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(Study Center on the Sobieski Age and of Modern Poland)
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Eastern European History Review è una rivista on-line peer-reviewed con lettori anonimi

Chiuso il 31-12-2024

Impaginazione a cura di: *Emanuele Paris*

ISBN: 979-12-5524-146-1
ISBN ebook: 979-12-5524-147-8
ISSN: 2612-0402 008

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2067/53009>

EASTERN EUROPEAN HISTORY REVIEW
Via Santa Maria in Gradi 4 – 01100 Viterbo
www.easterneuropeanhistory.eu
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EASTERN EUROPEAN HISTORY REVIEW

Annually Historical Journal

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n. 7/2024
Special Issue

ROYAL FREE ELECTIONS IN THE
POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH.
POLITICAL GAMES, SOCIAL COMMUNICATION,
DIPLOMACY

Edited by
Aleksandra Ziober and Alessandro Boccolini



EASTERN EUROPEAN HISTORY REVIEW: LA RIVISTA

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Con un carattere internazionale e interdisciplinare, una cadenza annuale e una fruibilità *open access* la rivista focalizza i propri interessi sulle dinamiche occorse nell'Europa Orientale durante tutta l'età moderna (XIV-XIX). *Eastern European History Review* è espressione del Centro Studi dell'Università della Tuscia CESPoM (Centro Studi sull'età dei Sobieski e della Polonia Moderna) nato nel 1997 per intuizione del Prof. Gaetano Platania, Direttore Emerito della Rivista.

L'iniziativa editoriale che presentiamo nasce dall'evidente mancanza in Italia di una rivista scientifica relativa alla storia dell'Europa centro-orientale in Età Moderna, nonostante la penisola abbia giocato un ruolo fondamentale per la Storia e la Cultura di una parte integrante del continente, a torto considerata come lontana e periferica.

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EASTERN EUROPEAN HISTORY REVIEW: THE JOURNAL

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The *Eastern European History Review* is an international and interdisciplinary annually online and open access peer-reviewed journal about studies on Central and Eastern Europe in the Modern Age (XIV-XIX). The Journal is also the expression of the Study Center CESPoM (Centro Studi sull'età dei Sobieski e della Polonia Moderna – Center Study on the Age of Sobieski and Modern Poland) of the University of Tuscia, born in 1997, from an idea of Prof. Gaetano Platania, today Director Emeritus of this journal.

It publishes articles with significant approaches and original interpretations in all research fields concerning Central and Eastern Europe, with specific attention to the History sciences.

The editorial initiative we present comes from the obvious lack of a journal, in Italy, concerning the history of Central and Eastern Europe during the Modern Age, this despite its fundamental role in the history and culture of that part of the continent, wrongly considered distant and peripheral.

Quite the contrary is true, in fact. Main objective of the journal is to create a space for reflection and discussion on topics pertaining to Central and Eastern Europe, but also relations with Continental Europe, encouraging dialogue between scholars and experts in the field, and between different approaches of scientific research.

The Editorial and Scientific Board

SUMMARY

Aleksandra Ziober <i>Introduction</i>	9
Miguel Conde Pazos <i>The Spanish Monarchy in the free royal elections in Poland: aspirations and diplomatic strategies (16th and 17th centuries)</i>	15
Kateřina Prařákova <i>The Secret Candidature of William of Rosenberg to the Polish Throne in 1574 and 1575</i>	37
Justyna Gałuszka <i>The role of Stanisław Stadnicki (c. 1551–1610) during the third free election</i>	51
Urszula Augustyniak <i>Magnate projects of electoral reform during the reign of Sigismund III and the potential effects of their implementation</i>	61
Bartosz Staręgowski <i>Security of the Greater Poland during the elections of the Polish Vasa dynasty. Mechanisms, organization and legal state</i>	85
Dorota Gregorowicz <i>The Holy See Towards the Contention for the Polish-Lithuanian Throne Between the Representatives of the Vasa Dynasty: John Casimir and Charles Ferdinand (1648–1649)</i>	103
Julia Paduch <i>Election 1648 from the perspective of Charles Ferdinand Vasa</i>	125
Alessandro Boccolini <i>The political and diplomatic activity of Virginio Orsini, Cardinal Protector of the Poland Kingdom in the time of John Casimir Vasa, last king of the Vasa Dynasty</i>	145

Aleksandra Ziober <i>The Art of Persuasion and Power: Profiles of Candidates for the Polish Throne after the Abdication of John II Casimir in the Light of Pamphlets</i>	171
Jarosław Pietrzak <i>Livio Odescalchi and his candidacy for Polish throne between 1696 and 1697</i>	193
Gaetano Platania <i>Fabrizio Paolucci: an extraordinary nuncio in the post-interregnum Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1697–1698)</i>	225
Grzegorz Glabisz <i>Political activities of the nobility of the voivodships of Poznań and Kalisz during the interregnum following the death of August III</i>	247
VARIA SECTION	
Matteo Sanfilippo <i>Bald Island: A Review</i>	273
Michaela Valente <i>Amor libertatis e tolleranza nell'Europa centrale dell'età moderna: questioni politiche e religiose.</i>	283
Bibliocard Susanna Piselli <i>I Nunzi di Papa Urbano VIII nella Rzeczpospolita dei Waza</i> , Series: <i>Acta Barberiniana</i> , vol. 7, edited by Alessandro Boccolini, and Gaetano Platania. Viterbo: Sette Città, 2024.	303



