

**Beata Stuchlik-Surowiak**

ORCID: 0000-0002-2851-6119

University of Silesia in Katowice

## Fighting Pestilence in Old Poland as Presented in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Żywiec Chronicle

Walka z „morowym powietrzem” na terenach dawnej Rzeczypospolitej w świetle żywieckiej kroniki z XVIII wieku

### Abstract

The article presents the problem of dealing with the pestilence (pol. *morowe powietrze*, “pestilent air”) on the territory of the old Republic of Poland, with particular focus on the Żywiec County in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century. The paper attempts to answer the questions of how the medics of that time dealt with epidemics, what actions were taken by ordinary people for whom the raging plague was often the result of the interference of demonic forces, and finally, what preventive measures against the plague were proposed to the faithful by the Church.

The source for the considerations is the *Chronografia albo Dziejopis żywiecki* [*Chronography or the Żywiec Chronicle*], the account of history of the town of Żywiec and the surrounding area covering the years 1400–1728, written by the mayor, Andrzej Komoniecki (1659–1729). The Chronicle brings back an extraordinarily colorful picture of old customs, beliefs and superstitions, as well as paramedical practices, which to our contemporary cultural sensitivity may appear bizarre, gruesome and terrifying.

In preparing the article, the author also used extensive literature, primarily in the history of medicine.

Among the research methods used in the study, it is worth mentioning, first of all: the explicative method, the method of document research, the method of analysis and criticism of sources, the method of cultural analysis and the method of stylistic-rhetorical analysis.

In contemporary socio-cultural reality, the reading of the *Chronografia* takes on new meanings. In the context of the pandemic that struck the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the extremely accurate accounts of the Żywiec chronicler seem particularly interesting, as they allow us to compare the attitude of our old Polish ancestors and ourselves in the face of a similar threat. This comparative leads us to believe that some of the measures taken to prevent the spread of infections, such as keeping a distance, limiting the number of participants at funerals, or not letting strangers into towns, are still taken today, while others, such as locking the sick up in huts, setting fire to infected houses, burying plague victims under fences, drowning them in rivers, or desecrating the bodies of the dead suspected of having caused the plague, are now happily forgotten.

**Keywords:** pestilence, epidemic, Andrzej Komoniecki, chronicle, Żywiec

## Abstrakt

Artykuł przybliży problem walki z „morowym powietrzem” na obszarze dawnej Rzeczypospolitej, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Państwa Żywieckiego, w XVI–XVIII wieku. Autorka stara się odpowiedzieć na pytania, jak ówczesni medycy radzili sobie z epidemiami, jakie działania podejmowali zwykli ludzie, dla których szalejąca zaraza była często wynikiem ingerencji sił demonicznych, i wreszcie, jakie formy walki z zarazą zostały zaproponowane wiernym przez Kościół.

Źródłem rozważań jest *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, opis dziejów miasta Żywca i okolic z lat 1400–1728, spisany przez wójta Andrzeja Komonieckiego (1659–1729). Kronika przywołuje niezwykle barwny obraz dawnych obyczajów, wierzeń i przesądów oraz praktyk paramedycznych, które dla naszej współczesnej wrażliwości kulturowej mogą wydawać się dziwaczne, przerażające lub makabryczne. Autorka wykorzystała obszerną literaturę przedmiotu, przede wszystkim z zakresu historii medycyny.

Wśród metod badawczych zastosowanych w opracowaniu warto wymienić przede wszystkim: metodę eksplikatywną, metodę badania dokumentów, metodę analizy i krytyki źródeł, metodę analizy kulturowej oraz metodę analizy stylistyczno-retorycznej.

We współczesnej rzeczywistości społeczno-kulturowej czytanie *Chronografii* nabiera nowych znaczeń. W kontekście pandemii, która nawiedziła świat w XXI wieku, szczególnie interesujące wydają się niezwykle trafne relacje żywieckiego kronikarza, które pozwalają porównać postawę naszych dawnych polskich przodków i nas samych w obliczu podobnego zagrożenia. To porównanie prowadzi do przekonania, że niektóre środki podjęte w celu powstrzymania rozprzestrzeniania się infekcji, takie jak zachowanie dystansu, ograniczenie liczby uczestników pogrzebów czy niewpuszczanie obcych do miast, są podejmowane do dziś, podczas gdy inne, takie jak: zamykanie chorych w chatach, podpalanie zarażonych domów, grzebanie ofiar dżumy pod płotami, topienie ich w rzekach czy bezczeszczenie ciał zmarłych podejrzanych o spowodowanie dżumy, są teraz szczęśliwie zapomniane.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zaraza, epidemia, Andrzej Komoniecki, kronika, Żywiec

The plea resounding in churches: “From the air, hunger, fire and war deliver us, Lord!” had been, until recently, for many of the faithful, only part of religious tradition. To some, it even appeared to be rather unclear. However, the events of the first months of 2020 made us rediscover the true meaning of this supplicatory call, which unexpectedly brought us closer to our old Polish ancestors, who saw the most effective chance to reverse the various misfortunes plaguing humanity in this very prayer, among which the most terrible, mentioned at the very beginning, was the “air” carrying disease<sup>1</sup>. In the face of the pandemic which destroyed the peace of so many cities and countries in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is worth going back in time by several centuries and trying to find an answer to the question of how the inhabitants of the Republic of Poland dealt with similar threats in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This issue is particularly interesting in the context of a little-known chronicle of the of Żywiec County, titled *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki* [Chronography or the Żywiec Chronicle], probably written in the years 1699–1728 (albeit covering a much broader scope) by the Żywiec

