

Sumptuary laws and dance customs at weddings in Gdansk during the 17th and 18th centuries

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„The dancers themselves should be honorable and well brought up people”

This sentence was written by Gottfried Taubert in his famous dance manual *Rechstaffener Tantzmeister* from 1717. He mentions here a certain event which took in place at a wedding in Königsberg: two young men named Ringwald and Pretorius quarreled - taunting each other during the dance. When the dance was over, they fought a duel. It ended up tragically, one of them was killed and the other was severely punished. This story of Taubert's is the inspiration for my research into the behaviours of people at weddings and other feasts where the dance plays the main role.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth century Gdansk on average 477 weddings took place every year.¹ They constituted a very important part of family and social life among the city's various religious denominations. In Gdansk, the Lutheran church was the dominant religious grouping until 1945. We know from published sumptuary laws how weddings, baptisms and funerals were regulated, in what place they were arranged, how many people could be invited, how they should be dressed and what they could eat and drink at related feasts. From the mid-sixteenth century until the nineteenth century, such sumptuary laws controlling weddings were issued many times (in 1540, 1590, 1628, 1642, 1671, 1681, 1705, 1730, 1734). Special acts were also issued for peasants living in Gdansk, but this is a different story. Sumptuary laws were legal tools to fight against luxury and have been used since ancient times. In the mid-fifteenth century sumptuary laws were already in use throughout Europe. In Gdansk, they were called *Hochzeit – Ordnungen* or *Hochzeit-Tauff Ordnungen*.

According to Gdansk legal regulations, which were based on Lutheran practice, weddings could take place only towards the end of the day. To attend the wedding it was necessary to obtain a written invitation. In the Polish-German phrasebook known as *Dialogues*, edited by Nicolaus Völckmar in 1612, we read that: *he who comes in without an invitation can be even expelled and beaten with sticks.*² There were two types of weddings: patrician and bourgeois. The cost of a patrician wedding could be higher and the band of musicians who played at the wedding more numerous. For wealthy parties, usually the band who played for Gdansk City Council were employed. Their services were highly sought after, because these musicians also performed at all important celebrations in the city. At a patrician wedding up to fifty guests could be invited, not counting the officiating authorities, as well as sixteen relatives of the newlyweds. In turn, when bourgeois weddings took place, they were allowed to invite up to thirty-five people not including guests from the circle of the authorities, clergy, and the ten closest relatives of the bride and groom.

The duration of weddings and dances.

The oldest sumptuary law concerning wedding dances, dated 1540, determined that the time provided for dancing should not exceed 2 to 5 hours after the feast. The time at which dances had to be officially closed varied depending on the needs and situation of the city. An ordinance of 1628, required wedding dances to end at 10 pm and that of 1657 ordered dance parties to close between 11 and 12 at night. In 1707, during the North War - when Gdańsk was in conflict with Russia - music and dances at weddings were

banned. However, enforcement was difficult, even though musicians playing after the deadlines were punished by imprisonment. Martin Csombor, a Hungarian nobleman who travelled to Gdansk in 1616 wrote:

*Feast and especially the wedding feasts, are held in Gdańsk in a pagan way, always at night. They eat at midnight, and the Reader could guess what kind of affairs take place then.*³

Dances at weddings and other parties.

The ordinance of 1590 required that dances were led by dance-masters (*Tanzmeister*). People present, including spouses, had to dance with each other, as well as groomsmen, fiancé and fiancée. This was the essential function performed at weddings and it is also noted as very important by Taubert (*Vortänzer*).⁴ The person who helps in this case, overseeing the manner in which those attending had to dance, is close in appearance to what we can see at the Venetian weddings, when the bride danced with her teacher (*il ballarino*)⁵ before all the guests. In a painting in his album *Frauentrachtenbuch* (1601), the Gdansk painter Anton Möller shows a young lady dancing with her partner and in the background one can also see a musician who is accompanying the dancers.

For the first three dances, couples were not allowed to change partners - this could happen only after the third dance. All couples had to dance in a dignified and restrained manner. Unfortunately, it seems that these prohibitions were not followed because five years later in 1595, a new decree was issued, which contained a warning against violation of these rules. In the earlier Ordinance of 1564 and repeatedly in the years 1590 and 1595, cautions were issued against licentious behaviour during the dance, including dancers bumping against each other, performing indecent jumps and removing clothing in unseemly fashion. The dance-masters also tried to limit contacts between the partners, which leads us to think that dances like *La Volta* were discouraged. *La Volta* offended primarily because amid whirling skirts, it

allowed onlookers to see the feet and legs of the female dancers:

*The whole feast is cheered by the continuous music of instruments and voices. Finally, at seven o'clock, one of the most significant women [...] led a move from the table (...). Then they began to dance in their fashion, not difficult at all, and we joined them. Thus we danced all night long, not without renewing our goblets, which polite suitors served to their ladies in the course of dancing..*⁶

