

# The sabre school of Count Michał Starzewski as a reflection of Polish fencing traditions

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## Summary

The Polish sabre fencing tradition has been a widely researched area in Poland but it remains largely unknown abroad. Sabre fencing has been mentioned in numerous classic works of Polish literature and it constituted an important aspect of Polish national identity at the time of the country's partition (1795-1918). Although influenced by the Italian, French and German schools of fencing the Polish sabre fencing tradition retained for decades its specific techniques, rules and terminology. In 1830 Count Michał Starzewski wrote the most famous Polish fencing treatise which captured all the characteristic tenets of the Polish sabre fencing culture. This unique work published one hundred years later by Starzewski's grandson provides a fascinating insight into Polish traditional fencing, its historical and cultural contexts as well as its legacy today.

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*He brandished the blade, which flashed like lightning, calling to mind old Polish fencing moves: cross stroke, mill, the crooked slash, the frightening downward blow, the stolen slash (a jab that proves the fencing master), attitudes of tierce and counterpoint, which is the former in reverse.*

[Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*,  
transl. from Polish by Leonard Kress]

## Introduction

The fencing tradition in Poland has been subject to numerous research studies carried out mainly by Polish authors [1-7]. Polish sabre fencing, in particular, has attracted interests of many scholars; however, it still remains a little known area outside Poland. This article attempts to outline the development of sabre fencing in Polish history by placing it in a wider European context and taking as its focal point the tenets of the Polish sabre fencing school of Count Michał Ostoja Starzewski.

Swordsmanship in Poland, like in other European countries, has been strongly associated with national tradition. In

particular periods of Polish history the development of swordsmanship reflected cultural transformations, changes in weapon technology as well as in social perception of sabre duels. The present-day word for fencing in Polish is *szermierka*, which shares a number of cognates in other European languages, e.g. Old French *escremie*, Spanish *esgrimar*, Italian *scrima*, German *schirmen*. In the Old Polish language (9<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> cent.), *szermierka* had a variety of meanings, e.g. "working the weapon", "swordsmanship", "duelling", "hand-to-hand combat" as well as "swordplay".

Fencing was frequently mentioned in classic works of Polish Renaissance literature, e.g. in Mikołaj Rej's *Żywot człowieka poczciwego* (The Life of the Honest Man, 1568), Łukasz Górnicki's *Dworzanin polski* (The Polish Courtier, 1566) and Sebastian Petrycy's *Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej sposobem Arystotelesowym ułożonej* (The Polish Commonwealth in Aristotelian Perspective, 1605). It was also referred to in many famous literary works of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Poland, e.g. in Jędrzej Kitowicz's *Opis obyczajów za panowania Augusta III* (1733-1763) (Description of Customs During the Reign of August III, 1840) [8], or in the memoirs of the great Polish playwright Aleksander Fredro *Trzy po Trzy* (Topsy Turvy Talk, 1844). The disastrous partition of Poland of 1795 by the neighbouring powers: Austria, Russia and Prussia, and the subsequent abolishment of Polish statehood and national army interrupted the historical development of Polish fencing.

## Origins of Polish sabre fencing

In medieval Poland the most basic melee weapon was the sword used in all kinds of armed combat. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the sword had been replaced by the sabre, originally an oriental weapon, which then became an integral part of national tradition and historical identity of the Poles.

*Szabla* is the Polish word for sabre with an ancient and rather obscure etymology. The Polish name for the weapon brought to the European territory by nomadic tribes from the East, in fact, differs from names for sabre in oriental languages, e.g. Turkish *killij*, Persian *shamshir*, Arabic *saif* and Circassian *shashka*. On the other hand, the names for sabre types in European languages are very similar, e.g. Russian *sablja*, French *sabre*, Italian *scabiola*, Hungarian *szablya*, German *Säbel*, and Spanish *sable* [9].

