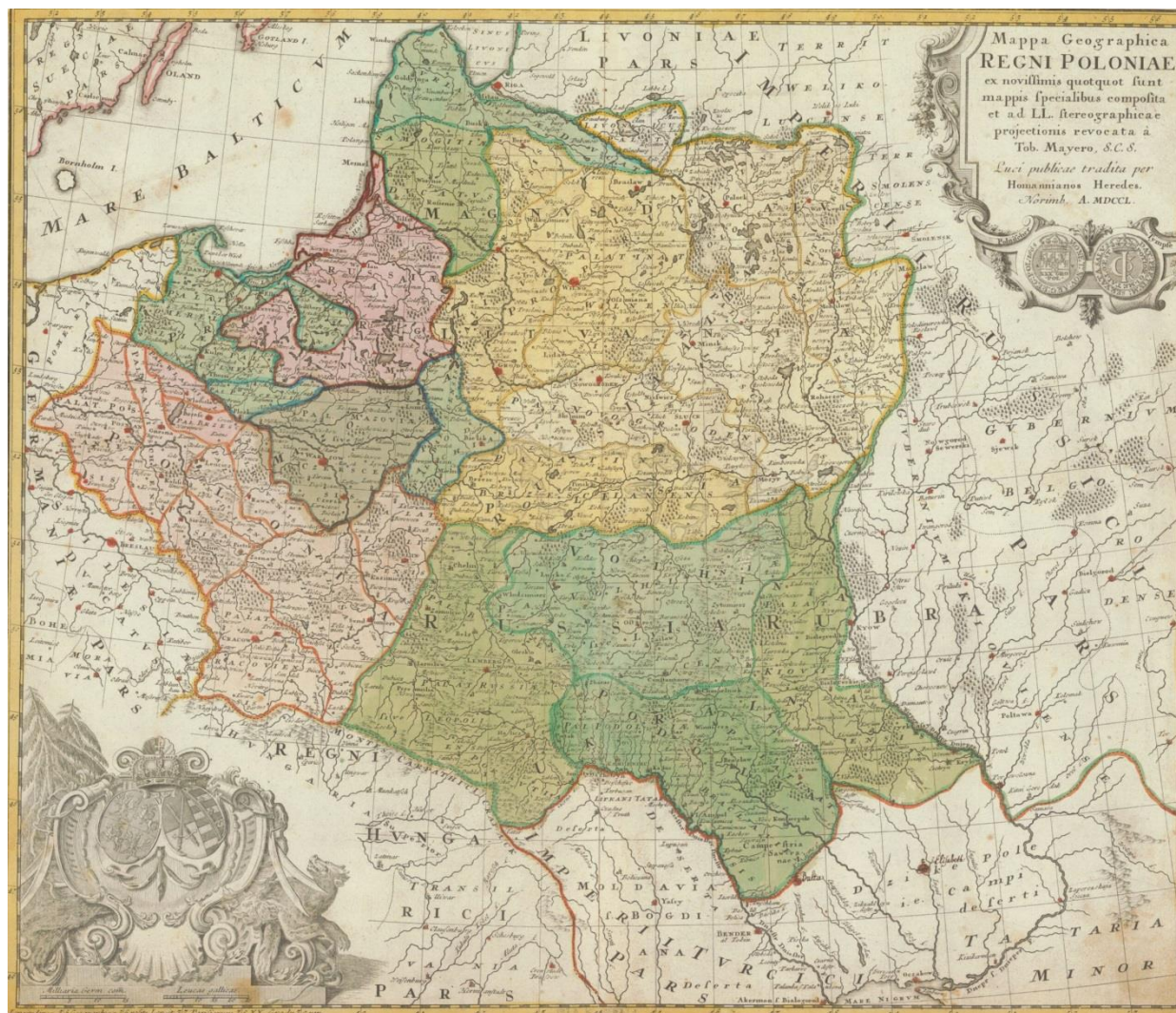# Property Inventories

Author: Piotr Zelny, a member of the PolishOrigins team

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth 1750

Have you ever considered how to conduct your genealogical research when there are no vital books? Have you ever asked yourself about the possibilities of finding your ancestors living prior to the partitions of Poland? Have you ever thought about their conditions of work and everyday life? This article is for everyone who has ever asked themselves these kinds of questions.

