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**THE POLE WHO TRANSLATED  
THE BIBLE FOR THE TURKS**  
**Wojciech Bobowski's Bible Translation into Ottoman-Turkish**

Wojciech Bobowski (1610?-1675?) is better known in Turkey by his Turkish name, Ali Ufkî, foremost as an Ottoman-Turkish composer and music theorist<sup>1</sup>. In Bobowski's biography, reconstructed on the basis of sources available to us today, many blank spots still exist and it is essential to underline the fact that the only biography which exists in Polish literature, by Franz Babinger (1935), is out of date in the light of today's discoveries.

In his many works, Wojciech Bobowski did not leave behind much information about himself. We owe most of what we know about him to the correspondence and diaries of European diplomats, travellers, and orientalists (i.e. Antoine Galland, Jacob Spon, Cornelio Magni, Isaac Basire, Thomas Smith) and from works of those for whom he was a source of information<sup>2</sup>. Very few documents related to his work as a *dragoman* (translator and interpreter in the sultan's service) have remained in the Ottoman archives (Behar, 2008: 23-24). There is little chance of recovering new materials there because around 1660, a great fire raged through Istanbul, in which the Topkapı palace also burned and most likely any documents in it.

What is known for sure is that Wojciech Bobowski was born in the

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<sup>1</sup> In Western literature, his last name has been written in many forms: Albert Bobowski, Albertus Bobovius, Alberto Bobovio, Bobonius, Bohonius, Bobrowski, Bozonius, and even Robovius. His Turkish name has been noted as Ali Bey, Hali Beigh, Hali Beg, and Hulis Bey (Behar, 2008: 17).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Paul Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, London, 1670; Franciscus à Mesgnien Meninski, *Thesaurus Linguarum Orientalium, Turcicae, Arabicae, Persicae...*, Vienna, 1680; Thomas Hvde, *Itinera Mundi*, Oxford 1691.

Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. Researchers are at a disagreement, however, concerning the exact place and the dates of his birth and death, and also about some other facts in his biography<sup>3</sup>. According to the author of the present article, the most plausible version of Ali Ufkî's life is as follows: He was born in Lviv about 1610<sup>4</sup>. On the basis of the available sources, it is impossible to prove that he was of noble descent, information which has popularly been taken as fact. This trait may have been contributed by Polish biographers in the 19th century. Living aside his social background, it is a well-known fact, that he received his good education, including his musical education, on Polish soil. As a young man, he was taken into captivity<sup>5</sup> during one time of Crimean-Tatar invasions<sup>6</sup> and following this, was sold into the service of the Ottoman Empire's sultan. After converting to Islam and taking the name of Ali, he entered the palace school of administration, Enderûn Mektebi. He served at the Sultan's court in the Topkapı palace in Constantinople for about 19 years<sup>7</sup> as a musician (he played the *santur*) and a music teacher. He was given the nickname Ufkî, which means "of wide horizons, quick-witted, clever". He left the palace, between the years 1651 and 1662 (Behar, 2008: 20). The most popular version of events that happened afterwards claims that he served an Ottoman official unknown to researchers,

<sup>3</sup> Most recently, the facts of Ali Ufkî's life given by other researchers were summarized by Cem Behar, a Turkish musicologist (2008). A supporter of another version of events is Hannah Neudecker (2005).

<sup>4</sup> This date has been accepted as fact by most biographers and researchers today, although it is impossible to confirm. Cornelio Magni knew Bobowski personally and published his description of the Topkapı palace entitled *Serai Enderun... Del Seraglio detto nuovo delli Gran Signori Ottomani, descritto da Alberto Bobovio Leopolitano Polacco...* (Parma, 1679). Using the name "Leopolitano", he indicates the Lviv origin of Ali Ufkî. With regard to the ancestral surname, the Polish biographers state that Bobowski was a member of the nobility and indicate his place of birth as being in the town of Bobowa in the Małopolska (Lesser Poland) province (Babinger, 1935). This version, however, seems highly unlikely. The town existed on maps of Poland in the beginning of the XVII century, however the author believes that if Bobowski had been born there, into a noble family, he would have gone to Cracow to study and not to Lviv. Moreover, the Tatars did not have ventured so far out to the West around 1610. If we are to hold the theory which addresses the connection between his name and place of birth, the author suggests taking one more possibility into consideration. In Ukraine at present, in the Transcarpathian circuit, south of Lviv, there exist two towns of similar names: Bobovo and Bobovshyje.

<sup>5</sup> Or as a ten year old boy, as Hannah Neudecker (2005: 175) believes; she claims that the date of Bobowski's birth was 1620.

