges of Southern Europe. Therefore folklorists focused on studying the course of the play and its words. In consequence, it was proved in their studies that this play has strong relationships to ancient beliefs and rituals.

According to Piasecki:

The oldest pagan layer is formed by ancient human sacrifice during laying foundations of new buildings, a propitiatory offering for ghosts who could be harmful to people who dwelled in them. With bridges, it is all about a bloodthirsty ghost of the river. These rituals have been observed among a number of nations and tribes throughout the world, from remote antiquity, through the Middle Ages [...] until primary peoples of contemporary times.

Other reminiscences are awoken through the creation of two enemy camps that fight between each other. Although angels and demons are not always present among Italian alterations, in one of them children choose between Guelphs and Ghibellines. Nevertheless, the predominant impact of the Medieval Christian cycle of eschatological beliefs can be observed [...]. Fighting between two camps is a very popular motive in pagan rituals, which embody the fight between forces of nature and which are supposed to have a beneficial effect on the result of this struggle. In this aspect, these eschatological motives would be a reworking of something much older. Numerous folk beliefs referring to the bridges between the world of the living alive and the dead also should not be neglected, the more so because there are many alterations (also Polish ones) where a motive of 'weighing' of the participants of the game appears, similarly to weighing of spirits of the dead by Michael the Archangel typical of the most popularized folk beliefs. (Piasecki 1935)

The first Polish description of the play can be found in the texts by Łukasz Gołębiowski, historian and folklorist. Later its existence was also noted by Kolberg in Poland. Further research on *jawor* was provided by successive surveys conducted by Piasecki, where nearly 300 descriptions of this play were collected from the studied area. The collected material allowed him to conclude that, due to a variety of reasons, considerable deviations were introduced into the play and into the words themselves; however, the plot remained unchanged with minor exceptions.

There are a number of examples which originate from the ritual, and have relationships to the above mentioned play. In some regions of Poland on Easter Tuesday, for example, girls carry a 'gaik' or 'maik' (decorated pine branch); in other parts, they walk around the neighborhood with a maiden clad in green, flowers and ribbons, called 'princess' as a manifestation of transition from winter to spring season. A similar ritual exists in Germany and the Czech Republic and its occurrence was also observed in England as Shrovetide rituals, where *holly boy* and *ivy girl* are symbols of good and evil nature. There is also a ritual celebrated at the beginning of May, where a character clad in green (*Jack in the green*) appears. In Northern and Western Europe, summer rituals are reported (around St. John's day, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday) similar in its form to the abovementioned. In the

former Yugoslavia, Ukraine or in the Balkan Peninsula, girls, being on the lookout for rainy days during draught season, walk around the village wearing only green and are sprinkled with water by village housewives. Thus, as indicated above, this ritual, being a framework for future plays, was popularized throughout Europe at that time and most probably it has changed insignificantly in the process of migration, adopting a variety of names and forms.

Piasecki argued that:

...the collected facts should be sufficient to justify the hypothesis that Poland also had rituals similar to (Slovenian) *zeleny Jurij*, (Yugoslavian) *dodola*, *topola or holly boy and ivy girl* – rituals connected with sycamore, which, being connected with the bridge-play, produced the form characteristic of Poland. According to this hypothesis, the play of *jaworowi ludzie*, with a couple of ‘sycamore people’, who fought similarly to Slovenian *Zeleny Jurij and Rabolj*, would be the only trace left after the rituals in Poland that have declined throughout history. This similarity of actions in old rituals and ‘fresh’ play that was adapted from abroad could have allowed for integrating them into one. (Piasecki 1959: 170)

In his study on the genesis of traditional movement-based plays and games, Piasecki provides evidence that this game has been among the best analyzed. The authors attributes great merits of this to Henning Frederick Feilberg, the Danish priest and folklorist, who was the author of a study in 1905 which contained the vivid description of nearly 1,500 games and plays from different countries of Europe (Feilberg 1905). Despite so many previous descriptions, the number of recorded games and plays has considerably risen, which is proved by the results of all three surveys conducted by Piasecki.

The play of *jawor*, more popular as *jaworowi ludzie* is likely to have originated from rituals which died out in Poland, but were more frequently observed in spring and summer rituals in many European countries where boys and girls, clad in green and being typically called by tree names, personified a spirit of vegetation. Thus, this would be the only trace left after these ancient rituals, which, according to people’s belief, beneficially affected the course of natural phenomena (Rada Naukowa Wychowania Fizycznego 1936).