---

1 This supplicatory prayer is also quoted by Komoniecki in the context of the 1707 epidemic: “*Od powietrza, głodu i wojny wybaw nas Panie*” [From the air, hunger, fire and war deliver us, Lord], and also *Od nagłej i niespodziewanej śmierci wybaw nas Panie* [From sudden and unexpected death deliver us, Lord] was sung every day”. Andrzej Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, ed. Stanisław Grodziski i Irena Dwornicka (Żywiec: Towarzystwo Miłośników Ziemi Żywieckiej, 2005).

mayor Andrzej Komoniecki<sup>2</sup>. A large section of this work is devoted to the struggle of the people, especially the inhabitants of Żywiec and its surroundings, with pestilence, infectious disease epidemics, as it was then called, *morowe powietrze* – “pestilent air”.

For a very long time, this term referred primarily to the plague that haunted Europe in the 1440s and wreaked havoc in Europe for more than three hundred years. It was not until the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that epidemics of other diseases, such as smallpox, typhoid fever, dysentery, typhus, measles, cholera and influenza, were included.

At the root of this nomenclature is the fact that it was once commonly believed that “rotten” air was the cause of the plague. Although as early as in the Middle Ages, during the first epidemic of the plague, there were doctors in Europe who suspected that the disease could be transmitted through contact with the infected (similar observations were made even in ancient times), this view long co-existed with the common belief, also among physicians, that in order to defeat the plague, one must purify the air<sup>3</sup>. As early as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Krakow doctor Jan Innocenty

- 
- 2 For biographical information on Komoniecki – *Słownik biograficzny Żywiecczyzny*, ed. Antoni Urbaniec, (Żywiec: Gazeta Żywiecka 1995); Franciszek Lenczowski, „Komoniecki Andrzej”, w *Polski Słownik Biograficzny XIII*, ed. Bogusław Leśnodorski, (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1967–1968); Jan Kracik, „Personalalia Andrzeja Komonieckiego w niedbałym zwierciadle historiografii”, *Karta Groni* 15 (1989), 62–64; Przemysław Dyrłaga, Rafał Kosiński, „Andrzej Komoniecki – życie i działalność” w *Monumenta albo zebranie starożytnych dzieł, ozdób, pobożności i łask Boskich przez obraz cudowny Matki Bożej Panny Marij w parochiej kościoła rychwałskiego (Rychwałda Monumenta)*, introd. Przemysław Dyrłaga i Rafał Kosiński (Żywiec: Towarzystwo Naukowe Żywieckie 2015), 19–56; Piotr Kowalski, *Świat Andrzeja Komonieckiego kronikarza Żywca. Studia z antropologii historycznej*, (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego 2010).
  - 3 Andrzej Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem. Epidemie chorób zakaźnych w Rzeczypospolitej w XVI–XVIII wieku i ich następstwa demograficzne, społeczno-ekonomiczne i polityczne* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton–Instytut Historii PAN [2000], 21, 39); Andrzej Karpiński, „Epidemie w Rzeczypospolitej od XVI do XVIII wieku (zarys problematyki)”, in *Dżuma, ospa, cholera. W trzechsetną rocznicę wielkiej epidemii w Gdańsku i na ziemiach Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1708–1711. Materiały z konferencji naukowej zorganizowanej przez Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska i Instytut Historii PAN w dniach 21–22 maja 2009 roku*, ed. Edmund Kizik, (Gdańsk: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska 2012), 15–26; Izabela Kaczmarzyk, „Medyczne posłannictwo ewangelickiego piśmiennictwa religijnego na Śląsku w XVII i XVIII wieku w sytuacji zagrożenia »morowym powietrzem« (na przykładzie dzieł Samuela Dambrowskiego i Jana Muthmana)”, in *Terra culturae. Obszary, transfery, recepcje kultury. Studia oraz szkice o kulturze i historii*, red. Łukasz Burkiewicz, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Ignatianum w Krakowie 2018), 265–284; Janusz Skalski, „Medycyna w Polsce przedrozbiorowej”, in *Dzieje medycyny w Polsce, T. 1: Od czasów najdawniejszych do roku 1914*, ed. Wojciech Noszczyk, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Lekarskie PZWL 2015), 3–121; François Lebrun, *Jak dawniej leczono. Lekarze, święci i czarodzieje w XVII i XVIII wieku*, transl. Zofia Podgórska-Klawe, (Warszawa: Oficyna

Petrycy recommended: “sing, read aloud, call out, especially where you don’t have rifles ... Others order ... cows to be driven through towns, so that the air could be moved by their lowing”<sup>4</sup>.

The reading of *Chronography* leads to the conclusion that in terms of the frequency of occurrence and demographic effects of the plague, the old Republic of Poland, including the County of Żywiec, did not differ from the European “norm”, which was frightening. In the periods of the most terrible epidemics, some cities on our continent lost over fifty percent of their population<sup>5</sup>. Komoniecki does not always give the exact number of the casualties, but when he does, pays attention to the precision of the record, repeating each value twice, by using numbers and numerals. The author’s characteristic ability to move the reader’s emotions is also revealed in those descriptions where instead of figures there are mentions that as a result of the plague some place had been completely depopulated. So, when in 1710 the monastery of Kalwaria Zebrzydowska was struck by the epidemic, almost all the monks perished, and Komoniecki summarized the event with a pictorial statement that “the monastery was left empty”<sup>6</sup>. In both cases, the “pestilent air” probably took the form of the plague that took over the entire territory of the Polish Kingdom and the Duchy of Lithuania between 1708 and 1712, and in Krakow it appeared as early as 1706 and was decimating the population of the city for three years<sup>7</sup>.