THE SECRET CANDIDATURE OF WILLIAM OF ROSENBERG TO THE POLISH THRONE IN 1574 AND 1575

ABSTRACT

The chapter examines the negotiations carried out by the Bohemian magnate William of Rosenberg in the early 1570s. Following the death of Sigismund II Augustus, William, alongside Vratislaus of Pernštejn, led a mission to secure the Polish throne for a son of Emperor Maximilian II. Their efforts failed when Henry of Valois was elected king in spring 1573. Despite this, William impressed some Polish nobles, who re-established contact after Henry fled Poland in June 1574, suggesting William as a candidate for the vacant throne. Attracted by the opportunity, William covertly financed his supporters to promote his candidature. However, he had to keep his ambitions hidden, as Emperor Maximilian II sought the throne again for his relatives and would view William's ambitions as betrayal. A complex game of secret offers and negotiations began. The exchange of encrypted letters is particularly noteworthy. However, William of Rosenberg did not continue the negotiations until the electoral assembly, but withdrew his candidacy in summer 1575, before the electoral assembly took place.

KEYWORDS: William of Rosenberg; Polish elections; Encrypted letters; Diplomacy in the 16th century; Secret negotiations.

Soon after Henry of Valois left the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in mid-June 1574, the influential Bohemian magnate William of Rosenberg began to aspire to the throne. Although he could not declare his ambitions openly because they undermined the interests of emperor Maximilian II, of whom he was a vassal, his candidature became one of the strong ones in the second half of 1574¹. This is one of the reasons why he deserves a special attention. Another reason is given by the remarkable communication and espionage situation that developed here in 1574 and 1575 thanks to Rosenberg's activity, which is also the subject of this study. Since he could not appear on his own and openly persuade his Polish supporters to give him their vote in free elections, he established a secret communication network. He involved various intermediaries who creatively passed on his letters and proposals. Despite the secrecy, the emperor learned much about his activities and responded by strengthening his own network of agents. These agents then tried to find out as much as possible about the plans of Rosenberg as well as other candidates who competed with the Habsburgs in Poland-Lithuania. Ironically, Rosenberg's interest in the Republic was initially stimulated by

1 Jaroslav Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové. Velmoři české renesance* (Praha: Panorama 1989), 175.

Maximilian II himself, who, in the summer of 1572, entrusted him and Vratislav of Pernstein with a mission that should lead to the election of one of his sons to the vacant Polish throne. The Bohemian nobles were supposed to convince the Polish and Lithuanian nobility to prefer one of the Habsburgs to Henry of Valois, the brother of the French king. They should have especially promoted the second-born Ernest, who was 19 years old², since Rudolf, the eldest son of Maximilian II, was destined to become ruler of the Holy Roman Empire and king of Bohemia. In case, however, the Polish nobility had a problem with Ernest's Spanish education, the envoys should have immediately started to promote his younger brothers Matthias or Maximilian³.

The candidature of Maximilian II's sons had many supporters among the Catholic clergy and various influential magnates⁴. On the other hand, the Habsburgs were distrusted by a significant part of the poorer Polish nobility⁵. Many regarded them as despots, recalling how harshly Ferdinand I of Habsburg had punished the Bohemian estates for revolting during the Schmalkaldic War⁶. And it was this objection that could best be refuted by members of the Bohemian nobility. Another advantage was the proximity of the Czech and Polish languages, which facilitated communication and confidential negotiations without the need for interpreters⁷. Rosenberg and Pernstein were also chosen because of the strong impression they must have made through their wealth, status, and family connections.

Vratislav of Pernstein was the High Chancellor of the Kingdom of Bohemia and a holder of the Order of the Golden Fleece, one of the most prestigious awards of

2 Ernest of Austria was considered the smartest of the Maximilian II's sons Almut Bues, *Die habsburgische Kandidatur für den polnischen Thron während des Ersten Interregnums in Polen 1572/73* (Wien: Verband der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften Österreichs, 1984), 45.

3 Bues, *Die habsburgische Kandidatur*, 69-70. Matthias of Austria was about 15 and Maximilian of Austria 14 years old at that time.

4 Ursula Augustyniak, *Historia Polski 1572-1795* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN SA 2008), 533.

5 Krzysztof Baczkowski, "Der polnische Adel und das Haus Österreich", in *Kaiser Maximilian II. Kultur und Politik im 16. Jahrhundert* (=Wiener Beiträge zur Geschichte der Neuzeit, 19), eds. Friedrich Edelmayer, and Alfred Kohler (Wien-München: Böhlau Verlag, 1992), 74.

