



Pucheroki

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Disce puer latinae! - Learn Latin, lad!

These were the words heard by the Kraków students who had difficulties in learning the language of Ovid and Cicero. In this case the lack of language flair was not an extenuating circumstance. The ability to speak Latin was the basis for functioning at the church and secular offices almost till the 19th century. One had to be familiar with Latin - end of discussion. When one reads city documents of the 17th or 18th century, one notices with astonishment that they comprise a strange mixture of Polish and Latin words. No wonder that modern Polish abounds in words of Latin origin, such as the commonly used words like honour, patriotism, machine or table.

There are even more specialist or scientific words of this kind like nationalism, conjunction, variation, passion, paramour, etc. Latin is also the origin of the name of the old tradition that today is observed only in villages near Kraków. The name *Pucheroki* comes from the word *puer* meaning a boy. In this case, this refers to boys who study at the Kraków Academy. The everyday life of students in Kraków was not easy. They were subject to strict discipline, the living conditions in dormitories were very restrictive or even spartan, and their studies lasted from dawn till dusk. For the people of the Middle Ages, accustomed to inconveniences, cold and hunger, these difficulties did not constitute some great obstacles. But many of them had troubles due to the high tuition fees. If the family was not excessively rich or they could not find a benefactor who agreed to finance the son's studies (unfortunately, the path to education was then closed to daughters), studies at the Academy were very difficult and frequently required many sacrifices. No wonder that poor students dealt with the hardships by begging their bread. The sight of students walking from door to door with a tin cup or a clay bowl did not surprise anybody. The merciful housekeepers with soft, motherly arts often helped the boys with a bowl of pottage, a spoon of cooked peas or a piece of oilcake. By principle, begging was prohibited but for students begging for their bread became a kind of legal privilege. This was the basis for the birth of a tradition first mentioned in the sources in the 16th century. Around *Easter*, when the burghers' tables obviously weighed down with good food, the students became more active. They gathered in groups, dressed up in strange outfits and walked to churches where they waited for donations reciting previously prepared poems and offering Easter greetings. In time the tradition became associated with only one day of Yew Sunday, that is the Palm Sunday. In the 17th century Wacław Potocki wrote a couplet devoted to this custom:

*Żaków z oratyką na pueri modą (...)
bakałarze wiodą*

The word *oratyka* (*orations*) is obviously the allusion to the recited poems, and the presence of *bakałarze* (bachelors) indicates that the university staff held some kind of patronage over the venture. In 1591 a book was written including the practical anthology of scamp poems declaimed on this occasion. The *Pucheroki's* destination was not limited to Kraków churches. They also visited villages near Kraków (Zielonki, Bibice, Bodzów, Pychowice, Kostrze, Modlnica, Trojanowice). They were a kind of attraction for their inhabitants benefitting from the fact that they applied for the generosity of those whom they did not ask for support on the day-by-day basis. In the 18th century this custom gained to scatter-brain character. It was particularly critically referred to by priests offended by the coarse, sometimes even vulgar and obscene, repertoire of students. In 1780 a regulation was issued that prohibited *puchery*. One can only



assume that young vigorous boys who left the dark dormitories and lecture halls for the green pastures opened the floodgates of joy, making various pranks and joking around with peasant girls. As far as the poems are concerned, let me quote one of them:

*A jo pucherocek wylozem na pniocek
Z pniocka do dołeczka zabitem robocka
A z tego robocka mlyko i owiecka
Owiecki zbłądziły mnie tu zaprosiły*

In this way *Pucheroki* moved outside of Kraków. In the 19th century this custom flourished at the villages in Kraków, but the role of students was assumed by the village boys. At that time the 'obligatory' outfit of *pucheroki* developed consisting of a high rolled-up hat made of straw and then more frequently of cardboard, often adorned with ribbons or tissue paper strips, and sheepskin jackets tied with straw plaits. The face had to be covered with soot, particularly where the beard and moustache were to grow in a few years. Another vital attribute was a basket, similar to those used for *blessed Easter food* only bigger, and a cane decorated with tissue paper. Today such outfit can be seen in the **Ethnographic Museum** in Kraków. One can also admire it on a live person on Palm Sunday, but only in a few villages. Practically only in Zielonki and Bibice the custom is observed with full attention to detail. *Pucheroki* start with orations early in the morning, travelling from one village to another and collecting donations in kind, mainly eggs that are often given in the form of Easter eggs. This dying custom is supported by the communal culture centres that organise competitions for the most beautiful outfit of *pucheroki*. Maybe in the future the patronage over this tradition should be assumed by the Jagiellonian University? However one may look at it, it is a university tradition.

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