

Falconry in Poland: an historical outline

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Poland is a lowland country in Central Europe and is mostly forested with many rivers, lakes and some open areas. Polish statehood started in the area which is now Central Poland in the tenth century. After slow growth there was a union with Lithuania in 14th century: an area covering what is now Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. As a result of this, Poland also had access to huge grasslands in its south-east territory. Polish raptor avifauna includes species popular in falconry – Peregrine Falcon, Saker, Merlin, Goshawk, Sparrowhawk and Golden Eagle. The Eagle has been the State Emblem of Poland since its very beginning.

Falconry at the beginning of the Polish State: the *Piast* era

There is not much information about Poland in the tenth century. Most of what we know comes from archaeology and numerous chronicles. In Polish museums there are virtually no material relics of falconry. There are two possible reasons for this. Firstly, most of the falconer's utensils were produced of leather and were either rapidly worn out or reused. Secondly, in later times the utensils were often richly decorated and then destroyed to re-use the materials with a high value.

One of the few known physical artefacts of falconry from that time is a knife handgrip in the shape of a falconer from 13th century (now in the Regional Museum in Toruń). This shows a lady feeding a falcon on her fist, and is made of horn. Another two knife handgrips featuring falconry motifs, from the 13th and 14th centuries, were found in Szczecin and Pultusk.

Despite the lack of physical artefacts, it is well known that falconry was practised in Poland before the State was founded. The eagle features from the outset on the first coins of the Piasts, the Royal family of that time. Poles had contact with Tartars and so

could learn the art of falconry from them (especially hunting with falcons). On the other hand, hunting with hawks could occur in that area itself. Interestingly, in Polish medieval falconry only falcons and hawks were used, whilst eagles were not trained at all.

The earliest written records from the 11th century already mention falconry as being widely practiced in kings' and princes' courts all over the country. The first king of Poland, Bolesław I the Brave (992-1025) imported falcons and employed falconers from other European countries. His grandson, Bolesław II the Bold, was renowned for his passion for falconry. There are numerous facts about almost all the other kings practising falconry. In the Piast era (10th to 14th century) there was a law called *Falcatio*, i.e. falcon's law, which was a part of the laws on hunting. At the beginning hunting, including falconry, was reserved only for the royal family. In addition, owners of land were obliged to protect the nests of falcons and were punished if the young falcons disappeared. They were also obliged to support and organise falconry hunting expeditions and support the falconry establishments of the royal family with food. Permission to hunt was a privilege given to aristocrats, clergy and nobles. The exclusion

from Falcatio was a privilege as well. One 12th century bishop, Pawel of Przemankowo, was known for constantly having his falcons with him, even in the Cathedral during Holy Mass. Many facts like this demonstrate Poles' real passion for falconry. In the 12th century there was such fervour for the chase amongst the clergy that in 1279 it was decided to forbid priests practising falconry, as it interfered with their duties.

Falconry, equipment and trained falcons, also played a role in politics. Kazimierz II the Great (1333-1370) was a superior of the Order of Teutonic Knights of Mary (also called the Knights of the Cross). The royal fief gifts sent every year by the Order included 18 fine trained falcons and 24 dogs. He had so many trained falcons at court that on important occasions he organised competitions of falcons from Poland, Lithuania and within the Order. Before a battle, the outcome of the competitions was used as a kind of prediction, especially when the Polish falcon won. He was the last king of the Piast dynasty. His grand-daughter married Jagiello - the Lithuanian Grand Prince, starting thus the Jagiellonian era of Polish and European history

Falconry in the Jagiellonian era

Wladyslaw Jagiello (1386-1434) started one of the most powerful dynasties in Europe. His posterities reigned in the Polish, Czech and Hungarian kingdoms, as well as many others for a short time (including Sweden, Russia and Denmark). Wladyslaw was a well-known hunter and passionate falconer. He codified Polish hunting law again and, for the first time, included a ban on hunting with dogs and falcons in spring and summer to protect crops. He was the first king who resigned his sole privilege to hunt and so since 1423 the owner has had the right to hunt on his own land. In his time falconry related customs became very popular – the falconer's best



Falcon flushed by hunting dogs - a symbol of death the tomb of Wladyslaw Jagiello (ca. 1434).

falcons were set free at his grave. On his own tomb in Wawel cathedral falcons flushed by hunting dogs are shown as a symbol of death. The falcon became a very popular element on tombs in this era.