6 Fears of Habsburg despotism and comments on the Schmalkaldic War were frequently expressed in contemporary writings. For example, an anonymous pamphlet that was analysed by Václav Bůžek, "Od Rakous a od Moskvy zbav nás, Pane Bože, všecy'. K projevům sarmatismu v polsko-litevské unii po vyměnění Jagellonců", *Acta Universitatis Carolinae. Studia Historica*, 4 (2003): 140.

7 The emperor Maximilian II himself, in a letter to the Nuncio Giovanni Delfino, explained his choice of William of Rosenberg and Vratislav of Pernste in primarily by their knowledge of the language. *Nuntiaturberichte aus Deutschland nebst ergänzenden Aktenstücken*, 3: Abteilung: 1572-1585, vol. 6: *Nuntiatur Giovanni Delfinos (1572-1573)*, ed. Helmut Goetz (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1982), 60.

the time⁸. While he possessed a large domain in eastern Bohemia and Moravia, Rosenberg owned primarily a large part of southern Bohemia. He held the office of the Supreme Burgrave of Bohemia and was considered the second most powerful person in the Kingdom of Bohemia after the emperor⁹. Further, both diplomats were related to the finest aristocrats, prince-electors and even members of the royal courts. In this respect, the splendour of Rosenberg was enhanced especially by his second marriage to Sophie of Brandenburg, who was a niece of the deceased Polish king Sigismund II Augustus. Although she had died in 1564, the widower was still regarded as a relative of the Jagiellons¹⁰. All these facts, which increased the prestige of Rosenberg as an honourable envoy, also played a role later in 1574 when judging his suitability as a candidate for the Polish throne.

Both Bohemian noblemen crossed the Polish border with a large suite at the end of August 1572¹¹. In accordance with the emperor's wishes, they immediately began to visit influential magnates whom they hoped to win over to the Habsburg cause with the help of arguments, promises and relatively generous bribes¹². These activities, however, were decisively interrupted by Polish senators, who forbade them to travel freely throughout the country and ordered them to stay in Urzędów until the beginning of the electoral diet¹³. Subsequently, from 1 December 1572 the Bohemian legation stayed in this small town about 42 km from Lublin¹⁴. Nevertheless, both envoys broke the strict restriction several times and secretly left Urzędów to visit some prominent individuals. On these visits, they were warmly welcomed and lavishly feasted¹⁵. Rosenberg and Pernstein, in return, presented their

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- 8 Petr Vorel, *Páni z Pernštejna. Vzestup a pád rodu zubří hlavy v dějinách Čech a Moravy* (Praha: Rybka Publishers, 1999), 237-58.
 - 9 On the previous brilliant career of William of Rosenberg, see Jaroslav Pánek, *Vilém z Rožmberka. Politik smíru* (Praha: Academia, 2011) 141-76.
 - 10 On extraordinary prestigious marriages of William of Rosenberg, see Pavel Marek, and Kateřina Pražáková, "Sňatkové strategie se zahraniční šlechtou", in *Světy posledních Rožmberků*, ed. Václav Bůžek (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2011), 152-64.
 - 11 Each of the envoys traveled with approximately 20 carriages and an entourage of 200 people. Goetz, *Nuntiatur Giovanni Delfinos*, 115. On the entourage of William of Rosenberg see: Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové*, 166-67.
 - 12 Bues, *Die habsburgische Kandidatur*, 55-62, Josef Macůrek, *Čechové a Poláci v 2. pol. XVI. století. Tři kapitoly z dějin česko-polské politické vzájemnosti* (Praha: Miroslav Stejskal, 1948), 217 and Kateřina Pražáková, "Habsburg Empire and French Kingdom in their Struggle for the Polish Crown", *Zeitsprünge. Forschungen zur Frühen Neuzeit*, 23 (2019): 88-90.
 - 13 Bues, *Die habsburgische Kandidatur*, 88-9.
 - 14 On the complicated journey to Urzędów, see Henryk Gmiterek, "Lublinská epizoda mise Viléma z Rožmberka do Polska v době bezkráloví v letech 1572-1573", in *Andros Probabilis. Sborník prací přátel a spolupracovníků historika prof. PhDr. Miloše Trapla, CSc. k jeho 70. narozeninám*, eds. Jiří Malíř, and Pavel Marek (Brno-Olomouc: Matice moravská-Univerzita Palackého, 2005), 405-06.
 - 15 Gmiterek, "Lublinská epizoda", 409.

hosts with generous gifts to win them over to the Habsburg cause. These included weapons, valuable books, belts, jewels, but also horses and dogs¹⁶. These extremely valuable gifts were provided at their own expense. For example, the popular English greyhounds, which the Polish nobles were especially happy to receive, came from the breeding of Peter Vok, the younger brother of William of Rosenberg¹⁷.

