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"The First Foretaste of the True East" – A Polish Reporter in Post-Ottoman Ruse

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Abstract

The article confronts the urban myth about Ruse as the "most European city" in the Bulgarian lands with the reports from October 1886, published in Antoni Zaleski's book *Z wycieczki na Wschód. Notatki dziennikarza* (From a trip to the East. A journalist's notes). The comparison of the Polish observer's notes with the most persistent elements of this myth reveals diametrically opposite notions about the city's role in the modernization of Bulgaria during the second half of the 19th century. The key points in the narrative on Ruse as "the city of first things" and "the Gateway to Europe" include the Islahhane grand hotel as "the pearl" of modern Bulgarian accommodation and hospitality facilities; Ruse as a "Little Vienna" because of its architecture; Ruse as an important diplomatic center due to the presence of numerous consulates; the railway from Ruse to Varna as proof of the successful integration of the Bulgarian lands into the European transport system; and social and cultural life in Ruse as evidence of the break with the Oriental lifestyle. The article shows that the city regarded by its inhabitants as a "gateway to the West" was perceived by foreign visitors as a true "gateway to the East." Zaleski builds his reports on the categories of East and West, European and Ottoman, Bulgarian and Turkish; his portrayal of the city puts it in the frame of an unquestionably Eastern, mixed Turkish-Bulgarian, post-Ottoman reality.

Keywords

Antoni Zaleski, Ruse, Ruschuk, Bulgaria, post-Ottoman, Polish journalist, foreign reporter in the Balkans

In 1887, Polish editor and journalist Antoni Zaleski[1] published his notes from a journey to the Balkans in the book *Z wycieczki na Wschód. Notatki dziennikarza* (From a trip to the East. A journalist's notes).[2] These reports originally appeared in the Warsaw daily newspaper *Słowo*[3] and described the key points (Bucharest, Ruse, Varna, and Constantinople) of a journey that the author had made in October 1886 with two distinguished companions, the renowned writer Henryk Sienkiewicz and painter Kazimierz Pochwalski.[4] Each of them had a different reason for traveling to "the countries that we used to call the East, but which today bear no other name than the Balkan Peninsula."[5] Zaleski was driven primarily by his professional instinct "to look for what is now and what may happen, instead of what has been."[6] The author's accounts follow the pattern used by numerous European correspondents covering the Balkans.[7] They contain an overview of the visited places, the meetings and curiosities personally experienced there, along with up-to-date information on the political, economic, and cultural state of the Ottoman Empire and newly-liberated Romania and Bulgaria. Despite the strict adherence to that model, Zaleski's notes provide vivid descriptions of everyday life in the cities he visited, including the Danube town of Ruse, one of the most rapidly developing urban centers of the Principality of Bulgaria.

The aim of this article is to confront the most popular urban mythemes about the city of Ruse (Rousse, the Ottoman Rusçuk) with the information contained in Zaleski's notes from his visit in October 1886. Such a comparison reveals diametrically opposite notions about the city's role in the modernization of Bulgaria during the second half of the 19th century.[8] Most striking is the fact that Zaleski manages to disprove the local opinions about Ruse in just a few paragraphs of his reports (pp. 83–90). In addition, it is worth noting that the Polish observer puts emphasis on the same civilizational landmarks of the city that have served as arguments confirming its status as a modern – and thus opposite to *Ottoman* and typically *Eastern* – place from the 1860s until World War II.

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[1] For a biographical note on Zaleski (1858–1895), see *Encyklopedia Warszawy*, ed. Barbara Petrozolin-Skowrońska, Warszawa: PWN, 1994, 998.

[2] Antoni Zaleski, *Z wycieczki na Wschód. Notatki dziennikarza*, Warszawa: Nakład Gebethnera i Wolffa, 1887.

[3] From no. 268 (November 19 / December 1, 1886) to no. 48 (February 18 / March 2, 1887).

[4] Zaleski, *Z wycieczki*, 7–8.

[5] Ibidem, 4. All fragments translated from Polish and Bulgarian by the author.

[6] Ibidem, 8.

[7] For a detailed contextualization of travel literature on the Balkans (with a focus on English reporters), see Chapter Four ("Patterns of Perception until 1900") of Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, updated ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 89–115.

[8] Regarding his detailed, yet somewhat ironic description of Ruse, Zaleski may be considered a continuator of Austro-Hungarian ethnographer Felix Philipp Kanitz, who first called it "the capital" of the Danube *vilayet* in his book *Donau-Bulgarien und der Balkan* (1875; see Nikolay Nenov, "Gradovete v „Dunavska B″lgariâ" prez pogleda na Feliks Kanic [The towns in the 'Danube Bulgaria' through the eyes of Felix Kanitz]," *Proceedings of the Rousse Regional Museum of History* 14 [2011], 300). Zaleski also refers to the town as the *vilayet*'s capital.