The appearance of sabre in Europe is strictly related to trade and military contacts between Europeans, Turks and Tartars. Originally, the weapon of the Muslim world was the sword. The contacts of the Muslims with eastern nomadic tribes resulted in the replacement of the sword with the latter's sabre. In the early Middle Ages, the sabre became a popular weapon in Kievan Rus and Hungary; however, it should be emphasized that the initial cultural contacts with these countries did not lead to the introduction of the sabre in Poland. At that time, Western European culture had a dominant influence on the development of Polish culture and weaponry. The sabre was virtually unknown in Poland and the Poles more often fought against their western enemies using the latter's own weapons. The sabre was used effectively against the enemy, when it was the enemy's preferred weapon. This was the case of Kievan Ruthenians, who fought against nomadic Khazars, Kipchaks and Pechenegs using the eastern sabre. Also the Hungarians became skilful sabre users; however, the first sabre-wielders in the Carpathian Basin had been the eastern Avars. In a historical perspective the sabre proved to be a more effective and functional cutting weapon than the sword. In the above context, one can wonder why Western European countries remained for so long conservative and almost dogmatic in using its own weaponry. Were they truly convinced about the superiority of the Western European weapons over Eastern weapons, including the sabre?

There were several political and cultural determinants of the adoption of the sabre as the Polish national weapon. The first one was the threat of Turkish and Tartar intrusions from the east and the south, which forced the Polish military to adopt the enemy's weapons and tactics. The second factor consisted of close relations of Poland with Lithuania and Ruthenia which served as transfer routes for the new weapon to the west. The third determinant included the military partnership between Poland and Hungary, which became especially visible after the defeat of Polish and Hungarian armies by the Ottoman Turks at Varna in 1444 (King of Poland and Hungary Władysław III was killed at Varna with a Turkish sabre). The last two determinants were transformations in the European art of war following the invention and introduction of

various types of firearms at battlefields, and decline of western European feudalism leading to new plebeian paid infantry and mounted formations. The new armies began to use different tactics and weaponry (e.g. halberds, Lucerne hammers, pitchforks, war scythes, flails) than their chivalric predecessors. All these factors co-occurred in Poland at the same time. According to Aleksander Górski, by the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the sabre had been commonly used in the Polish army, and by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century it had entirely supplanted the European sword [10].

The aforementioned determinants as well as the reigns of Hungarian Stephen Bathory as King of Poland (1576-1586) and John III Sobieski (1674-96) - a great lover of Oriental culture and arts - profoundly affected the characteristics and traditions of Polish sabre fencing. Sobieski's victories over the Ottoman Empire at Chocim (1673), Vienna (1683) and Parkany (1683) resulted in bringing to Poland magnificent Turkish and Persian trophies. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century the Polish noble culture, arts, customs and weaponry were under a heavy Oriental influence. The sabre became the symbol of Polish national traditions as well as an attestation of supposedly ancient Sarmatian genealogy of Polish nobility. The Polish fascination with the Orient faded after John III Sobieski's death, and Poland began to look to western military traditions.

The period from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century was the golden age of Polish sabre. The varieties of Polish sabre were multiple - the Hungarian-Polish sabre being the oldest one - and their traditional names referred to the reigns of particular kings, military leaders or places of origin, e.g. *Iwowskie* or *ormianki* (from Lvov, also known as Armenian sabres), *czerkieski* (Circassian), *kościuszkowski* (from Tadeusz Kościuszko), *batorowski* (from Stephen Bathory), *zygmuntowski* (from Sigismund II Vasa) and *janowski* (from Jan III Sobieski). The partition of Poland in 1795 ended the glorious development of Polish sabre fencing. The Poles in their later struggle for independence used sabres from other European countries.

According to Józef Łepkowski, "The style of Polish sabre fencing was completely different from any other European sabre schools" [11]. In the words of Zygmunt Hartleb, "Poland and the sabre have been always closely interconnected. The Polish sabre, however, is historically a newcomer from the Far East, who had once found another homeland here. It was Poland that gave the sabre glory and made it superior to all other arms" [12].

The emergence of recreational and organized sport fencing in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe was preceded by fencing tournaments, demonstrations and celebrations and contests. Sabre fencing was taught as a practical skills course in Polish Jesuit and Piarist colleges, dormitories, military academies and nobles' gymnasiums. In fencing classes in Polish schools real weapons were replaced with singlesticks. Fencing with singlesticks was an excellent physical exercise for the youth, and it became part of the school curricula developed by the Polish Commission of National Education - the first state educational authority in Europe established in 1773. Advanced

fencing techniques were taught in private gymnastic clubs, fencing and duelling schools and, first of all, in the military.

First sport fencing clubs were founded in Kolozsávar<sup>1</sup> in 1824, Pest in 1825 and London in 1848, followed by other European cities [3]. These clubs were initially fairly selective and their members were aristocrats, rich bourgeoisie, army officers, artists and writers. Fencing contests organized by these clubs gave then rise to professional sport fencing at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sport fencing was trained with three weapons: foil, epee and sabre; whereas the military still made use of bayonet, backsword and smallsword training.