Here we have some interesting impressions of Gdansk weddings written in 1635 by Charles Ogier, the French secretary of the legation of Count D'Avauz, Claude de Mesmes, who at that time was resident in Gdansk. In another passage Charles Ogier mentions that dances which were danced during carnival time (*Fastnacht*) in Gdansk did not differ from other fashionable dances in the contemporary world. He wrote:

*Then they rise from the table and started dancing both serious [dances] and humorous[dances]. A humorous dance was as follows: a male (named Kazanowski) after a few lively dancing steps and turns chooses a female (whose name was Constance), to do some serious and slow steps (staltus, passus graves.). Then men are put in the middle of [ballroom] whilst the woman continues to stand there and her partner dances around her making comical moves to amuse her. Then they all are laughing and each male dancer takes a woman's hand and they dance different figures and passages together. After this, the woman chooses another partner for the same dance.*⁷

Ogier describes one of the most popular dance-games in seventeenth century Gdansk. It was probably the same dance which was described by Georges Schroeder in his diary as *Lozetantz* or *Lesetantz* (in Polish: *taniec wybierany*).⁸ Another name of this dance found in French sources is: *bransles et courantes*.

The most popular dance in eighteenth century Gdansk was a *Polish dance* (*Chodzony*), which is better known under the French name *Polonaise*. In the city itself it was often named *Polnisher Tanz*. In Poland, it was the

custom that the *Polonaise* was usually the opening dance at balls, weddings or other important events. Its appealing character led to its acquisition by all social classes – it was danced in patricians and bourgeoisie homes, as well as at the Polish royal court. People danced it in pairs in procession and then in a circle or in figures such as casting off. Dancing was restrained, as it was a slow and quiet dance, representing the dignity and seriousness of men and grace in women. It made an extraordinary impression on newcomers to Gdansk, when they saw a large number of pairs dancing this dance. Peter Dunbar mentioned that he danced the *Polonaise* with another twenty couples at a wedding.⁹ In his report from the voyage of the Polish Queen from France to Poland via Gdansk in 1646 Jean de Labourer wrote:

*I've never seen a more majestic dance, self-possessed, and yet so full of dignity. They danced in a circle; usually two women together, followed by two men. After the first circle figure, which consisted of only bows, they dance with smooth and rhythmic steps, then at times two women take quick steps as if they wanted to escape the masters roaming behind them.*¹⁰

Description of this dance is the same as mentioned by Taubert in his book of 1717. He says that couples could be mixed and also danced with two women or two men.¹¹ It should be mentioned here that a characteristic element of this dance was the gestures often used in traditional *Polonaise*, especially the bows. Peter Mundy referred to this in 1642, when he described clothes and even made drawings showing some customs which he saw during the weddings in Gdansk:

A Dantziger Jungfer or Damzell, beginning to dance with him, which is here extraordinarily used at their weddings, although the dances are not so extraordinary. For what I could see or hear, generally after the Polish manner; Not so artificial and active as galliards and Corantoes with us, Nor so full of pleasant passages and changes as our Country dances; however very seemly and gentle. One great use that they make of these Meetings is to give an opportunity to young Men and Maidens to growe

*acquainted and to sepeke to one another, which otherwise is not soe easie to be don.*¹²

To Mundy, these dances seemed rather gentle and slow, but probably other quick dances were banned by sumptuary laws. He also mentioned clothing especially worn when dancing the *Polonaise*. If the woman wore fashionable dress (his drawing shows a lady wearing European dress), the man wore Polish national costume, which was much influenced by oriental costumes, like those from Turkey. The dress he is wearing is called *Żupan* in Polish. It is a kind of long full coat – *Delia* which is richly decorated with braid. Similar male and female characters are depicted in other illustrations of the *Polonaise* in Gdansk by well known artists like Anton Möller, in his drawings in *stambuch* and Issack van den Block's famous paintings *Apotheosis of Gdansk* of 1608. In this, the woman stands upright whilst the man is shown making a gentle bow; he takes her hand whilst in the other hand he keeps hold of a Polish style hat (*kolpak*).

In 1673 Georg Schroeder includes accounts of dances at weddings and parties in his diary. He lists five main dances, giving a short description of each: *Wechseltantz*, *Lesetantz* (*Loasetantz*), *Jagtantz*, *Grosse Jagttantz* and *Lichtetantz*. Some of them were quick like *Jagtantz* and *Grosse Jagttantz* and probably these dances were the type which were popular with young people but banned by ordinance. In turn, *Lichtetantz* was a more theatrical dance which needed huge chandeliers and a large space for its performance. *Wechseltantz* and *Lesetantz* dances followed French or Italian fashions. In the eighteenth century, some changes took place in music and dance styles. The beginning of the eighteenth century was marked by the activity of Gottfried Taubert, who arrived in Gdansk in 1702 and remained there for the next twelve years. He began teaching the new style of French Baroque dance. In his three volume book *Rechstaffener Tanzmeister* (1717) he described the habits and customs seen at weddings in Gdansk. In the third part of his book he informs us about different instructions for weddings parties and balls. The most important dances he taught

in Gdansk were the *minuet*, *courante*, *bouree*, and of course he gave instructions for the *Polonaise*, which is the only record from which we can try to reconstruct the steps for the early form of this dance. These dances were danced at weddings together with the popular *Polonaise* and of course English country dances (known in Gdansk as *anglezy*) in the eighteenth century. Taubert also taught choreographies such as the fashionable *Folie d'Espagne*. As part of these new mid-eighteenth century fashions, various songs were composed to celebrate weddings, but they also led to further regulatory ordinances.