The first mention of pestilence (as well as other excerpts from the events taking place before 1586) recorded by Komoniecki refer to the 16<sup>th</sup> century *Polish Chronicle* of Marcin and Joachim Bielski. The majority of them concern Krakow or the whole Poland, without specifying concrete locations. Additional information refers mostly to Żywiec and its

---

Wydawnicza Volumen: Dom Wydawniczy Bellona 1997); Łukasz Miechowicz, „Zaraza i »morowe mogiły« na nowożytnej wsi”, in *Epidemie, klęski, wojny*, ed. Wojciech Dzeduszycki, Jacek Wrzeński, (Poznań: Stowarzyszenie Naukowe Archeologów Polskich 2008), 287–292.

- 4 As cited in: *Wybór tekstów źródłowych do dziejów medycyny polskiej*, ed. Wanda Osinśka, Zofia Podgórska-Klawe, (Kraków: Instytut Historii Nauki, Oświaty i Techniki PAN 1983), 178.
- 5 Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 193–213, 332–339; Edmund Kizik, „Denkmahl der Pestilenz – pomnik zarazy wystawiony przez historyków”, in *Dżuma, ospa, cholera. W trzechsetną rocznicę wielkiej epidemii w Gdańsku i na ziemiach Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1708–1711. Materiały z konferencji naukowej zorganizowanej przez Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska i Instytut Historii PAN w dniach 21–22 maja 2009 roku*, ed. Edmund Kizik, (Gdańsk: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska 2012), 9–12.
- 6 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 343.
- 7 Karpiński, „Epidemie w Rzeczypospolitej od XVI do XVIII wieku”, 22.

surroundings, but Krakow still does not disappear from the author's field of view, as many of the cases of disease that plagued the inhabitants of the Beskid Mountains described by him originated in traveling to Krakow or in contacts with people returning from there. This fact cannot come as a surprise due to the overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions in the city, in which, even in the eighteenth century, the streets were still full of "dung, garbage and mud"<sup>8</sup>. This was noted by the burghers themselves and newcomers alike<sup>9</sup>. One of the earliest records illustrating the spread of the plague due to the contacts with the people from Krakow was noted by Komoniecki regarding the year 1592: "that year, from the month of September, there was plague air in Żywiec, which students from Krakow brought and infected the city"<sup>10</sup>.

This short fragment contains important information, which is also confirmed by other records. Another outbreak of pestilence, probably also the plague in this case ravaged Poland between 1587–1592<sup>11</sup>. In the first place, people were inclined to indicate the "guilty" of spreading the plague. This time it was students, which is not surprising, because this group was always highly mobile and in the case of an epidemic it was a great threat. But others also traveled, and the psychosis of fear that spread over the country in the following decades made anyone who had come into contact with a place plagued by pestilence a "suspect". This is perfectly illustrated by the record referring to the already mentioned year 1709, in which "Father Antoni Chrzęszczewicz ... stayed somewhere in Krakow, and Kęty, and other places during the plague, and then came to the parsonage. Whom, fearing he might have brought pestilence from where he had come from, was locked up in the parsonage and guarded, until he secretly escaped through a window ... and stayed again somewhere for almost a year and a half"<sup>12</sup>. Although the author does not mention it, we can assume that this spectacular act of violence against a clergyman was a response to his refusal to submit to voluntary quarantine, which was already recommended by Hippocrates who recommended

- 
- 8 Jan Kracik, *Staropolskie postawy wobec zarazy* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Petrus 2012), 31.
- 9 Katarzyna Pękacka-Falkowska, „Dżuma w Toruniu w 1708 roku. Wybrane aspekty” in *Dżuma, ospa, cholera. W trzechsetną rocznicę wielkiej epidemii w Gdańsku i na ziemiach Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1708–1711. Materiały z konferencji naukowej zorganizowanej przez Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska i Instytut Historii PAN w dniach 21–22 maja 2009 roku*, ed. Edmund Kizik, (Gdańsk: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska 2012), 112–123.
- 10 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 104.
- 11 Karpiński, „Epidemie w Rzeczypospolitej od XVI do XVIII wieku”, 20.
- 12 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 337.

about forty days of isolation. It was believed that after such a time, all hidden venom would be revealed<sup>13</sup>. In Poland, this preventive measure was undertaken widely in the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>.

Another drastic way of fighting the spreading plague was also expelling the sick, perceived by some as an exclusively Polish specificity, prohibited in some towns, and in others limited to getting rid of the poor and associated with the employment of “professional” eradicators of beggars<sup>15</sup>. In villages and small towns, on the other hand, there were frequent cases of placing the sick in shepherd’s huts, farm buildings or makeshift plywood barracks, far away from human settlements. Detailed guidelines for the care of such forced hermits can be found, among others, on the pages of Anzelm Gostomski’s book *Gospodarstwo* [The Household Management], the first original Polish agricultural guidebook published in 1588. In the chapter entitled “How to manage the air” the author recommended that “for those who drive it out of the towns, have a few cottages outside of the town”<sup>16</sup>. The people gathered there should, as we read in the following passages, be provided with food and all necessary care, but in practice, the interest in these misfortunes was usually limited to dropping food and some ineffective medicines by these abodes<sup>17</sup>.