Historians and humanities scholars concentrate on several factors determining Ruse's unique position among other towns of 19th- and 20th-century Bulgaria. There is a consensus, however, that the turning point in the modernization and Europeanization of the Bulgarian lands was the designation of Ruse as the administrative center of the Empire's Danube Province (Tur. Tuna Vilayeti) in 1864. The province was established "as a model project for the application of Ottoman Provincial Law Code of 1864," which introduced "a number of Western-inspired reforms."[9] In other words, Ruse owed its first steps into modernity to the Ottoman authorities and, above all, to the *vilayet*'s first governor, Midhat Pasha (1864–1868). The liberation from the Empire in 1878 made Ruse the largest and most urbanized city in the Principality of Bulgaria.

In the following decades, Ruse developed a strong urban identity based on the principles of innovation ("the city of first things [in Bulgaria]" – Bulg. градът на първите неща)[10] and Westernization ("the Gateway to Europe" – Bulg. врата към Европа).[11] These two principles quickly formed the foundation of a specific regional mythology that incorporated numerous facts and beliefs into popular narratives about this unique Bulgarian place and its society. Assumptions about Ruse as the country's "first" and "most" *European*, *civilized*, *modern*, *bourgeois*, and even *aristocratic* city were maintained by its inhabitants throughout the 20th century.[12] The constituent elements, or mythemes, of Ruse's urban mythology include, among others:

- the city's Islahhane grand hotel as "the pearl" of modern Bulgarian accommodation and hospitality facilities;[13]
- Ruse as a "Little Vienna" because of its Central European architecture;[14]
- Ruse as an important diplomatic center due to the presence of numerous consulates;[15]

[9] Rossitsa Gradeva, "Danube Province," in Gábor Ágoston, Bruce Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, New York: Facts On File, 2009, 172.

[10] Svetlana Toncheva, *Plośad"t, park"t i keât v Ruse. Vizualni markeri na pamet* [The square, the park, and the quay in Ruse. Visual markers of memory], Sofia: ROD, 2017, 9–10.

[11] Nikolay Nenov, *Point of View. Rousse. Illustrated History*, Sofia: ROD, 2006, 3. During the communist period, this mytheme was transformed accordingly to the "gates at the crossroads allowing connection with Russia and Romania"; see Petar Velikovski, "Kulturen život v Ruse prez vreme na V″zraždaneto [Cultural life in Ruse during the Revival Period]," *Proceedings of the National Museum – Ruse* 1 (1964), 51.

[12] Compare the study of Ruse's oral history and attached interviews in *Ruse. Portret na veka* [Ruse. A portrait of the century], ed. Nikolay Nenov, Sofia: ROD, 2000.

[13] Teodora Bakardjieva, "Ruse „grad velik i mnogot″rgoven" ili moderen li e „moderen Rusčuk" [Rousse, 'a great and multi-commercial town,' or is the 'modern Rouschouk' really modern]," *Proceedings of the Rousse Regional Museum of History* 14 (2011), 343.

[14] Vasil Doykov, Mariana Dimitrova, *Sgradite – evropejsko kulturno nasledstvo na Ruse. Obrazi i istorii* [The buildings – the European cultural heritage of Ruse. Images and stories], Ruse: Avangard Print, 2013, 4–5, 7–8. For a broader context of the transformation of Balkan towns into "little Parises and large Bucharests" in the eyes of European travelers, see the last chapter of Božidar Jezernik's *Wild Europe. The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travellers*, London: Saqui, 2004, 206–33.

[15] Nikolay Nenov, "Gradskiât mit „K″śata na Kaliopa" [The urban myth of 'Kaliopa's House'],"
Proceedings of the Rousse Regional Museum of History 13 (2008), 11.

- the railway from Ruse to Varna as proof of the successful integration of the Bulgarian lands into the European transport system;[16]
- social and cultural life in Ruse as proof of the break with the Oriental lifestyle.[17]

The topics listed above are directly addressed in Zaleski's overview of the city from 1886. However, if the label of "Bulgaria's most European city" may be regarded as "Ruse's basic myth,"[18] the Polish author's remarks may be interpreted as a concerted demythologization of that notion. Chapter II (*Ruschuk – Varna*) begins with the statement that "we get the first foretaste of the true East only after landing in Ruschuk." In addition, the image of a jovial Bulgarian town is immediately challenged by emphasizing the chaotic mix of soldiers' uniforms, "Turkish fezes," and "Greeks trying to outshout the Bulgarians" (p. 83). Zaleski's first impressions paint a picture of an unexpectedly wild place that has pulled the Western visitor out of his previous comfort zone.