Generous gifts as well as a skilful diplomatic increased the popularity of Rosenberg, who was described by his Polish counterparts as polite, kind, gentle and willing to seek compromise solutions¹⁸. In the winter of 1572/1573 the negotiations proceeded in such a friendly spirit that in early 1573 the envoys believed that they might succeed in their mission and that the archduke Ernest would indeed ascend the Polish throne¹⁹. In the weeks that followed, however, they found out that the circle of the highly affluent they had made contact with represented only a fraction of the electorate. The numerous poorer nobles continued to express many doubts about the Habsburg candidature²⁰, and Rosenberg and Pernstein were also unable to allay their fears that the election of the emperor's son would lead to a long and devastating war with the Ottoman Empire²¹. Another important aspect was the presence of the French legation, which was led by an exceptionally capable bishop Jean de Monluc.

16 For example in a draft letter from the beginning of November 1572, William of Rosenberg asked an unknown addressee (maybe his brother or one of the senior officials at the manor) to send him several valuable books. SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/15, William of Rosenberg to unknown, Dańczów 6 XI 1572. In the early February 1573, William of Rosenberg promised to Mikołaj Maciejowski, the voivode of Lublin, to provide him with six carthorses. SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/21, William of Rosenberg to Mikołaj Maciejowski, Urzędów 9 II 1572.

17 SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/17A, William of Rosenberg to Peter Vok of Rosenberg, Urzędów 5 I 1573. Peter Vok had brought several English grey hounds from his cavalier journey and started breeding this valued race. Václav Březan, *Životy posledních Rožmberků*, II, ed. Jaroslav Pánek (Praha: Svoboda, 1985), 359.

18 Bues, *Die habsburgische Kandidatur*, 74.

19 On 7 February 1573, William urged his younger brother to prepare as he would soon be accompanying the newly elected king on his journey to Cracow. SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/18, William of Rosenberg to Peter Vok of Rosenberg, Urzędów 7 II 1573.

20 Baczkowski, "Der polnische Adel", 78, Henryk Gmiterek, "Czechy wobec starań Habsburgów o koronę polską w drugiej połowie XVI wieku", *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, 50 (1995): 92.

21 On the relationship of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Ottoman Empire at the time of the death of Sigismund II Augustus, see Andrzej Dziubiński, *Stosunki dyplomatyczne polsko-tureckie w latach 1500–1572 w kontekście międzynarodowym* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2005), 257–69. The impact of the fear of the Turks as an important factor in the free election of the Polish king was also mentioned by the Rosenberg chronicler Václav Březan. Václav Březan, *Životy posledních Rožmberků*, I, ed. Jaroslav Pánek (Praha: Svoboda, 1985), 244.

With the help of generous promises, he was gaining more and more influence²². During March and April 1573, both Rosenberg and Pernstein became aware that their mission was doomed to fail²³. In addition to the difficulties mentioned above, Anna Jagiellon, the sister of deceased king, was increasingly leaning towards the candidature of Henry of Valois²⁴, and also high church officials indicated that they would support the French, as they did not consider the Habsburg cause to be viable²⁵. Nevertheless, both diplomats continued to do their best to promote Ernest's candidature, which naturally included an active participation in the electoral diet that begun on 5 April 1573 in the village of Kamień near Warsaw. They arrived in advance, so they could observe the gathering of an impressive number of Lithuanian and Polish nobles accompanied by their servants²⁶. In the early days of the diet, both diplomats probably attempted to carry on negotiations that might have supported the candidature of Ernest of Austria, but they obviously realised that they were defending a lost cause²⁷.

In this situation Rosenberg also delivered his speech on 9 May 1573, in which he tried to present the entire Habsburg family and especially the young archduke in the best possible light to the assembled Polish and Lithuanian nobility. In general, his speech was stylistically polished, and he even used many Polish expressions²⁸. He was also very realistic and reasonable in his arguments. However, his presentation lacked a dramatic delivery, enthusiasm as well as unexpected and huge promises, which might have changed the balance of power in the last phase of the diet. Some participants of the electoral assembly also reported the fact that Rosenberg spoke rather quietly²⁹. The most probable explanation was that he no longer believed in the success of his mission and was disturbed by the fact that he was praising the

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- 22 In detail Maciej Serwański, *Henryk III Walezy w Polsce. Stosunki polsko-francuskie w latach 1566–1576* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1976), 68–85 and Pražáková, “Habsburg Empire”, 93–4.
- 23 SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/22, William of Rosenberg to Peter Vok of Rosenberg, Urzędów 6 III 1573.
- 24 Maria Bogucka, *Anna Jagiellonka* (Warszawa: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1964), 103.
- 25 Bues, *Die habsburgische Kandidatur*, 142–144.
- 26 In older literature, the total number of people assembled was estimated at 40,000 to 50,000. Walter Leitsch, *Sigismund III. von Polen und Jan Zamoyski. Die Rolle Estlands in der Rivalität zwischen König und Hetman* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2006), 21. Contemporary estimates are more moderate, but still speak of an impressive gathering that may have included more than 30,000 people. Augustyniak, *Historia Polski 1572–1795*, 537.
- 27 Even the emperor himself was aware of the poor chances. SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/25, Maximilian II to William of Rosenberg, Vienna 5 V 1573.
- 28 SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/4, “The speech of William of Rosenberg”, n. d.
- 29 Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové*, 171.

qualities of the Habsburgs to those who did not trust them at all³⁰. And he was right, for only two days later the diet elected Henry of Valois the new king of Poland.

