

The traditional costume of nobility and bourgeoisie as an expression of patriotism in 19th century Poland.

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Abstract:

The Republic of Poland and Lithuania was removed from the map of Europe at the end of the 18th century. Its lands had been divided between Austria, Prussia and Russia for 123 years. One of the ways to show longing for independence was wearing a national costume. Under Austrian rule there was relatively more freedom to show an attachment to Polish traditions. The national costume was allowed to be worn and it became the most visible sign of Polish patriotism. Galicia, the region which went to Austria, became the region where national costume was a subject of continual interpretation and change. Two kinds of traditional costume were considered “patriotic”; *kontush* costumes worn by the nobility and a burgher’s *czamara*. Both were worn by men, but there were also attempts to create a national costume for women, usually inspired by *kontush* costumes.

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Introduction

The Republic of Poland and Lithuania was removed from the map of Europe at the end of the 18th century. After three partitions its lands had been divided between Austria, Prussia and Russia. For 123 years the Polish state didn’t exist, but there was a nation whose identity was shaped by the memory of the common history of all peoples inhabiting the territory of the once powerful Commonwealth. The existence of a nation without a state required enormous effort, above all intellectual. Patriotism gained a new meaning under the conditions of the partitions. It became a sign of opposition to foreign forces, which led to the clash of the Polish state from the face of the earth. The flame of patriotism had been fuelled throughout the whole period of partitions.

The conditions prevailing under the rule of partitioners were very different. Under the Russian and Prussian partition, Polishness was eradicated, and the rulers sought to Russify and Germanise their new citizens. The inhabitants of the Austrian partition, Galicia, with two main centres in Lviv and Krakow, relatively had the most freedom. Only in the territory of the multinational Austrian monarchy, and later the Austro-Hungarian, one could demonstrate its Polishness without any restrictions. The universities in Lviv and Krakow remained the only graduate schools where one could study in Polish, despite initial attempts to Germanise them. To maintain the national identity, all manifestations of attachment to one’s own history were important.

Kontush costume

The visible sign of patriotic feelings could be a dress. Among the noblemen and bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, this function was fulfilled by a traditional *kontush* costume which achieved its most mature shape in 18th century. The Polish *kontusz* dress consisted of a *żupan* (a high-collared jacket) and a split-sleeve overcoat, girdled by a wide silk sash. The headdress was a *kolpak* – a cap with a fur border and an aigrette in a jewelled frame. The legs were clothed in wide trousers tucked into high boots of fine leather, usually yellow or red. The outer garment was a *delia* – a wide cloak, sometimes with an expensive fur lining. A characteristic feature of the *kontusz* were the split-sleeves, called *wyłoty*. On solemn

occasions they were thrown over the back to show off the lining made of fine fabric whose colour oftentimes contrasted with the rest of the garment. Initially, it was reserved for nobles, but with time this rule ceased to be rigorously applied.

Already in earlier centuries, wearing the *kontush* and the *żupan* was a declaration of sympathy for the tradition of the Republic, which was of particular significance when a king of foreign origin was to sit on the Polish electoral throne. In the years 1776-1780, each of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth voivodeships established the colours of *kontush* costumes for their representatives, either referring to the colours of the uniforms of Polish cavalry, or related to the colours of provincial coats of arms. This tradition was restored to the Duchy of Warsaw created by Napoleon (1807 - 1815), a small state which was only an ersatz for Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. At official appearances, the noblemen were obliged to wear *kontush* costumes that complied with 18th century regulations for the former Krakow province: a blue cloth of wool *kontush* with a crimson collar without embroidery and with crimson lining of the sleeves and a white *żupan*, both closed with bosses bearing coats of arms of the Duchy of Warsaw.