Property inventories, apart from commonly known vital records, are one of the basic sources (one of many) for genealogical research on the peasant family. Their genealogical value cannot be overestimated as they contain registers of feudal obligations which list peasant families living in the particular localities. They

occur in mass numbers, which is one of the reasons why they play such a significant role. It is believed that tens of thousands of such sources have survived to this day. The exact number is unknown. The oldest documents of this type, preserved to the present, come from the turn of the 15th and the 16th centuries. The registers of feudal obligations (containing lists of peasants) disappeared from the pages of the property inventories in the 1860s as the result of abolition of the feudal system. Since feudal obligations (serfdom and others) were abolished, there was no longer any reason to prepare the registers.

Register of subjects and their feudal obligations of the village of Wielowieś from 1772

Introduction: The Feudal System in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Since 1569, the Kingdom of Poland and The Grand Duchy of Lithuania constituted one united country which was commonly known as The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or the Commonwealth of the Two Nations or simply as Poland. The country covered a vast amount of territory in Central Europe and included territory now in contemporary Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus and Latvia. The highest authority was the King of Poland, who was also the Grand Duke of Lithuania, elected by the nobles '*szlachta*'. The country existed until 1795 when, as a result of the Partitions of Poland, it was dismembered and divided between its neighbors (Russia, Prussia and Austria) and disappeared from the map of Europe.

During that time, the prevailing social-economical-political system in Europe was feudalism. Broadly defined, it was a way of structuring society around relationships that were derived from the holding of land in exchange for service or labor. Each European country had its own specific local system of feudalism.

Also, the feudal system itself evolved over the course of centuries. In the Polish-Lithuanian state, feudal society was divided into four basic social classes. These were the nobility, the clergy, the burghers and the peasantry. However, each class was very diverse and divided into smaller social subgroups having their own rights, limitations and obligations.

One of the most important rights was the right to possess land. At that time, the overwhelming majority of the members of peasant society had no right to possess land in its own right. A plot of land was allocated to peasant families by the possessor (owner or leaseholder) of the land (and/or of the village). The peasants were serfs and subjects of the landlord. As serfs who occupied a plot of a lord's land, they were required to work (as serfs) for the landlord on his farms as well as pay him rent and tributes. As subjects of a particular lord, a serf's freedom to leave the village (the estate property) belonging to the lord was highly restricted since moving to another village (belonging to another lord) would mean abandoning their current lord and the obligations owed to him. In return, subject peasants were entitled to protection, justice, material support and the right to build a house and cultivate their allotted field in order to maintain their own subsistence. The system existed deep into the 19th century when it was abolished in stages in the territories of the three partitioning powers. The abolition of the feudal system and the emancipation of the peasantry began in 1807 in the Prussian partition of Poland and the process lasted there until 1872; in 1848 in the Austrian partition of Poland; and in 1861 and 1864 in the Russian partition of Poland.

The feudal system recognized three basic categories of land property. These were royal, ecclesiastical and noble properties. The lands that were part of the royal domain consisted of court counties, non-court counties (tenements), and economies. Ecclesiastical lands were the property of individual bishoprics, monasteries or parish churches. Noble lands were owned by individual noble families and great magnate houses. The land property (the royal, the ecclesiastical or the noble domains) comprised areas consisting of individual villages and towns or only their parts as well as agricultural and forest areas. They could form huge property areas numbering hundreds of villages and towns and covering many thousands of square kilometers as well as small, one village properties or properties covering only part of a village.

The great complexes of properties had their own central administrative management. To make them easier to manage, they were divided into smaller and more convenient economic units (not to be confused with state or church administration units) called properties, estates, states, tenements, counties etc. Each of these units had its own local management office. The local managements supervised the farms located in the villages which belonged to the landlord (the king, the church, or a noble). Peasants living in these villages were subjects of the landlord, hence they were obliged to serve (feudal obligations) on the farms of their lord as well as pay him rent and tributes. The local management offices produced many types of documents. One type, property inventories, which includes registers of feudal obligations, is extremely important for understanding the feudal system of the time. Together with other types of documents property inventories paint a vivid picture of the relationship between landlords and their peasant subjects.