When Rosenberg left Poland together with Pernstein, he was probably not fully aware of the strong impression he had left. Most likely he did not pay much attention to the fact that several participants in the electoral assembly, such as Stanisław Górka, were so impressed by his speech that they tried to give him their votes, although he himself did not admit any possibility of his own candidature at that time³¹. Both envoys were more concerned that Maximilian II would not blame them for the failure of the mission and that they should be compensated for at least some of the enormous costs they had incurred³². For example, for Rosenberg alone, the entire mission cost 38,662 guldens³³. He did not expect to receive it all in gold, but counted on various favours and, among other things, the waiving of some of the taxes he paid from his large domain³⁴.

42

While Rosenberg was occupied with the expenses of the previous mission and the administration of his possessions after his return, the Polish and Lithuanian nobles were preparing for the arrival of Henry of Valois. His short reign, however, disappointed both sides, who had different expectations and views of how the court and government should be run. When Henry of Valois learned of his brother's death, he made a resolute decision and secretly fled the kingdom of Poland on the night of 18 to 19 June 1574 to claim the succession to the French throne, which was much closer to his heart³⁵. This was a disgrace for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth³⁶, and in the first weeks after Henry's departure it seemed that one of previously recommended sons of Maximilian II would now have to be chosen³⁷. However, other candidates also began to be considered, as the idea of a Habsburg on the Polish throne remained completely unacceptable to a significant number of

30 This is also indicated by the letter William of Rosenberg wrote to his brother on 5 May 1573. The letter gives a very depressed impression and shows that William was feeling mentally rather exhausted. SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/24, William of Rosenberg to Peter Vok of Rosenberg, 5 V 1573.

31 Pánek, *Vilém z Rožmberka*, 276; Macůrek, *Čechové a Poláci*, 69-70.

32 In fact, the emperor was praising Rosenberg and Pernstein during the entire mission and was convinced that they were doing their best. Bues, *Die habsburgische Kandidatur*, 98-9.

33 Pánek, *Vilém z Rožmberka*, 269.

34 William of Rosenberg proposed this to Maximilian II in early November 1573. SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/28, William of Rosenberg to Maximilian II, Prague 2 XI 1573.

35 Serwański, *Henryk III Walezy*, 194-205.

36 On the derisive pamphlets that circulated about Henry's shameful escape from Poland, Kateřina Pražáková, and Tomáš Sterneček, "Die Ehrlosigkeit der Valois-Könige und die Würde Polen-Litauens. Eine Apologie des polnischen Adels in einer Schmähschrift von 1574", *Historisches Jahrbuch* 138 (2018): 172-97.

37 Christoph Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten und Interessen des Hauses Habsburg in Polen-Litauen während des zweiten Interregnums 1574-1576* (Wien: Universitätsverlag, 2001), 14-5.

Poles and Lithuanians³⁸.

Precisely in this situation several influential nobles turned their attention to Rosenberg. Particularly prominent among them was Stanisław Górka, a Lutheran voivode of Poznań who wanted to vote for the Bohemian magnate already in the spring of 1573. In Lesser Poland, the noblemans Konrad Krupka Przeclawski and Stanisław Szafraniec took a particularly active part in the plan to elevate Rosenberg to the royal throne³⁹. They started corresponding with him and recommending him to other nobles, many of whom, like them, were non-Catholic⁴⁰. They greatly appreciated his religious tolerance, which had been evident during his stay in Poland and earlier in two marriages to non-Catholic imperial noblewomen.

As far as marriage was concerned, Rosenberg's widowhood naturally offered the argument that he might marry Anna Jagiellon after his election⁴¹. Presumably because of her advanced age, which would have prevented Rosenberg from obtaining the heir he desired⁴², also another, less well-known suggestion arose. The South Bohemian magnate offered to marry the daughter of elector Augustus of Saxony (probably Dorothea, who was nearly 11 years old at the time) and then to support the Polish state treasury from the generous dowry he would receive⁴³. Even if Rosenberg did not succeed in arranging this highly prestigious marriage, he promised to pay a substantial annual sum into the Polish treasury⁴⁴. In addition to tempting promises of financial support, the adherents of the South Bohemian magnate also claimed that the Habsburgs would have considerably restricted the rights and freedoms of the Bohemian kingdom if Rosenberg had not been resolutely defending them⁴⁵. This was an argument that was particularly close to the heart of Piotr Zborowski, who became another prominent member of this faction. He was the voivode of Krakow, and in addition to the power derived from his title, he could rely on his considerable family fortune and the support of his brothers who cooperated with him⁴⁶.

38 Almut Bues, "Die Beziehungen der Habsburger zu Polen in den Jahren 1572 bis 1574", *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 77 (1998): 27-42.