Reading Komoniecki’s chronicle allows us to conclude that expelling the sick to remote cottages was a practice also known in Żywiec. When in 1677 “in the house of Ignacy Pyżykowski ... a daughter and three other children died and they are buried there by the house in the garden”<sup>18</sup>, the rest of the household members were evacuated, to a shepherd’s hut, the so-called *koleba*, and “there Zofia Kasprzyczonka and servant mother and son died and the whole *koleba* with them ... was ignited by order of the landlord<sup>19</sup>. By the way, it is worth adding that such actions were abandoned only at the end of the eighteenth century, when instead of chasing the sick out of their homes, more emphasis was put on not letting “suspicious” people into cities and villages<sup>20</sup>.

---

13 Kracik, *Staropolskie postawy wobec zarazy*, 27.

14 Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 107; Szymon Wrzesiński, *Epidemie w dawnej Polsce* (Zakrzewo: Wydawnictwo Replika, 2011), 106.

15 Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 113; Wrzesiński, *Epidemie w dawnej Polsce*, 32.

16 Anzelm Gostomski, *Gospodarstwo*, introd. Stefan Inglot (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1951), 104–105.

17 Kracik, *Staropolskie postawy wobec zarazy*, 166.

18 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 232.

19 *Ibidem*.

20 Wrzesiński, *Epidemie w dawnej Polsce*, 32.



Apart from the mention of expelling the infected, Komoniecki's note also brings information about other precautions taken to prevent the spread of the plague. In such a context, the passages concerning burying victims of the plague in the garden and burning of the cottage in which the sick lived should be interpreted.

The first of these issues is connected with the rule, common during the plague, to bury the dead away from parish cemeteries, on the outskirts of towns or outside their walls. Such burials usually took place late in the evening or at night and only exceptionally could relatives and friends of the deceased participate in them. In extreme situations the bodies were simply drowned in a river or lake, buried in a field, forest or garden, as was the case with the family described by Komoniecki. This was mainly due to hygienic reasons (the idea was to prevent the plague from entering a city center or village), but it was also forced by the fact that during an epidemic, church cemeteries would simply be overburdened<sup>21</sup>. Thus, also in Żywiec, as the author of the chronicle wrote in the context of the 1715 epidemic it was often the case that "people were buried without funerals and coffins"<sup>22</sup>.

Despite the fact that this type of procedure was punishable by severe penalties, including the death penalty, clandestine funerals at church cemeteries did sometimes take place as was the moving the corpses of relatives from a forest or meadow to a consecrated land, especially after the plague ceased<sup>23</sup>. In 1600, Jakub Kozak was treated posthumously in this manner, "who was buried in the field out of the town under a shrine, saying that he died from pestilence, but then he was buried again at the church in Kęty under the bell tower after ten weeks"<sup>24</sup>. Such actions were an expression of the common belief that everyone had the right to a dignified burial; many writers and moralists also protested against "barbaric" funerals during the epidemics<sup>25</sup>.

Another issue signaled here concerns the procedure of burning affected houses together with their deceased residents. With reference to the aforementioned epidemic of 1677, Komoniecki writes about the burning of the *koleba* in which the sick were staying, and in other fragments of the chronicle, he also informs about setting fire to regular residential houses. An interesting testimony of such practices is the note under the year 1713:

---

21 *Ibidem*; Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 158–160.

22 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 462.

23 Karpiński, „Epidemie w Rzeczypospolitej od XVI do XVIII wieku”, 156.

24 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 109.

25 Karpiński, „Epidemie w Rzeczypospolitej od XVI do XVIII wieku”, 159–160.



“On Saturday, in the village of Rycerka in the Żywiec County, pestilence appeared in two cottages, that is at Bogacz and Paciorek families, which a tenant brought along from Hungary and contaminated; where ... twelve people died. The dead were inspected for signs of death on their bodies by [the lords of] the castle from a distance. Black pustules, like blueberries, were recognized. For this reason, the forester and Kubarski, a servant of the judge, were ordered to set fire to these cottages. ... The cottage of the Krawiec family caught the fire from these two and so three homes burned down; they say that one woman burned alive in one of them”<sup>26</sup>.

The characteristic phrase “they say” suggests that the terrible news of a woman burned alive could only be an anecdotal rumor, from which the author clearly distances himself. What is certain, however, is that a third home caught on fire from two intentionally burned houses. With a high probability we can add that due to the compact wooden architecture of the villages and small towns, such accidents happened very often. However, the fear of pestilence was so poignant that the common belief in the purifying power of fire led to such practices, not only in case of annihilation of contaminated houses and the bodies of victims, but also for healing and prevention purposes. A seventeenth-century author of almanacs, Jakub Kazimierz Haur, recommended, for example, heating bricks in fire and pouring vinegar over them [to clean the air – transl.]. Straw, gunpowder, old rags, horse hooves, goats’ horns and dung were also set on fire. It was also pointed out that it was necessary to start fires in the streets<sup>27</sup>. It was widely believed that this was an excellent way of purifying the air, but it is not difficult to imagine what the consequences could have been. Thus, when, under the year 1592, the author of Żywiec chronicle writes that “during this pestilence, six houses in Krakowska Street burned down”<sup>28</sup>, the reader can be almost convinced that this time it was not a deliberate action.

In the record referring to the events of 1713, in accordance with the adopted convention, Komoniecki indicates the “guilty” of the plague, which then reached the Żywiec County from Hungary. The further part of this record, however, is a kind of an abridged instruction what to do in the case of plague. The information about sudden deaths therefore had to be passed on, as we can see, to the castle, from where an expert was sent to determine the cause of death. The mention of examining the

---

26 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 437–438.