In Poland, sabre fencing remained most popular, with foil and epee enjoying a fairly marginal status. The popularity of this particular type of fencing weapon in Poland was greatly affected by the school of fencing masters in Wiener-Neustadt headed by one of the best fencing masters in history, Luigi Barbasetti<sup>2</sup>, a graduate from Giuseppe Radelli's Italian fencing school. In his two famous, richly illustrated fencing manuals *Das Stossfechten* and *Das Sabelfechten* [13,14] Barbasetti described fencing methodology down to the last detail, including footwork, training exercises and classification of fencing actions. Thanks to his works the theory, practice and methodology of European fencing were greatly developed. Fencing masters who graduated from the Wiener-Neustadt academy were perfectly prepared to teach fencing in their own private salles, gymnastic centres and military units.

The Wiener-Neustadt academy propagated Italian patterns in fencing, and thanks to a great number of its Polish students the Italian school exerted a profound impact on the development of fencing in Poland in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Polish graduates of the Wiener-Neustadt academy as well as professors and students of the University of Lvov and Jagiellonian University of Kraków founded the first fencing centres in Vilnius (1868), Lvov (1878) and Kraków (1900). In the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria, i.e. the Austrian-controlled territory of partitioned Poland, fencing was practiced in the Sokol movement societies as an important component of physical, military and patriotic education. In the Russian-controlled Kingdom of Poland fencing was trained in private gymnastic centres and in the military.

It should be kept in mind that Polish fencing education had grown out of earlier European patterns. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century two treatises were published *The Book of the Courtier* by Baltassare Castiglione (1528) and *The Boke named the Governour* by Thomas Elyot (1531) which independently of each other addressed the principles of proper humanist education, rhetoric, and physical fitness suitable for the Renaissance noble youth. These works had preceded the emergence of first European aristocratic "academies" in Italy, France, England and Spain the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The curricula of these academies reached Poland through the royal courts of Europe.

After the French Revolution of 1789 Napoleon Bonaparte transformed these academies into Imperial Schools that still taught horse riding, fencing and dancing.

In Poland, such curriculum was introduced by the Nobles' Academy of the Corps of Cadets (active between 1765 and 1794) founded by the last King of Poland Stanislaw August Poniatowski. This was the first Polish state school for noble youths educating candidates for military officers and civil servants. The fencing classes in the Nobles' Academy were carried out by, among others, French officers.

In partitioned Poland (1795-1918), fencing became a part of the curriculum at the Jagiellonian University of Kraków. The incorporation of traditional "knightly" fencing exercises into the university teaching curriculum was an imitation of earlier patterns of German universities, where fencing, horse riding and dancing had been taught for centuries. These skills were regarded as indispensable for the model versatile education of "Gallant-hommes" youths at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century [15]. The first fencing classes for students were held in the University's Collegium Iuridicum in the academic year of 1817/1818. The attending students had to take a final public fencing exam on a date set by the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy or by the Faculty Council [15]. The fencing classes were conducted until the restructuring of the Jagiellonian University in 1833 in the aftermath of the fall of the November Uprising of 1830-31 and they enjoyed great popularity among the Kraków students. The most famous fencing instructors were Frenchman J. Ch. Remy, university professor F. Sapalski, and most notably A. Tavernier<sup>3</sup>.

Overall, the tradition of sabre fencing education in partitioned Poland developed in a number of directions, e.g. military fencing, competitive fencing in the Sokol Gymnastic Society and as a duelling skill. There was also the tradition of historical fencing upheld by Polish writers and artists. All these fencing traditions co-existed independently of one another for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they all had a positive impact on the emergence of recreational and competitive fencing.

## Count Michał Ostoja Starzewski and his fencing treatise

The Polish sabre school was most comprehensively described in the only known period sabre manual *O szermierstwie* (Treatise on Fencing) by Michał Ostoja Starzewski in 1830. The treatise was published by Starzewski's grandson in 1932 and remains an invaluable source not only for the historical study of Polish sabre fencing, but also for the study of Polish sport language as it contains a great number of long forgotten traditional Polish fencing terms (retained in the present article in their original forms) [16].

