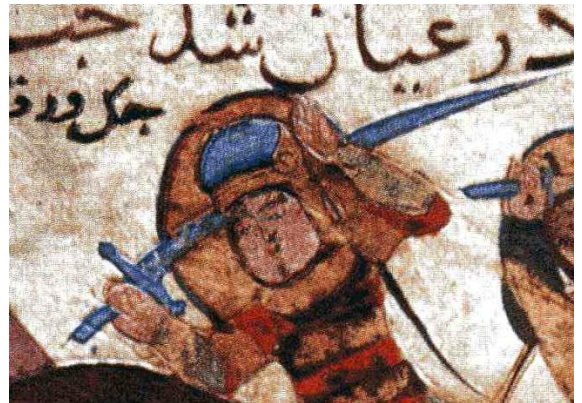


## The Saber's Many Travels (The Origins of the Cross-Cutting Art)

*Before you engage in combat, mind this:  
the blade of your saber is nothing else  
– and cannot be anything else –  
but an extension of your own arm, and equally:  
your entire arm, from the armpit right to the hand  
which is grasping the hilt, is nothing else  
but an extended grip of the saber.*  
(Michał Starzewski, of the Ostoja coat of arms)

### Some remarks on the history of the saber:

The curved saber first emerged on the steppes of Central Asia amongst the nomadic peoples. It reached the Middle East in 7<sup>th</sup> century AD via Arab traders, who had good trade relations with the nomads. A while later, the Arabs conquered the Sassanid Persian Empire and assimilated the conquered nations, which meant that the saber could spread across the region in a relatively short time, becoming an ever-present element of the Islamic world. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century saber was commonly used as a weapon by Huns, Avars, Cumans, Bulgars, Turks and Hungarians, whose influx threatened to flood Europe. Miniatures in the Byzantine chronicles of Skylitzes show bands of warriors of Turkic-Tartar origin, who inhabited the regions around the Caspian Sea, mostly Pechenges and Kipchaks, armed with spears and long sabers.



In the 12th century, again thanks to the nomadic peoples, the saber was introduced in China, India and in Rus, and four hundred years later, via Turkey and Hungary, it finally arrived in Poland. It is quite unparalleled for a single weapon type to be in use by warriors, knights and soldiers on battlefields across the world and to remain almost unchanged for hundreds of years (from 5th to 20th century).

In this article we will try to show what made the saber so unique and how it came to hold a very special place in the heart of every Pole.



*“Poland and saber are two related notions. The saber is a foreign traveler from the far East, who found a second homeland here; it was here that the saber was given a place of honor and glory beyond all other weapons.” (Z. Hartleb)*

In 1576 the Prince of Transylvania, Stephen Bathory was elected to the Polish throne. At that time the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth spanned around a million

square kilometers. The state had to wage wars on many fronts and the army was of an insufficient size. The only sensible choice, taking into consideration such large swathes of land, was to create an effective, well-armed and fast cavalry which would be capable of moving swiftly at long distances. The saber, which was so popular amongst the nomads, was a perfect weapon for a cavalryman. The newly-elected king created the Polish winged Hussars and instituted wide-ranging reforms of the army, cementing its power for over 200 years. Bathory also brought to Poland the first saber-makers, that is the smiths who forged sabers. The saber rapidly gained in popularity; it was synonymous with nobility and soon after it became symbolic of the strength of our arms and of our independence.

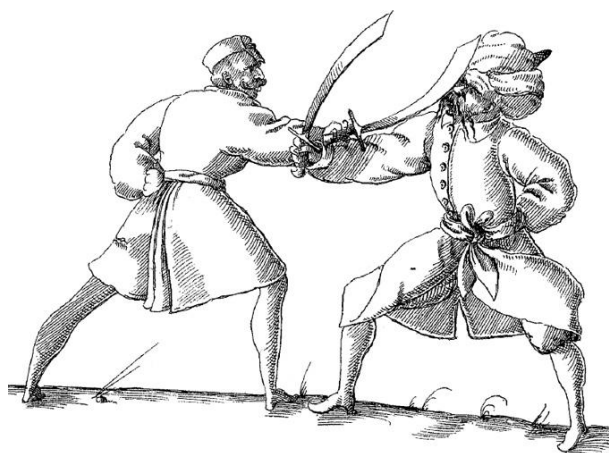
One of the main reasons why the saber was so popular and sought-after was the many functions that it could serve. It was an excellent weapon for both soldier and civilian, both from horseback and on foot. It began to symbolize the knightly superiority of the nobility, to whom military duty was both an honor and a privilege. At the same time, it was instrumental in teaching the knightly arts, and served as means of civic education for the youth. It helped break up quarrels which erupted so often at various political gatherings and it was also used in duels. To inherit a saber was to be obliged to continue the national traditions of the knightly order.