Genesis – origins of *palant* game

Piasecki devoted almost a quarter of a century to investigating the genesis and development of the game of *palant* around the world. The material collected in this way allowed for the proposal of a number of surprising hypotheses and theories. One of them is a theory concerning the area where the players of this game were found, with insignificant ‘scatter’ in remote places all over the globe.

According to Piasecki, *palant* extended its range over the area from France to Persia (now Iran) and Pamir (high and vast mountain range in Central Asia), even reaching regions of Japan and Hawaii. Throughout the area which was covered by the occurrence of this game, the most fundamental rule of the game is to hit the ball as far as possible in the air, using a bat or, less frequently, with the palm of the hand (Piasecki 1932: 1-3). The technique of hitting with the palm of the hand, though easier, did not necessarily exist in its primary form. The most probable hypothesis is that when this game came from the West to the regions of the Caucasus – the area of vast steppes and grassland, it was hardly possible to find a suitable material to make a bat. This could have caused the decline of this tool (Piasecki 1932: 6). Nevertheless, hitting the ball gives a player some time to cover a marked distance, which means that the team scores a point, if the opponents do not catch the ball while it is airborne or the running player is not ‘handcuffed’ during their run.

Another typical rule present in the oldest descriptions of *palant* is catching the ball hit by the opponent team. It determines chances to win, combined with the change in roles of both teams. This rule can still be observed at present in other games and plays, starting from the simplest forms, such as *lapanka*, *kolo*, and *świnka* to more complex individual and team games, played long before the advent of *palant* among the nations and tribes all over the world (Piasecki 1932: 6-7). There are also games and plays which use this easy hitting technique, such as *świnka* and *golf*.

At the early stage of development of the game, stones or fruit were supposedly used, with its form resembling the present ball. Piasecki tried to find traces of the game in the oldest sources reported in antiquity. Following the traces, he came across an excerpt which described two young people playing with a ball in the court of the King of Phaeacians in Homer’s *Odyssey*: “Then Alcinous told Laodamas and Halios to dance alone, for there was no one to compete with them. So they took a red ball which Polybus had made for them, and one of them bent himself backwards and threw it up towards the clouds, while the other

jumped from off the ground and caught it with ease before it came down again” (Homer 1953: 114).

The hits also had other forms than the present ones. Hitting an item probably usually was performed from its ground position. This is confirmed by a Greek bas-relief mentioned by Piasecki in his study focused on the genesis of *palant*. It depicts a group of young people engrossed in the game resembling hockey (Piasecki 1932: 4).

In his belief, *palant* became a germ of a variety of successive games, such as cricket and racket games. He tried to prove this with the shape of bat (*palant* stick) which has changed throughout history. It underwent a number of transitions, from the simplest cylindrical form to the form of flat beater as in England (cricket), then extending hitting surface (getting closer to present rackets), which, according to Piasecki’s hypothesis, was supposed to make the hitting technique easier (Piasecki 1932: 5).

Apart from instincts that appear in *palant*, there is also a unique symbolism of this entertainment, manifested in characteristic terminology, typical of particular regions or countries and favored position of the team of the player who strikes the ball. There is a rationale behind calling the place of hitting the ball a ‘kingdom’ or ‘heaven’ while the places occupied by the opponent are referred to as ‘pigsty’ or ‘hell.’ It is caused by the mechanism of symbolically distinguishing between the better and the worse, e.g. chiefs, fathers, mothers, who, through the ability of throwing, feel the power and ability to ‘conquer the space’ as they ‘reject’ the ‘herdsmen’ or ‘swineherds.’ However, the latter, using their best skills, also have their strengths as they can attack by ‘handcuffing’ or catching the ball.

The world of the culture of European Middle Ages is deeply embodied in the game of *palant* through allusions, resulting from local traditions, to fighting between social classes for supremacy. According to Piasecki, this supports the hypothesis which found medieval university students in Krakow in 15th and 16th centuries to be first participants of this game, later spreading around the whole country and Rus (Piasecki 1932: 7-9).

