Hello and welcome history friends Patrons all to our first proper episode of the Jan Sobieski biography. To those of you that joined us after hearing our intro for this biographical miniseries, I welcome you warmly, as though Jan Sobieski welcome you into his home. For those longstanding patrons who have been with us for some time already and are eager to begin – this is a kind of audio present from me to you. You guys deserve it, and I hope you enjoy it. Remember to join in the conversation or debates about Jan Sobieski and his age on social media, and of course you can email me if you have any questions about anything else that we do here. Other than that, I am eager to get right into this, so let’s begin, as I take you to a very special event in the history of Europe – the birth of one incredible individual.

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The storm raged like a tempest. The waves whipped up vast plumes of foam, tossing the small fishing vessels effortlessly as lightening forked across the sky. From her vantage point at the window of Constantinople’s Topkapi Palace, Kosem Sultan, the most powerful woman in the Ottoman Empire, watched the storm inflict its natural rage upon the eternal city. Suddenly, as if God himself reached down to earth, a lightning bolt forked towards the Blue Mosque, one of the city’s most prestigious buildings. It was only a flash, but from her window Kosem could see it. The crescent atop the minaret had been turned to ashes. Stunned, Kosem Sultan would ask the court’s wisest men what the lightning strike could mean. If ever an ill-omen had been inflicted upon the greatest Empire since Rome, then this was surely one. The court soothsayers, eager not to offend but still willing to verge into perilous territory, told Kosem that the bolt had been a sign of an impending military disaster which would surely befall the Empire within a generation. It was 17th August 1629, and on this date, thousands of miles away from this scene in Constantinople, a son was born to parents Jakub and Zofia. They would name him Jan, or John, of the House of Sobieski.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The legends which would accompany the birth of Jan Sobieski were neither limited to this Turkish episode nor ceased to be remembered even long after he had gone. Yet, this man of legendary exploits began life relatively simply, at least in comparison to the Polish nobility of the era which he would have counted among his peers. Born in the castle of Olesko, a town 75 KM from Lvov in Western Ukraine, the region had long been the country retreat and residence of the Sobieski family. Jan’s father Jakub had been a distinguished magnate and soldier, serving in several sejms and campaigns, including that launched into Russia during the so-called Time of Troubles, and the battle of Chocim in 1621 where an allied force less defeated an Ottoman army of 100k with less than half that strength. Jakub’s family and wife’s side had all suffered from war; his brother in law had been killed by Tartar raiders, while his own uncle had died at Ottoman hands. In time, Jan Sobieski himself would see his elder brother Marek die through the same legacy of wars in which his father fought. Certainly, it was reasonable to assume that the sons Marek and Jan would follow their father’s lead and take up the responsibility of all Polish magnates – military service.

In 1640 Jan and Marek were sent to Cracow to study and better themselves. By this stage in its history Poland could boast a number of quality teaching and learning institutions, though the curriculum was as rigid and stifling as one might expect for young boys entering adolescence and no doubt dreaming of bigger things. Polish nobles often sent their sons to study within Polish cities, to gain a better appreciation for the Polish culture and tradition, while apprenticeships were served abroad as the teenager grew into a man. Jan would also follow this formula, but first he had to do well enough in school to make daddy proud. After learning from a personal tutor for the first two years, the boys were then enrolled in the prestigious and uniquely secular college in Cracow, the *Collegium Nowodvorianum*, established in 1586 and named after a Polish influential and career soldier who had fought at the famous battle of Lepanto in 1571 against the Turks. Thus, no matter where the Sobieskis chose to go or where they received their learning, the traditions and legacies of Poland’s martial past, as much as the recent history of their homeland, were virtually inescapable.

Jan’s learning regime is worth noting also when we consider his later tact and reported affability with both nobles and soldiers alike. His education, as did that of most nobles in the era, consisted of education through intense study of the classics. For the next two years the two Sobieskis would be taught through the great orators of antiquity, Cicero and Aristotle, as every subject from geography, to history to physics was taught through the prism of the classical world. At the very least, the five hour daily sessions of studying poetry from the ancient as well as the Renaissance eras imbued Jan with a respect of oration and a firm belief in the power of the pen. For his own benefit he taught himself Turkish and dabbled in the Tartar language, while the institution itself taught him French, Italian, German and some Spanish. A product of his day, Jan was as well-educated a noble as one could be after this intensive period of study, and following this experience he and his brother were enrolled in the prestigious Jagiellonian University.


Queen Jadwiga, who had close relations with the Capetian House of Anjou, was actually related still more closely with the Piasts, Poland’s semi-official ruling House up to this period. Her father had been King of Hungary and Poland simultaneously, signifying that personal unions were surprisingly commonplace in the 14th century. In 1997, Jadwiga was canonised.

The Jagiellonian University must have seemed like a glorious relic of an incredible past. The Jagiellonian dynasty was the traditional Polish royal house, and had been founded by Jogaila, Grand Duke of Lithuania, in 1386. Following his baptism as Vladislav, this Grand Duke then married the Queen of Poland Jadwiga and was pronounced King of Poland thereafter. This union forged the promising beginnings of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, which itself was legitimised by treaty with the 1569 Union of Lublin. By that point, the Jagiellonian dynasty had spread its wings through intermarriage and opportunism to place candidates on the thrones of Hungary, Bohemia and of course in Poland, where they retained a monopoly. Under the subsequent Polish Renaissance or Golden Age of the 16th century, a series of great Polish literary giants came straight from the same Jagiellonian college where Jan Sobieski and his brother now entered. The teaching of Latin, still the legal and administrative language of Poland-Lithuania, was also a primary teaching device. Jan Sobieski for his part was greatly impressed by the college, as well as its library, of which I am a little jealous. ‘When I have free time, I always read a book’, Jan wrote to his father shortly after his first year there.

Yet, reading and studying were of course not the only activities that the young Polish nobles engaged in. The art of war was also a topic of premier importance to them, since 70% of all Polish armies were composed of nobility of some kind. Military service was an expected and welcome duty rather than a necessary evil which Poles like the Sobieskis entered into unwillingly. On the contrary, in the lessons of horseback riding, shooting practice and sword fighting, both teenage brothers relished the opportunity to test their might and further their skills. When they returned home from their studies in spring 1646, they did so on the cusp of adulthood. Jan, incidentally, was largely passed over by his mother in favour of his older brother Marek, who, it was believed, would inherit the family’s title and estate. Yet, although the welcome home had been warm, it wasn’t long before both youths were en route once more. This time their travels were not to a Polish university for the sake of knowledge, but to the courts of Europe to gain life experience.

This was a common route for nobles in Poland Lithuania to take. It gave them the opportunity to see exciting and captivating new lands for themselves, while it also granted them the bonus opportunity to meet and ingratiate themselves towards, not merely their European contemporaries, but also royalty. Jan’s father Jakub had followed this very tradition between 1607-13, visiting virtually every major city in Western Europe, and just in time too considering the turmoil it was to endure five years after he got home. Jakub must have seemed like a fountain of wisdom following his travels, and he no doubt expected his sons to be imbued with the same life lessons and experiences as he had been. Jakub fully appreciated the importance of the tradition, and though their mother Zofia sobbed as she watched her sons leave her side yet again, their father had given them the following advice:

Learn from other nations, study their culture and bring their ideas with you. Even if our nation offers the finest democracy since Ancient Athens, even if we don’t allow dictatorship, nor savage rule, still you will learn a lot of things by visiting the western lands. I recommend you stay in Paris for further studies. There is no other city like this in Europe.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Indeed, Jan and Marek were destined to complete a grand tour of the entire continent as they prepared the horses and opened the great gates of their castle on 21st February 1646. You may notice by that date that the TYW was still raging on, though by this point affairs had centred upon Westphalia and the treaties which were to follow. What this meant was that Jan would have a first-hand impression of the impact of such a war on the HRE, as well as the individual towns he came across. In the wider scheme of things though, Jan’s experiences in 1646 add weight to the idea that he passed through some of the most monumental events in the continent’s history. Although we may know him from the siege of Vienna, Sobieski was very much a man of his time, and by that point in 1683 he had already seen some of the best and worst that the era had to offer. In a sense he is our lens through which we can view the seismic events of the 17th century, not just in Poland but also in Europe. Let’s see how he got on.

The first stop of the trip of the two brothers and their fellow nobles was through to the fortified town of Zamosc, which today is a recognised UNESCO world heritage site, and then prepared themselves to travel the 90KM to Lublin. Lublin was known as the Jewish Oxford, and formed part of a ring of cities of towns where Jews had a history of settling, thriving and expanding through business and trade. The brothers were especially interested in the city, as it was known to them as the place where Poland and Lithuania – so long joined in a dynastic union – were forged into a single state. It was also an important trading post in its own right, linking the Baltic ports, the HRE and Poland with the interior of Russia, Moldavia and the Black Sea. Lublin was thus a kind of crossroads, one of many such towns in the sprawling hugeness that was the PLC. After Lublin they moved on and relied on the hospitality of their father’s old friends along the way, as they moved further west. Incidentally, the further west they moved, the more apparent it became that all was not right with the HRE.