The Old Polish traditions which accompanied a curved saber were upheld by the nobility from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This weapon was treated with particular reverence and respect in Poland. The sabers were consecrated, passed on from father to son, and from son to grandson as if they were the most precious of jewels, and they also evoked memories of historical events. Sons were baptized on crossed blades, and those blades were later given to them as a gift accompanying confirmation, and from a very early age the boys would practice fencing with them. Sabers, trophy banners and Hussar armor were all placed in churches as offerings to God.



### About the Cross-Cutting Art:

Historically in Poland fencing with a saber was called the cross-cutting art. Various encyclopaedists explained the origin of this name in the following fashion:



*“The fencing art, the cross-cutting art, the art of cutting in a cross, kreuzhiebe der fechter; The Fencer needs to be teaching his student to fence, to perform thrusts, and parry for as long as it takes for the student himself to become the master and be able to teach his former teacher a lesson or two. . . . Damn him to the gallows, he’s cutting in such a flurry, likely in the style of the cross-cutting art.”* (Słownik języka polskiego, tom 5 M. Samuela Bogumiła Linde, Lwów 1859 [Dictionary of Polish, vol. 5 by M. Samuel Bogumił Linde, Lviv 1859])

*“In the old days, Poles, who used only such weapons as are designed for cutting, had tremendous skill both on the battlefield, and in individual combat, which so often occurred at gatherings and brawls during various diets, and hardly ever did they go into such subtle techniques as the Germans do, instead basing their entire fencing art on the art of cross-cutting, that is on two quick successive cuts that went in a cross-wise fashion, from left diagonally to the right, and the other way round.”* (Encyklopedia Powszechna Tom ósmy S. Orgelbrand Warszawa 1861 [General Encyclopaedia, vol. 8, by S. Orgelbrand, Warsaw 1861])

*“The Cross-cutting art – this is how the nobles of Old Poland named the skillful cuts with a saber. (...) Anyone who knew the cross-cutting art well was esteemed and respected by his fellow noblemen: the skill and agility of those fierce fighters was always something to be admired. Often, if two such formidable fencers stood back to back and defended against the oncoming rabble, they could fight their way through the throng, and escape with little harm to themselves. The tradition of the cross-cutting art, which was known even not so long ago amongst the legionnaires who served in the army of the Duchy of Warsaw, is now entirely lost.”* (Encyklopedia Powszechna Tom szesnasty S. Orgelbrand Warszawa 1864, [General Encyclopaedia, vol. 16, by S. Orgelbrand, Warsaw 1864])

*“Fencing, from German fechten ‘to fight’, in Polish szermierka. After the curved saber became widespread in Poland, we developed a style of fencing that was the most famous style in the world. Poles became so incredibly skilled at fencing with a curved saber that no other nation in the world could match them in this art. They called it the cross-cutting art because cuts and parries were formed in the shape of the cross.”* (“Encyklopedia Staropolska”, Zygmunt Gloger, Warszawa 1900-1903) [Old Polish Encyclopaedia, Zygmunt Gloger, Warsaw 1900-1903?]