Property Inventories and Why They Were Created

Property inventories were documents of an economic, financial and legal character. The documents achieved a level of standardization in the 17th century. However, when dealing with such a great amount of documentation dispersed over such a large area and which occurred over such a long period of time, frequently we encounter a problem in the sense that the contents of individual documents may differ considerably one from another.

Property inventories may present a more or less accurate picture of particular lands, villages and towns. They may contain descriptions of buildings, lands and crops. They may contain registers of feudal

obligations which list inhabitants of particular villages and cities along with information concerning their property status and obligations towards the landlord. Eventually, they may contain a detailed description of the system of feudal duties of the particular village being described.

On the one hand, they could sanction the existing regulations, norms and relations between subjects (peasants or townspeople) and the feudal lord, or, on the other hand, they could invalidate the existing rules and introduce new ones. The inventories served as the basis for controlling the condition as well as for estimating the profitability and valuation of individual land properties.

Often the property inventories were prepared for various types of transactions, such as purchase, sale, lease, pledge, etc. On other occasions the inventories dealt with the circumstances related to the inheritance of property, i.e. the takeover of the inheritance as well as the division of property between the heirs. The inventories provided a database for estimating the profitability and valuation of the property which affected the amount of lease obligations and property divisions between the heirs. They also appeared due to border disputes arising between the owners of neighboring properties.

The inventories were produced by clerks managing the farm, the property or the entire complex of properties when the supervisor was to be changed. In such circumstances the property inventory was produced to illustrate the state of the property at the time when it was to be taken over by a new official. Sometimes this documentation could have been created as a result of the official controls carried out by supervisory authorities. The audits were usually conducted by commissioners travelling around their territories. In this way, the activity of the managers of individual farms and entire properties was controlled on site.

Register of subjects and their feudal obligations of the village of Słomki, 1765. AGAD Warsaw

The reorganization and reform of property management was another reason why the inventories were created. The goal of this activity was to present an actual picture and description of the condition of the property or to introduce the intensification of agricultural production. In the latter case, the inventory did not present the actual state of affairs, but presented and sanctioned the newly introduced and binding changes in the amount of peasants' obligations towards their landlord.

The persons responsible for the compilation of property inventories were various types of officials reporting to the landowner. They were workers of administrative and economic departments. Depending on their individual function and position, they were called officials, economists or commissioners. These officials were assisted by scribes who manually drew up the relevant documentation. In general, each inventory was to be made on-site in the form of a site visit. However, it sometimes happened that officials simply copied data from older documents or introduced new regulations not based on the site visit, but on the basis of the data from older inventories. In addition to the site inspection, old inventories and the other documents, an important source of information was the local population, which made declarations to the official regarding the property status, the size of the cultivated land, the amount of livestock and the size of the family as well as the type and amount of feudal obligations.

What Property Inventories Contain

Generally, property inventories consist of three basic parts. The title, the descriptive part, and the normative part. This type of documentation may refer to a single settlement or to an entire complex of properties, which could include many villages and towns. They can be in the form of a separate book (a manuscript), a notebook, a loose document or a record entry in court books.