<sup>1</sup> Present-day city of Cluj in Romania

<sup>2</sup> L. Barbasetti (1859-1948) was a fencing master in fencing schools in Milan and Rome. He founded a fencing school in Vienna and was a head of the Wiener-Neustadt academy. He was also a fencing instructor in Trieste and Verona. Barbasetti published a number of books on fencing methodology

<sup>3</sup> A. Tavernier was a captain of Napoleonic cavalry (1804-13) and a horse-riding instructor in Versailles and in Count Esterhazy's school in Hungary. He worked at the Jagiellonian University between 1817 and 1821

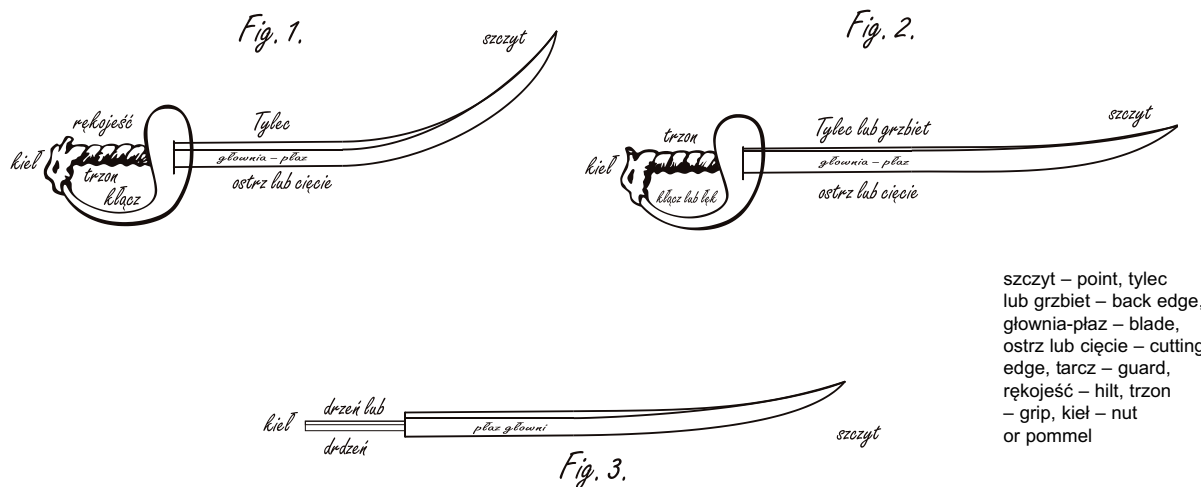


Fig. 1. Classification of cutting weapons according to Michał Starzewski: Fig. 1 – sabre, Fig. 2 – sword (Józef Starzewski, Ze wspomnień o Michale Starzewskim [In Memory of Michał Starzewski], Kraków: Drukarnia Narodowa, 1932)

Count Michał Franciszek Ostoja Starzewski was born on September 6, 1801 in Krosno. He received primary education in a local monastery of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin. After his father's death Starzewski's family moved to the city of Tarnów. Starzewski graduated from a private secondary school and completed a special course for home tutors. He fought in the tragic November Uprising 1830-31 against Russian rule as a non-commissioned officer of the Volhynia Mounted Rifles. After 1839 Starzewski managed a boarding house in Tarnów for sons of rich landed gentry and was a fencing master in the 1<sup>st</sup> Light Cavalry Regiment of Emperor Ferdinand I of Austria. During the Spring of Nations of 1848 Starzewski became a captain of the National Guard. One year later he applied for the post of fencing instructor at the University of Kraków, expressing his wish to "share his experience with students as fencing is, in fact, one of the most fundamental skills taught in universities" [15]. The University Senate and President supported Starzewski's application and submitted it to a respective committee of the Austrian Ministry of Public Education. The committee, however, rejected it. Starzewski did not give up his teaching plans and in 1850 received an official permit from the Kraków City Office to establish a private fencing school. Apart from fencing classes the school also offered gymnastics, music, drawing and calligraphy courses. In 1857, Michał Starzewski won a sabre contest at a prestigious sport tournament in Paris. On his return to Kraków, he taught fencing in a local Sokol Gymnastic Society "Orzeł Biały" (White Eagle). Starzewski's most famous students included Polish legal historian Stanisław Estreicher, national activist Oswald Potocki, and poet and novelist Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer. In 1887 Michał Starzewski moved back to Tarnów, where he continued to teach fencing in the Sokol Gymnastic Society until his death in 1894 [16].