It would have been really interesting and rewarding to have been able to hear from the likes of Sobieski how he viewed the end phases of the TYW, or how the conflict was viewed in Sobieski’s family. Since his father had left Germany in the nick of time before the conflict erupted, it is possible that they knew very little of it other than the tales of excesses and great developments which were disseminated by the usual bulletins. Yet as nobles they would have been at least informed enough to appreciate the Polish involvement. Vladislav IV had secured a twenty year truce with Sweden in 1635, when the latter was in dire straits, and the treaty was viewed among Polish nobles as proof of their nation’s continuing ascendancy. Poland had by no means escaped all the terrors of the war, and the trade with their Baltic dominions had been greatly hampered by the intrigues of the Swedes and Danes over the years. The war with Sweden had, after all, dragged on from the beginning of the century up till the end of the 1620s, which as we know gave Gustavus Adolphus a chance to focus on the HRE with all his attention. From there, Swedish diplomacy orchestrated a war between Russia and Poland, which Poland had definitively won by 1635. Thus, although it was by no means all quiet on the western front, Poland had certainly had it better than most in Europe, and did not know of the horrendous plagues of pillage, devastation, disease and terror which had wracked the centre of Germany, though they had certainly heard of such plagues second-hand.

This bit of context is necessary in my view if we are to imagine how the 26 year old Jan Sobieski viewed the devastation he came across, and if we are to assess at the same time the impact it had upon him. We know from later accounts that, ever the curious soul, Jan tried to find out as much as he could about German fortifications and the tactics of the warring parties while he was there, but the devastation must have been harrowing. Perhaps because the party had been advised to take the northern route to their destination, which remained Paris for the moment, they were able to see first the richest portions of the Commonwealth in the Baltic port region – cities such as Poznan and Danzig in the portion of Pomerania which Poland still held. This corner of Europe was economically vital for Polish interests, and even with the chaos engulfing the rest of Europe it had managed to retain a level of prosperity and stability. Again, this state of affairs in the Commonwealth’s territories in important to bear in mind when we consider how much of a culture shock it must have been for the party when they entered their first foreign city, Berlin. One third of its houses were damaged or levelled in some way, and half the population had vanished. Squeezed in between the Swedes, the Emperor and the Poles, George William’s experience as Elector of Brandenburg had not been particularly enjoyable, but his son and successor Frederick William aimed to change this state of affairs. As Jan Sobieski passed through this new elector’s domains, he could scarcely have imagined that this scarred wasteland would one day rip his homeland to shreds.

Having visited Berlin and then Frankfurt, Sobieski may have wondered what the fuss was all about. On 5th May though, he and his party entered Amsterdam, and perhaps for the first time realised the incredible range of sights, cultures and styles available on the continent. Built across the mouth of the Amstel River, with two halves of the city linked together by six hulking bridges, the city must have appeared like nothing Sobieski had ever seen. The engineering marvels of the Dutch were one thing, but it was when he came to peruse their wares, more specifically their art, that Jan really got weak at the knees. ‘Exactly what I’ve been looking for’, he exclaimed, when setting his eyes upon one of Peter Paul Rubens’ most renowned paintings, Madonna and the Child. ‘If the price is reasonable, I will buy it’, he added, which of course he did, sending it via carefully arranged courier back home to the family castle.[[3]](#footnote-3) From Amsterdam, the party then visited Rotterdam, before entering the Spanish Netherlands, still technically in a state of war with the DR. There they saw the sights of Antwerp and Brussels, before moving into French territory for the main event – Paris.

As the largest unitary state on the continent, with the most centralised state institutions except for England, France would have gleamed like an impossibly irresistible gem to the Polish party. On 9th June 1646, Jan Sobieski entered into Paris for the first time, and the resulting love affair between himself and France began, an affair which was to last a lifetime and go some way towards influencing his decisions in life, from his choice of wife to his later foreign policy as King. What would really have stood out about Paris to the visiting Poles was the sheer size of the city; we often forget that it was the largest in Europe at the time, with an estimated quarter of a million souls living in the one metropolitan area. To put this in perspective, their more familiar Cracow boasted less than 40k people, and so it’s no wonder that so many family members and friends had visited before and advised him to really take Paris in. He fully intended to, seeing the parks, the cathedrals and palaces. As noble guests from Poland, they were well treated by their French hosts, and although there is no record of Jan having in depth conversations with the likes of Cardinal Mazarin, he and his brother did manage to join the military branch of the King’s Household. This commitment seems to have kept them for a long time in France. Even the following spring in 1647 when Jan wished to see the rest of the country, his brother Marek would elect to stay behind in Paris.