Nevertheless, from the beginning of the 19th century, the noblemen in traditional dress seen were less and less often. Ewa Felińska, nee Wendorff (1793 – 1859), Polish patriot, author of novels and memoirs, remembered the balls from her childhood (circa 1800), when the view of men in *kontush* costumes seemed to her terribly funny:

“But when the mature men, with big moustaches, dressed in kontushes with split-sleeves put on their backs, wrapped in thick and heavy sashes, which added so much thickness to them, some even obese, they also were choosing serious ladies to dance with, (...), began to rotate ladies, to jump, to prance, to tap the leg with the other one, to bounce on one leg as if they were small children, it was so funny to me that I started to laugh at my voice. (...) For the first and last time in my life, I've seen noblemen in kontush costume dance mazur. Later, only the tail-coats took part in lively dances, and the kontush costumes barely ever passed into the polonaise” (Kufier Kasyldy 1974, 110).

The spontaneous reaction of a girl from a noble family to the sight of men in *kontushes* is a clear proof of how far this outfit already came out of everyday use. Next decades were the time of gradual decline of the Polish *kontush* costume. As it happens to most fashions it went to lower states. Ambroży Grabowski (1782 – 1868), bookseller, antique dealer and excellent self-taught researcher on Krakow monuments and traditions, noticed this tendency in 1834:

“Kontusz, żupan, sash, quadrate cap ‘rogatywka’ and yellow or red shoes, since the fall of Poland have ceased to be the garment of our noblemen and only yet are used in Krakow by the lower states. Even on the solemn holidays, for example, Pentecost, Corpus Christi, and so on, one can meet in our city a furrier, butcher, fisherman, bricklayer and others dressed in old national costume, silk sash, sometimes with a karabela (sabre) at his side. (...) How nice it was to meet this year, during feast days, respectable dress of our fathers and grandfathers, before which, no matter whether it was on the bricklayer or fisherman, I revealed my head respectfully. Unfortunately! It will soon disappear with all of us, and our children will listen about kontush costume like we listen about Roman chlamies and togas”. (Grabowski 1909, vol. 1, 283 – 284)

Grabowski's description shows respect for the old outfit, but also indicates a continuous loss of its significance. As *kontush* costumes were more often worn by burghers, the noblemen less often were eager to follow the tradition of their ancestors. However, Ambroży Grabowski was wrong in foretelling the disappearing of the Polish noblemen's traditional outfit. Its revival came sooner than anyone could expect. As the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth lost its independence, every attempt to maintain national identity was more and more important.

The atmosphere of increased patriotic feelings accompanying the national uprisings accelerated the process of returning to the traditional costume. In the second half of the nineteenth century, especially after the January Uprising (1863), the *kontush* costume was more and more willingly used by noblemen, especially on the occasion of important ceremonies, such as weddings or church holidays. The significance of such a demonstration was also obvious for occupying governments. The only part of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth where one could wear it quite freely was Galicia, remaining under the Austrian rule. It was totally forbidden in the Polish territories of the Russian partition. In the second half of the 19th century the *kontush* attire had two basic variants. Mostly it was exceptionally colourful and rich and perfectly recalled the Baroque splendour of the previous century. This opulent form of outfit was very often chosen by bourgeoisie. More modest versions, resembling fashionable contemporary men's clothes, were visibly a result of a natural evolution of *kontush* costumes.

In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the *kontush* costume was elevated to the rank of official court dress. It was worn instead of a tailcoat also at the court of Vienna, to which it added unforgettable richness. In Galicia an excellent opportunity to show off the splendour of traditional clothes was the visit of Emperor Franz Joseph I in 1880 (figure 1).



Figure 1: Antoni Kozakiewicz, *The emperor's welcome at the railroad station in Lvov*, The National Museum in Krakow Collections, inv.no. MNK III r.a-12783, Photo by Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Krakow

During his journey through Galicia the traditional *kontusz* dress was an expression of patriotism and attachment to the Polish spirit. These garments were at their finest at balls organised in the monarch's honour. Aleksander Nowolecki, a witness of Franz Joseph visit reported, that at a Krakow ball

"... Polish costumes shone with their luxurious wealth (...) in their fullness of colours, bright in the brilliance of gold thread and the finest fabrics. Scarlet kontushes, white, dark blue, yellow, right next to amaranth ones with an equally vivid contrast of hues at their wyloty (...) to this, we shall add the shining

karabelas [sabres], the brightness of fine stones at the knots, buckles and aigrettes, and it is easy to understand that all of them flowed to form a patterned and a fabulous whole, picturesque in the highest degree."

In Lviv, at a noblemen's ball, "the national dress outshone both the tailcoats and the ladies' outfits." (Nowolecki, 1881, p. 190 – 191) Such colourfulness is visible in an outfit consisting of a dark green, almost black *kontush* with an amaranth lining of split-sleeves and blue *żupan* (figure 2).



Figure 2: Tomasz Gryga, *Kontush costume*, Krakow, 2nd half of the 19th century, inv. no MNK XIX-5783/1-3, Photo by Photographic Studio of the National Museum in Krakow

The president of the city of Krakow, Mikołaj Zyplikiewicz (1823 – 1887), during the visit of the Emperor was usually dressed in a white and blue *kontusz* costume, representing the colours of his town. He was a townsman, born as the son of a furrier, but he could put on a nobleman's costume thanks to the royal privilege from 16th century, given to the mayor of Krakow and also to its officials. The patriotic character of the *kontusz* dress could be emphasised even more if one chose to use fabrics in the national colours of Poland, white and red (figure 3).



Figure 3: Kropiewski & Matlas, *Kontush costume*, Lviv, 2nd half of the 19th century, inv. no MNK XIX-4608/1-10, *Kontush sash*, Vienna, 2nd half of the 19th century, Photo: the National Museum in Krakow

In such an outfit we can see Mikołaj Zyblikiewicz on the portrait painted by Jan Matejko in 1887 (figure 4).



Figure 4: Jan Matejko, *Mikołaj Zyblikiewicz as the Marsahl of Diet of Galicia and Lodomeria*, 1887, inw no. MNK II-a-523, Photo: the National Museum in Krakow

He was a Marshal of Diet of Galicia and Lodomeria then, so probably it was the reason why he had abandoned the *kontush* costume in white and blue, the colours of Krakow, in favour of the outfit in red and white, the Polish national colours. Marshals wear *kontush* costumes in its most splendid variant. Thanks to the artistry of Jan Matejko we can recognize types of fabrics used to make it: silver lamé for the *żupan*, silk red velvet and white satin for the *kontush*. Bosses are gilded and decorated with turquoises. A silk gold lamé *kontush* sash, probably a Polish production from the 18th century, is tied on the *żupan*. Mikołaj Zybkiewicz has a very big, fur *kolpak* on his head and keeps his left hand on the Polish sabre *karabela*. Such an outright demonstration of richness and high position achieved by dress was very common among 'self-made people', coming from lower classes.

We know that *kontush* costumes were made in Lviv, Krakow and Vienna. Kazimierz Chłędowski (1843 – 1920), a Polish writer and politician, made a very interesting remark about the lost tradition of making *kontush* costumes which is another proof that we have for the revival of this fashion, not the continuity:

“Krakow and Lviv tailors lost the tradition of making beautiful kontushes, so when the wealthier people in Galicia began to wear delias and kontushes during solemn ceremonies, the best tailor was the Viennese tailor, German Frank, who made Polish outfits from old engravings, customizing them, if possible, to present-day conditions. Noblemen Siemieński, Alfred Potocki, later prime-minister Badeni and others always had kontushes from Frank. For reasons of patriotic economy, the princes Sapieha were making their outfits in Lviv, where there was a tailor better than those in Krakow, famous for the entire eastern Galicia Wieczyński. When Wieczyński somehow in the years after 1870 rolled up his factory and withdrew from the property of 300,000 florens, he generously gave 150,000 florents to his insolvent or poor paying clients, not wanting to make legal complaints against the class of society on which he made his fortune”.
(Chłędowski, 110-111)