In 1760, the wedding of Louis Losekanna and Renata E. Uphagen, wealthy burghers from Gdansk, took place. This event had given the invited guests the opportunity to see and hear a pastoral opera-comique (*singspiel*) which included choruses, arias, recitatives and lovers' duets. It had been composed by the Gdansk bandmaster Friedrich Ch. Mohrheim.¹³

Not everyone, however, observed the restrictions on the food to be served at weddings and other festivities. The tables were richly set and the courses also very often exceeded those listed in the Ordinances, which precisely laid out how much and what food and drinks could be served at the feast. And despite attempts to curtail them, various kinds of fights or quarrels at the weddings also occurred.

Music and musicians.

In Gdansk, musicians were divided into different categories: Churches employed organists and cantors and the City Council had its own band of musicians who played during important ceremonies. Municipal trumpeters had particularly privileged positions. Thanks to private engagements and concerts, regular bands of musicians existed and they were associated in a music guild.¹⁴ Each of these groups of musicians was characterised by a different musical profile and public.

Playing music at weddings entitled bands to high wages, which were laid down for weddings by ordinance. Gdansk regulations of the years 1590 and 1695 confirm that wind instruments were allowed to play only at large patrician weddings, where musicians had to play well during the meal and then for the dance. The selection of musicians was made by the groom, who could also invite lutenists and violinists. Music including performances by trumpeters and drummers was banned at weddings of people belonging to lower social classes. However, in the seventeenth century loud, ceremonial music was favoured and was played particularly with wind instruments, especially at peasant weddings. Since the mid-seventeenth century, it had become fashionable to order pieces of music from composers specially for weddings. Wedding concerts could involve lengthy compositions for voices, violin and basso continuo - like the one Crato Butner composed for the wedding of John Eggelbert and Elizabeth Dirsh.¹⁵ This type of concert developed and was fashionable even into the eighteenth century. The main composer was Friedrich Ch. Mohrheim. Surviving compositions allow us to track changes in the styles of music and dance in Gdansk over the centuries. Cultural openness and widespread incorporation of new music was possible thanks to Gdansk's numerous artistic contacts with other European cities.

The desire of Gdansk authorities to discipline its citizens didn't interfere in the following three events associated with dance. During the time of carnival (*Fastnacht*), carnival balls were organised and these included masked dancers and sumptuous feasts. Secondly despite all prohibitions lavish weddings were recorded in diaries of enchanted travellers visiting Gdansk. There are also descriptions of solemn entries of Polish kings into the city, when the royal ceremonies were transformed into a kind of a theatre, where dancing skills were shown to the monarchs and where opulent banquets were arranged in honour of royal guests.

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Endnotes

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⁶ *Karola Ogiera dziennik podróży do Polski 1635 – 1636*, vol. 1, Gdańsk, 1950, p. 315

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⁸ A. Kajdanska, „*Von Unterschiedlichen Tantzen*” *Georg Schroeder’s Diary nad the Tradition of Dance Culture in Gdansk in the Second Half of the 17th Century*, in: Tagungsband zum 3. Rothenfelser Tanzsymposium 6.-10. Juni 2012

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¹⁰ Jean de Laboureur, *Relacja z podróży królowej Polskiej*, in: „Cudzoziemcy o Polsce; Relacje i opinie”, vol. 1, Kraków, 1971, p. 257. This is a relation concerning Ludwika Maria Gonzaga de Nevers’ voyage as a new Queen of Poland. She was a second wife of Wladyslaw IV, King of Poland. This marriage was concluded *per procura* in Versal at 5 November 1645. Her voyage started from Paris and she travelled *via* Gdansk to Warsaw.

¹¹ Gottfried Taubert, *Rechtschaffener Tantzmeister*, 1717, english ed. Tilden Russel, *The Compleat Dancing Master*, 2012, New York, p.74

¹² Peter Mundy, *The travels of Peter Mundy*, vol. IV, London, 1924, p. 190 – 191; I kept the original spelling of the author.

¹³ E. Kizik, *Wesele, kilka chrztów i pogrzebów: uroczystości rodzinne w mieście hanzeatyckim od XVI do XVIII wieku*, Gdańsk, 2001, p. 125

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