## Tenets of the Polish sabre fencing school

First fencing manuals and treatises in Europe were published as early as in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Their authors were Don Jeronimo De Carranza (1569), Luis Pacheco de Narvaez (1569), Girard Thibault d'Anvers (1626) in Spain; Achille Marozzo (1536), Camillo Agrippa (1553), Giacomo Grassi (1570), Giovanni dall'Agoccio (1572), Angelo Viggiani (1560), Ridolfo Capo Ferro (1610), Alfieri Francesco (1640) in Italy; Henriho de Saint-Didier (1573), Charles Besnard (1653), Labat (1690) in France; and Johannes Lecküchner (1482), Hans Talhoffer (1443) and Joachim Meyer (1570) in Germany. These works had focused on the art of sword fencing for chivalry and aristocracy, whereas the sabre was used in military training for army officers and new bourgeoisie. In Poland, sabre training was one of the most important components of military drill for the cavalry. Although Starzewski's treatise came out late it constituted a detailed description of the traditional Polish sabre fencing school developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and was the first, original and pioneering, methodological fencing manual in Poland.

In his treatise Starzewski divided cutting weapons into curved *szable* (sabres) and straight *pałasze* (swords).

Bouts were held within a fairly limited space and the sabre, despite its heavy weight, was wielded with an immovable elbow. The cuts were made from the wrist in avoidance of the opponent's hits to the forearm. Even as an exercise, Polish sabre fencing never appeared posed and unnatural, unlike European foil fencing or highly artificial Spanish geometric rapier and court sword fencing. Interestingly, those schools used equivalents of Polish sabre beat and opposition parries [16]. The fundamental determinants of a good Polish sabreur was *siła dłonna*, i.e. literally "dexterity of the armed hand" and *wyżęzenie ramienne*, i.e. wielding of the sabre with an immovable elbow. The term *godzenie* ("striking") signified



Starzewski distinguished two categories of cuts: *cięcia wręczne* (short or shallow cuts, i.e. cuts on the armed hand) and *cięcia rdzenne* (long or deep cuts, i.e. cuts on the torso, head and shoulders). The name *rdzeń* (literarily 'core') denoted a focal spot in the centre of the opponent's chest where the cut lines were to hypothetically converge.

The cuts on the armed hand (*cięcia wręczne*) were given particular prominence in fencing training, whereas in combat, long cuts on the body were much more significant (like in present-day epee). The long cuts were, first of all, primary offensive cuts in fencing combat, while the cuts on the arm were secondary offensive cuts.

In his treatise Starzewski depicted both categories of cuts by way of two circular diagrams (Fig. 3). Diagrams of cuts had been drawn earlier in fencing manuals by Fiore de Liberi (1410), Filippo Vadi (1487), Achille Marozzo (1568) and Salvatore Fabris (1606), some of them based on Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. Starzewski had no knowledge of those earlier diagrams and his drawings were his original representations of Polish traditional sabre cuts [16]. The cuts on the arm (*cięcia wręczne*) were shown by Starzewski within a circle two feet in diameter drawn around the sabreur's hand holding the hilt (Fig. 3 – right) [16]. These cuts were performed from the wrist, and a good level of the fencer's 'hand dexterity' was required for their successful execution. While performing the short cuts a fencer had to make sure not to drop his sabre too low and to complete the cut on the opponent's hand. The focal spot for the short cuts was the middle of the opponent's hand.

The short cuts on the arm included:

- *Wręcz* – according to Starzewski, the most natural high diagonal cut from the inside;
- *W łąż* – a high diagonal cut from the outside, executed from the left upper side to the opponent's index finger driving the sabre;
- *W nik* – a low diagonal cut from the inside, from the left to the right;
- *W lew* – a low diagonal cut from the outside, as if intending to knock up the opponent's hand to the right;
- *W kłacz* – a cut from the right to the left aimed at the sabre guard;
- *W trzon* – a cut from the left to the right aimed at the fingers holding the sabre grip;
- *W kiść* – a cut from above;
- *W kiel* – a cut from below, aimed at the sabre pommel [16].