The essence of fencing in the cross-cutting style relied on simple and very dynamic combinations of diagonal cuts, both high and low, going from left to right, and from right to left. Such cuts, performed with precision and celerity, were used offensively (in case of a cut that reached its target or reached the guard of the opponent) as well as defensively (when a cut was a deflecting parry). This allowed for the maximum use of the saber's kinetic energy, unlike in a static guard where the energy is typically lost. Moreover, the continuous movement of the blade made it possible to change a cut into a feint almost imperceptibly. There were two types of feints. The first one relied on delivering a feigned cut, with a sudden change of the direction of that cut, by moving the saber above the head on a circular plane. The second type relied on two lightning quick cuts from the shoulder, of which one was a feint – whereby the tip of the blade would be retracted backwards, which meant bypassing the opponent's guard and fooling him – whilst the second cut was the proper attack which reached its target. The footwork was quite free – the steps could be either to the right or to the left and they were synchronized with the movement of the hand. This meant that the opponent's guard could be avoided with precision and, at the same time, the attacker could take himself out of the line of attack by stepping sideways. High guards, where the tip would be dropped towards the ground, helped achieve the circular motions that had the trajectory of intersecting circles. Going beneath the opponent's cut was particularly effective. The sudden shortening of distance blocked the offensive capabilities of the opponent and the attacker could reach him easily with *nyżek* [‘cut from the right, from below’], practically depriving

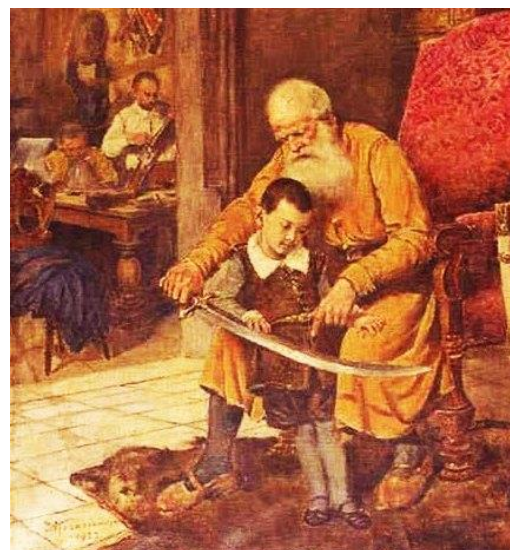




him of any way to defend himself. One of the greatest advantages of the Polish cross-cutting art was that it could be used easily and fruitfully in cramped spaces and in close quarters. The fighters could rely on their ability to deliver precise cuts in different directions in a limited space, which meant that the cramped battlefield with a surrounding mass of soldiers did not pose any problems.

### On education:

In the 16th and 17th centuries saber fencing reached its peak. The *Sejm* [General Assembly or Diet] of the old Commonwealth would propagate and advise a general and widespread way of teaching the noble youth (alongside horse riding), which greatly aided the increasingly high levels of fencing abilities. The soldiers who retired from the military due to old age or ill health, would be taken in by noblemen, becoming part of their household, receiving protection and full board. In return, they would instruct children in military matters. However, before young boys could take a real steel weapon in their hands, they would be trained in stick-fighting, which was called the game of *palcaty* in Poland (*palcaty* – from Hungarian *palca* ‘stick’). This is how Jędrzej Kitowicz describes this weapon:



*“... they would fight each other with sticks, which were of various shapes and sizes; depending on youth or age they were thinner or thicker; made of dogwood or oak – the thinnest (the thickness of a finger) were for young boys, and the thickest were for those who already had their moustache. These were as thick as a staff or a peasant’s cudgel. All of them were called palcaty.”* (Jędrzej Kitowicz, 18<sup>th</sup> century)



In Poland *palcaty* were used to train young knights from the Middle Ages onwards, but the art reached its greatest peak in Polish Jesuit schools in the 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The stick-duels were often regulated by special rules. It was particularly true for the so-called Circles of Stick-Fighting, which were set up by *palestrants* [lower ranking court of law officials] during various gatherings of the tribunals and at local magistrates’ court meetings. The game would be held within a circle made up of the participants, and each bout would last up to one or several hits. Every person would fight everyone else and the following ‘officials’ –

the Marshall, Vice-Marshall and two Instigators – were chosen later on the basis of the results of the bouts.