After impressions from the port, the report presents a description of the Islahhane hotel, recommended to the travelers by their distinguished compatriot Antoni Piotrowski[19] as "the very best in Ruschuk" (p. 85). Contrary to local opinions and Zaleski's own initial expectations, his summary is dominated by ironic indulgence:

> The hotel itself is completely different from those you see in the West. On the ground floor, there is a huge hall – dark, somewhat dirty, with a balcony, or rather a veranda to the garden. Its walls are decorated with a large oil print of Prince Alexander in full uniform. Above the portrait – festoons in the national colors of Bulgaria. On the first floor, there is a similar hall with another, only slightly larger, portrait of the dethroned Prince; some benches and a piano stand around it. It is a ballroom. So balls are also held in Ruschuk! What a pity that we arrived at a time when Bulgarians were not in the mood for entertainment, for I would have loved to see a Bulgarian ball and dance with the local elegant women. But all is not lost. The entire *beau monde* comes to our hotel's restaurant in the evenings, so I will be able to contemplate them to my heart's content. […]
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> We get a room on the first floor, furnished rather decently with Viennese trash, but relatively expensive (8 francs a night). The high prices are caused at the moment by journalistic correspondents, of which there are quite a few, who have set up their headquarters in Islahhane (pp. 85–86).

Zaleski's irony then intensifies in the description of a walk through the town's center when he unloads his frustration with an obvious sense of Western superiority. Firstly, the author declares that it is difficult to even take a step outside without a *dragoman* (interpreter, p. 86), which serves as an introduction to the stark contrast

[16] Martin Doykov, "Predimstvata na Ruse kato presečen punkt na evrotransportni koridori no. 7 i 9 [The advantages of Rousse as a point of intersection of the European transport corridors 7 and 9]," *Proceedings of the Rousse Regional Museum of History* 14 (2011), 415.

[17] Bakardjieva, "Ruse," 343–6.

[18] Nenov, "Gradskiât mit," 12.

[19] Antoni Piotrowski (1853–1924), Polish painter and illustrator. In 1879 and 1885, he was a correspondent for British and French newspapers in Bulgaria. A volunteer in the Bulgarian army during the Serbo-Bulgarian War, he later continued to work in the Principality, including for the royal court in Sofia.

observed between the two banks of the Danube. Ruse appears to evoke comparisons to Jewish towns in Poland rather than to Vienna:

> What a difference from what we saw this morning on the other side of the Danube! There are Turks here at every turn, and the traces of their rule have not been erased by the seven-year reign of Prince Alexander. Everything here is still Turkish, the pavements are vile, there is mud up to the ankles, and every few steps, you see the towers of minarets and such sloppiness everywhere resembling our Jewish towns. There are houses of all shapes and architectural forms. Next to a few decent tenement houses, you see wooden Turkish cottages with characteristic balconies and overhangs. Right next to our hotel stands a beautiful Viennese-style villa of Mr. Stoyanov, brother of the famous Zahari; a large two-story house is being built next to it, but a few steps away and along the entire street, there are many low, wooden, one- or two-story houses, very rundown and shabby. While you can see minarets every now and then, there are no church towers or domes anywhere. This is still a legacy of Turkish times when Christians were not allowed to build temples with bell towers or any other towers taller than minarets. A dozen or so steps from our hotel, there is a church, or rather a Catholic chapel, even with a bishop holding the office of apostolic delegate, but you need to know well where this temple is located; otherwise, it is difficult to find it, as it looks so inconspicuous from the outside. In a word, the former capital of the Danube Vilayet, the residence of the Turkish pasha who ruled all of today's Bulgaria, although still having 30,000 inhabitants, looks strangely inconspicuous and shabby. Its houses look more like temporary barracks than permanent dwellings. There are quite a few shops here, but due to the fact that it is Sunday and, on top of that, election day, almost all of them are closed.
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> In the whole of Ruschuk, there is only one long, relatively wide, and fairly regular street. It leads from the railway station to a spacious square, completely unpaved, which could pass for a market square since there is a large government building next to it, still called *konak* after the Turks. The building is modern, two-story, almost a palace, quite magnificent, and its Viennese style is in great contrast with the low and collapsing houses that surround the square. […] In the middle of the square stands a shabby wooden gazebo with a cross. This is the first cross I encountered in Ruschuk, while I have already seen a dozen or so minarets (pp. 86–88).

