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A Polish Report on the Qalmuqs from 1870

I



Konrad Prószyński in 1875

The text presented hereafter appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century in a Polish popular magazine "Opiekun Domowy" (Home Guardian) published in Warsaw, in a Russian sector of the partitioned Poland. The magazine made it its aim to educate in a patriotic spirit large circles of the Polish society, mainly lower classes, giving way to despair after the Tsarist repressions that followed the unfortunate uprising against Russia in 1863. The weekly, founded in 1865 and existing up to 1876, printed in a popular form concise articles and notices concerning the social life, history, literature, sciences, sightseeing etc. Among them also abundant information on geography and ethnology of Polish territories and other countries could be found.

The appearing in the magazine, as informal series, of articles connected with Asiatic subjects was the merit of a new collaborator entering the editorial staff.

Konrad Prószyński (1851–1908) occupies in the history of Polish culture and education a distinguished place as a social and educational worker, educationalist, editor and publisher of periodicals and, in particular, as the author of masterly conceived and extremely useful primers, spelling-books and readers which seriously contributed to the conservation of the Polish language throughout generations of Polish people¹. Just before the outbreak of the uprising of 1863

¹ For K. Prószyński's bibliographical data and activity see before others: S. Lewicki, *Konrad Prószyński (Kazimierz Promyk)*, Warszawa 1996; S.F. Reymont, *Życie i działalność*

against Russia, Stanisław Antoni Prószyński, Konrad's father, was arrested and sent into exile to Tomsk in Siberia. In 1864, Pelagia, his wife, decided to join her husband along with their children. Among them there was also Konrad, 13 years of age. During four years the boy was living among Polish deportees, that gave him various lessons, and studied geographical charts. At the same time, he dreamed of his returning to Poland and mastering a military art just to continue the national fight for independence. His colleague and friend was Stanisław Witwicki, the future exquisite Polish artist, painter and writer. Both of them, after many endeavours and preparations to a very risky fly, partially accepted by their parents, set on their return way to Poland in May 1867. Konrad succeeded, via St. Petersburg and Minsk, reaching Warsaw, and with all energy started earning his life and continuing his education.

In 1870, he had a chance to enter upon collaboration with the editorial staff of the above mentioned magazine being one of four main periodicals propagating the ideas of "Positivism", a trend or movement pervading the outlook on life based on objectivity, natural sciences, economic and cultural revival of the subjugated country.

The young journalist making his début proposed to print a couple of texts well suiting the polythematical profile of the magazine, concise and interesting to the readers. Three of them, discussing some problems of Siberian and Asiatic history and ethnography (*Tomsk, Lapland and the Lapps* and *Qalmuqs*) were soon after printed in the volume VI for the year 1870.² It would be interesting to know what reasons did induce the young author to choose just the above topics. As far as *Tomsk* is concerned, the answer is clear: the very town, its history, its inhabitants and every-day life in it were well known to the author by autopsy since he spent in it four years and his family continue to live there. The *Lapland and the Lapps* were rather little known to the readers and the topic hid in itself something "exotic". Was it also the case of the *Qalmuqs*?

II

While planning and publishing his text, K. Prószyński was probably convinced of a total ignorance of Qalmuq matters among his future readers, and a novelty of his own remarks. On the whole, he was right in his conviction since at the epoch the ideas of the Poles on the Qalmuqs, like on other Mongol peoples, were vagues, unclear and restricted to a very narrow circle of specialists. The

oświatowa Konrada Prószyńskiego (Kazimierza Promyka), Warszawa 1948; S. Kieniewicz, *Dramat trzeźwych entuzjastów. O ludziach pracy organicznej*, Warszawa 1964 and 1973.

² *Tomsk*, "Opiekun Domowy" VI, 1870, no. 13, pp. 136–139; *Kałmucy*, "Opiekun Domowy" VI, 1870, no. 13, pp. 512–514; *Laponja i Lapończykowie*, "Opiekun Domowy" VI, 1870, no. 18, pp. 218–219.

starting publicist was not probably aware of the fact that already some three centuries earlier the Poles had occasion to get an idea of the Qalmuqs and that some two centuries earlier the Poles desired to have direct political relations with them and to treat them as military allies.