Afterwards, the entire company celebrated the elections in the nearest tavern by consuming the so-called *kazub* (a meal made up of vodka and pretzels), of course at the expense of the tavern owner. After the celebrations, the members of the Circle would come back to the square in front of the court, where the Instigators would ‘hunt’ for unwary passers-by. Those ‘lucky’ enough to be selected, faced a choice: they could participate in a bout within the circle and try their luck in *palcaty* – regardless of the result they would then be accepted into the company; they could pay



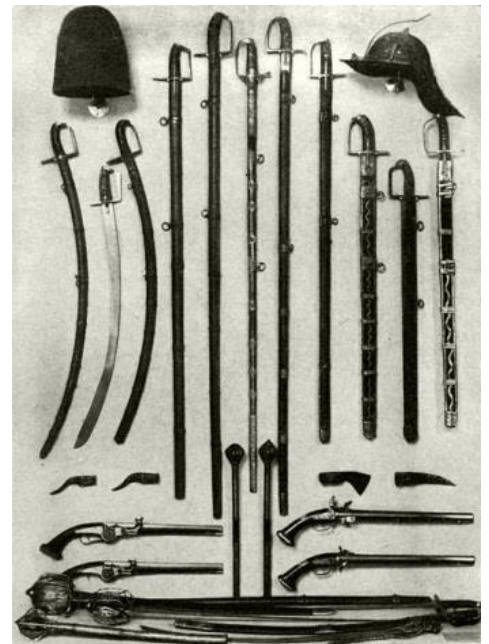
*“It seems that, just as merriment has its own outward ways of expression, where the national character is exhibited in various dances, so the movements resulting from anger influence the ways one uses steel. The Hungarian cuts from the left, the Muscovite from above, the Turk **towards himself**, and the Pole uses cross-cuts.”*

From this we may deduce that the cut was called Turkish because of its popularity in Turkey. The above quote is substantiated by the diagrams found in Starzewski and Werner, where the line leads the saber towards the fencer who executes the cut, that is *towards himself*.

It is very likely that, under Turkish influence, Poles quickly saw the merits of using this cut and adapted it to their own needs, making it part of the cross combination, and this is why it later became in the eyes of the Germans thoroughly Polish in style. We believe that the differences in using the saber by various nations were based not so much in a different way of fighting, but rather in preferring certain cuts to others.

The most famous Polish saber manufacturers of the 17th and 18th century were based in Lviv, Wyszyna, Kalisk and Staszów (in the Sandomierz voivodeship), and following the name of the town where they were forged, they were called *lwowskie* [Lvovian], *wyszyńskie* [from Wyszów] or *staszówki* [from Staszów]. Locally-made Polish sabers often received names in honor of the king who ruled at the time. Thus a saber from the reign of Stephen Bathory would be called *batorówka*, one made during the times of Sigismund III Vasa, would be a *zygmuntówka*, and one that was forged during the reign of the kings of the House of Wettin (e.g. Augustus II and III) would be an *augustówka*.