<sup>6</sup> This could have happened during the informal Polish-Ottoman war in 1633-34.

<sup>7</sup> Or 21 years. as Neudecker prefers (2005: 176).

with whom he left for Egypt. In recognition of his excellent service, he was set free and as a freeman, set off for the Istanbul district of Pera (Behar, 2008: 28). He worked as a translator for the English embassy, and towards the end of his life, he returned to the Ottoman court, but this time as a *dragoman*. He most likely died in Istanbul around 1675. Neither his grave nor any documentation regarding the death of Ali Ufkî have been found.

The works of Wojciech Bobowski that have been preserved to this day focus on three main subjects: music, language and religion. It was he who gave Turkish musicology the first Ottoman-Turkish classical music anthology, *Mecmua-i Sâz ü Söz*. In it he wrote over 500 pieces from the 16th and 17th centuries, utilizing the European musical notation, with proper modifications he invented himself (Ayangil, 2008). He composed a dozen or so pieces himself. One of the more interesting examples of Ali Ufkî's compositions is his arrangement of the *Genevan Psalter*: He translated the texts of 14 psalms into Ottoman-Turkish and converted their melodies to fit the aesthetics of Ottoman court music (Behar, 1990).

He was a polyglot and his talent was appreciated and admired in the circles of the Ottoman elite, also among European diplomats and travellers. Ali Ufkî became a link between the East and the West. The best known orientalists studied the Turkish language and Ottoman customs under him, among others Antoine Galland and Franciscus à Mesgnien Meninski. He wrote grammars and dictionaries of the Turkish language for educational purposes. He translated linguistic works into Turkish (for example Comenius' Latin textbook under the title of *Janua linguarum reserata*) and religious treatises (such as Hugo Grotius' *De veritate religionis Christianae*). He left behind a few treatises concerning Christianity, written with regard for the needs of Muslims, and treatises which concerned Islam in Latin for Europeans. His *De Turcarum liturgia, Peregrinatione Meccana, Circumcisione, Ægrotorum Visitatione...* remained one of the main sources of information regarding Islam in Europe for centuries. The treatises were surprisingly objective for the time in which they appeared. Bobowski does not evaluate the religions he describes in his works. He does not denigrate the Muslim religion or Turkish customs, nor does he exalt the importance of Christianity the way later authors writing on the subject did. Another important work of Bobowski, a detailed description of daily life in the Topkapı palace, entitled *Serai Enderun*, allowed the modern historians to recreate the

destroyed parts of the Sultan's palace before it became a museum<sup>8</sup>.

Wojciech Bobowski's work which had the greatest impact was his Ottoman-Turkish translation of the Bible. It was not the first translation of the Bible into Turkish, but the first to encompass the entire Bible: the Old Testament (including Apocrypha) and the New Testament. The translation was part of an international project initiated by Jan Amos Komenský, a great philosopher, reformer and educator of enlightenment, and a leader of the Bohemian Brethren. Inspired by a vision of alliance between the Protestant countries and the Ottoman Empire against the Catholic Habsburgs, he saw the need to translate the Bible into the Ottoman-Turkish language, in order to inspire the Turks to convert.

He got together a group of people who were to help him to carry out the project. Professor Jacob Golius, an orientalist at Leiden University, was an academic advisor, and the editor preparing the manuscript for printing was his brother Peter. The translator was to be Levinus Warner, who resided in Constantinople from 1645 and worked as a resident for the Dutch Republic to the Sublime Porte from 1655 to 1665. There was no printing press in the area of the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century, and the translated fragments had to be sent to Leiden, where the Bible was to be printed by Johanne George Nissel and then sent back to Turkey. The international endeavour was financed by the Dutch merchant Lurens de Geer (Behar, 2008: 40).

In the year 1658, Warner was officially commissioned to translate the Bible. Comenius gave him 6 months to do this. It turned out very quickly, however, that much more time was necessary. Despite his knowledge of the Turkish language (he was a student of Professor Golius) Warner himself did not take up the translation unable to do so because of his diplomatic responsibilities. He commissioned the translation, then, to an Ottoman of Jewish descent, Yahya bin Ishak, whose nickname was Haki<sup>9</sup>, who finished the work in either 1659 (Neudecker, 1994: 367) or 1661 (Malcolm, 2007: 332). For reasons unknown to us, the translation did not please Warner or the advisors in Leiden. At that time, Ali Ufkî was finishing his translation of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer commissioned by the English Embassy. It might be that Warner decided to ask Bobowski to edit Haki's translation on the recommendation of

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<sup>8</sup> A list of all the surviving works of Bobowski, along with their locations has been provided by Cem Behar (2008: 52-55).