Matthias of Miechow in his celebrated *Descriptio Sarmatiarum Asianae et Europianae et eorum quae in eis continent*, printed in 1521, inserted the following passage:

Iuxta illud mare [= the Caspian Sea] et post ad orientem vt Ruteni proferunt, sunt thartari criniti quos thartari kalmuchy et paganos nuncupant, quoniam ritum Machometicum non colunt, nec crines capitis abradunt, quemadmodum thartari omnes radunt, praeter adolescentes qui rasa coma, binos radios crinium ab aure dextra, et alium a sinistra vsos in brachia prominentes, in signum innubilitatis aut virginitatis reliquunt.³

In another chronicle published in Poland some ninety years later, viz. that by Alexandre G w a g n i n, supplemented by Marcin P a s z k o w s k i, entitled *Kronika Sármácyey Europskiej, w ktorey sie zamyka krolestwo Polskie ze wszystkiemy Páństwy, Xsięstwy, y Prowincyami swemi: tudzież też Wielkie Xsięstwo Lithew: Ruskie, Pruskie, Zmudzkie, Inflantskie, Moskiewskie, y część Tátárow*⁴ one can find a separate paragraph entitled: "Kalmyckich Tatarow Horda" (The Horde of Qalmuq Tatars)⁵ and the following, rather queer information:

The Horde of the Qalmuq Tatars is situated beyond the Volga River near to the Caspian Sea eastwards of the Sun. The inhabitants of that region live in wild fields, and on behalf of large (long) hair they never cut, are called Qalmuqs. You cannot know who those Qalmuqs are: they profess no faith and living beyond the sea like beasts they cry out "hałła" [= Allah] like Jewish Karaims do. Just about them Ovidius writes what follows:

Horrida Sarmatiae gens est sub flumine Volha

Non coma non vlla barba resecta manu

what means:

There lives beyond the Volga River a terrible people of the Sarmatian land.

A razor does not touch upon the hair of that race.⁶

The modern historian Bohdan B a r a n o w s k i characterizes the Polish knowledge of the Qalmuqs matters in the 17th century in the following way:

³ *Descriptio Sarmatiarum Asianae et Europianae et eoru[m] quae in eis continent*, Anno MDXXI, Liber primus De Sarmatia Asiana.

⁴ Supplemented by Marcin Paszkowski, Cracow 1611.

⁵ Probably written by Marcin Paszkowski.

⁶ This is a translation from Polish of a passage on p. 17.

It has not been known in Poland who were those “famous Qalmuq warriors”, what language did they speak and what religion did they confess. But it was known that they were sworn enemies of the Crimean Tatars and this was most important for us. It was supposed that they were non-Muslim and spoke a Tatar language or another language very similar to it. In this connection the letters sent afterwards by our authorities to the Qalmuqs were written in Turkish or maybe even in the Crimean dialect. In 1653, when the Polish Commonwealth of the nobility was imperilled again by the Cossack-Tatar alliance, those far enemies of the Crimea were reminded of and [the Poles] desired with their assistance to corner the Islam Girey’s army.⁷

Zygmunt Abrahamowicz, Orientalist and historian, describes the situation in a more detailed way:

[...] the Polish troops were defeated at the battle of Batoh in the Ukraine; directly after the battle, a great many of the landed gentry who had been taken prisoners, were cruelly exterminated in the battle-field by the Tatar rabble, whom the Cossack commanders had bribed to do the terrible job. This being the situation after the Batoh defeat, the Court of King John Casimir conceived the idea to draw the Kalmuks into the war against the Tatars and Dnieper Cossacks, so that with the aid of these eastern neighbours of the Crimea and the Nogais, the enemies of Poland might be taken into two fires. The idea matured in late April 1653. The King and the Crown Chancellor Stefan Koryciński resolved to send on the mission to the areas of the lower Volga one Kasper Szymański, a nobilitated townsman, who had previously travelled as an envoy to the Crimea, and who therefore could speak Turkish and Tatar, languages which could serve as a makeshift in negotiations with the Kalmuks, of course with the aid of a Kalmuk interpreter.⁸

It is not here a proper place to discuss all details of K. Szymański’s mission. According to B. Baranowski, “The Poles had entered upon negotiations with the Qalmuqs but this brought to the Commonwealth no special profits”.⁹ What concerns the letters which K. Szymański should have conveyed to the Qalmuqs and those which he probably received from them in return, the matter has not been cleared up to the present day. Z. Wójcik has no doubt that “the letters

⁷ B. Baranowski, *Znajomość Wschodu w dawnej Polsce do XVII wieku — La connaissance de l’Orient en Pologne avant le XVIII-ième s.*, Łódź 1950, p. 217.

⁸ Z. Abrahamowicz, *The Unrealized Lagation of Kasper Szymański to the Kalmuks and Persia in 1653*, “Folia Orientalia” XII, 1970, pp. 13–14.

⁹ Baranowski, o.c., p. 218.

from the Qalmuqs, written in Turkish, reached Poland".¹⁰ On the other hand, Z. Abrahamowicz's opinion is that:

K. Szymański either did not start on his journey at all, or, if he did, he must have turned back shortly afterwards without reaching either of his places of destination; neither Isfahan, nor even the Kalmuks.¹¹

It is worth mentioning that the Qalmuqs did not disappear from the horizon of Polish politicians also during the years to come. B. Baranowski informs us that [...] in next years the situation changed inasmuch as the Tatars became allies of Poland in her war against Russia. And the Tatar's authorities did their best to use the Qalmuqs for fighting the Tatars on the Ukrainian territory.¹²

The same author adduces an interesting detail concerning Polish-Qalmuq relations:

The Hetman Pavel Tetra, Poland's ally, sent over as a gift for the King John Casimir, as a kind of peculiarity, a Qalmuq taken prisoner. At the same time [...] Cegielski, a secretary of the Crimean chancery of Islam bey, announced that the Khan had intention to send to the Polish King two Qalmuq girls as a gift.¹³

The same author gives in this information some more details:

From that time on the Qalmuq slaves came into fashion in Poland. The exceptional ugliness of those Mongol new-comers, their exotic origin and religion made that, at the magnates' courts, the Qalmuq slaves were looked upon favourably as a kind of "curiosum". At John Sobieski's court there were: a Negro, an Arab and a Persian while a Qalmuq, named "Astrakhan" or "Astraka", a specialist of silly and obscene jokes, was Sobieski's favourite. Afterwards [...] he was baptized. Probably he also became the founder of the noble family "Kalmucki", of its proper arms, that was just raised to the rank of nobility in 1683. This family, settled in Galicia, received at the beginning of the 19th century from the Austrian Government a title of baron. [...] Sobieski had intention to offer a Qalmuq, being a dwarf, to his great friend Kuzma, Prince of Tuscany."¹⁴

In the second half of the 17th century, the Qalmuqs, in the quality of the Tsar's allies, continually took part in the struggles against Poles and Tatars. There are some reports on them in 1664 and 1665. As soon as, in 1666, the Tatars changed

¹⁰ Z. Wójcik, *Organizacja dyplomacji w drugiej połowie XVII wieku*, in: *Polska służba dyplomatyczna XVI-XVIII wieku*, ed. by Z. Wójcik, Warszawa 1966, p. 326, note 187. Cited after Abrahamowicz, o.c., p. 19.

¹¹ Abrahamowicz, o.c., p. 22.

¹² Baranowski, o.c., p. 218.

¹³ Baranowski, l.c.