27 Wrzesiński, *Epidemie w dawnej Polsce*, 89.

28 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 104.

deceased “from a distance” seems rather bizarre, however, in the absence of access to other security measures, keeping the distance that was the only method of avoiding infection at that time, used in contact with both the sick and the dead. Jan Kracik illustrates this fact very suggestively:

“In sickness and dying, loneliness grew. ... Whoever was hit by the arrow of the plague became dangerous ... A priest absolved him, if he was able to, from a few steps away, and gave him communion mostly on a silver shovel attached to a long stick. A surgeon or a nurse would slip food from a distance, holding his breath, sprinkling himself with vinegar. ... It was looked from a distance how a man full of drudgery and fire, left out in longing and heaviness, becomes ill, nauseating and dormant, mindless, and lastly dead”<sup>29</sup>.

For the sake of scientific accuracy, however, it should be added that even during the raging pestilence, acts of mercy happened, such as supplying the inhabitants of contaminated homes with first-needed articles. The mayor of Żywiec mentions such an action in 1708, when “three wagons of food were sent to the town of Kęty as our neighbors, to rescue them as people affected by the will of the Lord by pestilence”<sup>30</sup>. It is difficult to say to what extent it was a disinterested action, and to what extent the effect of a cool calculation. After all, today’s benefactor may need help tomorrow. Enough to say that such initiatives were undertaken, although even in this situation one should pay attention to the requirement to keep distance. The food was left in an open field in a village located several kilometers from Kęty.

Komoniecki almost never records the symptoms of pestilence. The phrase: “Black pustules, like blueberries” is therefore unusual and suggests that the 1713 pestilence may have been smallpox. The Polish name *czarna ospa* (black pox – transl.) owes its name to the dark bloody scabs that are abundantly present on the skin. However, the laconic note makes it impossible to exclude epidemic typhus (dark rash) and bubonic plague. Also, in the case of the latter disease, skin hemorrhages were possible on swollen lymphatic glands and black and blue ulcers appeared on an infected body. For this reason, both smallpox and bubonic plague were called the “black death”<sup>31</sup>.

---

29 Kracik, *Staropolskie postawy wobec zarazy*, 192–193.

30 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 317.

31 Janusz Skalski, „Medycyna w Polsce przedrozbiorowej”, in *Dzieje medycyny w Polsce*, T. 1: *Od czasów najdawniejszych do roku 1914*, ed. Wojciech Noszczyk, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Lekarskie PZWL 2015), 3–121; Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 47–49.

In the 1613 *Instructia abo nauka, jak sie sprawować czasu moru* [Instruction, or teaching how to act during the time of pestilence], physician Sebastian Petrycy, the father of the aforementioned John Innocenty, teaches that someone who is infected with “pestilent air” has, in addition to other ailments: “tumors behind the ears, or underarm ulcers ... or buboes ... or *morówki*, that is, bad, black and fiery ulcers”<sup>32</sup>. The repeated repetition of the “or” conjunction, indicating the admissibility of different symptoms, reflects the fact that the common name “pestilence” covered both forms of “black death” as well as other diseases. Difficulties in differentiating the symptoms of individual diseases also resulted from the fact that during many epidemics different diseases coexisted<sup>33</sup>.

The buboes mentioned here are painful, swollen lymph nodes on the body of a plague sufferer. Most often these enlarged lymph nodes abscessed, forming fistulas, and their size may have reached that of a chicken egg or orange. The disease usually started with sudden chills, high fever and an accelerated pulse. These symptoms were accompanied by severe headaches, drying of the lips and tongue, redness of the face and sharpening of its features, sallow skin color, sometimes depression, psychosis, or hallucinations. In the bubonic plague, bacteria were transmitted to humans mainly through infected fleas and rats<sup>34</sup>.

In the treatment of all the diseases commonly referred to as pestilence until the end of the seventeenth century, bloodletting was commonly used, after which it was recommended to drink beer or theriac, a concoction which was a mixture of several dozen plants with an admixture of turpentine, wine, honey and opium. This medicine was very popular throughout Europe, especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it was very expensive, so in the old Poland its cheaper equivalent called theriac for the poor was used. Theriac is mentioned, among others, by an eminent doctor and botanist Szymon Syreński<sup>35</sup> in his monumental book about plants and their practical application published for the first time in 1613.

32 As cited in: *Wybór tekstów źródłowych do dziejów medycyny polskiej*, red. Osińska, Podgórska-Klawe, 110.

33 Karpiński, „Epidemie w Rzeczypospolitej od XVI do XVIII wieku”, 26.

34 Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 45; Anna Drążkowska, „Kilka uwag na temat sposobów walki z dżumą w XVII i XVIII wieku na podstawie wybranych źródeł”, in *Epidemie, klęski, wojny*, ed. Wojciech Dzieduszycki, Jacek Wrzeński (Poznań: Stowarzyszenie Naukowe Archeologów Polskich 2008), 269–273.

35 Szymon Syreński, *Zielnik [...] to jest opisanie własne imion, kształtu, przyrodzenia, skutków i mocy ziół wszelakich [...]*, reprint from 1613, (Warszawa: Usługi Wydawnicze Iwona Knechta 2013), 1267.

Another pan-European remedy the so-called four (in other versions seven) thieves vinegar, based on a variety of herbs, spices, wine vinegar and garlic. The recipe was, according to legend, revealed by gravediggers sentenced to death for stealing the bodies of epidemic victims. During the treatment, laxatives and diaphoretics were also applied. More original methods were also used, such as wrapping the patient's head with blond plantain leaves soaked in their own urine; in the case of plague eating dried and powdered buboes, licking pus from one's own lymph nodes or eating a mixture of nutmeg, clay, tar and bones of the deceased from the plague<sup>36</sup>.