Although the phrase "Viennese style" appears several times in Zaleski's notes, it does not contain the positive connotations that would allow Ruse to be called "Little Vienna." Instead, the overall style and spirit of the place automatically evoke its labeling as Turkish, i.e. synonymous with disorder, squalor, and ugliness. Once again, the Polish reporter presents the Balkan world within the frames of Western – Eastern, European – Ottoman categories. This is, of course, in full accord with the foreigners' common tendency to portray Balkan towns as "a copy or even a caricature of western Europe" and places where "everything was borrowed."[20]

In 1886, Ruse was also far from serving its function as a significant diplomatic center. According to Zaleski, the position held in the highest esteem by the inhabitants throughout the peninsula was not that of a consular official but of a foreign correspondent. It is the latter who provides the locals with the most errands and well-paid opportunities:

[20] Jezernik, *Wild Europe*, 227.

all offices are open to them and, in their own interest, give the requested information as quickly and as accurately as possible. […] People can sometimes learn more from such a correspondent than from consular agents or *kavases* (bodyguards). […] they offer chances to earn more in a day than the inhabitants of the entire town do in a week. […] A correspondent in the East is synonymous with a great lord (pp. 92–93).

Zaleski clearly suggests in this way that there is no point in visiting the city's consulates – one can gather all the news and gossip while chatting with the guests in Islahhane's main hall. In Ruse, "books are difficult to import, except for deliveries through Bucharest, newspapers arrive late" (pp. 171–172). The biggest inconvenience for journalists and diplomatic representatives is the fact that most correspondence is sent from the other side of the Danube, from the Romanian Giurgiu, due to the far worse state of the Bulgarian postal and telegraph services (p. 76).

In a similar fashion, Zaleski is quick to debunk the other two civilizational achievements of modern Ruse. The railway, the first in the lands of the future Principality (built in 1866), is an undisputed accomplishment. Although the Polish group encounters only a few passengers, "the carriages are quite comfortably furnished," and "the conductor speaks French" (p. 174). The landscape from Ruse to Varna, however, is described as depressingly dull; the land is still "hideously cultivated," and the huts are ugly and dirty. Only Turks can be seen in the fields, as Muslims inhabit the whole region up to Dobrudja (p. 173). In summary, the transport line has not produced any visible economic results. Apart from the questionable Europeanization of the city and its surrounding region, Zaleski's notes undermine the very idea of a Bulgarian state populated by ethnic Bulgarians.

As for the social and cultural life in Ruse, the Polish journalist gives a categorically bleak assessment:

Social life does not exist at all in Ruschuk, as it does not exist in the whole of Bulgaria. A Bulgarian is hospitable and, despite the proverbial stinginess, will gladly welcome a traveler into his home, feed him, give him something to drink, and provide accommodation for the night. But he does not crave company at all, he is not in the habit of seeking it, nor does he feel the need for it. Every Bulgarian (I mean here not only peasants but also wealthier people belonging to the intelligentsia) lives for himself, strictly confined to the family circle; they rarely come together, and even then rather in pubs than at home. […] There are social relations between men but none between ladies. The latter live in seclusion like Turkish women and are rarely visible even to the eyes of their closest friends (pp. 167–168).

[…] There is no such thing [as feasts and public meetings] here. In a city like Ruschuk, where there are, after all, many officers, officials, judges, schoolteachers, wealthy and fairly-well educated merchants, and, finally, consuls and their secretaries, there is no club or meeting place. Everyone lives for themselves, the consuls stick to their circle, and the rest of the men sometimes come to the Islahhane hotel (p. 168).

[…] All Europeans complain enormously about the lack of any intellectual resources in Bulgarian cities and about the extremely boring life. The theater is out of the question, even in Sofia (p. 171).

A fellow Pole, who lives permanently in Ruse, tells Zaleski that there are "enormous difficulties in bringing up children" (p. 172) and sums up the position of Westerners in the city: "We are all getting covered with patina here, cut off from all of Europe" (p. 171).

Zaleski's description of Ruse, which he visited in October 1886, fits into a popular subgenre of Western European travelers' and journalists' reports on the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, many of which covered the Bulgarian lands. Zaleski contributed to the literature on the subject an unconscious yet undeniable opposition to the emerging urban myth of Ruse as "Bulgaria's most European city." His depiction of post-Ottoman reality leads to the conclusion that what local residents regarded as a "gateway to the West," foreigners might have perceived as a true "gateway to the East."

It should also be noted that Zaleski is not consciously ironic and pessimistic about Ruse and the Bulgarian Principality as a whole. He is quick to point out the potential for economic growth, the reasons behind many cultural shortcomings and peculiarities, and the uncorrupted morality of the newly-liberated people. His role of a spontaneous observer of the parliamentary elections gives credence to the information he provides about the country's political system, as well as to his conviction that Bulgarians genuinely want to build an independent and prosperous democratic state. The nascent political life seems to be the point at which the dichotomous categories of East and West, European and Ottoman, Bulgarian and Turkish exhaust their potential as markers of national exoticism. Instead, it suggests the emergence of social phenomena to which continental observers have long been accustomed. In 1886, however, post-Ottoman Ruse is far from resembling a "Little Vienna," at least in Zaleski's reports.

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