An even more interesting form of the *kontush* costume than those rich in colour and fabric described above were outfits which resembled contemporary tailcoats by having uniform dark colours and a slightly modernized cut. These outfits were a natural evolutionary form of the *kontush* costume, not just replicas of old fashions. A black *żupan*, together with a black *kontush* resulted in the look of reliability and trustfulness that was so much expected from a respectable man in the 19th century. Alfred Potocki (1822–1889), an aristocrat and politician, wears such an outfit in the portrait by Jan Matejko (1879) (figure 5).



Figure 5: Jan Matejko, *Alfred Potocki as the Marsahl of Diet of Galicia and Lodomeria*, 1879, inv.no. MNK II-a-522, Photo by Jacek Świdorski, the National Museum in Krakow

It seems that his *kontush* is made of velvet, with a satin or taffeta collar and inside of sleeves. The *żupan* is probably also made of satin or taffeta. Alfred Potocki rejected everything that could give his outfit the impression of richness, colourfulness and splendour so characteristic for 18th century noblemen's costumes and its 19th century imitations. The stiff, gold and silver lamé silk sash is replaced by the plain black silk sash. Expensive bosses of silver and gold, decorated with filigree and precious or semiprecious stones are substituted by modest metal buttons decorated with a crossed cords motive at the *kontush* and very small silk buttons at the *żupan*. Alfred Potocki also has a Polish sabre, baton of the Marshal of Diet of Galicia, Order of the Golden Fleece and Order of the Iron Crown. A proud aristocrat, the head of the most powerful family in Krakow, well known by every single inhabitant of Galicia, didn't have to prove his importance through the richness of his clothes. He could choose something modest and elegant being sure that nobody would doubt his power. It is worthy to compare marshal Alfred Potocki's image with the one of marshal Mikołaj Zyblikiewicz. Such a simple black *kontush* costume is preserved in the collection of the National Museum in Krakow (inv. no. MNK XIX-6810/1-3).

Burgher's Czamara



Figure 6: Czamara, inv.no. MNK XIX-4620, Photo by Karol Kowalik, the National Museum in Krakow

Another outfit considered as “patriotic” in the 19th century was the *czamara* (figure 6). In contrary to the *kontush*, it was an outfit connected with the bourgeoisie, not the nobility. It resembled a noblemen’s *kontush*, but it did not have split-sleeves. It was fastened in front of a range of haberdashery silk loops and silk-wrapped buttons. It gained special significance during the January Uprising, when it became an insurgent uniform. Already in 1861, two years before its outbreak, Kazimierz Chłędowski wrote: “*These were the times of demonstrating nationality with Polish dress; most of my colleagues [students] were already in the nooks, so I did not want to be worse than others*”. (Chłędowski, 1951, p. 110 – 111)

The *czamara*, same as the *kontush* and *żupan*, was treated as a patriotic dress, eagerly worn, especially by academic youth. Kazimierz Chłędowski emphasized also another important motivation which influenced the popularity of the *czamara*: it was simply much cheaper than the opulent traditional noblemen’s costume. He found it a pity that this dark, unadorned outfit replaced the colourful *kontush* costume. The *czamara* was only a substitute of the latter for him. Kazimierz Chłędowski wrote:

“Thus, the old Polish costume was simplified. It was made into a black, open czamara, a black żupan from a low quality silk rep, girded with a black leather belt, fastened with a silver plated large buckle with a convex Polish eagle, and it was also supplemented with black, more or less wide trousers and wrinkled shoes. It was all crowned with a Cracovian cap, good yet, if black, velvet, with a lamb or other fur; often, however, the Cracovian cap turned into a very tall cap of white, red or blue woollen cloth, which looked very miserable juxtaposed with this poor outfit”. (Chłędowski, 1951, p. 110 – 111)

Czamaras also had additional symbolic connotations – as a bourgeoisie outfit it was considered as an expression of social solidarity. That is why it was worn by people attached to the idea of equality, or those who wanted to improve the situation of peasantry.