Other types of remedies were recommended to the sick by the Church. Until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Church maintained the conviction among the faithful that pestilence is a scourge sent by God as punishment for sins<sup>37</sup>. Besides the indications given by the medical authorities, there were also "prescriptions" to ward off the disease in the spiritual dimension. An interesting example of combining these two spheres was left by Jesuit Walenty Bartoszewski, who formulated the following remedy in his occasional leaflet: "Forwardly, on each day, everyone implore the Lord's forgiveness for sins, having participated in the sacraments, incense the house morning and evening, having closed the windows and the doors"<sup>38</sup>. Protestant clergy also wrote about pestilence as the instrument of punishment of the Creator<sup>39</sup>. The author of the Żywiec chronicle interprets the reality no differently when, with reference to 1707, he writes directly about the "divine scourge of the plague"<sup>40</sup>.

In the intention of defeating pestilence, supplicatory services were held in churches. Crowds participated in processions. Chapels and

---

36 Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 177–178; Skalski, „Medycyna w Polsce przedrozbiorowej”, 45; Wrzesiński, *Epidemie w dawnej Polsce*, 76–78; For an alphabetical list of several hundred pestilence remedies, cf. Franciszek Giedroyc, *Mór w Polsce w wiekach ubiegłych. Zarys historyczny* (Warszawa: Drukarnia L. Szkaradzińskiego 1899), 131–139.

37 Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 34.

38 As cited in: Mariola Jarczykova, „»Powietrzna zaraza« w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim w ujęciu Walentego Bartoszewskiego i Piotra Kochlewskiego” in *Świat bliski i świat daleki w staropolskich przestrzeniach*, ed. Mariola Jarczykova, Bożena Mazurkova, Szymon Dąbrowski, (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego 2015), 163.

39 Kaczmarzyk, „Medyczne posłannictwo ewangelickiego piśmiennictwa religijnego na Śląsku w XVII i XVIII wieku”, 271; Beata Stuchlik-Surowiak, „Jan Muthman i Samuel Ludwik Zasadius – od budowniczych ewangelickiej świątyni do wyklętych wygnańców”, w *Itinera clericorum. Kulturotwórcze i religijne aspekty podróży duchownych*, red. Danuta Quirini-Popławska i Łukasz Burkiewicz, (Kraków: Akademia Ignatianum: Wydawnictwo WAM 2014), 413. Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 34.

40 Komoniec, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 314.

paintings were founded, and votive offerings were made. The mayor of Żywiec mentions such practices many times. In particularly difficult years, solemn processions were held several times a month to pray in front of a miraculous painting or relic. According to Komoniecki's testimony, in October 1707 alone, several pestilence processions were organized in the Żywiec County and its surroundings, during which three churches were most frequently visited: in Rychwałd, Łodygowice and Żywiec.

However, it is also here, too, that the voices of doctors calling for a halt of collective religious practices during the times of epidemics as a potential source of the spread had been heard throughout Europe since the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>41</sup>. When a similar procession was to be organized in 1708, the lord of the Żywiec County did not agree to the participation of the faithful from Kęty which was infected. A special order was therefore sent, instructing the "people not to interfere"<sup>42</sup>.

Unlike Protestants, Catholics had another powerful weapon against the scourge of pestilence; it was the belief in the intercession of saints. St. Roch was the first to turn to, followed by St. Sebastian, St. Anthony, St. Judoc, St. Rosalia, and of course, Virgin Mary<sup>43</sup>. Here too, the chronicler from Żywiec does not disappoint, confirming the information present in other sources and mentioning, among other things, the construction of chapels dedicated to these saints during the epidemics<sup>44</sup>.

When prayers failed and the "pestilence saints" turned out to be helpless, the plagued population reached for radical measures. These were connected with beliefs in the power of the undead, which spread until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They became especially suspicious during times of pestilence, when many people were dying. Such accusations were most often prompted by a suicidal or violent death of a given person. Sometimes all it took was a rumor, spread already after the funeral, that the deceased had returned. From our point of view, the steps taken then were gruesome: the body was dug up, the head was chopped off and placed under the armpit or at the feet of the deceased, or the heart was pierced with an aspen stake. Practices were also known to turn the deceased face down and put sharp thorns into

41 Kracik, *Staropolskie postawy wobec zarazy*, 96.

42 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 324.

43 Kaczmarzyk, „Medyczne posłannictwo ewangelickiego piśmiennictwa religijnego na Śląsku w XVII i XVIII wieku”, 271; Kracik, *Staropolskie postawy wobec zarazy*, 142–148; Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 239–244.

44 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 524.

the coffin. All these measures were aimed at immobilizing the body<sup>45</sup>. Such actions have often been reported in accidentally discovered graves. This was the case in 1710, when in Żywiec “a withered body under the Gethsemane Chapel in a brick tomb, of an unknown man was found headless”<sup>46</sup>.

Such posthumous avengers were called by different names, and it was geographically determined. Komoniecki's chronicle is populated by *strigas* (*strzyga* and *strzygoń*). Thus, when, in 1585, in Kęty, pestilence appeared, the author inserts a short sentence between mentioning the number of victims, whom there were nine hundred and forty-seven, and the fact that three priests died as a result of pestilence, saying that: “and Wojciech Młynarski's, already buried, head was cut off”<sup>47</sup>. Apparently, for some reasons, unexplained by the chronicler, the deceased Wojciech Młynarski was, in the opinion of the general public, guilty of the spreading plague.