39 The edition of three letters of Konrad Krupka Przeclawski from the summer 1574, Fedor Verzhbovsky, *Две кандидатуры на польский престол Вильгельма из Розенберга и эрцгерцога Фердинанда 1574–1575 гг. По неизданным источникам* (Варшава Тип. К. Ковалевского, 1889), No 1, 2 and 6, p. 3-8 and 13-4.

40 On the formation of the Rosenberg faction Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten*, 41.

41 Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové*, 174.

42 To the two marriages from which Rosenberg had no children, and his growing desire for an heir, see Marek, and Pražáková, "Sňatkové strategie", 153-59.

43 Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten*, 63.

44 According to some sources, the sum was 200,000 guldens. Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten*, 63. However, this would have bankrupted the Rosenberg estate despite its size and wealth.

45 Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové*, 174.

46 A statement by Peter Zborovsky on the suitability of Rosenberg's candidature as part of encrypted correspondence. SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/36.

Przeclawski contacted Rosenberg as early as 19 June 1574, just one day after Henry's hasty departure, and hinted at the opportunities that suddenly appeared to the Bohemian nobleman⁴⁷. Rosenberg must have responded favourably, and a further correspondence developed, which was also joined by Piotr Zborowski around the end of June and the beginning of July 1574⁴⁸. It is impossible to determine exactly when they came to an agreement, as the Bohemian magnate made considerable efforts to keep his plans secret. If he had publicly announced his candidature for the Polish throne, Maximilian II could have immediately accused him of breaking his promise of fealty. As a very influential nobleman, he would not face the highest penalties, such as the loss of property or his neck, but the threat of losing all his offices would be very unpleasant, especially if it was not compensated by the gain of the Polish crown⁴⁹. For this reason, Rosenberg attempted to conduct all negotiations in secret until he would be certain of success. On the other hand, if he felt that his candidature was not going well, he wanted to withdraw in a situation where Maximilian II could not prove anything to him⁵⁰.

Therefore, he corresponded with his Polish supporters in ciphers. He used quite a popular system, in which not only each letter was replaced by a sign, but also the names of all persons were substituted by agreed symbols⁵¹. If the cipher was broken, which was quite difficult, it was still quite a challenge to guess which persons were mentioned in the letter. However, Rosenberg did not fully trust the ciphers either and apparently destroyed the great majority of the letters after reading them. Although other persons referred to very active contacts between Rosenberg and Polish nobles from the summer of 1574 to the autumn of 1575, relatively few documents from this period have survived in the former archives of the Rosenberg family⁵². In addition to letters containing various proposals and promises, Rosenberg also entrusted the negotiations to a few confidants. He especially relied on his secretary, Jan Netolický of Turov, whom he sent to his supporters in Poland under cover of buying horses there⁵³.

47 Verzhbovsky, Две кандидатуры, No 1, p. 3-5, the letter of Konrad Krupka Przeclawski to William of Rosenberg, 19 VI 1574.

48 The first of the preserved letters is dated 10 VII 1574, but it does not seem to be the first contact. Verzhbovsky, Две кандидатуры, No 4, p. 11-12, the letter of William of Rosenberg to Piotr Zborowski, 10 VII 1574.

49 On the possible penalties see Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové*, 175.

50 Rosenberg mentioned his efforts to conceal everything several times in his letters, for example on 23 January 1575 he wrote to Konrad Krupka Przeclawski: «Secundo, hoc Imperatori etiam suspicandi aliquid occasione facile praeberere possit, quod hanc rem inco Maiestatem Suam celare volui, [...]», Verzhbovsky, Две кандидатуры, No 22, p. 53.

51 This type of cipher had been used for example by some prominent personalities during the Schmalkaldic War. Anne-Simone Rous, *Geheimdiplomatie in der Frühen Neuzeit. Spione und Chiffren in Sachsen 1500–1763* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2022), 325-32.

52 They form a thin folder of encrypted documents. SOA Třeboň, Historica Třeboň, sign. 4834/36.

53 Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové*, 175. According to the Rosenberg chronicler,

Jan Netolický's mission was successful and already in the summer months of 1574 Rosenberg became quite popular among the Polish nobility, especially in Lesser Poland. As early as 2 August 1574, Olbracht Łaski warned a Habsburg agent named Matthes Stolz that «sehr viell weren d[a]rob, den von Rossenbergk hierinnen zu ersuchen und I[h]n auch zu einem Könige begeren»⁵⁴. The wording suggests that Łaski assumed that the emperor had already heard something about Rosenberg's candidature, but was unaware of its extraordinary impact. The exaggerated warning should be taken with some caution, as this adventurous nobleman primarily wanted to get into the circle of Maximilian II's well-paid agents. On the other hand, it is certain that the accusation had a grain of truth. Maximilian II also considered the news to be quite important and tried to obtain more information or even intercept Rosenberg's letters⁵⁵.