The title of the inventory provided the collective name of the complex of properties e.g. the property of Serednie, as well as the names of individual localities included in this property inventory. Depending on the circumstances of preparing the documentation, the purpose of its creation and its content may be specified, too. The title contained the name of the owner or owners of the properties and, if the properties were on lease, also the lessee. The date of the origin of the document and, in the case of a lease, the period of its validity were included.
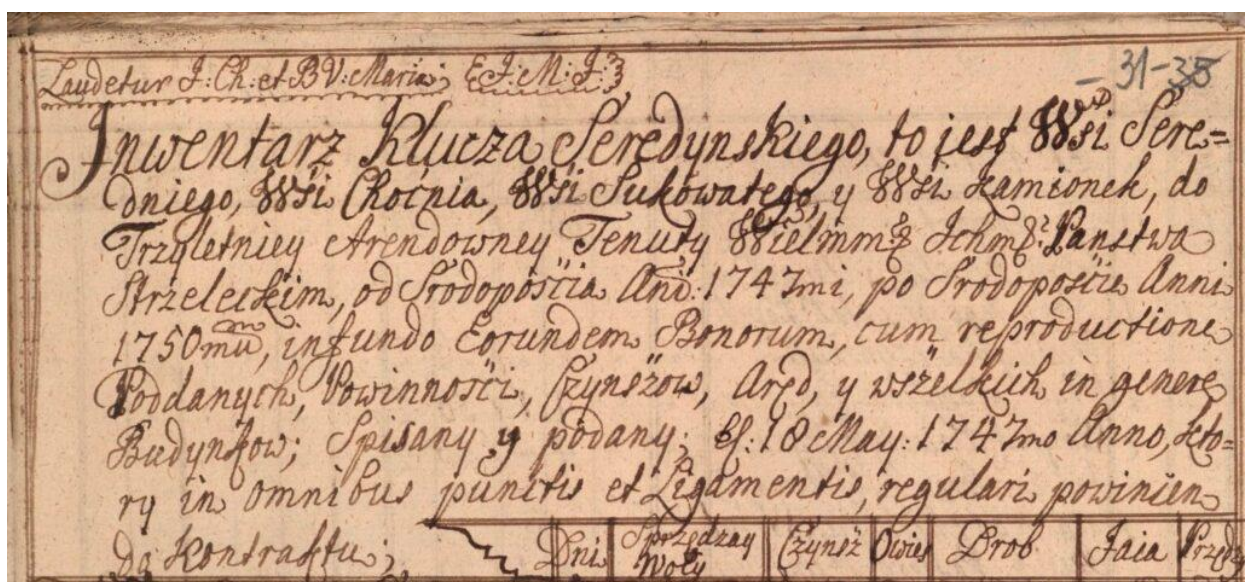
Title page of an inventory. The complex of properties of Serednie, 1747. AP Przemysl

The second part of the document, i.e. the descriptive part, usually contained a detailed description of a manor, farm buildings and agricultural land. The areas of individual villages were divided into the noble (the manor farm), the ecclesiastical (the church area) and the rural (peasants' fields) terrains. The manor area was the part of the village managed directly by the officials of the landlord. It consisted of an administrative and residential building, i.e. a manor house, farm buildings and farm land. The whole entity was called the manor or manorial farm.

