

SOME DETAILS
ABOUT THE
LIFE OF JOACHIM
LELEWEL

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Some Details About the Life of Joachim Lelewel in Brussels*

We are familiar with the simple life that this great Polish scholar and patriot led in Brussels. Joachim Lelewel first lived in a small apartment above a tavern called "Varsovie" on Rue du Chêne, 26 (this house no longer exists). He later moved to two small rooms on Rue des Eperonniers, 58 (Marais S. Jean, 18). Currently, there is a commemorative plaque on the latter house, reminding us of his long stay in Brussels (Pl. VI).

Like most emigrants, Lelewel faced significant financial difficulties, and his sensitivity and pride made his situation particularly difficult. He never wanted to accept any assistance, neither from his numerous Belgian and Polish friends nor from his own family. He lived on his meager writing fees (which were insufficient) and occasional odd jobs that he would accept from time to time.

We find a rich source of information about Lelewel's life in Brussels in the letters he wrote to his family, especially his brother Jean, who was also an emigrant and had settled in Switzerland, where he worked as an engineer. The following details are derived from a collection of his letters published some time after his death.¹

In 1833, before his departure from France, he wrote: "For the past year, I have spent 600 francs, maybe 700 with all the extraordinary losses. Today, if I could stay in France, I would spend less." Elsewhere, he complains about his correspondence costing him about 40 francs per month, despite his efforts to send multiple letters in the same envelope. There were also debts of the Polish National Committee amounting to 2,000 francs, which he decided to settle using his personal budget. On August 8, 1836, he wrote, "Today, I paid 500 francs towards the debt of the National Committee. I hope I will be able to fully settle it through my work or my savings."

It is often believed that Lelewel had sufficient means to live comfortably and that he received subsidies and donations like many other emigrants who, unfortunately, frequently exploited the hospitality and generosity of the Belgians. However, this was not the case. From this perspective, Joachim Lelewel is entirely beyond reproach. He even managed, by depriving himself of everything, to assist other emigrants who were more unfortunate than him with his meager resources. He had the habit of having only one proper meal per day, which he prepared himself. His only luxury was going to have a cup of black coffee at a nearby café, and he even reproached himself for this "indulgence."

One day, he received 600 francs for some past work, a sum he no longer counted on, and immediately donated 50 francs to the fund for poor emigrants and 100 francs for the expenses of the patriotic movement, keeping the rest for himself. He said, "I could be rich if I wanted to accept the offers made to me. I would have all the conveniences if I accepted all the hospitality, even if it were only for a month each time." He added, "Perhaps they offer it to me because they know very well that I will not accept."

In a letter dated May 7, 1838, he provided his brother with a list of his furniture, which we reproduce in its entirety: "My wardrobe is not included. In my library, the numismatic section is worth 300 francs. My engraved plates - the copper alone is worth more than 200 francs, and the work should not be without value, if it could be useful after my death. Copies of my works, perhaps worth 150 francs. I have some old coins

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¹ *Lisly Joachima Lelewela-Poznan* 1878, volume II.

and a few Greek medals, which, if sold, could fetch around 200 francs. In this way, the sale of my furniture could bring in 1,500 to 2,000 francs if I die leaving debts."² That was his entire personal fortune. (His library and collection of old geographical maps of independent Poland, approximately 200 maps and atlases, were not included in this list as Lelewel had bequeathed them to the future University of Vilna in independent Poland)

In Brussels, at that time, there were numerous anecdotes and stories circulating about the life and peculiarities of this great man. His extremely poor appearance made him stand out. He usually wore a blue worker's blouse. When his brother Jean asked him about it, he received this reply: "You don't like my blouse. You say it might still be suitable for traveling - well, we (emigrants) are constantly on the move... This blouse saves my wardrobe; it will last another three years, maybe more. It withstands grease stains from the kitchen, which is also my dining room. It's better that way than staining my coat."

We cannot go into further details of this kind; there are too many, and we must move on to Lelewel's works. We would like to draw special attention to his major numismatic work, as we are celebrating the centenary of its publication this year. It is the "Numismatique du Moyen-Age" (Numismatics of the Middle Ages).³

In 1833, the work was already well advanced. He wrote, "The work that currently occupies me is scholarly research on numismatics. There is little hope of printing it. It is a difficult publication that can earn little or nothing at all. I have already started engraving the plates. So much work has been done that it must be finished. It would be my only consolation far from my loved ones."

To gather information, he embarked on excursions to various cities. In general, Lelewel traveled on foot. During one of his walks, he was stopped in Assche by the justice of the peace, who suspected him of being an Orangist. After being interrogated by the public prosecutor, he was brought before the examining magistrate. Fortunately, the magistrate happened to be his friend, and the adventure came to an end.

In February 1834, eleven out of the projected twenty copper engravings were already completed, and the French text was nearing its end. The remaining challenge was to find a publisher, which proved to be the most difficult task.

To complete his work, Lelewel maintained extensive correspondence and received remarks and details from many enthusiasts about their own research.

Lelewel, despite being frugal, amazed himself by doing "all this for his pleasure and distraction," but he added, "and perhaps also for profit." He further stated, "The Belgians see this last goal for me, but I would be very happy if this work could be published."

At one point, political difficulties almost interrupted his work. We know that after the disorders of April 6, 1834, the government, through the decree of April 13, decided to expel a certain number of foreigners from Belgium, including French, Dutch, and several Polish emigrants. Lelewel was among them. However, the efforts of his friends, especially those of Ducpétiaux, led to a positive outcome. The execution of the order against him was suspended until the completion of his work on the "Numismatique du Moyen-Age" (Numismatics of the Middle Ages). It is worth noting that due to this expulsion threat, Lelewel received a letter from La Fayette filled with compassion and friendship.

² This account is quite difficult to understand. It is unclear how Lelewel, with the figures cited, manages to calculate 1500 to 2000 francs..

³ Joachim Lelewel, *Numismatique du Moyen-Age*, considered from the perspective of type; accompanied by an atlas composed of chronological tables, geographical maps, and engraved copper plates. Published by Joseph Straszewicz. Bruxelles, at Bertot, bookseller, Marché-au-bois, 1835, 3 parts in 2 vol. 8°, 292, 126 and 337 pp.

The expulsion order was withdrawn, but uncertainty remained. The traces of this sentiment can still be found in a letter dated October 19, 1834: "A long stay is doubtful. I have received a reprieve until the completion of my work, and expulsion will undoubtedly follow. I cannot predict what will become of me. My situation is starting to become critical. I have, in fact, at the moment, an amusement that is also a great work, my publication. But time is passing, my reserves are running out, the future is uncertain, and this publication entails significant expenses. What should I do? In any case, it must be finished. The publisher will be Straszewicz;⁴ I hope he will find funds for me. Undoubtedly, he will have to advance around fifteen hundred francs himself. He will not lose anything. Meanwhile, public opinion speaks joyfully about the money that Straszewicz has already given me, an amount ranging from twelve to sixty thousand francs."

Two months later,⁵ the situation remained uncertain. "I have a premonition that Straszewicz will have troubles with my publication. The sums I have advanced are increasing. For now, I am covering the current expenses of printing and engravings... If they finish the printing, I will take a little rest and hope to settle my accounts with Straszewicz, more or less. I will have around 300 francs and copies that I can sell if necessary." As will soon be seen, the printing proved to be more costly and difficult. "Straszewicz made me the proposal to print 'Numismatique' out of friendship. I will not lose anything, and perhaps I will gain something. The mountains of gold imagined by Straszewicz did not entice me, but I hoped and desired the end of this heavy work and the satisfaction it will bring me. I also hope to recover my expenses. I have advanced from 300 to 400 francs. Straszewicz has paid three thousand, and he still has two thousand to settle. The costs can reach up to six thousand francs. If the printing is not yet finished, it is not my fault but the dishonesty of the Brussels printers who quarrel among themselves for the profit they expect from this edition."

Our scholar was tired of all these controversies, and on July 26, 1835, he wrote, "...troubles with the accounts... I will propose that he (Straszewicz) gives me 600 francs for everything. I think he will accept; that will be the result of over two years of work." (At that time, an excerpt from his numismatic work titled "Observations on the Types of the Middle Ages of the Currency of the Netherlands" was published under the title "Memoir extracted from a work entitled 'Numismatique du Moyen-Age sous le rapport du type.' Ouvrage publié par Joseph Straszewicz." It was printed in only 100 copies by E. Laurent, 1835).

Finally, everything worked out for the best. The publisher did not lose anything; on the contrary, he gained three thousand francs, and the author, in the end, received slightly more than he had hoped for.

In one of his letters, we learn that he received three hundred francs for the illustrations, that his "Numismatique" was printed in 750 copies, of which the author kept 50 copies for himself. On the subsequent copies, he collected one franc, and the engraved plates remained his property. He was very content with this arrangement and wrote, "I have enough to live until 1837."

If we have lingered so long on the insignificant details of these accounts and calculations, it is to show the moral and material situation in which Lelewel accomplished this enormous work.

But more than his material success, he felt the moral satisfaction of completing his work and the reception it received. He joyfully announced to his brother that the scientific impact of the "Numismatique du Moyen-Age" exceeded his expectations. "It is endlessly cited, despite the difficulties of its reading. It marks a turning point for numismatics, which has been profoundly shaken. I did not have that intention, and I did not foresee it, but it is the truth."

⁴ Straszewicz, a Polish émigré, publisher of several works by Lelewel.

⁵ January 30, 1835.

Numismatics was Lelewel's favorite science. In works like these, he poured his heart and soul. The greater the difficulties, the more pleased he was with his success. In one of his letters to Jean, he writes, "I have something very interesting to tell you: Louis-Philippe subscribed to twelve copies of my numismatic work, but Straszewicz was forbidden to mention this order." And in another letter, "King Leopold asked for four copies... The success of the volume 'Etudes Numismatiques' is enormous... one hundred and thirty subscribers! And the minister asked me for 20 copies, making it a total of one hundred and fifty." And further, "Straszewicz is laughing now, considering himself a great publisher and paying me ten francs per plate and ten francs per sheet. Without Straszewicz, I would not have had a publisher."

Lelewel was not deterred by difficulties in his numismatic research. He did not hesitate to travel (on foot!) to different cities if he believed he would find something of interest there. He went to Antwerp to attend an auction of a large numismatic collection. Another time, he paid a visit to numismatists in Liège, who received him warmly. "Such was the joy of numismatic enthusiasts, the friendliness, the receptions, that I didn't have a free moment."⁶ These journeys across the country were quite frequent. He made a trip to the Namur and Charleroi regions. "In ten days, I covered thirty-two long leagues."⁷ He spent the Easter holidays of 1839 with one of his compatriots, Madame Godebska, along with numismatic enthusiasts in Louvain. In his letters of December 1844, he again discussed the "Numismatique du Moyen-Age." We learned that the work was already completely sold out and that only secondhand copies could be found.

His scientific ambition was the main driving force behind his work; we can understand this from the following sentence written about the "Études Numismatiques et Archéologiques":⁸ "The publication of this work has given me a lot of trouble. The delay has diminished the relevance and scientific charm of my efforts."⁹ To ensure that the album with its engravings would be ready on time, he would lock himself in his apartment for a few months and refuse entry to anyone. The instructions were so strict that it was in vain for friends or visitors to knock on the door and call out their names. As a scholar, Lelewel was well-known and highly regarded. He maintained extensive correspondence with scholars from various countries and was a member of multiple scientific societies in England, France, Germany, and others. It is worth noting that Russian scholars, despite his political stance towards their enemy country, sought him out. I would like to mention Serge Stroganov from Moscow University, who sent him his work on Russian numismatics in Brussels, inviting him to correspond. Lelewel was very appreciative of this tribute to his expertise by the Russian professor.

The Free University of Brussels also sought his collaboration. In his letters, we find this passage regarding this matter: "There is a university here called 'free,' which is supposed to be the 'counterbalance' to the Catholic university founded by the clergy. The founders invited me to give any history course. This could have stabilized my situation in Belgium. But when they began to delve into the issue, the Belgians became afraid, and silence ensued. Thank God, the project has been shelved. The existence of this university is not without gossip, and I do not want to get involved." It is understandable that Lelewel did not want to involve himself in Belgian internal affairs, considering his already difficult situation. Even booksellers refused to print works bearing his name. He mentions the response given by an intermediary on behalf of a major bookstore in Brussels: "The request I made to Mr. Melline, a bookseller in this city, regarding the publication of the history of Poland did not yield favorable results. This publisher would find your proposals very advantageous, he told me, if he could, given his current situation, undertake the publication of any

⁶ Letter of April 3, 1838.

⁷ Letter of October 21, 1838.