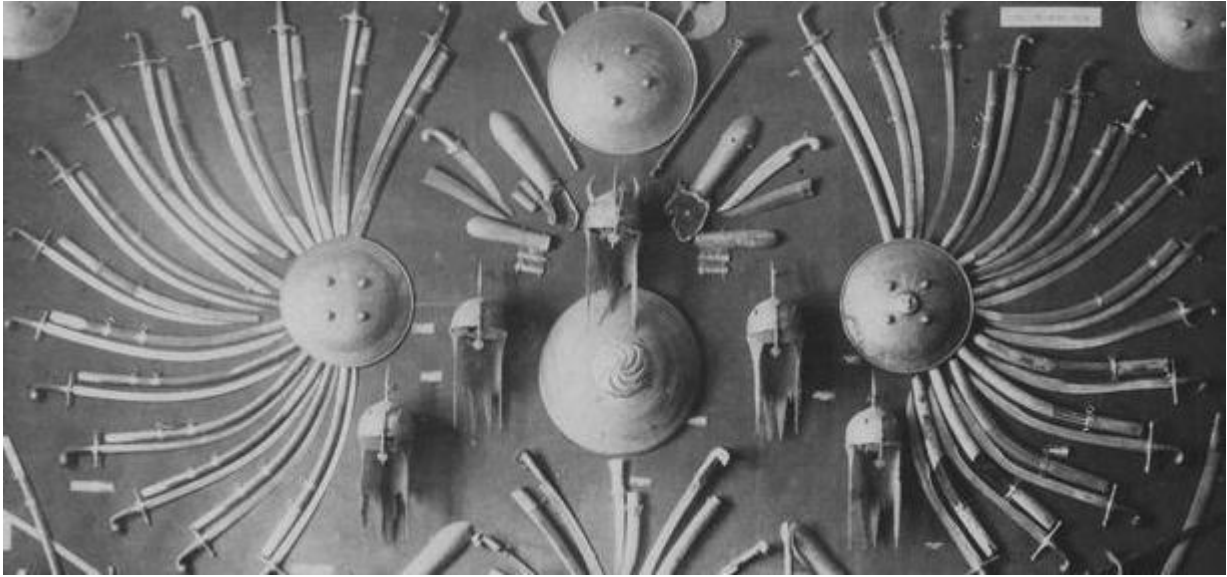
Poles used a very rich terminology to refer to various types of sabers. A given saber could be named after its place of production, the engraving on the blade, blade shape, hilt type, weight and finish. The quality of the blade was tested by bending it almost right to the hilt. If the blade would spring back to its normal shape after such bending, it would be tested further by cutting bones, quires of paper, loaves of Meissen bread, nails, hooks, door handles, and if it was of good quality it would not have a single dent on the blade.



“This is why sabers with blades whose quality was well tested were in high demand and often sought-for, and could reach astronomic prices.” (K. Bernolak)

The blades of highest quality were made of damascene steel and bought for the equivalent of their weight in gold. Saber blades found in Poland were often imported in large quantities from manufacturers in southern Germany and Northern Italy. It was common to use blades from trophy sabers of the eastern type and fit them with a more Polish hilt furniture. In 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries there were no standard issue blades, so every saber was made to measure, by adjusting particular measurements to individual needs. The customer would often choose the weight, curvature and length that were to his liking.





*“The Poles are left now with only the Saber, slightly longer, and heavier, but much better at cutting than the Turkish one, whether ‘tis due to good iron or the skill of the hand that cuts. Hence the Poles have to get used to its heaviness by constantly carrying an obuch [Polish war-hammer] in their hand. So you see them each and every day – the hand and fist are taught to work the saber. Moreover, to learn how to fight well and truly, they exercise often by fighting with sticks, with which the Youth continually experiment at their leisure.” (Dalairac, François-Paulin, end of 17th century)*

### **Some notes on the Construction of the Saber and on fencing with it:**

The hilt of the saber is a particularly important element of the construction of each saber. Some researchers say that the differences in the hilt construction result from different fencing styles of particular nations, others believe that they were purely ornamental or were designed as an aid for gripping in particular cuts. Of course, as can be easily seen, there is a lot of truth in all these theories, but none of them is entirely right. First of all, we should begin with the assumption that not many nations actually developed their own, distinct fighting style. The weapons and techniques were changed and adapted in response to wars, conquests or technological advancements. The weapons were borrowed in an



unchanged shape and then slightly improved upon in order to expand on the available fencing techniques by modifying the weapon. On the other hand, modifying the weapon makes sense only up to a certain point, because it is limited by human body mechanics, which is limited in and of itself. The construction of the hilt influences the power of the cut, the stability of the edge alignment and the maneuverability of the saber whilst it is in motion, and also the speed with which one is able to return to guard. However, the differences in the hilt can only *aid* certain fencing techniques, because it is the way that the *blade* is constructed which determines the technical possibilities of using the weapon and its effectiveness in disabling or killing the opponent. For example, even though the French smallsword hilt is completely different from the Belgian one, the repertoire of guards and thrusts in both cases is exactly the same, because it is determined by the shape of the blade and not the hilt.