<sup>9</sup> Two versions of Haki's manuscript are currently in the Warner Collection of the University Library at Leiden. An analysis of its fragments, along with the facsimile, can be found in Hannah Neudecker's (1994) book.

the English diplomats. However, a final decision was made to reject the translation altogether and in the year 1662, Bobowski received a commission to do the translation from scratch. The translation of the Old and New Testaments including the Apocrypha, took him two years. He finished in 1664.

Wojciech Bobowski's Bible has not yet seen its full critical edition. Researchers emphasize the exceptional value of the work for the fact that Ali Ufkî made an effort to write the text so as to make it speak to Muslim Turks. That same intention is also visible in his translations of the Psalms mentioned above. Today we have three versions of the manuscript of the Holy Bible (two of them to be found in the Warner Collection of the University Library at Leiden and one in the Harleian collection of the British Library) and one Biblical apocrypha (in Leiden). It is unknown to us what language it was that Wojciech Bobowski translated the Bible from. Bruce G. Privratsky has come to some interesting conclusions regarding this subject:

„Ali Bey versified the Psalms and several other passages according to the Vulgate tradition (...). However, Ali Bey follows the Textus Receptus where New Testament textual variants are involved (...), suggesting that his source text was one of the modern vernacular versions based on Erasmus' Greek New Testament, perhaps the Olivetan Bible of French Protestantism and/or the King James Version. A study of Ali Bey's spellings of proper names, e.g. *Petro*, *Se'mun*, *Filipo*, *Pilato*, could reveal much about his connections with Christian tradition. Several of these are Italian spellings and suggest a Catholic connection. The fact that Ali Bey refers to John the Baptist as *Yûhannâ Ma'madânî*, a Christian construction of John's name in Arabic, suggests that he was in contact with the Oriental churches also, perhaps the Syrian Orthodox Church” (Privratsky, 2014: 19–20).

Already in the year 1662, in Leiden, a fragment of the Book of Isaiah was printed experimentally, and by 1666 all fragments of Bobowski's translation were sent to Jacob Golius. Comenius was certain that the endeavour would be a success, and therefore he wrote an introduction to the Turkish version of the Bible. Within that short text entitled *Bibliorum Turcarum Dedicatio*, the author dedicated the translation to the sultan Mehmet IV, and expressed his wish for understanding and friendly perspectives between the three monotheistic religions (Behar, 2008: 42).

That wish, however, could not become reality, because with the death of Levinus Warner in 1665, and a year later that of the project's main

sponsor Lurens de Geer, printing was put on hold. As the first printed version of the Ottoman-Turkish Bible was William Seaman's translation of the New Testament, published in Oxford in 1666, that made history (İncil-i Mukaddes: yani lisan-ı Türkî'ye tercüme olunan bizim Rabbimiz Yesû Mesih'in yeni ahid ve vasiyeti). It did not, however, boast very much success (Privratsky, 2014: 28; Siemienieć-Gołaś, 1995). Wojciech Bobowski's unpublished manuscript had been forgotten for 150 years. Neither Comenius nor Bobowski, however, could predict how important their work would be in the future. In 1739, in Leipzig, the first four chapters of Ali Ufkî's version of Genesis were printed. In 1819 *The British and Foreign Bible Society* published the New Testament in Paris, and the entire Ottoman-Turkish Bible was printed there in 1827. From that time, and throughout the 19th century it was published in fragments or as a whole in different alphabets – Greek, Arabic and Ottoman. In Istanbul, it was printed for the first time in the year 1870. The first Turkish publication in the Latin script was done in 1932. Even in the newest version of the Turkish Bible, from the year 1988, one can read in the introduction that it is a 1941 version based on the translation by Ali Ufkî.

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## **POLAK, KTÓRY TŁUMACZYŁ BIBLIĘ DLA TURKÓW**

Wojciech Bobowski w świecie nauki lepiej znany jest pod swoim tureckim imieniem Ali Ufkî przede wszystkim jako muzyk – kompozytor i twórca pierwszej antologii muzyki osmańsko-tureckiej. Jest to niezwykle barwna, wielowymiarowa postać w historii kulturowych relacji polsko-tureckich. Pozostawione przez niego dzieła oraz przekłady, z punktu widzenia dzisiejszej nauki, możemy zaliczyć do kilku dziedzin humanistyki: muzykologii, językoznawstwa, translatoryki, dydaktyki, religioznawstwa, a nawet etnologii. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiona została historia powstania jednego z najważniejszych dzieł Bobowskiego – przekładu Biblii Starego i Nowego Testamentu oraz apokryfów na język osmańsko-turecki.