¹⁴ Baranowski, o.c., pp. 218-219.

from allies into sworn enemies of Poland, the Poles reconceived their plans to send a new embassy to the Qalmuqs and use them to overcome the Tatars. In 1672, Krzysztof Kowalewski, or Kowalowski, was sent to them. At the beginning of the 18th century, the Tsar Peter I sent some Qalmuq irregular troops to help August II fighting against the Swedes and the partisans of the King Leszczyński. They fought in 1707 in the neighbourhood of Leszno, Great-Poland district.¹⁵

Quite interesting is B. Baranowski's another information saying that, at the end of the 17th century, the Polish nobility followed the Qalmuq fashion as far as the horse harness, the forms of caps, shoes and other objects were concerned. This fashion came probably via the Crimea.¹⁶

III

It is reasonable to admit that K. Prószyński neither had access to serious archives in Russia and Poland, nor was informed of all above mentioned details that had been buried in the past and brought to the light of day by modern historians. At the same time we are confronted with a rather embarrassing question: what was the main source of his information. He was no doubt a man of abilities, but was he at that epoch already able to read French, German or English?

He could surely read and understand Russian, the official language in Tomsk (where as we know, he spent four years of his life) and in Warsaw, and we should probably search the source of his Qalmuq knowledge in some Polish and Russian texts.

It should be observed that the European scholars along with some broader circle of educated readers had at the epoch access to a detailed and valuable information on the Qalmuqs themselves. Starting from 1774 there appeared the widely-known *Sammlung historischer Nachrichten über die mongolischen Völkerschaften* by P.S. Pallas¹⁷ and, in the years 1804–1805, there appeared in Riga four volumes of first-hand ethnographic observations by B. Bergmann: *Benjamin Bergmann's Nomadische Streifereien unter den Kalmücken in den Jahren 1802 und 1803*¹⁸.

It would be interesting to know which book collections were accessible to K. Prószyński on his arrival at Warsaw. There were at that time in Warsaw three main private collections of scientific books: the library of A. Przeździecki, that of the Zamoyski's Foundation and united book collections of W. Krasiński and K. Świdziński. All of them had an exclusive character and were destined for

¹⁵ Baranowski, o.c., p. 220.

¹⁶ Baranowski, o.c.

¹⁷ 2 volumes, S. Petersburg 1776–1801.

¹⁸ Theils 1–3, Riga 1804, Theil 4, Riga 1805.

a group of privileged scholars.¹⁹ There were also some book collections managed by professional organisations like Association of Medicine Doctors, Association of Gardeners, etc., but those were destined exclusively to their members. There existed in addition a number of private lending libraries which disposed also of scientific books (like that of M. Orgelbrand working in the years 1865–1897) but they demanded money from their readers what was evidently unacceptable for the needy young man. It is therefore more than probable that K. Prószyński in search of the Qalmuq materials directed his attention to the Biblioteka Główna (Central Library) which on the decree of Russian authorities dated 21.05.1871 was put under control of the newly created Imperial Warsaw University. The same library was opened also earlier and, in 1864, it initiated three new reading rooms one of which being destined for students. Still in 1866, it was appreciated as the only public reading room of scientific literature existing in Warsaw.²⁰

It is now difficult to precise all books and papers that K. Prószyński could have at his disposal while writing his informative article. It is reasonable to suppose that he borrowed main information from a rather popularizing text, or texts, than from a detailed study of a scientific character. In a negative sense it is evident that he did not consult the above-mentioned B. Bergmann's book. While this last discusses on two pages the problem of head dressing among the Qalmuq men, women and children, K. Prószyński puts off the question with one sentence indicating the analogical usage of the Chinese. Still more striking is a difference in a description of the Qalmuq marriage ritual. B. Bergmann writes:

„Ein Kalmuk, der eine eigene Hütte und eigenes Vieh besitzt, sieht sich nach einer Gefährtin um. Hat er einen Gegenstand für seine Wünsche gefunden, so sendet er ein Paar Freunde oder Verwandte zu den Aeltern des Mädchen sum sein Anbringen vorzutragen”.²¹

On his hand, K. Prószyński presents a picture of many young riders setting off in pursuit after a racehorse-mounted girl just to win a bride. It is possible, however, that these descriptions might originate from different areas or epochs and both might be true.

It is natural to suppose that K. Prószyński tried to enlarge his knowledge of Qalmuq problems by means of various encyclopaedias and encyclopaedic dictionaries in accordance with his eventual knowledge of West-European languages. But it is more reasonable to suppose that he started with those written in Polish and in Russian. In one point this general supposition evidently becomes the fact.

