

## 8 The Tricks and Traps of *Ad Hoc* Diplomacy

### Polish Ambassadors' Experiences of Ottoman Hospitality

Tetiana Grygorieva

#### Introduction

On August 24, 1557, an embassy representing Poland led by the Palatine of Chelm, Andrzej Bzicki, arrived at Constantinople. The reason for this embassy was far from pleasant. In the previous year, the *starosta* of Cherkasy and Kaniv, Prince Dmytro Vyshnevetsky, had attacked the Ottoman fortress of İslâm Kermen at his own discretion.<sup>1</sup> This attack had the potential to harm the generally peaceful relations of Poland with the Porte, so Bzicki was supposed to soothe the anger of the sultan, who was reported to be most seriously displeased. The entourage of the ambassador included his personal secretary and a quite well-known poet of his time, Erazm Otwinowski, who took the trouble of composing the ambassadorial diary.<sup>2</sup> According to this diary, the embassy stayed in Constantinople for about three weeks and seemed to resolve all the tensions successfully. Yet the author of the diary claimed to be ignorant of the nuances of negotiations and concentrated on the ceremonial proceedings of the embassy, on supposed Ottoman 'customs', and on his own impressions of visiting the legendary city. Otwinowski narrated that the embassy was accommodated in two houses situated opposite one another near a wide street leading to Süleymaniye Mosque. When not busy with his secretarial duties, Otwinowski travelled across Constantinople, visiting the sightseeing attractions of his time: Hagia Sophia, the Hippodrome, the Christian churches of Galata, and several markets.<sup>3</sup>

Otwinowski reported that upon his arrival, Bzicki immediately paid a visit to the grand vizier Rüstem Pasha and offered him gifts for his efforts in organising an official reception by the sultan. Otwinowski specified that Rüstem Pasha was presented with two large goblets similar to those intended for the sultan and with two bunches of sable furs. After his audience with the sultan, the ambassador was visited by a number of Ottoman officials of various ranks; among them was an Ottoman dragoman who happened to be a Polish renegade referred to as Strasz.<sup>4</sup> Otwinowski handed him a letter from the voivode of Krakow, Jan Firlej, along with 200 golden coins for his services, while an additional 100 golden coins had to be paid

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to the Strasz's sister, who stayed in Poland. On this occasion, Otwinowski expressed the expectations of the Polish king that Strasz would promptly inform him of any prospective danger to Poland. Strasz replied that when writing to Poland he always put himself at great risk. So, he suggested that it would be much more convenient if the king maintained a standing representative in Constantinople. The dragoman even volunteered to arrange for Otwinowski to stay in this capacity. However, Otwinowski declined this offer 'seeing the inherent dangers of such a piece of service'.<sup>5</sup>

From this passage one could make at least two conclusions. First, maintaining a standing representative in Constantinople was considered a good strategy for regularly communicating news about fluctuations in Ottoman politics. Second, Poland tended to reject such an opportunity. Indeed, Poland and later the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (for convenience, hereafter referred to as Poland) deliberately kept itself from embarking on the 'parade of embassies' which gradually developed in Constantinople. At the time of Bzicki's mission, Constantinople hosted the Venetian *bailo* as well as French and Austrian Habsburg resident ambassadors. By the second decade of the seventeenth century they had been joined by representatives of England and the Dutch Republic.<sup>6</sup> However, Polish kings insisted on not keeping resident ambassadors in Constantinople and on dispatching exclusively *ad hoc* embassies up to the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

There were basically three reasons for such a bold rejection of the opportunity to establish a permanent mission in Constantinople, namely tradition, money, and prestige. First, as a matter of tradition, Poland refrained from keeping a resident not only in Constantinople, but also in any other European capital up to the end of the seventeenth century. Also, Poland did not welcome residents of the other sovereigns in order to prevent foreigners influencing its policy. After the extinction of the Jagellonian dynasty and Poland's adoption of an elective monarchy, it became a playground for rivalry over the royal crown with its neighbours striving to influence the process. So, during the election period, all foreign ambassadors (including Papal nuncios) were prohibited from arriving in the country. Second, the Polish *sejm* (parliament) generally considered funding resident embassies to be a waste of public money.<sup>7</sup> Finally, as a matter of prestige, Poland was proud not to keep its official residents in Constantinople believing that this would be recognised by the hosts as a sign of subordination. In particular, equating the practice of maintaining a resident with the obligation to deliver gifts to the Ottomans is obvious from the claim of the envoy Krzysztof Serebkowicz (1623) that he decisively declined both the demand of gifts for the sultan and the offer to stay in the capacity of a resident. He reported that the Ottomans should not

treat us on a par with the other ambassadors, i.e. French, English, Venetian, Dutch, Persian etc. Because they are obliged to deliver gifts, and they are bound to, since they are currently living at the Porte.

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KATILAN YAYIMLANDIKTAN  
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN