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# From British Menageries and Hippodromes to the Olympic Circus in the Grand Duchy of Posen: The Origins of the Use of Ostriches in European Sport and Entertainment

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Throughout history, animals have been involved in human life in various ways. People have attributed a special role to birds of prey or exotic birds, including ostriches, whose involvement in entertainment and sports began in the first half of the nineteenth century. This article discusses the origins, development and reception of the ostrich entertainment industry in two areas of nineteenth-century Europe that had significantly different social, political and economic circumstances: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (as it was then known) and partitioned Poland (the example of the Grand Duchy of Posen). The first uses of ostriches for entertainment purposes in Europe consisted of bird exhibitions in travelling menageries, hippodromes and in circus shows. Among the pioneers of this kind of entertainment in the British Isles was William Batty, and in the culturally excluded territories of partitioned Poland it was Ernst Renz, whose Olympic circus, thanks to its diverse programme of shows and performances, provided important entertainment and educational opportunities for Poles under occupation.

## Introduction

For ages, animals have accompanied people in various activities. Initially, people only hunted animals but over time humans began use them for work and other

purposes (Tymowski 2013). Taming, breeding and then domesticating animals resulted in their use in sports or entertainment (Stoddart 2004). Animals may have served as people's partners, tools or objects of training. A special role was assigned to birds, which were definitely more difficult to make cooperate with humans, did not display an aptitude for recreational breeding, and their training appeared tedious or time-consuming (Gugolek *et al.* 2016). Nevertheless, as the years passed, people began to breed birds, including predatory or ornamental ones.

Among the numerous species of birds used by humans, the ostrich – the largest living bird, belonging to a small class of fast-running flightless birds – deserves special consideration. Despite the existence of a few distinctive subspecies differing in colours and plumage quality, there is only one extant species of ostrich (*Struthio*) in the world (Wagner 1986). The sandy and burning deserts of Africa are the only native homes of these animals (*The History of Birds* 1860). Studies of fossils indicate that ostriches could be found 40–55 million years ago, and that the evolution of these ostriches led to the emergence of giant birds up to four metres high, which also lived in the Middle East and Europe. Interestingly, in the ancient world, ostriches were not considered birds, but a class between bird and beast, as they could not fly (*Armagh Guardian* 1845: 4). With the passage of time, however, these birds began to reduce in size, while developing greater speed abilities (Moyses-Jaubert *et al.* 1992). Over the years, ostriches have enjoyed particular popularity and even fascination among people. Historically, the press described these birds as gentle and harmless, but only tameable by those who regularly spent time with them, as they could be fierce and violent towards strangers (*Lancaster Gazette* 1844: 4).

The use of ostriches for sports and entertainment on a larger scale began in the first half of the nineteenth century. Initially, ostriches were one of many animal species shown in travelling menageries, and later they were included in the programmes of circus shows, one of the most popular forms of entertainment at the time, attracting spectators from all social classes. The cradle of the modern circus is considered to be England, from where the new entertainment quickly made its way to France (Stoddart 2000; Włodarczyk and Rozmiarek 2023). It was in England that ostriches were introduced as part of elaborate circus performances, also featuring sporting or proto-sporting elements (Godlewski and Sajek 2018), although according to some authors, one of these events, i.e. ostrich racing, can be considered a pseudo-sport (McKay and Miller 1991). The practice of exhibiting ostriches appeared somewhat later in Poland and was rather incidental, but the reasons and causes for using the birds for entertainment were the same throughout Europe.

To date, researchers of broadly defined nineteenth-century entertainment have not addressed the issue of the use of ostriches in sports and entertainment. The purpose of this article is to reveal the origins, development and reception of the ostrich entertainment industry in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, with a particular focus on two areas differing in their political and socio-economic circumstances. The first was the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland – a colonial power at the time and a leading nation in many global cultural developments, including the modern circus. The other was Poland, which in the aftermath

of three partitions (1772, 1793 and 1795) by the Russian Empire, the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Prussia, disappeared from the political map of Europe for 123 years and hence its social and economic development was significantly impeded.