The descriptive part of the inventory provided the location of the manor and farm buildings, the external appearance of these buildings and their internal layout, the number and area of rooms, equipment and their condition. There was a description of the farmland, agricultural crops, pastures, meadows, gardens and a register of the livestock. The peasants were obliged to serve and fulfil various duties on this manorial farm. Some more complex inventories also provided very precious descriptions of peasants' cottages as well as inns and other rural buildings located in the specific village.
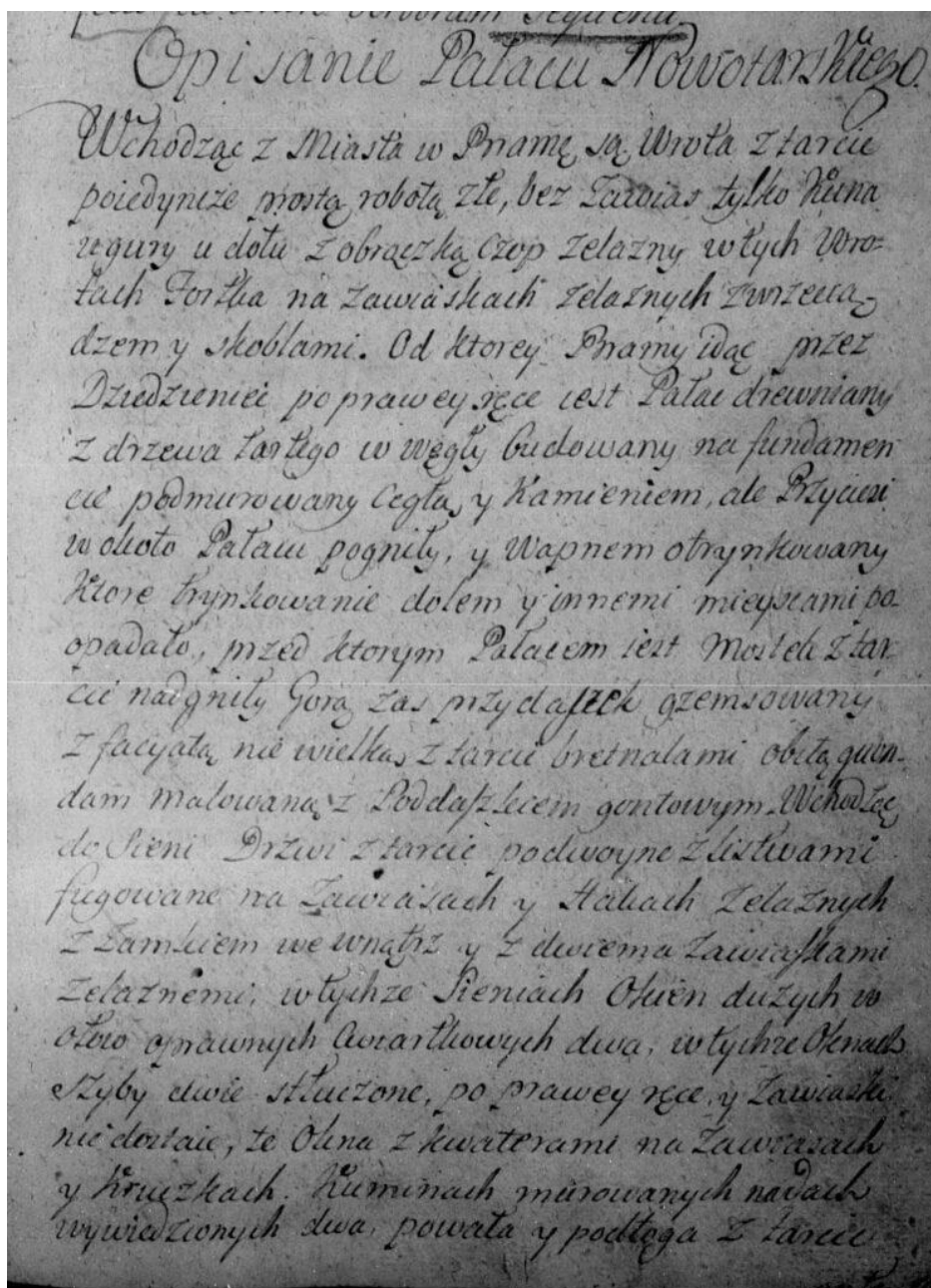
Descriptive part of an inventory. Description of the palace in Nowy Targ, 1767. AN Krakow

The third part of the document, i.e. the normative portion, was divided into two parts. The first part contained a register of population along with the property of individual families as well as their feudal obligations. The second part provided detailed instructions and regulations in regard to the relations between peasants and the landlord as well as rules of the village's internal system.

The register of population usually was presented in tabular form. It listed the first and the last name, or only the first name, or the first name and the nickname of the head of individual peasant families living in the village. Other family members were frequently omitted. The population was divided into various categories. Belonging to a particular category depended on property status. The state of property of a particular family determined the amount of feudal service and other tributes required. For this reason, the inventories sometimes provided more detailed information about the area of land being cultivated by a particular family. Families belonging to a particular category usually farmed a specific amount of land e.g. 'a field', 'a half-field', 'a quarter-field', 'a garden'. Also the census included the number of oxen and horses owned by a family or more frequently, just the number of the animals used by the family to cultivate the lord's farm as part of the peasant's feudal obligation. It was very important information because it determined the type of the feudal service required of the serf (with animals or on foot) and the number of duties related to transportation.

Register of subjects and their feudal obligations of the village of Trościaniec, 1765. AGAD Warsaw

Subsequent columns listed the number of days of feudal service required of the serf (in division on its type) per week, and also the number of oxen and horses, the amount of rent in money, the amount of oats in bushels and the other tributes such as: geese, capons, chickens, eggs, yarn etc.