The freedom for landowners to hunt started the so-called 'golden era' of hunting and falconry. Aristocrats and nobility became very passionate falconers and hunters, including our kings and queens. Most aristocratic courts had falconry establishments, the biggest ones belonging to kings, with both local and imported falcons and foreign falconers. Falconry became seen as an element of the knightly lifestyle, a kind of preparation for war. The falconer's social role also became more important, changing from that of simple servant to king's officer.

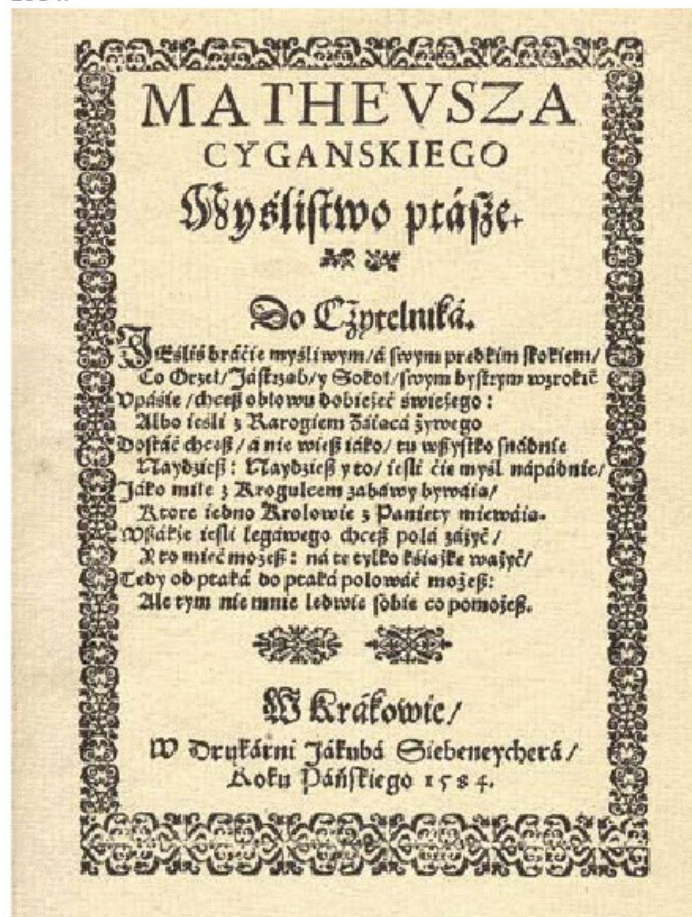
Falconry in the time of free election

After the last of the Jagiellonian kings, Zygmunt III August (1548-1572) passed away Poland became a republic with free election of kings. Our first elected king, Henri Valois (1573-1574, later king of France) brought his favourite falconers and hawks with him from France. On arrival, he soon discovered



Above: The king with a falcon going for hunting from "Bird Hunting" by Mateusz Cyganski, 1584

Below: The title page of "Bird Hunting" by Mateusz Cyganski, 1584.



that the Polish king's court had many, much better, falcons and falconers than his own.

Stefan Batory (1575-1586) was another devotee of falconry. He hired German falconers and bought many falcons from abroad, also creating a school of falconry in Grodno. The high prices paid by the king and noblemen for good trained falcons are frequently mentioned in contemporary literature.

This was also the time of the first flowering of literature in the Polish language. The two premier Polish poets, Mikolaj Rey and Jan Kochanowski, allude to falconry and falcons in many of their poems. In 1548 the book of Krescentyn on farming and hunting was published in Polish and includes extensive material on falconry. In 1584 Mateusz Cyganski published a book on bird hunting, which describes ways to hunt different species of birds, as well as methods of training birds of prey for falconry.