Patriotic feminine dress

A separate issue in the 19th century was an attempt to create a feminine patriotic dress. There were two ways to achieve it. The first one was simply using national colours, red and white. Such dresses were considered "national". Aniela Louis (1831 – 1900), the daughter of a rich Krakow merchant wrote in 1848:

"...the tailor brought a very nice dress, white and red checkered dress, trimmed with black velvet and black lace, with a black scarf, and curls around the head. The dress is very pleasing, because it's national." (Pamiętniki krakowskiej rodziny Louisów 1962, p. 169)

Another way to express patriotic feelings by an outfit was to wear a feminine version of the *kontush*. Such outfits were used in 18th century, but never achieved the importance of men's *kontush* costume. *Kontushes* for women became more popular around the same time as men's national outfits, that is after 1863. To make an outfit made after European fashion more 'patriotic' the bodice of the dress was transformed using the most characteristic feature of *kontushes*, that is split-sleeves.



Figure 7: Jan Matejko, *Teodora Giebułtowska in her wedding dress*, Krakow 1879, inv.no. MP 436, MW, the National Museum in Warsaw

A great example of a feminine *kontush* was the wedding dress of Teodora Giebułowska (1846 – 1896), who in 1864 became the wife of famous Polish painter Jan Matejko (1838 – 1893). The bride and the groom were dressed in ‘national’ costumes, which was quite obvious considering the devotion of Jan Matejko to his homeland and its glorious history. The artist designed the wedding dress for his wife. He himself was wearing a *czamara*. A precise description of Teodora Giebułowska’s wedding outfit is preserved in memories of her niece Stanisława Serafińska:

“Aunt Teodor’s outfit, the one in which she was later portrayed, was made according to Matejko’s drawing by a Bochnia tailor Ryparek, Bohemian, very fluent in his craft. It was a kind of a kontush with open sleeves, with a long train of perfect white cashmere, lined with silk. Skirt for this also white silk, shorter than the outer clothes. The same white kontushes, worn over blue gauze dresses with golden belts, we have as bridesmaids” (Serafińska 1955, p. 150-151)

All the splendour of the 18 year old bride we can see on her portrait painted by the husband one year after the wedding (the original painting was destroyed and we have the version of it dating from 1879) (figure 7). *The kontush* made of cashmere wool has a silk lining and very rich silk braiding. It is worn over a silk crinoline dress of white silk. In the collection of the Serafiński family there is a very similar *kontush*. It probably belonged to one of Teodora Giebułowska bridesmaids, maybe Stanisława Serafińska. It is not as gorgeous as the brides *kontush*, especially the braiding is simplified compared to Teodora’s outfit, but it has another lovely feature: the sleeves are trimmed with delicate feathers. We can easily imagine how wonderful Teodora and Jan’s wedding suits of women in *kontushes* and men in *czamaras* were. At the beginning of the next century inspiration from Polish national costumes were present in attempts of artists who wanted to create the national style of women’s garments.

Conclusion

The Polish national noblemen and burghers costumes had periods of decline and flourishing in the 19th century. They were almost abandoned in the first decades of the century, but underwent a revival in the sixties. We could note the presence of colourful *kontushes* inspired by ancient costume and at the same time elegant, dark version of them, appealing to contemporary men’s fashion. As noblemen’s costumes were mostly used for different ceremonies, more modest *czamara* served as everyday garments. Women were also trying to use elements of traditional costume in their dress. Both types of Polish national costume, *czamaras* and *kontushes* were very strong expressions of patriotic feelings. They were a visible sign of faith in a resurrection of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

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