Content analysis of historical source materials, being the most suitable method to study various forms of human communication, was carried out for this work. Multiple existing and available sources from the period, mostly reports and notes from the British and Polish press, were consulted as well as playbills advertising visits of travelling menageries. The flourishing British press of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries also included extensive coverage of relevant shows and performances from other countries, including France. In our opinion, the available sources permit a reliable and accurate presentation of the research problem. The article comprises five main sections. After this introduction, the second section considers the history of human use of ostriches for various purposes throughout the ages, while the third section addresses the pioneering use of ostriches for entertainment in Britain and France. The fourth section deals with entertainment involving ostriches on Polish territory, and the fifth section is a summary of all the addressed issues.

The subject of the study is important from the point of view of the humanities, social sciences and physical culture sciences, with a particular focus on the history and sociology of sports and recreation. The study findings provide an overview of the current state of research regarding the use of exotic animals – in this case, ostriches – as part of broadly defined leisure, and its receptions in European history.

### **Ostriches and Humans Across the Centuries**

The first interactions between humans and ostriches date back to around 5500 BCE, as evidenced by numerous cave drawings found in different areas of today's Sahara depicting the hunting of ostriches by the Egyptian pharaoh and his immediate family, most likely for the birds' highly prized feathers used in headstalls for chariot horses and symmetrical hand fans (Vandervoodt-Jarvis 1994). In later times, ostrich plumes were also used to decorate the helmets of Roman military officers and medieval knights returning from the Crusades as well as cavalier hats (Jensen *et al.* 1992). In the late eighteenth century, ostrich feathers were introduced to European fashion salons by Marie Antoinette, indirectly contributing to the beginning of the turbulent development of ostrich farming (Horbańczuk 2003). After British settlers arrived in South Africa and made Grahamstown a major trading centre in 1820, ostrich feathers became one of the main exports of the Cape Colony, alongside ivory. Equally popular was the use of ostrich eggshells as gifts and goblets during religious ceremonies, or as water containers by the Khoisan people (formerly called Bushmen and Hottentots) (Wagner 1986: 6–8).

The popularity of ostrich meat, skin, and feathers made it necessary to tame the birds. Ostriches had been tamed for the purpose of ceremonial processions by

Ptolemy II Philadelphus, pharaoh of Egypt from 285 to 246 BC, who owned eight paired harnessed ostriches, and whose wife personally rode one of them. Roman noblewomen were also known to ride ostriches in a similar manner (Brooke 1995). Assyrian kings, especially Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC), kept ostriches in royal zoos open to the public, and these zoos were considered to be under divine protection thanks to the presence of the birds (Aynard 1972). In addition, Parthian kings (149 BC – AD 227), in order to improve their trade relations with Chinese emperors, were known to send the latter live ostriches as well as ostrich eggs (Colledge 1967). Professional taming of wild ostriches, however, did not occur until the nineteenth century in South Africa, and the man credited with initiating the breeding of ostriches in captivity was either farmer Graaff-Reinet from the Karoo region (Smit 1963) or, according to his own account, a certain farmer named Douglass (Douglass 1881).

Ostrich farming began in the years 1857–1860 in South Africa, first with catching the wild birds and keeping them in camps and paddocks (Beyleveld 1967). Feathers from ostriches on the farms were used to make headdresses or brooms, and some people even believed in their potency to ward off mosquitoes. Demand for such goods caused a growing number of people to plan to export the birds from Africa to other continents for breeding, and in 1859 the Acclimatisation Society of Paris, thanks to the generosity of one of its members, M. Chagot, even offered bonuses for domestication of ostriches in Algeria or Senegal and for breeding ostriches in Europe (Mosenthal and Harting 1877). By 1865, there had only been 80 tame ostriches in the southern part of the African continent (Wagner 1986: 8–10). Ostrich farming reached other continents later, e.g. Australia in 1868 or 1869, when the Zoological and Acclimatisation Society of Victoria acquired five immature birds (Hastings 1991). In the mid-1870s, the South Australian pioneer pastoralist, T.R. Bowman attempted to farm ostriches (Iwanicki 1985). In the United States, the first ostrich farms were set up in 1882 (Lee 1911), while commercial ostrich farming in Botswana started as late as the early 1980s with capturing the birds from the wild, purchasing them from local farmers, and importing them from neighbouring countries, such as Namibia and Zimbabwe (Moreki *et al.* 2021).