Through Piasecki’s historical records, one can learn that H. Schnell, German chronicler, had attempted to find evidence of German origins of *palant*, however, his findings were insufficient to support the thesis. According to Westfall chroniclers, as early as the 11th century, junior high school students played hitting balls on Tuesday before St. John’s day. In the 13th century, U. Lichtenstein also mentions a ball being hit by players. Later, Johann Gutsmuths, German educationalist, assessed *palant* as the most attractive entertainment throughout Germany, termed ‘German ball game.’

The occurrence of *palant* in England was confirmed by two medieval drawings, dating back to 1344 (reproduced by Joseph Strutt), which undoubtedly represented this game. However, Piasecki proposes a hypothesis that *palant* is most likely to have originated in France, then popularized by Parisian masters and students (Piasecki 1932: 10, 29, 36).

The first references to the existence of *palant* in Poland can be traced back to 1427 in *Album Studiosorum* in Jagiellonian University. The excerpts contained in this text reported on assault and battery of one of the inhabitants by Krakovian students who used *palant* bats (*pylathiky*). In 1610, a description of the game of *palant*, written by Hipolit Guarinoni, Italian physician and educationalist, said:

...the ball game I have seen before in Czech lands, yet never in Italy, is a leather hard [...] ball, between two parties who spread around the field, in the middle and across at the distance of 70-80 and 100 steps and wait for a ball flying in the air on the lookout for catching it. Second party hits it up towards them with a four-feet long stick; the stick is cylindrical, with its handle thinner, thicker at the tip to hit the ball even stronger and set it off to the sky. There are two of them to hit the ball up: first, who skillfully throws it up for the striker, and another one, who, if he hits correctly, hits the ball up and away. This ball, if caught in the air by opponent party, strikers take their hand off striking, turning into catchers. This game is one of the most demanding exercises as you should not expect any agility or variety of movements but just pure running... We found this game nice in Prague and we would practice it all day long. Poles and Silesian people used to be best at it, thus I guess this game would have originated there. (Piasecki 1932: 3)

Another evidence of the existence of *palant* in Poland can be provided by the description by F. Falibowski in 1625, who employed behavior of the players as a metaphor to depict the problems of education those days: “This is where to find the examples to follow; these children, when they play the ball, one of them hits the ball, then another passes it or throws and runs after it like a crazy while others laugh heartily” (Dowgirt 1966: 58).

In *Encyklopedia Staropolska Ilustrowana* [ Illustrated Encyclopedia of Old Poland] by Zygmunt Gloger, a citation can be found where the author proves that all ball games have been popularized in the area of Poland in King Sigismund’s III days.

The eighteenth-century sources by Jędrzej Kitowicz report, for the first time, on *palant*, giving a detailed description of the game played on the courts of that time:

The ball was a woollen or oakum ball bundle, spun on the outside with threads and then sewn with leather or colorful thread net; some put a fishbone into it to provide better springiness. This ball was used in two manners: .... second time during resting in the fields to throw it in the air as far as possible and chase it with the whole group. First ball game... The second gave the body some flexibility, speed for running and agility to catch it in the air, which, thrown by one of the players in the air and hit aslant from the side, went up so fast that it could not be seen for some time. Then, all the players, toward whom the ball was thrown, watched the ball with their eyes wide open and hands ready, while it was flying down; as soon as they saw it, off they went stampeding to catch it in the air. If the ball, uncaught by any hand, fell onto the ground, the game was over now; there were no bets, no stakes, only the merits of winning or laughing at the losers. The game was named *palant*, played by children with their schoolmasters and professors, for pure amusement. (Kitowicz 1950:95)

There are a number of other sources to prove the existence of this game in the area of Poland. The richest material and studies on *palant* was delivered by Eugeniusz Piasecki in his theoretical considerations of the genesis of traditional games and plays and in a master's theses supervised by Piasecki as a professor.

Based on the above-mentioned excerpts and the cited description of the game, Piasecki concluded that *palant* was an old Polish game. His hypothesis was supported by the obvious influence of the West on life in Prague those days. This must have related to fashionable French and Italian games; however, as proved by Guarinoni's excerpt cited above, Poles and Silesian people were the best *palant* players. Yet, Piasecki treated this information only in terms of hypothesis rather than theoretical argumentation.