As far as the long cuts on the body (*cięcia rdzenne*) were concerned, Starzewski distinguished three sections of the opponent's target area: *strona sieczna* – the right side – "the most exposed"; *strona rdzenna* – the middle section close to the sagittal axis of the body; and *strona wrębna* – the left side – "the hardest one to reach" [16]. Following this distinction, Starzewski divided the long sabre cuts into *sieczne*, *rdzenne* and *wrębne* and depicted them within a large circular diagram with the focal spot of cut lines placed in the centre of the opponent's chest (Fig. 3 – left). It was a spot where all the long sabre cuts should have ended. The target area for the

long cuts encompassed the opponent's head, shoulders, torso and upper thighs. Out of twelve long sabre cuts, two were *rdzenne* cuts (*wbrew*, *w pion*), five were *sieczne* cuts (*odlew*, *w zerk*, *w łęg*, *kłęb* and *podlew*) and five were *wrębne* cuts (*w rąb*, *w lic*, *w pierś*, *w trok* and *nyżkiem* commonly known as the Polish hellish quarte).

*Cięcia rdzenne:*

- *Wbrew* – a cut to the forehead from above;
- *W pion* – a belly cut from below.

*Cięcia sieczne:*

- *Odlew* – a high, left, diagonal cut downwards to the opponent's right shoulder;
- *W zerk* – a cut to the opponent's right cheek;
- *W łęg* – a cut to the opponent's right side of the torso;
- *W kłęb* – a cut to the right hip;
- *Podlew* – a low, left diagonal cut upwards.

*Cięcia wrębne:*

- *W ręb* – a high, right, diagonal cut downwards to the opponent's left shoulder;
- *W lic* – a cut to the opponent's left cheek;
- *W pierś* – a cut to the opponent's left side of the torso;
- *W trok* – a cut to the left hip;

• *Nyżkiem* – a low, right diagonal cut upwards. "This cut is called the Turkish cut as this was the common way the Poles used to rip Turkish bellies in the past. At the election rallies of the Polish nobility, many a duelling nobleman loosened his opponent's belt with the Turkish cut, but did no harm. The Germans called this cut *die höllische polnische Quart*. In sabre duels, German fencers almost never used this technique but often got a souvenir cut in their underbelly from their Polish adversaries" [16].

In feinted offensive actions Polish sabreurs often used combinations of short and long cuts. First a cut on the arm was feinted, but then immediately followed with a real deep cut, like in present-day sabre fencing. In the words of M. Starzewski: "Each sabreur in his actions, especially while performing triple cuts, should know how to feint an attack on the torso and make a cut on the arm, and how to feint a cut on the arm to make a cut on the body" [16].

Finally, the Polish sabre fencing school involved an interesting custom in training and competition fights related to the measuring of the distance between the fencers at the start of a duel. The fighting distance was measured either by the fencers themselves or their seconds. First the fencers matched the lengths of the blades close to each other from guard to guard. Next, the fencers took a step back and struck the sabre cutting edges against each other, and then moved further away from each other and made contacts with the tips of their blades. Following these steps an offensive action could commence [16].

## Conclusion

The impact of European fencing schools, e.g. Italian, French and German, on Polish sabre fencing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was highly significant. Exchanging fencing experiences

of professional officers, establishment of private fencing salles by foreign fencing masters and participation in fencing tournaments greatly contributed to both the theory and practice of fencing in Poland. Deprived of its independent statehood and national army Poland never really developed its own 19<sup>th</sup>-century fencing school. Instead, Polish sabre fencing at that time either referred back to the Old-Polish fencing patterns recalled by Michał Starzewski in his treatise (1830), and later by Antoni Durski (1879) [17] and Marian Tokarski (1899) [18] in their fencing manuals; to be finally developed into Olympic fencing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the most characteristic features of Polish sabre fencing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the use of traditional Old-Polish swordsmanship terminology. It was only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that Italian, German and French sabre fencing terms made their way into the Polish language, and the traditional names for cutting techniques were replaced with numerical expressions [19, 20, 21].

To commemorate M. Starzewski's invaluable contribution to Polish fencing the annual Polish Cup in Cadet Women's

Epee has been named the Michał Starzewski Memorial Tournament. Every September the event is jointly organized in Krosno – the birthplace of M. Starzewski – by the Polish Fencing Association, the Krosno District Council and the "Sokolik" Student Fencing Club from Krosno. Each year a commemorative glass sabre is awarded as the main trophy to the tournament winner.

The Polish fencing school of Michał Starzewski constitutes a fascinating phenomenon of Polish physical culture and national heritage. In present-day Poland the exposition and propagation of its technical and tactical tenets and the traditional Old Polish fencing terminology serve a valid purpose: It is an invaluable contribution to the historical, patriotic, moral and physical education of young Poles. Still, a more comprehensive historical reconstruction of traditional Polish fencing would require, however, many studies of the cultural context, archival records, historical and cultural research as well as specialist literature.

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