¹⁹ H. Kozerska, *Warszawska Biblioteka Uniwersytecka 1832–1871 Biblioteka Rządowa — Okręgu Naukowego — Główna — La Bibliothèque de l'Université de Varsovie entre 1832–1871 Bibliothèque de l'Etat Bibliothèque du District Scolaire Bibliothèque Centrale*, Warszawa 1967, p. 25.

²⁰ Kozerska, o.c., p. 85.

²¹ *Benjamin Bergmann's Nomadische Streifereien...*, Dritter Theil, p. 146.

There is no doubt that K. Prószyński while writing his passage on the Qalmuq religion borrowed the main information from the Polish *Encyklopedia powszechna* (Universal Encyclopaedia) by S. Orgelbrand, published in Warsaw in 1859–1868. By a mere chance, a copy of this encyclopaedia, bearing a stamp “Biblioteka Główna” (Central Library), has been preserved up to the present day.²² In its volume 13. “Jun.-Kapil.”, printed in 1863, you can find on pages 785–786 an article entitled “Kałmucka religia” (Qalmuq religion) signed J. Sa[winicz]. A simple comparison of both texts proves that K. Prószyński, using the same words and phrases and making only small changes, summarized a passage of the mentioned article.²³ It should be observed that, on the other hand, K. Prószyński made no use of some other articles on other Qalmuq problems printed in the same volume. It is worth mentioning that this article, like nearly the whole *Encyklopedia powszechna*, was a translation of the Russian *Spravočnyj entsiklopedičeskij slovar'*, printed since 1847.²⁴

To sum up, the main source, or sources, of K. Prószyński's paper are unknown, they were probably texts (maybe travel accounts) of a rather popularizing character. It is possible that an illustration annexed to the paper and presenting a group of Qalmuq clergymen playing long trumpets or alpenhorns [See the reproduction] could be a point of departure for further research. At the same time, it is clear that the young author of the paper should have possessed some earlier knowledge of Qalmuq matters received from his family, his friend or other inhabitants of Tomsk where the Qalmuqs made a considerable part of the population.²⁵ So, for instance, when he writes that

“[...] some (people) claim, however, that among the Qalmuqs many hidden musical talents could be found which might even distinguish themselves provided that they are suitably trained and fitted with better instruments”,

and that: “In Astrakhan there has been arranged a choir composed of Qalmuq children”, we can be pretty sure that he had heard about it still before his coming back to Warsaw.

In his following studies and texts K. Prószyński has never returned to ethno-geographical descriptions or touring questions referring to Asia. His article

²² Actually in Central Reading Room of the Warsaw University Library.

²³ K. Sa[win]: “sto miljonów razy”, “szczęśliwość”, “brakuje czasu”, “dorabiają doń skrzydła [...] pod wiatr obraca się”, “z przeciągłym śpiewem” and K. Prószyński: “sto miljonów razy”, “szczęśliwość”, “oszczędzając sobie czasu”, “ze stosownie dorobionymi skrzydłami, na wietrze”, “śpiewają przeciągłym głosem”, and some others.

²⁴ Cf. *Spravočnyj entsiklopedičeskij slovar'* Izd. K. Krajja, Vol. 6, S. Petersburg 1847, art. “Kałmyki (Volžskie)”, pp. 426–429, art. “Kałmytskoe veroučenie”, pp. 430–431.

²⁵ “The population of the Tomsk province (*gubernya*) consists mainly of Russians, Tatars, Ostiaks, Teleuts, Qalmuqs and a part of Qirqiz. They are altogether 700 thousand”, K. Prószyński, *Tomsk*, p. 139.



Qalmuq Priests

on the Qalmuqs had no scientific ambition but gave a useful information on that rather little known or forgotten people like Qalmuqs. It is also worth mentioning as a Polish contribution to the general knowledge of Mongol peoples. A few tens of years later, this branch of research will be admirably developed on the academic level by another Pole, W. Kotwicz, the author of “the best most complete and best of all grammars of Kalmouck” (N. Poppe).