To find out how dangerous a rival Rosenberg was, as well as the more important task of promoting his sons' candidacy, the emperor entrusted various agents. Unlike in the interregnum of 1572/1573, this time he did not send an official legation to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to promote one of his sons, but he delegated the matter to various confidants. Among them, Andrzej Dudycz, stood out for his diligence and activity⁵⁶, but also the above-mentioned Matthes Stolz played his part⁵⁷. With his agents, especially Dudycz, the emperor corresponded in code. He used a cipher system very similar to that of Rosenberg. He replaced each letter with a negotiated character, using Latin as the original language⁵⁸. Sometimes he did not encrypt the whole letter, but only the important paragraphs⁵⁹. The Habsburg's agents in Poland and Lithuania were also afraid of the disclosure of important information, and therefore they would have liked to communicate with their informants in code. However, as their correspondents were not skilled enough, they had to give up on the ciphers or, at best, be content with substituting the names for the nicknames⁶⁰.

Jan Netolický was sent to Poland for the first time on 10 VII 1574 to negotiate Rosenberg's candidature. Březan, *Životy posledních Rožmberků*, I, 268. Edition of several preserved letters that were exchanged between Rosenberg and his secretary, Verzhbovsky, Две кандидатуры, No 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, p. 16-18, 20-27, 29.

54 HHStA, Polonica 1574, carton 23, Matthes Stolz to Maximilian II, 2 VIII 1574.

55 Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové*, 178.

56 On the early career of this remarkable personality: Lech Szczucki, "Andrzej Dudycz. Młodość i początki kariery", *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 116 (2007): 5-17. On Dudycz's activity during the interregnum, especially: Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten*, 5-6, 30-31, 75-76 and more.

57 For example, Olbracht Łaski did not want to deal with Dudycz, but with Stolz. Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten*, 77.

58 HHStA, Polonica 1574, carton 23, Matthes Stolz to Maximilian II, 10 VI 1574, 7 VII 1574 and others.

59 HHStA, Polonica 1574, carton 23, Maximilian II to Andrzej Dudycz, 18 IV 1574, 6 V 1574 and others.

60 HHStA, Polonica 1574, carton 23, the correspondent P. M. to Stanisław Fogelweder, September (?) 1574.

In 1574, agents sympathetic to or paid by the Habsburgs were not only concerned about Rosenberg's candidature. They also monitored other personalities who were being considered by the faction that thought it best to elect a "Piast", i.e. a nobleman of Slavic origin. Moreover, the candidacies of both Alfonso II d'Este and Ivan the Terrible attracted some attention at the time, while the final winner of the free election, Stephen Báthory, was not mentioned much in the summer and autumn of 1574⁶¹. More than him, the Habsburg court was disturbed by the efforts of Henry of Valois, who, after his escape, was unwilling to give up the government and was sending appeals for obedience to Poland-Lithuania⁶².

Rosenberg was not so worried about the activities of Henry of Valois, believing that the fugitive king would inevitably be deposed at the next diet. And that was the moment for which he was preparing. He assumed that in the spring of 1575, when the Polish nobles would gather in Stężyca, they would not only dethrone Henry of Valois, but also immediately proceed to the election of a new king. And he hoped that the desire for a quick decision to end the interregnum, as well as the strong opposition of many Poles and Lithuanians to the Habsburgs, would create a situation in which the assembly could proclaim him king. He would pretend to the Habsburg representatives that he was extremely surprised by the election and that he had made no effort to obtain it. Then he would negotiate with them, explaining that in the given situation it was impossible to elect a member of the Habsburg dynasty, but that it was better for them if someone who wanted to maintain good relations with them took over the government of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth than if it was one of their enemies⁶³.

With regard to this plan, it was of course advisable for Rosenberg to attend the diet in Stężyca in person. Nevertheless, if he had travelled there without any commission, he would have revealed his ambition. He would not have been able to explain to the emperor why he had undertaken such an arduous and expensive journey. In the autumn of 1574, however, a great opportunity seemed to arise for him to attend the diet with all dignity and with a suitable authorization. The Habsburg family became divided on the question who the candidate should finally be, whether the young archduke Ernest should not be replaced by his father Maximilian II. Suddenly also Ferdinand of Tyrol indicated his own candidature and contacted some Polish and Lithuanian nobles⁶⁴. Rosenberg wanted to take advantage of the disunity, which was generally detrimental to Habsburg interests. He proposed to Ferdinand of Tyrol

61 There was a gradual increase in Bathory's influence, but not until 1575. Jerzy Besala, *Stefan Batory* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1992), 93-4.

62 The Habsburg family archive contains a considerable number of copies of letters and appeals sent by Henry of Valois to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. HHStA, Polonica 1574, carton 23 and 24.

63 At the end of January 1575, Rosenberg suggested that the emperor should be persuaded to accept the decision of the Polish nobility. Verzhbovsky, *Две кандидатуры*, No 21, p. 48-50, the letter of William of Rosenberg to Piotr Zborowski, 23 I 1575. More on this topic Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové*, 178.

64 Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten*, 32.

that he could represent him in Stężyca⁶⁵. Naturally, in this situation, in the autumn of 1574, Rosenberg was particularly concerned that his secret candidacy should not be revealed. He was particularly afraid that Martin Gerstmann, who had very good contacts in the Republic from his position as Bishop of Wrocław, might reveal something⁶⁶.