A little more details about the mechanisms of spreading such beliefs can be found in a note record to the year 1679. At that time in Rajcza “the air was pestilent in two houses ... Sir Andrzej Irlant, the Żywiec judge, ordered to burn the two houses. They said that a woman *striga* choked those [people], coming to these houses after her death; whose head was cut off in the grave, having opened it”<sup>48</sup>. By the way, it is worth mentioning that this specific “disarming” of the undead during an epidemic was practiced even in church circles, for example, in monasteries<sup>49</sup>.

In addition to medical services, priests and self-appointed *striga* catchers, professional officials were also appointed in towns overtaken by pestilence who were supposed to watch over the safety of the inhabitants at that particular time. In large cities, a network of “pestilence offices” was well-developed, especially when representatives of the authorities escaped from the plague, and such situations were not uncommon.

---

45 Bohdan Baranowski, *Życie codzienne małego miasteczka w XVII i XVIII wieku* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1975), 163; Jan S. Bystron, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce. Wiek XVI–XVIII*, t. 1 (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1976), 291; Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 269; Stanisław Bylina, *Religijność późnego średniowiecza. Chrześcijaństwo a kultura tradycyjna w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w XIV–XV w.* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton–Instytut Historii PAN 2009), 143–145.

46 Komoniecki, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 346.

47 *Ibidem*, 99.

48 *Ibidem*, 235.

49 Beata Łukarska, *Religijność sarmacka w przekazie piśmiennictwa polskiego XVII i XVIII wieku. Zarys monograficzny i antologia tekstów źródłowych* (Częstochowa: Uniwersytet Humanistyczno-Przyrodniczy im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie 2018), 350.

For the duration of an epidemic, among other things, “pestilent air mayors” and “pestilent air trustees” were appointed, as well as temporary cooks, porters, barbers and surgeons; specially designated and marked people also worked on cleaning and burying the bodies. The specific nature of these functions is often indicated by their very names, for example, “corpse inspectors”<sup>50</sup>.

On the basis of the Żywiec chronicle, it can be concluded that in small towns and villages, the number of “plague” posts was much smaller, but it seems that the help of local residents was usually used (during the aforementioned plague of 1713, as we remember, a forester and a servant of the local judge were appointed to set fire to the contaminated cottages), and professionals would be called in only in exceptional situations, which often involved bringing people from larger towns. When, for example, in the tragic year of 1713, pestilence reaped an increasingly abundant harvest, “from Krakow ... a grave inspector was sent to review the dead and the sick”<sup>51</sup>. Probably the guards whose participation in the fight against the spread of the plague recruited from among the local population. As it is most often mentioned, their role was not to let in newcomers from outside the town. The description documenting the functioning of Żywiec during the pestilence of 1707 is particularly vivid. The author writes: “30 townspeople in Żywiec always guarded the town without letting anybody go in”<sup>52</sup>. Behind this tight cordon, everyday life was taking place.

Andrzej Komoniewski’s *Chronicle* is a unique source of knowledge about old medical practices, human behavior and attitudes in the face of the plague. The value of it becomes particularly significant in the current reality in which we have come to face the threat of a pandemic. It results from the careful reading of the Żywiec mayor’s *Chronicle* that some of the measures taken to prevent the spread of infections, such as keeping a distance, limiting the number of participants at funerals, or not letting strangers into towns, are still taken today, while others, such as locking the sick up in huts, setting fire to infected houses, burying plague victims under fences, drowning them in rivers, or desecrating the bodies of the dead suspected of having caused the plague, are now happily forgotten.

---

50 Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem*, 80–99.

51 Komoniewski, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, 438.

52 *Ibidem*, 314.



## Bibliography

- Baranowski Bohdan, *Życie codzienne małego miasteczka w XVII i XVIII wieku* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1975).
- Bylina Stanisław, *Religijność późnego średniowiecza. Chrześcijaństwo a kultura tradycyjna w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w XIV-XV w.* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton–Instytut Historii PAN 2009).
- Bystron Jan S., *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce. Wiek XVI–XVIII*, T. 1 (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1976).
- Drażkowska Anna, „Kilka uwag na temat sposobów walki z dżumą w XVII i XVIII wieku na podstawie wybranych źródeł” w *Epidemie, klęski, wojny*, ed. Wojciech Dzieduszycki, Jacek Wrzesiński (Poznań: Stowarzyszenie Naukowe Archeologów Polskich 2008), 269–273.
- Dyrlaga Przemysław, Rafał Kosiński, „Andrzej Komoniecki – życie i działalność”, w *Monumenta albo zebranie starożytnych dzieł, ozdób, pobożności i łask Boskich przez obraz cudowny Matki Bożej Panny Marijej w parochii kościoła rychwalskiego (Rychwałda Monumenta)*, introd. Przemysław Dyrlaga i Rafał Kosiński (Żywiec: Towarzystwo Naukowe Żywieckie 2015), 19–56.
- Giedroyc Franciszek, *Mór w Polsce w wiekach ubiegłych. Zarys historyczny* (Warszawa: Drukarnia L. Szkaradzińskiego 1899).
- Gostomski Anzelm, *Gospodarstwo*, introd. Stefan Inglot (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1951).
- Jarczykowa Mariola, „»Powietrzna zaraza« w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim w ujęciu Walentego Bartoszewskiego i Piotra Kochlewskiego” in *Świat bliski i świat daleki w staropolskich przestrzeniach*, ed. Mariola Jarczykowa, Bożena Mazurkowska, Szymon Dąbrowski, (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego 2015), 153–172.
- Kaczmarzyk Izabela, „Medyczne posłannictwo ewangelickiego piśmiennictwa religijnego na Śląsku w XVII i XVIII wieku w sytuacji zagrożenia »morowym powietrzem« (na przykładzie dzieł Samuela Dambrowskiego i Jana Muthmana)” in *Terra culturae. Obszary, transfery, recepcje kultury. Studia oraz szkice o kulturze i historii*, ed. Łukasz Burkiewicz, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Ignatianum w Krakowie 2018), 265–284.
- Karpiński Andrzej, „Epidemie w Rzeczypospolitej od XVI do XVIII wieku (zarys problematyki)”, in *Dżuma, ospa, cholera. W trzechsetną rocznicę wielkiej epidemii w Gdańsku i na ziemiach Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1708–1711. Materiały z konferencji naukowej zorganizowanej przez Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska i Instytut Historii PAN w dniach 21–22 maja 2009 roku*, ed. Edmund Kizik, (Gdańsk: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska 2012), 15–26.
- Karpiński Andrzej, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem. Epidemie chorób zakaźnych w Rzeczypospolitej w XVI–XVIII wieku i ich następstwa demograficzne, społeczno-ekonomiczne i polityczne* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton–Instytut Historii PAN 2000).
- Kizik Edmund, „Denkmahl der Pestilentz – pomnik zarazy wystawiony przez historyków” in *Dżuma, ospa, cholera. W trzechsetną rocznicę wielkiej epidemii*