Based on materials collected for over 12 years, Piasecki could easily name a number of *palant* modifications, played in Europe, Asia, Africa and North America. Therefore, the game spread around the world, although not always as a pure form of *palant*. It might often provide a background for similar games, such as Franch *rounders*, North American *baseball*

or English *cricket*, which Piasecki found to be a 'brother game' of *palant* (Piasecki 1932: 1-12).

*Palant* was also popular in Poland for a very long time. It was one of the most admired team games during the interwar years, being implemented into school curricula as a form of physical education classes. After the Second World War, regular games between different sports clubs were organized, with most of them in the region of Silesia. The development of the game was so dynamic that, as early as in 1952, the first unofficial Polish championship was held, which apparently mobilized the interested persons to establish PZPP (*Polski Związek Piłki Palantowej* – Polish Federation of Palant Ball). Under the auspices of this association, the first official Polish championship was played in 1957.

Sadly, despite the dynamic development of this Polish traditional discipline of sport, one thoughtless press campaign, which strongly discouraged doctoral theses of ethnographical studies of *palant* in Poland, aimed at ridiculing the game marred it for many years, leaving it devoid of due respect. Despite official neglect for development of the game in Poland, some milieus (especially in villages) did not give up the game, giving it the distinction of a celebration (Grabów near Łęczycza in Wielkopolska region). The most sensitive to tradition and national culture physical education teachers are implementing *palant* into their curricula, thus opening up opportunities to the younger generation of being in touch with tradition.

### **Final Remarks**

Perhaps it is high time we – as the Laboratory of Ethnology of Sport at the University School of Physical Education, Poznan – share our cultural heritage and exchange the most valuable elements of our traditions in physical culture. The latest publishing effort by Wojciech Lipoński, edited under the UNESCO logo, namely the *Encyclopedia of World Sport* (2003), contains over 3,000 traditional sports and games and plays from most of the regions and cultures around the world and is an example of a cultural masterpiece on a unique scale. It is not simply the collection of different sports. Each sport and each game and play comes with a careful, ethnologically supported background, rooted in various historical sources from antique vases, through paintings, sculptures and literary sources. It is our ambition at the Laboratory of Olympism and Ethnology of Sport at the University School of Physical Education in Poznan to reconstruct and re-introduce as many sports from that

Encyclopedia as possible. One of the successful examples is certainly the case of Polish *pięścieniówka* (ring-net ball), which, having been reconstructed from the literary sources dating to the 1930s, was recently introduced to the program of the IV World Traditional Games festival in Busan (South Korea) in 2008. It has been gaining more and more popularity ever since all over Europe. The description of the game may be found in the abovementioned Encyclopedia. It is hoped that more details on its reconstruction process will follow in one of our later papers.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Play in this sense means a form of physical, playful activity, and a very first variety of game and sport. It refers to a range of spontaneous, voluntary, frivolous and non-serious activity. Some plays exhibits no goals or rules and are considered to be “unstructured” in the literature. For more information on play see the book of C. Garvey, (1999) *Play*, published by Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>2</sup> This quotation was translated by author of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> There are some Russian games like *narodnyie gulanya* (name for all folk games), *kulatshanoie boi* (kind of traditional fist fight), Polish old sports like *rochwist* (folk kind of horse racing), *czoromaj*, *łapa*, *browar* (different varieties of ball games), *kwadrant* (which is similar to Polish *palant* and current American baseball).

<sup>4</sup> Olympism has its roots in the beliefs of the ancient Greeks. In modern times the Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin established the Olympic Movement in 1894 and is recognised as the father of modern Olympism. He modernised ancient Greek ideals and introduced them to the rest of the world through the staging of a modern Olympic Games. Today, the festival celebrates the ideals which remain at the heart of Olympism. By blending sport with culture and education, Olympism promotes a way of life based on the balanced development of the body, will and mind, the joy found in effort, the educational value of being a good role model, and respect for universal ethics including tolerance, generosity, unity, friendship, non-discrimination and respect for others.

<sup>5</sup> The term *ludic* derives from the Latin word “*ludus*,” in English “play.” It means literally “playful,” and refers to any philosophy where play is the prime purpose of life. *Ludic* connotes anything that is “fun.” One outstanding publication, *Homo ludens* (1938) [“Man the Player”] by Johan Huizinga, a Dutch historian, cultural theorist and professor, was mainly dedicated to play as a prime source of man’s culture.

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