Despite these efforts, Rosenberg certainly failed to conceal his candidature. It is unclear whether it was the suspicious Martin Gerstman or someone else who first began to report the matter, but as early as 15 October 1574, Emperor Maximilian II sent a letter to the Bohemian nobleman in which he indicated that he would reward him if he remained loyal. The danger that Rosenberg represented as a candidate was brought to the Emperor's attention not only by his agents in the Commonwealth, but also by some Czech nobles. Ladislaus III Popel of Lobkowitz, for example, informed the Habsburg court at the end of August 1574 of the large number of letters the Bohemian nobleman had received from some of the prominent figures of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth⁶⁷. At the same time, he hinted that Rosenberg had high expectations of himself in the new royal election⁶⁸.

As reports of Rosenberg's secret negotiations with the Polish lords continued to circulate and even Dudycz began to mention them more frequently from the beginning of 1575⁶⁹, none of the Habsburgs, not even Ferdinand of Tyrol, appointed Rosenberg as his representative at the diet of Stężyca. As a result, he could not attend the assembly, from which he expected the election of a new king. Nevertheless, he sent considerable sums of money and probably some expensive gifts to his supporters before the diet began on 12 May 1575⁷⁰. The course of the diet, however, disappointed him. The assembled nobles from various parts of Poland and Lithuania (despite the arrival of the French legation) made it quite clear that they no longer counted on Henry of Valois as king, but they did not proceed to elect a new

65 Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten*, 63.

66 «Cavete vobis, ne quid ab episcopis aut Podolski scribatur ad episcopum Vratislaviensem Gerstmannum et tua persona ne prodatur; esset valde male», Verzhbovsky, *Две кандидатуры*, No 14, p. 29, the letter of William of Rosenberg to Jan Netolický, 1 X 1574. Key data on Martin Gerstmann's career Kurt Engelbert, "Gerstmann, Martin von", *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, 6 (1964), 328 [<https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd102120242.html#ndbcontent> (25. 5. 2024)].

67 «videtur mihi, quod aliquid aliud tractetur, ac si vellent dominum Guillhelmum de Rosis aliqui eligere, nam litterae ad ipsum perferuntur: ante quatuordecim dies nuntius ultra 8 litteras ex ea parte, uti mihi relatum, attulit a duce Ostroviensi et hic evocatur, [...]», Verzhbovsky, *Две кандидатуры*, No 10, p. 19, the letter of Ladislaus III. Popel of Lobkowitz to Maximilian II, 20 VIII 1574.

68 «[...] et ipse dominus de Rosis videtur sibi in ea parte, si electio deberet fieri, non parum polliceri, [...]», Verzhbovsky, *Две кандидатуры*, No 10, p. 19, the letter of Ladislaus III. Popel of Lobkowitz to Maximilian II, 20. 8. 1574.

69 On the repeated reports of Dudycz, who began to draw attention to Rosenberg's popularity from the beginning of 1575, Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten*, 41.

70 Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové*, 176 and Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten*, 63.

monarch. An election would have been undesirable for the Piast party in the given situation, as the Habsburg supporters had a strong position at the diet. In the end, the assembly dissolved with the proviso that a new diet would be held in the autumn of 1575 to elect a new king⁷¹.

The tumultuous course of the Stężyca assembly and its dissolution indicated that the interregnum could last a long time and that the outcome was more than uncertain. For Rosenberg, this was the moment when he decided to give up his candidature. Although he continued to answer his supporters' letters in a friendly manner after the diet of Stężyca, he stopped sending money to Poland, which was crucial⁷². His resignation was so obvious that even the emperor Maximilian II soon learned of it. He did not try to accuse Rosenberg of anything, on the contrary, he welcomed the reconciliation of relations with one of the most influential persons in the Kingdom of Bohemia⁷³.

48

In general, Rosenberg's candidature represents a highly remarkable aspect of the interregnum that preceded the free elections of December 1575. The exceptionally wealthy and influential magnate found himself in a position to consider the royal throne. The opportunity was so tempting that he seized it, despite the risk of reprisals from the emperor himself and other members of the powerful Habsburg dynasty. For almost a year, complicated negotiations took place, full of hidden offers, ciphers, concealments, and denunciations. However, the failure of the diet of Stężyca resulted in a change of heart and the abandonment of bold ambitions. As a result, Rosenberg did not become an important candidate for the election at the end of 1575, but he also escaped any punishment.

71 Augustynowicz, *Die Kandidaten*, 65-69.

72 Pánek, *Poslední Rožmberkové*, 176.

73 On the later reconciliation with the emperor and Rosenberg's activities as an advisor and diplomat in serious matters concerning Poland, Kateřina Pražáková, *Obraz Polsko-litevského státu a Ruska ve zpravodajství české šlechty (1450–1618)*. (České Budějovice: Historický ústav Filozofické fakulty Jihočeské univerzity, 2015), 125-29.

ABBREVIATIONS

HHStA: Haus-, Hof und Staatsarchiv, Wien.

SOA Třeboň: Státní oblastní archiv v Třeboni.

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