- w Gdańsku i na ziemiach Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1708–1711. Materiały z konferencji naukowej zorganizowanej przez Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska i Instytut Historii PAN w dniach 21–22 maja 2009 roku, ed. Edmund Kizik, (Gdańsk: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska 2012), 9–12.
- Komoniecki Andrzej, *Chronografia albo Dziejopis Żywiecki*, ed. Stanisław Grodziski, Irena Dwornicka, (Żywiec: Towarzystwo Miłośników Ziemi Żywieckiej 2005).
- Kowalski Piotr, *Świat Andrzeja Komonieckiego kronikarza Żywca. Studia z antropologii historycznej* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego 2010).
- Kracik Jan, „Personalia Andrzeja Komonieckiego w niedbałym zwiercadle historiografii”, *Karta Groni* 15 (1989), 62–64.
- Kracik Jan, *Staropolskie postawy wobec zarazy* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Petrus 2012).
- Lebrun François, *Jak dawniej leczono. Lekarze, święci i czarodzieje w XVII i XVIII wieku*, transl. Zofia Podgórska-Klawe, (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen: Dom Wydawniczy Bellona 1997).
- Lenczowski Franciszek, „Komoniecki Andrzej” in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*. T. XIII, ed. Bogusław Leśnodorski, (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności 1967–1968).
- Łukarska Beata, *Religijność sarmacka w przekazie piśmiennictwa polskiego XVII i XVIII wieku. Zarys monograficzny i antologia tekstów źródłowych* (Częstochowa: Uniwersytet Humanistyczno-Przyrodniczy im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie 2018).
- Miechowicz Łukasz, „Zaraza i »morowe mogiły« na nowożytnej wsi”, in *Epidemie, klęski, wojny*, ed. Wojciech Dzieduszycki i Jacek Wrzesiński, (Poznań: Stowarzyszenie Naukowe Archeologów Polskich 2008), 287–292.
- Nowak Jacek, „Litania do Wszystkich Świętych”, *Warszawskie Studia Pastoralne* 4 (2006): 125–143.
- Pękacka-Falkowska Katarzyna, „Dżuma w Toruniu w 1708 roku. Wybrane aspekty” i in *Dżuma, ospa, cholera. W trzechsetną rocznicę wielkiej epidemii w Gdańsku i na ziemiach Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1708–1711. Materiały z konferencji naukowej zorganizowanej przez Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska i Instytut Historii PAN w dniach 21–22 maja 2009 roku*, ed. Edmund Kizik, (Gdańsk: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska 2012), 112–123.
- Skalski Janusz, „Medycyna w Polsce przedrozbiorowej” in *Dzieje medycyny w Polsce*, T. 1: *Od czasów najdawniejszych do roku 1914*, ed. Wojciech Noszczyk, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Lekarskie PZWL 2015), 3–121.
- Słownik biograficzny Żywiecczyzny*, ed. Urbaniec Antoni, (Żywiec: Gazeta Żywiecka 1995).
- Stuchlik-Surowiak Beata, „Jan Muthman i Samuel Ludwik Zasadius – od budowniczych ewangelickiej świątyni do wyklętych wygnańców” in *Itinera clericorum. Kulturotwórcze i religijne aspekty podróży duchownych*, ed. Danuta Quirini-Popławska i Łukasz Burkiewicz, (Kraków: Akademia Ignatianum: Wydawnictwo WAM 2014).

Syreński Szymon, *Zielnik [...] to jest opisanie własne imion, kształtu, przyrodzenia, skutków i mocy ziół wszelakich [...]*, reprint from 1613 (Warszawa: Usługi Wydawnicze Iwona Knechta 2013).

Wrzeński Szymon, *Epidemie w dawnej Polsce* (Zakrzewo: Wydawnictwo Replika 2011).

*Wybór tekstów źródłowych do dziejów medycyny polskiej*, ed. Wanda Osińska, Zofia Podgórska-Klawe, (Kraków: Instytut Historii Nauki, Oświaty i Techniki PAN 1983).