Unfortunately, not all the categories of rural population were listed in the registers. The usual categories listed included the part of the population which owned houses and farmed the land allocated to them or, if not farm fields, at least land sufficient for a garden. The categories found were: 'kmieć' (a peasant farmer cultivating about 1 'łan' of farming land, depending on a region and a historical period it was equal to at least 40 acres), 'półrolnik/półkmieć' (a peasant farmer cultivating about a half of the 'łan' of farming land), 'zarębnik' (a peasant farmer cultivating about a quarter of the 'łan' of farming land), 'zagrodnik' (owner of a cottage with a small amount of land), 'ogrodnik' (a gardener), and 'chałupnik' (a cottager).

Families which did not have their own houses and did not cultivate any land, i.e. 'komornik' (a landless peasant) and 'kątnik' (a landless peasant) were mentioned less frequently. Other groups of the population, such as farm workers, maidens, hired workers or servants were almost always absent or occurred very rarely in the registers.

Apart from the rural inventories, there were also municipal inventories which contained lists of the population of individual towns. They provided data regarding the property of townspeople as well as their burdens such as taxes, rents, fees and tributes.

At the end of the normative part of the inventory, were found detailed instructions regarding the performance of the feudal duties of serfdom, the so-called regulations or descriptions of obligations. The instructions developed in detail and precisely regulated the duties of the communities towards the landlord and determined the internal system of the village. The instructions regulated the amount of time to be worked, the number and length of breaks during the workday when a serf fulfilled his feudal obligations, working conditions related to variables such as the weather, the use of agricultural tools and draft animals. They enumerated the types of annual agricultural work as well as regulated matters related to the other duties and fees, such as the transport of goods, deadlines for paying rents and for paying tributes in the form of agricultural products, animals and cash. They also regulated important issues such as land trades between peasants, etc.
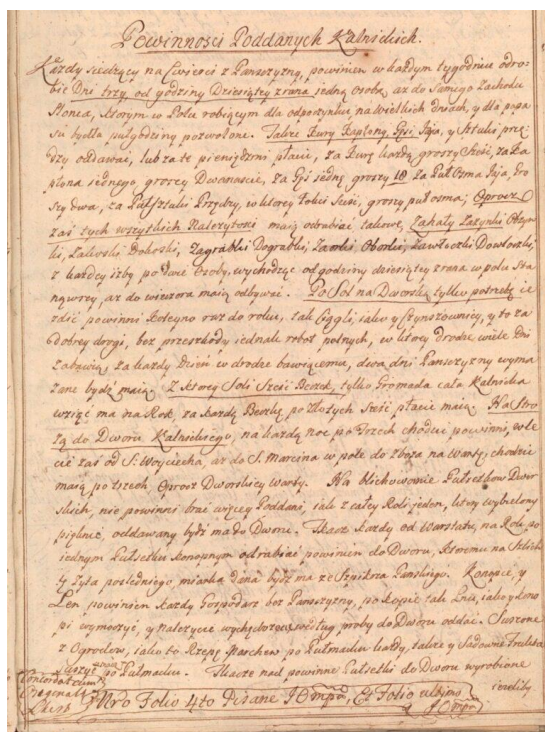
Normative part of an inventory. Regulations of obligations of Kalnica, 1767. AP Przemysl

In addition to such complete inventories containing all three parts, there also exist partial documents containing only some of the above-mentioned elements. For example, if there was neither a manor house nor a manor farm in a particular village then the inventory would not contain a descriptive part of these elements. The most painful fact for genealogists is that some documents may not contain a list of peasant or town families, their property status and feudal obligations. On the other hand, there are also some documents which may contain much richer material.

Documents of this type were written by thousands of scribes and officials employed in offices. Their content corresponded to the needs and purposes necessary for managing a particular property. Hence their content and accuracy largely depended on the need of the moment and the experience of the clerk drawing up the document.

Assessment of the Source

Generally, the property inventories are rated very highly by historians. These are sources that provide a lot of data on such a subject matter as the organization and functioning of individual villages and towns included in the particular properties, the size of individual settlements, their population, property, buildings and economic conditions and finally the relations between the feudal lord and his subjects.

