

Armenians in Old Poland and Austrian Galicia

*A Demographic and
Historical Study*

Franciszek Wasyl



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Contents

Introduction	IX
Chapter I: Sources and Literature	1
1. Overview of Sources	1
2. The Sources in Detail	4
2.1 Lists of the Faithful (<i>Status Animarum</i>)	4
2.2 <i>Registers of Marriages, Baptisms and Deaths</i>	19
2.2.1 Armenian Catholic Registers	20
2.2.2 Roman Catholic Registers	25
2.3 <i>The Josephine and Franciscan Measures (Cadasters)</i>	26
2.4 <i>Cartography</i>	30
2.5 <i>Surviving Sources from the Gmina: Acta Iudicii Civilis Armenorum</i>	32
2.6 <i>Documents from the Archbishop's Office</i>	34
3. Selected Literature	34
3.1 <i>Historical Demography</i>	35
3.2 <i>Genealogy, Family Chronicles, Memoirs and Diaries</i>	37
3.3 <i>Historiography and the Armenians</i>	40
3.4 <i>Founding Masters</i>	44
Chapter II: The Armenians and their Small Collectivity	47
1. Geography of Settlement	47
2. The Size of the Armenian Population	51
3. The Religious Community	56
3.1 <i>Territorial Organization</i>	56
3.2 <i>Economic Affairs</i>	62
3.3 <i>People of the Church</i>	66
4. The Formation of an Armenian Nobility	72
5. Questions of Armenian Identity	78
5.1 <i>The Case of Kasper Melchior Ciaglewicz</i>	78
5.2 <i>The Case of Grzegorz Romaszkan</i>	83
Chapter III: The Armenian Way of Marriage	91
1. Contracting a Marriage in Armenian Society	93
1.1 <i>The Law</i>	93
1.2 <i>Kinship of the Spouses</i>	97

1.3	<i>Age at Marriage</i>	100
1.4	<i>Seasonality of Marriages (Annual by Month)</i>	105
1.5	<i>Seasonality of Marriages (Day of the Week)</i>	108
1.6	<i>Second Marriages</i>	110
1.6.1	<i>A Bachelor Marries a Widow</i>	112
1.7	<i>Mixed-rite Marriages</i>	114
2.	<i>Faith, Custom and Tradition in Armenian Marriage</i>	122
2.1	<i>Matchmakers, Engagement and the Marriage Contract</i>	122
2.2	<i>The Marriage Ceremony and the Wedding Feast</i>	129
2.3	<i>Marriage Custom Flouted</i>	131
Chapter IV: Offspring		135
1.	<i>Before the Birth of a Child</i>	137
2.	<i>Expecting a Child: Case Studies</i>	140
3.	<i>Baptisms in the Armenian Catholic Cathedral in Lwów</i>	144
3.1	<i>Armenians of the Lwów Metropolis in the Light of Baptism Records</i>	150
3.2	<i>Godparents</i>	154
4.	<i>Midwives and Medical Knowledge</i>	160
5.	<i>Illegitimi</i>	166
6.	<i>Baptism and Confirmation</i>	173
7.	<i>First Names</i>	176
7.1	<i>First Names of Boys</i>	177
7.2	<i>First Names of Girls</i>	185
7.3	<i>First Names Given at Confirmation</i>	189
7.4	<i>Two-part Names Given at Baptism and Confirmation</i>	190
7.5	<i>First Names of Illegitimate Children</i>	191
Chapter V: The Armenian Hearth and Home		193
1.	<i>Family and Kinship in the Armenian Collectivity (Language, Law, Norms)</i>	195
1.1	<i>The Family from the Perspective of a Divorce Case</i>	200
1.2	<i>The Family from the Perspective of an Inheritance Case</i>	207
1.3	<i>A Family Firm: Family Relations from the Perspective of Commercial Activity</i>	209
2.	<i>Armenian Burgher Families on the Example of Horodenka and Kutý</i>	216
2.1	<i>Multigenerational Families</i>	218
2.2	<i>Servants and Lodgers</i>	222

3.	From a Prospering Burgher Family to the Nobility	226
3.1	<i>The Abgarowicz Family of Stanisławów: the Story of Three Brothers and Two Generations</i>	226
3.2	<i>Armenian Noble Families: Krzeczunowicz and Nikorowicz</i> ..	230
3.2.1	The Krzeczunowicz Family	231
3.2.2	The Nikorowicz Family	241
Chapter VI: Death and the Funeral		253
1.	The Death of Children and the Young	254
2.	Death in the Prime of Life (20-59 years)	260
2.1	<i>Diseases and Illnesses</i>	261
2.2	<i>Deaths in Childbirth in Women Aged Twenty or Above</i>	264
2.3	<i>Seasonality of the Deaths of Armenians in the Prime of Life</i>	269
3.	Death in Old Age (60 and Above)	271
3.1	<i>Diseases and Illnesses of Old Age</i>	277
3.2	<i>Loneliness in Old Age</i>	281
4.	Deaths in Hospitals and Deaths Caused by Poverty and Destitution	285
5.	Remarkable Cures: the Book of Miracles as a Record of Diseases	291
6.	The Moment of Death: Ritual and Formula	295
6.1	<i>The Will</i>	295
6.2	<i>The Moment of Death</i>	297
7.	The Funeral	300
Afterword		307
Documentation: Armenian Catholic Censuses		311
Map		511
Sources		515
Literature		525
List of Illustrations		543
List of Tables		547

List of Figures 549

Documents in the Annexe of Sources 551

Index 553

Introduction

This book is the result of a combined interest in historical demography and the history of the Polish Armenians. Historical demography, which is already a very well-developed field of historical reflection, rests on a defined and established methodology that has been used – and sometimes even improved – by its successive practitioners. The history of the Armenians, understood as an account of events in the life of this collectivity and its institutions (social, religious), also has a place among the academic sub-disciplines. It is not difficult to see what distinguishes these two lines of interest. Demography is concerned with quantitative analysis: “demographic facts” that it examines for their biological (births and deaths) or biological-cultural (marriage) substrata. But in the classical formulation the history of the Armenians can be presented as the sum of enquiries into the fate of individual people or families (genealogy), or as the history of the collectivity and its institutions as a whole (history of the church, social history).