⁸ *Études numismatiques et archéologiques. Premier volume. Type gaulois celtique. Bruxelles, P. J. Vogler, 1841, 1 vol. 471 pp. Atlas, 1840, obl.*

⁹ Letter of November 1, 1840.

work bearing your name. He assures me that if he had published even a single one of your writings, he would immediately see the Russian government and most of the German governments take severe measures to hinder, more than ever, and even completely ruin the book trade he conducts with Russia and certain parts of Germany. Consequently, he cannot take such risks, no matter how much he desires to oblige you."

On November 19, 1838, in a letter addressed to Jean, Joachim Lelewel wrote: "Immediately after the anniversary,¹⁰ I was offered a job. It involves creating a catalog for a collection, which could earn me around 200 francs. This work will take up the whole month of December and maybe even January. It seems quite secure, and it is much needed!"

The old bookseller Ver Beist recommended Lelewel to his friend Leclercqz to create a catalog of his numismatic collection that he wanted to sell. "This catalog took up the months of February and March (1839)," Lelewel wrote in his "Adventures." "Then the sale took place, and I received 250 francs, some books, and in the end, with delightful roasts, we emptied a few bottles of Cypriot wine." This catalog was published under the title "Revue du cabinet de médailles de feu Leclercqz, 1838."

On May 8, 1839, Joachim returns to the question of this catalog in a letter to Jean: "Thanks to Leclercqz's catalog, I can finally improve my finances, although this gain seems unworthy to me. It was painful for me to catalog a large number of fake medals and place them among the genuine ones, even among the most precious rarities, and then to find myself at the sale among enthusiasts who laughed at it, even though they knew the necessity for which I did it. Despite everything, I should not have stooped so low, especially since I am considered an expert here! But that's not all! The catalog is in the hands not only of enthusiasts who saw me at the sale but also of those who do not know me but are aware that I worked on it."

On November 9, 1841, Lelewel appraises the numismatic collection of the city of Brussels, which they intended to sell to the government. We find the following details regarding this matter: "I don't remember if I have already written to you that for a few months, I have had a paid job. The city is going to sell the numismatic collection to the government, and they asked me to create the catalog. They hinted at the hope of 500 francs, but I would be content if I could get 300 francs because the entire collection is not worth more than fifteen thousand."¹¹

Under the date of October 30, 1852, he adds: "I am done with the city; I have returned the catalogs to them. They promptly paid me five hundred francs, which I accepted with gratitude and without hesitation because the city has also concluded its business with the government, and my catalogs were useful."¹²

There was talk of assigning Lelewel to create a catalog for the State's numismatic cabinet. As early as January 1842, he wrote: "In the more distant future, I can hope to have work for the government at the mint; but that is still far away."

In April 1843, Joachim wrote to his brother: "Oh, I forgot to mention the unexpected happiness of the old man.¹³ The governor here dances around him and proposes to entrust him with the public numismatic cabinet, which would be a public position, but there are still difficulties, even from the old man's side."

¹⁰ November 29, which marked the beginning of the Polish revolution of 1830, which was solemnly celebrated by Polish emigrants and has been a national holiday since the resurrection of Poland.

¹¹ Letter of January 27, 1842.

¹² The handwritten catalogue is now preserved in the Cabinet of Medals at the Royal Library of Belgium.

¹³ To deceive the censorship of the occupiers in the letters to his family in Poland, Lelewel, when referring to himself, would often write in the third person and use terms like "vieux" or "vieille femme."

However, neither a public position nor the task of creating a catalog for the State were assigned to him. In May 1844, he wrote: "A month ago, I accepted to work on the catalog 'of the State's numismatic collection,' believing that they had prepared a space for me, as promised six months ago, but nothing has been prepared, and I am still waiting."

In October of the same year, Lelewel mentioned in a letter: "We have no news about the catalog of the government's cabinet; it hasn't been started yet, and we don't know when it will be possible to do it. It would be a few months' worth of work." As mentioned earlier, Lelewel never undertook this work.

In the same collection of letters, we find some interesting details regarding the large medallion that David made of Lelewel. The few sentences we encounter in his letters show how much Lelewel avoided any publicity or external displays, even from his friends and his own family.

In response to a question posed by his brother Jean about his portrait, Lelewel replied on December 8, 1844: "I conclude this long letter with a little news that will let you know that if you won't have the painting, at least you will soon have the satisfaction of seeing me in bronze. The very famous sculptor David has been making various efforts for a long time to obtain my profile. Recently, he stayed in Brussels and came to my place with a pencil in hand. I didn't have the possibility to show him the door or snatch his pencil away, but he didn't reach his goal without difficulties.¹⁴ Finally, you will have me in bronze, rejoice!"