Register of townspeople of Ustrzyki, 1758. AP Przemysl

These sources are generally reliable, although some data should be treated with caution and, if possible, compared with other types of documentation. As mentioned above, the inventories were drawn up by the

hands of thousands of officials and scribes of various degrees of experience and levels of work and motivation.

In the case of property valuation for the purpose of sale, lease or division, the parties drawing up the document controlled each other, a situation which affected the credibility of the document. It was similar in the case of the taking over of the property by a new official from the hands of the former official. On the other hand, when inspections had been completed by commissioners overseeing the particular territories, local supervisors may not always have been willing to disclose true data regarding the condition of the property. If they managed them badly, such data could be embarrassing to them and so efforts were made to conceal or distort the information.

The peasants themselves, who were a main source of information, were usually reluctant and distrustful about disclosing their family and property data, fearing the imposition of higher feudal burdens. It also happened that villages which were considered too burdened, demanded the preparation of a new inventory and the introduction of a new order or the restoration of the older norms of the serf system.

Register of townspeople of Pińczów, 1769. AP Kielce

However, even the things which were theoretically written down reliably and truthfully on site, in practise often may not have corresponded to reality. The peasants tried their best to avoid the obligations of serfdom. In each village, there were so-called voids, '*pustki*', i.e. uninhabited and not cultivated plots. However, people were usually not interested in taking over these plots/voids for one's own, because that would lead to an increase in the number of days of feudal service and other obligations. Local peasants could lease them for a relatively small amount of a rent. Hence, it was better to pay a relatively low fee every year and sow 'nobody's' voids instead of taking them over and settling on them.

'*Komorniks*' (landless peasants), who did not have their own houses or fields and thus theoretically belonged to the poorest class of the population and did the lowest level of feudal service, in practice could have been at a much higher level of material position. Having a sufficient number of draft animals or hiring them and paying a relatively small rent, they cultivated empty plots ('voids'), which brought them good profit, whereas their burden of feudal service and other taxes did not increase because these were not their own plots of land. It must also be remembered that inventories often did not present the real state of affairs, but the state of affairs which was to be introduced as a result of reforms.

Many problems may have resulted from very different terminology used in the property inventories by different officials and scribes. Such discrepancies occurred mainly in terms used to describe categories of population, jobs, works, tools, units of measure etc. Contemporary scientific compilations as well as dictionaries of older Polish language usage are necessary in order to interpret and analyze the documents properly.

Register of subjects and their feudal obligations of the village of Minkowice, 1642. AP Krakow

Surnames of peasants form an additional complication. As was previously stated, the oldest inventories date back to the 15th century. However, in that early period, peasant's surnames appear rather rarely since usually only first names and nicknames were then in common use. Thus, the value and use of such early registers is limited by the lack of permanent surnames. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a very large and diverse country compared to other European countries, especially those of Western Europe. The extreme diversity of the Polish State was typical of much of the area of Central Europe. The time when peasants' surnames were formed was not uniform throughout the Commonwealth and varied depending on the region of the country as well as the social and the material status of the peasant family. However, peasant's surnames began to appear on a massive scale at the beginning of the 17th century but the process of their

formation and mutability lasted up to the end of the 18th and even into the early 19th centuries. It must therefore be assumed that the practical use of the inventories in genealogical research will be limited in most cases back to the 17th century.

Where to Find Property Inventories

Property inventories from the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and then during the Partitions of Poland (until the 1860s) are found in hundreds if not thousands of archival collections scattered around almost all the state archives in the areas of contemporary Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, and Russia. These countries, or only some of their current territories, used to be the part of the Polish-Lithuanian state. A very significant number of inventories is also stored in libraries, archives of scientific institutes, museum archives, diocesan archives as well as monastery archives…

In order to find the property inventories relating to the areas of research interest (villages, towns), first it is necessary to determine the category of the land property, whether it belonged to the royal, the ecclesiastical or the noble domain. Then it is necessary to determine the specific owner or tenant. Depending on the owner or tenant of the area, as well as the purpose of drawing up the document, the property inventories may be kept in the archival collections of individual families, bishoprics, monasteries or central and county, fiscal and court state offices. Unfortunately, in the old Polish administration the division between private and state affairs was not strictly observed. Therefore, a huge number of state documents (e.g. inventories of various royal properties), which theoretically had to be kept in the appropriate state offices, remained in private hands. That is why today many of them can be found in the archival collections of individual families instead of the archival collections of state royal offices.