So it was that Jan continued his tour of the country, taking in the other cities across its vast expanse, and brushing up on his French as he went. As someone with an intense and pressing interest in virtually all things, with an inherent curiosity that led him to have passionate conversations and read volumes of books, it shouldn’t surprise us to see that Jan took great pride and interest in expanding his already impressive bank of languages. By the time he left France for England alongside his likely reluctant brother in October 1647, he had not quite mastered French, but more diversions awaited across the Channel. It was time to see the second largest city in Europe after Paris – London, and take in the sights of that cultured place. Whether or not it was something of a comedown going from Paris to London, locals can perhaps judge for themselves, but certainly Jan seemed to have enjoyed himself, displaying the kind of keen interest and fascination with foreign cultures and works which would accompany him for the rest of his life. Of course, even considering Jan’s immense pleasure at seeing the famous Globe Theatre and Old St Paul’s, the niggling instability of the country must have rankled the Polish party somewhat. By this point Charles I had been definitively defeated in the Civil War, and with him in captivity it was hoped that a period of peace and calm could endure. However, just as the party planned a trip north to Scotland, it was reported that the Scots were preparing to invade in aid of Charles in spring 1648, so the decision was made to return to Amsterdam while they planned the next leg of their journey.

Amsterdam must have been a city taken in by the news of the peace with Spain after eight decades of conflict, but the Sobieskis continued to search out the martial aspects of the city which they collectively found so fascinating. Before long, they had an audience with Admiral Martin Tromp, the terror of the Spanish at sea, and one of the most renowned sea dogs in Europe after his earlier feats. The idea that someone as significant in history as Jan Sobieski could meet someone so important and talented in Admiral Tromp and not cause some kind of rupture in the historical geek continuum is of course a good thing, though I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall for their meeting. At this stage, not yet as accomplished or renowned as he would later be, Jan Sobieski still held the aura of a person on the up and up. The most notable way he tended to display such an aura was through his dedicated patriotism. Having planned to visit Constantinople in the autumn of 1648, with a further tour into the extended lands of the Ottoman Empire, news arrived from home that thoroughly troubled the brothers.

Indeed, though they could not have known it, Jan Sobieski was learning of arguably the opening salvos in what would be Poland’s long decline. At this point, little information was available on what was going down in Poland’s wild east. The Polish King Vladislav IV had planned a great crusade against Constantinople, to take it back from the Turks and grant himself and his Vasa house everlasting glory, but there was a problem. Vladislav could not acquire the taxes and levies he needed from the Polish representatives in the Sejm, and with that, his planned invasion seemed in jeopardy. This wouldn’t normally have been too catastrophic a result, but the key problem was that Vladislav had already acted as though the war was a certainty through the recruitment and large promises of great bounties he had made to a fiercely warlike and eager for plunder auxiliary group within the Commonwealth, the Cossacks. When the Cossacks learned that they would not in fact be given the chance to do some delicious raiding along the Turkish lands, and that all the plunder promised to them by their master would not in fact be theirs, a ripple of discontent spread through their ranks. At the same time as this ripple was spreading, Bogdan Khmelnitsky, a Cossack of great standing among the Cossack people, found his quest for justice against a Polish nobleman denied. The Polish nobleman in question had killed Bogdan’s son, and when justice did not seem en route, Bogdan took matters into his own hands. He negotiated a treaty with the neighbouring Tartars, a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, and planned a great joint raid against the Polish Commonwealth as vengeance for his denied justice. Over the course of May 1648, the Polish crown forces were routed in a series of running battles, and the Cossack-Tartar force advance on Kiev.

In such a perilous situation, It was vital that the different strands of the Commonwealth’s government stuck together to repel the invader. However, in order to achieve this unity in policy and overcome the traditional rivalries and bickering among the powerful nobles, a strong leader was required. Vladislav had, for all his faults, at least managed to maintain a semblance of strength during these fraught times. However, perhaps one of Vladislav’s greatest flaws was that, after playing a not insignificant role in setting this developing crisis into motion, the king of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania suddenly died, leaving an unexpected and dangerous power vacuum at the top of the Commonwealth, at a time when she could least afford it. When news reached the Sobieskis of the plight of their country and of the sudden death of their king, they put aside their plans for a Turkish holiday. It was time to go home and serve their homeland. Next time, we’ll see how this service played out. Thanks for listening to this first part of the biography on Jan Sobieski history friends, this has been WDF, and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Scene is paraphrased from Varvounis, *Sobieski*, pp. 23-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)