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“Nasz dobry Cesarz” [Our Good Emperor]: About the Poles’ Perception of the Austrian
Kaiser in Galicia

In contemporary Polish Galicia, which only partially includes the historical boundaries of the Habsburg province, one can readily discern through conversations and by observation that the myth of Kaiser Franz Joseph and nostalgia for the Austrian Empire is still alive among the people.

In this paper, I will examine some Galician Poles’ images of the Austrian Emperor from the time of the partitions of Poland (the first occurring in 1772) through the reign of Franz Joseph. I will focus on contemporaneous accounts, available in the form of memoirs and journalistic articles, to analyze whether the image of the Habsburg ruler changed over time and, if so, what could have caused this transition.

Interestingly, the first accounts of the Poles’ opinions on Austrian policy in the region at this time—e.g., Dzeduszycki or Popiel—are almost completely negative and describe the Poles’ hatred and hostility towards Habsburg rule in Galicia. Particularly following the tragic events of 1846, the peasants’ uprising against Polish landowners supposedly supported by the Austrian officials, the Poles criticized the Kaiser and his policy in the region in such publication as Wielopolski’s *List szlachecka polskiego o rzezi galicyjskiej do księcia Metternicha* or in Ujejski’s *Chora*.

New hope for the Poles came in 1848 with the Spring of the Nations, when even Austrian sources such as “Wiener Zeitung” postulated on the re-establishment of an independent Poland in union with Austria. Unfortunately, the end effect of 1848 was rather tragic for the Poles, as the Polish witnesses stated (Louis and Krzepicki), when this new hope turned once again into distrust and disbelief. This situation did not change with the appointment of Emperor Franz Joseph. Initially, the new Kaiser was perceived by the Poles as too young, too inexperienced, and too easily manipulated. Yet, Franz Joseph’s public relations and Polish policy would eventually cause a significant change in the minds of the Galician Poles. While his first visit to Galicia was a failed attempt to win over the trust of the Poles, during his next trips to the region he was greeted enthusiastically. This dramatic change in the Kaiser’s image was definitely a result of his Polish reforms—e.g. Polish administration of the region, Polish schools and universities, and most importantly, the autonomy given to the province in 1866.

This presentation will show how the Poles’ perception of the Austrian Emperor went hand in hand with the issue of Polish rights in the region (independence or autonomy) and to a lesser extent with the public relations talent possessed by the state apparatus—e.g., the depiction of the Kaiser in Polish national costume was very successful, showing the Emperor “embracing” this culture or the role of his visits to the province. Significantly, after Galicia received its relative autonomy from the Emperor, he became a “benevolent and fatherly” figure, often called “nasz dobry cesarz” [our good Emperor], a myth still found in the literature (as argued by Wiegandt and Woldan) and

minds of Poles today. More importantly, this presentation supplements the work offered by Leopold R. G Decloedt in *Imago imperatoris: Franz Joseph I. in der österreichischen Belletristik der Zwischenkriegszeit* (1995) and *An meine Völker: die Literarisierung Franz Joseph I.* (1998). Literary representations like Roth's "Die Büste des Kaisers" take on much more specific political shapes as they span the image of Franz Joseph used in Vienna and those from the provinces.