Jean became impatient and asked about the medallion. But there was no sign of life from David. "Has David done anything? I don't know. He hasn't sent me anything, but I've heard that he had other urgent works," Lelewel wrote.¹⁵ "I'm finally sending you two plaster medallions sent by David; they will certainly break at my place. If you want the one in bronze, come and get it yourself." On January 20, 1846, Lelewel wrote, "David refused to make a portrait of the Prince of Orleans, but he sculpts vagabonds."

Lelewel's admirers made several medals in his honor, but the old loner was not at all proud. In one of his many letters,¹⁶ he writes in a moment of good humor: "The Belgians steal from me; there is no doubt that my 'facies' is my material and intellectual property. They respect this property in such a way: Hart struck a large medal. Three copies of the small medal were brought to me by the Schoors brothers, wealthy numismatic enthusiasts whom I did not know before. Geefs, one of the top sculptors here, often came to my place without being invited. I thought his visits had a purpose and that he came to steal from me. It's done! He told me that he has an order for a copy of my bust in alabaster for Volhynia or Podolia." What Lelewel tells us about the difficulties he caused David when he wanted to draw his profile is perfectly true. He created difficulties for anyone who wanted to paint his portrait. Such cases often arose, as many of his Belgian and Polish admirers desired to have his likeness. From another source, we learn about the portrait of our scholar painted by Jean van Eycken. The widow of a friend of Lelewel, Mrs. Casimir Korybut-Daszkiwicz, was determined to have the portrait of this great patriot. As we know, it was not easy. But Jean van Eycken accepted the proposal and succeeded in painting the portrait through a trick. He painted through a partially opened door during a long conversation that Lelewel had with a Belgian democrat who was in on the secret. In this oil painting, Lelewel is depicted standing, his right hand resting on a cane, and his left hand placed behind his back in a gesture familiar to him. He is dressed in a blue working blouse. This portrait was later purchased by Chopin's nephew, Colonel Henry Jedrzejewicz, who lived in Paris.

We also know of another portrait painted without Lelewel's knowledge in 1854 by Guminski. This time, he is depicted sitting while drawing one of his geographical maps, with his left hand also behind his back. In

¹⁴ The drawing by David is in print room of the Royal Library of Brussels.

¹⁵ Letter of May 1845.

¹⁶ Letter of December 15, 1858.

the background, several shelves with books can be seen, as well as a chair holding his hat and handkerchief. Numerous photographs of this portrait were spread throughout Poland, and the original belonged to Jozefowicz, who resided in Paris.

The author of this last portrait, the Polish artist Guminski, left us a description of Lelewel's dwelling. "His apartment was as unique as its occupant; it was accessed through a winding staircase that led to the room occupied by a barber on the ground floor. The furnishings consisted of two small tables, a few simple stools, a small wardrobe, and shelves with books. His bed was made of a pallet instead of a mattress, covered with a modest blanket. His cap and handkerchief were always lying on a chair. During harsh weather, it was very cold inside, as the warmth only reached through the barber's room." One day, Guminski arrived at Lelewel's place and found him in the middle of the room, contemplating a stovepipe. Our scholar rubbed his hands together with joy and said, "Can you feel the warmth? And to think that my landlord believes I did him a great favor by allowing the pipe to pass through my room. His stove was emitting smoke, and the stove repairman decided that only a pipe could solve this inconvenience."

Lelewel, in his naivety, believed the stove repairman's story. The reality was quite different. Two Polish brothers, the Biernacki, lived in Brussels at that time. Knowing Lelewel's sensitivities, they convinced the barber, for a sum of money, to participate in this charade. It was not very difficult. Moreover, they paid for the coal so that the pipe heating Lelewel's room would always remain warm.

Thus, amidst financial and political difficulties and the homage of his Belgian and Polish friends, Lelewel spent almost half of his long life in Brussels, entirely immersed in his scientific works of history, geography, and numismatics.

Although a hundred years have passed since he settled on the hospitable soil of Belgium, his memory lives on through his works, not only in written or engraved form but also in a living legacy—the Royal Numismatic Society of Belgium, of which he was a founding member and the first honorary president.

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