At this time falconry was the only way to obtain the two crest feathers from the heron, which were widely used as a decoration of the nobility's caps. The best crests included some 80-100 feathers, which means that 40-50 herons were caught. Herons captured alive were generally released after their feathers were collected. Sometimes such herons were released with a special ring on their neck. In one well-known case a heron was caught by King Wladyslaw IV on 18 May 1647 and released with a golden neck-ring bearing an inscription. The same bird was taken again by King Jan III Sobieski on 19 July 1677, 30 years later!

Falconry was very popular up to the end of this era of Polish history. The last king of Poland, Stanislaw August Poniatowski (1764-1795) was an exception – he was not interested in hunting and falconry at all.

The decline of falconry

Along with loss of independence in 1795, Poland had also largely lost its traditions of falconry by the end of the century. There were less and less falconers known and the

former enthusiasm for falconry decreased. As a result of uprisings, the Polish nobility who were patrons of the sport often lost their property. This was also a time when guns became more widely used for hunting. As a result of this, by the beginning of XIX century falconry was no longer widely followed. Records of its practice are only numerous in the eastern part of the country.

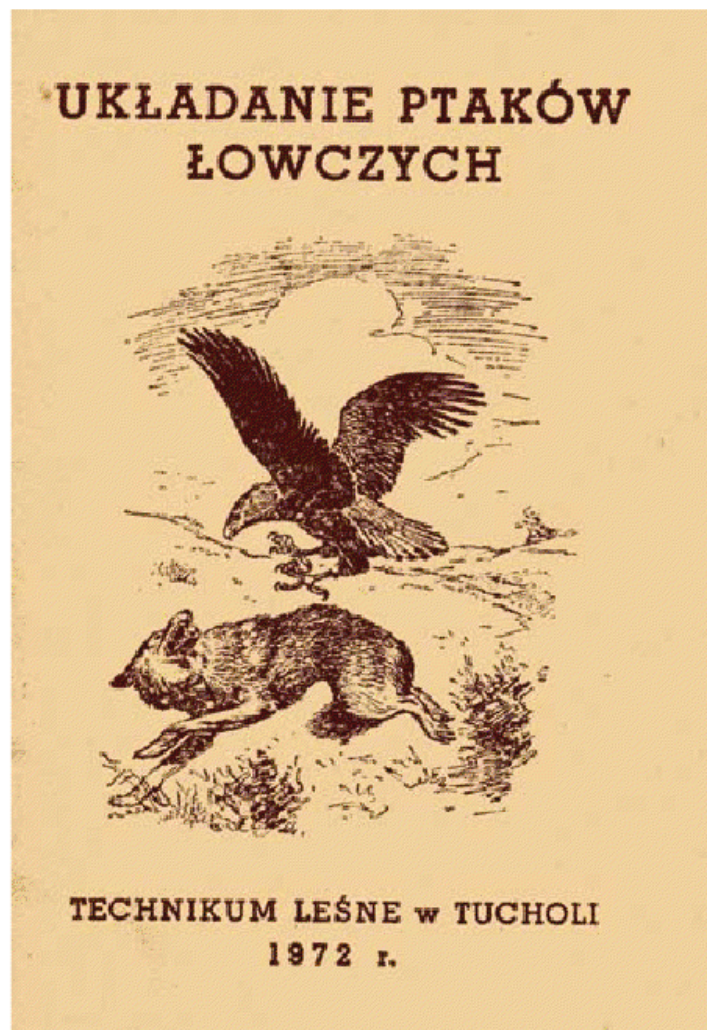
The decline of falconry was mentioned in many articles and books on farming and hunting at this time, especially in work by the eminent contemporary ornithologist Kazimierz Wodzicki.

After Poland obtained freedom again there were a few attempts to revive the art of hunting with birds. Prof August Dehnel, best known for his role in saving the European Bison, published articles on falconry in 1938 in *Lowiec Polski*, the hunting monthly: in 1939 this was published as a book.