Four types of hilt furniture were popular in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Poland:

- The Hussar Hilt – this type is characterized by a simple hilt with a small, but stable resting nook for the little finger, a rounded knuckle-guard and a small ring for the thumb, which is called the thumb-ring (*paluch*). The thumb-ring gives an additional propping point, which strengthens the cut in its final phase by creating a lever between the little finger and the thumb. The ring strengthens the grip on the saber and makes it easier to keep a proper edge alignment, which means the cut is stronger and more precise.
- The Hungarian Hilt – the hilt is angled forward which reduces the amplitude of wrist movements, creating a very strong propping point for the little finger in the form of an extended almond-shaped pommel. This allows the forearm muscles to relax and increases the freedom of cuts.
- The Polish-Hungarian Hilt – both the shape of the hilt, which is angled forward, and the thumb-ring mean that this type of hilt combines the merits of both the Hussar-type and the Hungarian-type hilt. It is likely that this was the most commonly occurring hilt type in Poland, as evidenced by many surviving exemplars in museums.
- *Karabela*-type Hilt – the wedge-shaped construction of the hilt means that the saber is wedged in the hand during the cut. The centrifugal force which works on the saber during the cut pushes the hilt into the lower part of the hand (along the extended line following from the little finger) and blocks it there. This means that the forearm muscles relax more and it is easier to execute fast chained cuts with fluidity.

In recent years several theories regarding the saber have emerged in Poland. For the most part, they have approached the historical Polish saber from the perspective of 19th century dueling fencing and the subsequent developments in sports fencing. By applying practical and scientific criteria, they claimed that their theory was the most probable and realistic way in which the heavy saber was used. Many groups were formed and cold steel enthusiasts everywhere began thinking that the processes of discovery and reconstruction of the traditional Polish fencing style was complete.

But we decided to reject these theories and, as every stream begins at its source, we have started our search in the regions from which the saber first originated – that is in Eastern India and in Persia. When we saw the combat of Indian Sikh warriors from Punjab, we soon understood that the direction in which we took our research had to be correct. The very natural and dynamic style of fighting that uses movement around a circle, with sequences of fast and powerful strikes delivered from the shoulder and wrist, and the use of wooden cudgels in training reminded us very much of the descriptions of the Circle of Stick-fighting found in Jędrzej Kitowicz's work.



We analyzed the saber fencing techniques that were preserved across centuries in different geographic regions and our analysis yielded surprising results. In Chinese fencing, in Northern Indian *gatka*, in Southern Indian *kalaripayattu* or in the traditional forms of fighting found in the Caucasus region and in the Ukraine we can observe obvious and recurring movements of the hand and weapon. Despite the differences in the general style of particular movements, the mechanics of the cut is unchangeable. Additionally, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century weaponry in eastern parts of India, in Persia and Turkey is almost identical, which means it dictated and predetermined the same way of fighting.





*“I know very well that it is an ancient weapon used by many nations, particularly those from the East, like the Swedes, Poles, Hungarians and Turks, but also in many other places which differ from our own in climate, religion and rituals” (F.A. Marcelli 1686, all quotes based on Carlo Parisi’s translation).*

If we want to reconstruct the fencing style of a given weapon, we must first analyze its construction and understand the basic tenets according to which it was designed. The construction of the weapon influences its use by relying on the principles and limitations of the human body and the way the body functions. In accordance with the above we can observe the following principles:

- During the strike, the curvature of the saber makes the strike become a slice or a draw, which increases the effectiveness of cutting.
- The movement of the arm must be broad enough for the blade to go fully through the target. If the cut is too shallow, the main property of a curved blade won’t be used, that is increasing the power of the cut through slicing or drawing.
- The weight of the saber means that the shoulder and wrist need to cooperate. The elbow is almost entirely straight when executing the cut, which means that the shoulder joint takes most of the load. Whilst the shoulder gives the cut its strength, the wrist is responsible for speed and direction.
- In order for the weapon to have the appropriate energy, you need to take a swing and align the edge on an appropriate plane. In a correct cut, the blade should inscribe a circle that passes through the axis of the body and returns to the starting position. In some cut combinations the blade, after passing the axis of the body, goes behind the back, gaining the energy necessary for a second cut.