Inventory of the town of Bukowsko. Register of Jews, 1758. AP Przemysl

The biggest collections of property inventories are kept in the following collections: The Archive of Royal Treasury '*Archiwum Skarbu Koronnego*', The Archive of Camera '*Archiwum Kameralne*' (The Commission of His Royal Highness in The Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw); The Tribunal of Treasury of The Grand Duchy of Lithuania '*Trybunał Skarbowy Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego*', The Commission of Treasury of The Grand Duchy of Lithuania '*Komisja Skarbowa Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego*' in The Lithuanian State Historical Archives in Vilnius; The Collection of Aleksander Czolowski in The Stefanyk National Science Library in Lviv, collections of The Library of Ossolineum in Wroclaw, collections of The Library of Princes of Czartoryski in Krakow, collections of Polish Academy of Science, collections of The Kornik Library and many more; collections of court books of county '*grodzki*' and land '*ziemski*' courts can be in the state archives in Gdansk, Krakow, Lodz, Lublin, Poznan, Torun and Warsaw in Poland, Kyiv and Lviv in Ukraine, Vilnius in Lithuania, Minsk in Belarus, Riga in Latvia, Moscow in Russia and Berlin in Germany; collections of the greatest houses of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – the houses of Branicki, Chodkiewicz, Czartoryski, Lubomirski, Potocki, Radziwill, Sanguszko and many more; archives of every bishopric, monastery and parish which existed prior to the mid-19th century; papers of every noble family which possessed manorial estates prior to the mid-19th century; collections of individual collectors…

This is just an illustrative list which is intended to give a general overview of the issue. In searching for such files, a certain type of specialization is definitely very useful. The researcher simply must know the local history where the research is to be conducted and be acquainted with the main collections of central archives (as in regard to Poland, in Warsaw, Krakow and Lviv) and main libraries as well as the archives and libraries which are important to the region being researched. There are tens of thousands of inventories from the 15th/16th to the mid-19th centuries to be found.

Register of subjects and their feudal obligations of the village of Niechworów, 1786, 1787, 1788. AGAD Warsaw (2)

Conclusion

Property inventories have been created since the middle of the 17th century in mass quantities, though some of them date back almost to the Middle Ages. They are documents containing census lists from a particular

village or city. From the genealogical point of view, the register of population is the most important part of the presented source. However, we must emphasize that it is almost never a complete census. It contains selected categories of the population. These are usually the families which had their own houses and cultivated parcels of farmland or at least a plot for a garden. That makes up the majority of the population. The families are listed by the name and the surname of the main representative or representatives of the family. The feudal world was predominantly patriarchal. Other members of the family infrequently are found in the registers.

On the other hand, the documents provide invaluable information regarding the family's property, social status, position within rural society, everyday work, the type and number of days required for providing feudal service, rental rates, tributes rates and the other duties. The feudal peasant society was predominantly personal serfdom which meant that change of place of residence by individual families was highly restricted. Taking this fact into consideration, we can assume, with a dose of reserve, that families of the same surname appearing in different years in the same settlement in documents from the feudal period until the beginning of the 19th/middle of the-19th centuries are the sequential generations of the same extended family.

Despite their shortcomings, property inventories remain a valuable historical source for genealogical research. These are the documents that allow genealogical research on peasant and burgher families into the depths of the eighteenth and sometimes even seventeenth centuries. Properly analysed they can provide invaluable data. They allow us to paint a kind of 'background' and to see the shadows of our ancestors on this canvas. These are names and surnames from the distant past which provide a snapshot of their daily work and their daily life.

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This article was written by Piotr Zelny – a genealogist, historian, archivist, mountain guide and staff member of the Historical Museum in Sanok; and a researcher and genealogy guide with PolishOrigins.
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