Following its title, this book seeks to fuse the methodologies of both fields so that they supplement and enrich one another. This is best illustrated by an example. Marian Rosco Bogdanowicz (1862-1955), who was descended from the Polish Armenians, recalls in his memoirs a family tragedy that took place as the 1830s gave way to the 1840s. The memoirist's grandfather, Antoni Rosco Bogdanowicz, had: “... a single son and four daughters, of which three [were] pretty and comely maidens and one was the disabled, but exceptionally good and worthy, Serafina, who was very nearly as short as a dwarf.”¹ One day the girls went to bathe in the Bug (the event took place in Sokal). One of them struck a whirlpool and started to sink. Her two sisters, and a girlfriend standing close by, hastened to her aid. The result: “... all four drowned before the eyes of the petrified, disabled Serafina, who remained on the bank.”² A demographer discovering this tragic episode in the story of the Bogdanowicz family in the local death records might conclude that the number of deaths resulting from unfortunate accidents in the river tended to increase in the summer. Yet because a series of important facts set in train by this event on the Bug remain concealed, our desire for a closer and deeper understanding is not satisfied: “Under the influence of this catastrophe my grandfather did not want to return to the Sokal lands. Instead he settled in his home (now the Baworowski palace)

1 M. Rosco Bogdanowicz, *Wspomnienia* [Recollections], preface by A. Knot; prepared for printing, footnotes and translation from foreign texts by J. Gintel, Kraków 1959, vol. 1, p. 10.

2 Ibid.

in Lwów at ul. Czarnieckiego 4.”³ The family moved to Lwów as a result of the calamity, which is not something we would be able to glean from demographic sources. But this was not the most important matter. As a consequence of the young girl's death: “Serafina's father and aunt inherited much more wealth than they could otherwise have expected.”⁴ The physically unattractive maiden had become an alluring prospect on the local matrimonial market. To avoid potential dowry hunters, the girl's family: “... arranged for her to marry her virtuous and exceptionally understanding cousin, Robert Bogdanowicz.”⁵ The case of Serafina exemplifies the interventions made by close family members both to preserve kinship and to secure the economic success of the new couple. This girl of “dwarfish height” provided her husband with such comfort and peace of mind that he: “... flung himself wholeheartedly into his beloved historical studies.” Perhaps in this way he found compensation for what may have been lacking in his married life.⁶ The marriage produced two sons: “Zygmunt, an excellent musician, [...] committed suicide for reasons that have not yet been explained. The second was Stanisław.”⁷ This brief excerpt from the life and times of the Rosco Bogdanowicz family demonstrates how two angles of historical enquiry can supplement and clarify each other.

As it was in the author's case, initial interest in the Armenians often flows from the enchanting myth that surrounds them in Polish literature. Though intricately layered, it can be defined in a brief phrase: “Newcomers from the Orient.” The meaning and origin of these fantasies of the Armenians lies in the Old Polish Period. Adopted by a historiography in thrall to multi-culturalism, this myth is now enjoying a renaissance that is damaging to the historical reality it seeks to describe and explain. After all, the scent of the cardamom and roots the Armenians traded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries does not mask the odour of the goat meat and Hutsul cheese they carried in their bags as they drove herds of oxen to Ołomuniec.⁸ There is no doubt that these “Simple Armenian people in Galicia”⁹ deserve to be studied and discussed with the “oriental” lenses removed and with greater attunement and sensitivity to the ties of the Armenians with their new homeland.

3 Ibid., p.p. 10-11.

4 Ibid., p. 10.

5 Ibid., p. 11.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 13.

8 Depiction of Polish Armenians of the nineteenth century after L. Jabłonowski, *Pamiętniki [Memoirs]*, prepared with an introduction and footnotes by K. Lewicki, Kraków 1964, p. 86.

9 The words of Henryk Golejewski. See H. Golejewski, *Pamiętnik [Memoirs]*, prepared for publication by I. Homola, B. Łopuszański, J. Skowrońska, Kraków 1971, vol. 2, p. 77.

This monograph, which complements the existing body of work on the Armenian diaspora in a Central European context, is the first demographic synthesis devoted to the Armenian community in Old Poland and Austrian Galicia (1772–1860). It is the story of the biological and cultural trajectory of a human life: birth, marriage, childbearing, family life, sickness, old age and death. The author enumerates the Armenian diaspora in Austrian Galicia and poses questions regarding Armenian identity, religious practices and community life. The book includes a discussion of archival sources and contains a selection of the parish family registers (*status animarum*) in the annex. These documents, which not only enhance the narration but also detail the Armenian families, can stimulate further research and support genealogical investigations.

The author:

Franciszek Wasyl received his PhD from the Jagiellonian University in 2012. His main area of interest is the socio-economic history of Armenians and Jews in the 18th and 19th centuries. He is a collector and editor of source materials that document the presence of ethnic minority groups on the territories of Eastern Europe. He has been working at the Research Center for Armenian Culture in Poland (within the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences) since 2019.



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