The above technique is the only way to perform a strong cut and, at the same time, use the curvature of the blade. An additional argument in favor of this view is that a similar technique forms the basis of saber fighting from horseback. Below, we present several quotations that emphasize that the cuts made with a curved saber are usually very strong and precise:

*“The cut with a saber is very different from a thrust with a sword. It can sever the head and take life with one strike, and if the cut comes down vertically, it can easily sever a limb.”* (F.A. Marcelli 1686)

*“The blade (of the saber) is four times broader, often more, than that of the sword (rapier). Because of this, and because of the weight which is considerable and a blade that is sharp, the saber hurts with vigor and falls with strength. This blade is very dangerous because of the cuts it delivers, which are much more deadly than those made by the sword, and can sever limbs”.* (F.A Marcelli 1686)



*“The foolishness of the one who thinks he can escape a blade which cannot be stopped – nor can it be prevented from harming whoever’s in its way – will be punished severely.”* (F.A Marcelli 1686)

*“You hear often of those fighters of old and the uncanny power of their cuts. Most likely this was something which was often practiced. Also, mark that the power of the cut does not depend solely on the strength of the arm, but also on how well you align the blade and how often you practice with it”.* (Aleksander Raciborski „Historia i psychologia szermierki” [The History and Psychology of Fencing] 1894)

*“As far as I am aware, for the most part fencing in the east is about performing the strongest possible cuts, or at the very least about the most efficient use of the curvature of the blade and drawing the edge”.* (Aleksander Raciborski „Historia i psychologia szermierki” [The History and Psychology of Fencing] 1894)

Various exercises and tests were performed to facilitate the learning of correct cutting mechanics:

*“I was present at one such test which was cutting through loaves of bread with one strike of the blade – soon, it turned out that it was not the strongest ones who cut best . . . Methinks, I do not need to explain further that one cannot possibly cut such a loaf with a lighter saber.”* (Aleksander Raciborski „Historia i psychologia szermierki” [The History and Psychology of Fencing] 1894)

*“One of the exercises performed in the Caucasus is cutting the surface of the water, contained in a large vessel; if the cut falls correctly, that is with the blade towards a plane that divides the blade symmetrically into two halves, then you can barely see any disturbance on the surface; the smallest of splashes can tell you that the cut did not go through properly, and would not be as effective.”* (Aleksander Raciborski „Historia i psychologia szermierki” [The History and Psychology of Fencing] 1894)

In light of these remarks, the 17th century descriptions of the incredible prowess of Polish soldiers become quite a lot more credible:

*“Prokop Sieniawski, the court Marshal of king Sigismund III ... could sever the head of an ox with a single cut of the saber”* (Ambroży Grabowski, “Przypowieści Polaków” [The Stories of the Poles], 1819)

*“Wojciech Padniewski, when in Wallachia, cut off a Turk’s head, and his arm right to his armpit in one single blow.”* (Wargocki Addit. Valerii Maxim)



*“Augustus II was renowned for his great strength, and he could sever the head of an ox with a single cut of the saber.”*

Similar events can easily be found portrayed in Mongolian, Persian or Turkish battle scene paintings. Severed heads and limbs, bodies cloven in half with sabers, are one of several types of scenes which show how a curved blade can be used. Interestingly enough, the depictions from Central Asia, India, Middle East and Europe show a recurring position of the hand and weapon which suggests that the fighting techniques and the cutting mechanics were quite similar in all these cases.