IV

Translation of K. Prószyński's paper

Qalmuqs

The Qalmuqs, or Qalmyqs, so called by the foreigners, present one of main branches of the Mongol tribe. They are nomadic people whose environment are pastures and whose main wealth are sheep, cattle and horses. Nowadays, they occupy two habitations separated by a distance of some hundred miles one from another: one of them extends on the Volga River in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea, the other as far as distant Asia, southwards of the Altai Mountains. The last, the major part of which is called Dzungharia, is their proper mother country. They created there a powerful state being dangerous to their neighbours. In the 14th century, one of the China Emperors, having half a million of soldiers, was conquered and taken prisoner by the Khan of that people. That power, however, was not durable on behalf of inner disturbances. Already at the beginning of the 17th century the northern Qalmuqs had to submit the power that was conquering

the Siberia, Russia. A dozen years or so later, one of minor chiefs that were under the rule of the Great Khan, started on a migration — as a result of a discord — along with all his tribe with a view to find a place to establish a separate, independent state. Forcing his way through abodes of hostile peoples, he approached the Volga River and there he gave rise to the Qalmuqs which today inhabit that region and which call themselves the “Elots”. Their brothers that remained in their mother country were, in the half of the last century, conquered by the Chinese and fell under the yoke of the Celestian Empire. Thus the might of their state has disappeared irrevocably.

The present-day Qalmuqs lead a life like their forefathers did, but less bellicosily. Divided into groups embracing anywhere from ten to twenty families, they move with their yourts, or tents made of thick felt from one place to another in search of pasturages appropriate for their flocks. Their most favourite food are mutton and a brick-tea boiled with milk and mutton grease, “sweetened” with salt. Koumis and brandy serve them as drinks.

There is much of silk stuff in their clothing: the women like men wear gallgaskins (baggy trousers) and leather boots embroidered in various coloured patterns. They put on a long gaberdine often lined with fur; they wear calpacks of thick felt or fur on their heads. The women of fashion are quite fond of gewgaws that they hang on themselves in a great number. The men wear sometimes a long hair plaited in a tress like Chinese. Their weapon consists of a gun, sometimes also of a bow, of pistols and of a (double-edged) dagger. I do not mention their (bodily) features since those are in common with all Mongol peoples and more or less are known to everybody. In their customs and rites there are some rather characteristic features which deserve to be mentioned.

The Qalmuqs are very hospitable. If a guest presents a gift to the master of the house, the last does his best to return and offers another object, for instance a horse, instead. A Qalmuq, being delighted with his guest, invites him to a feast, and after having chosen the best piece of mutton does not allow him to take any trouble but tears the meat with his own fingers and puts it to the newcomer’s mouth himself.

Not less original is their rite of marriage. If there is any marriageable maid (lit. virgin), her parents declare this fact and, on a given day, the young men rivaling among themselves arrive in great number and sue for a girl’s hand. The bravest curser of the herd is given to the maid; she mounts it and sets off at a run to the goal. The young man that presents himself along with her at the winning-post receives her (hand). Once the decision of the fate is settled, the young couple return in a triumph, then some other rites and marriage contracts are concluded.

The Qalmuqs profess a Buddhist religion which occupies a higher place than idolatry but some of its rites are very odd. They attribute to some words such a (great) power that the one who repeats them a hundred million times will obtain happiness after his death. They carve out those words in a specially arranged

circle (wheel) and sitting in silence with utmost solemnity they turn it by means of a string. More often, however, they spare their time by putting that wheel with suitably replaced wings [= prayer-mill] in the wind which turns it instead of hands. This serves as a prayer. The Qalmuqs have also their temples, called *chursuls*, in which services are officiated by priests, called *geluns*. They read devotional books and sing with a protracted voice. A noisy music, composed of mixed tones of long trumpets, fifes, kettle-drums and copper plates, belongs equally to the service. Such a music is not very pleasant, some (people) claim, however, that among the Qalmuqs many hidden musical talents could be found that might even distinguish themselves provided that they are suitably trained and fitted with better instruments.

In Astrakhan there is arranged a choir composed of Qalmuq children.