Revival of Polish falconry

At the beginning of the 1970's a revival of Polish falconry commenced. Similar processes were undertaken a few years earlier in other countries of the former Soviet bloc – East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Earlier, in the late 1960s, Mr Zygmunt Pielowski who was a scientific specialist on game, practiced falconry on his own as an experiment. In 1970 Mr Czesław Sielicki started preparations to legalise falconry, this being his interest since University. A forester, teacher and hunter interested in hunting traditions and canineology, he also revived the traditional use of hunting horns in Poland, organising the first group of trumpeters at the Forestry School in Tuchola in 1970.

In 1971 Mr Czesław Sielicki organised the School Falconry Circle 'Raróg' (Saker) at the Forestry High School in Tuchola, where he was a teacher. In the late summer of 1971, he attended a falconry course in East Germany with six students, for training that was to play an important role in the School's establishment. The Polish falconers came into contact with an already established falconry



The first falconry manual after WWII by Czesław Sielicki, founder of Polish modern falconry, in 1972

organisation and shown a model of high-level falconry. That also led to the model of training candidates, with an apprenticeship period and obligatory falconry course.

In 1972 the Ministry of Forestry decided to permit falconry as a legal way of hunting in Poland. Later this year Mr Sielicki organised the Polish Falconry Club 'Gniazdo Sokolników' of the Polish Hunting Association with founding members being also Zygmunt Pielowski, Waclaw Lesiński, Andrzej Mania. The same autumn the first course for six hunters - candidates for falconers - was organised in Tuchola. The first Field Meeting of Polish falconers was organised by Mr Sielicki in Kobylniki the same year with an international presence. This became a yearly tradition, followed over 35 years with only



First Falconry Meeting in Poland in 1973.

one exception in the 21st century – due to bird flu in 2006.

Today, around 150 falconers in Poland practise falconry. They are mainly members of Polish Falconry Club 'Gniazdo Sokolników' and the Polish Falconry Order – the second club established in 2001. The legal status of falconry has improved significantly over the years, being now included in Hunting Law. Falconry now is also important in environmental education, raptor protection and cultural heritage protection. Falconers play a leading role in the Polish Peregrine Restoration Project, with more than 300 Peregrines released and a wild breeding population established in 1998.

Evidence of falconry

Falconry has had a number of significant cultural impacts on Polish history.

Firstly, there are the names of towns, villages, geographical points and people. There is a wide range of names connected to falcon, saker, gyrfalcon, falconer, falconry, goshawk, sparrow hawk, eagle, etc. A second, related, area is that of coats of arms. Surprisingly, in view of the previous fact, there are only four Polish coats of arms with elements connected

to falconry.

There is extensive evidence of the symbolic role of falconry in Polish literature. As mentioned above, the first Polish poets used to write about falconry, which retained symbolic importance until its decline in the 19th century. Falconry also featured strongly in paintings of the 19th century.

19th century painting (as well as literature) played a patriotic role. We had romanticism and positivism. An effect of this patriotic role of art are subject shown in paintings and described in literature. Despite that, falconry at the end of 19th century was not practiced, it was seen as an element of patriotism. It is mentioned in the most important books of that time: '*Pan Tadeusz*' by Adam Mickiewicz (our greatest poet) and in '*Potop*' by Henryk Sienkiewicz (who later got a Nobel premium in literature for his '*Quo Vadis*'). Falconry was shown as something patriotic in opposition to occupants. In fine arts there were few artists well known for their battle-piece, hunting and rural scenes and that is where falconry appeared.

Older artefacts are very rare. As mentioned before, there are 3 handgrips from the 13th and 14th centuries showing falconry related scenes. The tomb of King Wladyslaw Jagiello has also been referred to above. Showing falcons and dogs as a symbol of death is a reminiscence of pagan custom to bury preferred dogs, falcons and even horses together with a king or prince.

An especially interesting artefact is the silver dress of the Black Madonna in Czestochowa (a most important icon of Polish Christianity) made in 1433. This shows falcons and dogs chasing a hare. Falconry is also shown on the medieval frescos of Saint John's Church in Torun, as one of the allegories of man.

The role of falconry in the Polish lifestyle was much bigger than physical artefacts of this time known today would imply. It has survived in art, literature and culture and is therefore an intangible but vital element of our traditions. 🦅