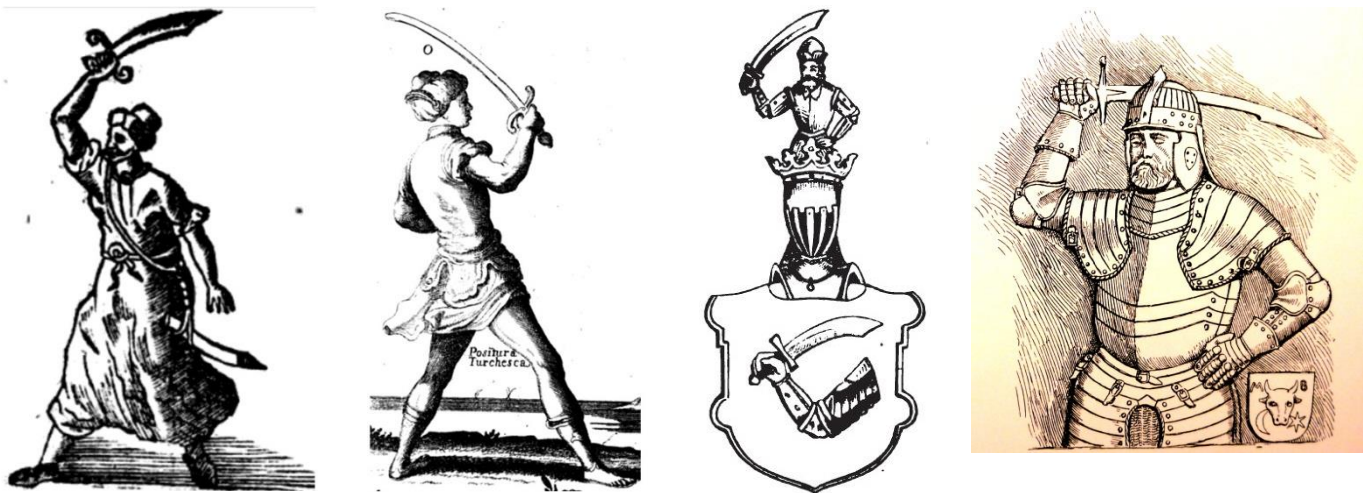
We also need to stress that both the left [left foot forward] and right [right foot forward] fencing position was used, as is shown in iconography and artistic depictions. This affirms what we have previously described – that there was a greater freedom of movement in performing the cuts, allowing for the weapon to be used both in the left and right positions. This is of utmost importance, because it allows the fencer a greater mobility in any direction he chooses, which is also important when fighting with a shield.





*“The footwork should always aid the cuts, lending them more strength and power, and should always match the natural movement of the cut.” (F.A Marcelli 1686)*

Various depictions from 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries show that the most commonly portrayed position is one where the hand is raised high. This is true both on horseback and on foot. This position of the hand is also found on coats of arms and low reliefs. We can see this clearly in a drawing found in the treatise of Luis Pacheco de Narváez from c.1599 and a drawing from the manuscript of Giuseppe d’Alessandro from 1711. From a practical point of view, this position allows for a very strong cut in any direction whilst keeping the blade safe from being deflected or intercepted by the opponent.



*“This is why, toccata and attachi (actions involving blade contact) or any other similar actions are useless, **because the saber is never forward**(...) and, what is more important, it is never static because of continuous cuts.” (F.A Marcelli 1686)*

In order to learn fencing with a saber well one needs to strengthen and relax particular muscles of the forearm, so that the cuts can gain the appropriate strength, speed and fluidity, which makes it possible to change the direction of the cut whenever it is needed. This fluidity underlies all the skills of a saber fencer and contributes to his unpredictability.

*“The mastery of the saber comes with long and regular practice, after which the arm becomes stronger and more agile, developing the necessary speed and readiness.” (F.A Marcelli 1686)*

To sum up, we have attempted to reconstruct the style of saber fencing from the old Commonwealth by, first of all, rejecting many stereotypes and practices that rely on sport fencing to fill in the gaps by applying modern principles to a heavy military saber. We focused on the history of this weapon from its very beginnings by analyzing the available historical sources, such as historical texts, contemporary paintings and depictions, ethnographic sources and even video materials, both archival and contemporary. We have also reconstructed the methodology of teaching, which was the most time-consuming aspect of the whole endeavor. After several years of work we have managed to attain a full picture of the Polish cross-cutting art.

In the last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Poland lost its independence as a result of partitions, torn apart by Russia, Austria and Prussia. This meant a break in the historical continuity of the Polish army that lasted until 1918. The battlefield changed and the use of the saber in those new conditions was no longer viable. Even though the saber, held in a Polish hand, achieved many victories during the Napoleonic days, in the war of 1920, or in September 1939, the cross-cutting art faded in the beginnings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

After more than two hundred years it has returned and constitutes an important part of our own national heritage, whilst at the same time bringing us much satisfaction.

**Translated by Daria Izdebska**

*"Article originally appearing in English on Sword Forum ([www.swordforum.com](http://www.swordforum.com))"*