One of the earliest ‘sports’ associated with ostriches were the so-called headless ostrich races held in Roman amphitheatres, during which the birds were ceremonially decapitated to amaze eager spectators and run in circles before finally collapsing. The first such race was probably organized during the reign of Emperor Commodus (AD 180–192), when the ruler himself struck the birds with a sharp crescent-shaped blade, demonstrating his combat readiness. Emperor Commodus was so skilful at decapitating ostriches that the birds kept running for some time after having their heads cut off (*Leicester Chronicle* 1833: 1). In turn, Emperor Probus (AD 276–282) was said to have ordered the slaughter of a thousand ostriches, and handed out their carcasses to spectators (Toynbee 1973). The slaughter of ostriches in Roman amphitheatres is assumed to have continued intermittently throughout the third century, and the shipments of ostriches from Africa to Rome continued until at least the early fifth century. In addition to using the fowl for spectacle, the Romans

also harnessed ostriches to chariots, and some Arab tribes held ostrich hunts, usually with poisoned arrows, and used ostrich meat and skins to make clothes and household items (Horbańczuk 2001). In the second half of the nineteenth century, ostrich (rhea) hunts popular in South America began to be considered a kind of cross-country sport. Soldier C.S. Smelt reported, when describing his stay in Buenos Aires in 1868, that South American Indians hunted ostriches with half-blood greyhounds, and that ostrich chases often lasted an hour and a half or even longer. In addition, the local terrain, often full of potholes and overgrown with thick and tall grass in which foxes and other animals also lurked, was an extra attraction for hunters. Ostrich hunting was, it was claimed, one of the most exciting pursuits that the mentioned soldier had the good fortune to witness in his life (Mosenthal and Harting 1877).

### **Ostriches in Britain and France**

In the early eighteenth century, ostriches had become exclusive gifts presented to the highest-ranking representatives of the political world. Many examples of this use of the exotic birds can be found in the British press of the period. As reported by the *Ipswich Journal* as early as 1728, His Excellency Cossam Khaya, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary from the Bashaw, Dey, and Divan of Tripoli, held his first audience with His Majesty at Hampton Court, during which he presented to the king ostriches and antelopes brought to the British Isles for that purpose (*Ipswich Journal* 1728: 2). Ostriches were also gifted by the Dey of Algiers to the Sultan at Constantinople (*London Packet and New Lloyd's Evening Post* 1801: 1) and to the king of France (*Morning Post* 1825: 3) as well as by the Algerine Ambassador to His Majesty during the Ambassador's visit to Portsmouth (*Ipswich Journal* 1810: 2). Four dark ostriches were also brought to Brighton as a gift to His Majesty from the East Indies (*Saint James's Chronicle and London Evening Post* 1822: 1), and six ostriches were also presented to the monarch by Captain Clapperton on behalf of the Sultan of Sokoto of Central Africa (however, as it turned out, two of them had died during the journey) (*Hampshire Chronicle* 1825: 3).

Many of the received gifts were then donated to menageries or royal gardens, which cared for the birds and exhibited them to the public. For example, a female ostrich from the Barbary Coast was given by the Earl of Rothes to the Surrey Zoological Gardens (*Huntingdon, Bedford and Peterborough Gazette* 1831: 4). Twenty years later, the Gardens had four ostriches (*Morning Advertiser* 1852: 7). British menageries, in turn, received two ostriches from Sir Thomas Reid, a consul in Tunis as well as two ostriches from Admiral Sir Thomas Briggs, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet stationed in Malta (*Sussex Advertiser* 1835: 2). Furthermore, a 'stupendous ostrich' was also on display in William Batty's menagerie (*Tipperary Free Press* 1839: 3).

Most ostriches were brought to Britain and France as gifts from North Africa, especially Morocco, as confirmed in numerous press notes. This is because the forested and uncultivated areas of Morocco were abundant in deer, antelopes and, especially, ostriches (*Cork Examiner* 1844: 4). Representatives of the Austrian Embassy in Morocco, on their return from Tangier, delivered two ostriches as gifts from the Emperor (*Albion and the Star* 1830: 3). Moreover, ‘the Emperor of Morocco sent to the King of the French two ostriches’ (*Stamford Mercury* 1846: 2), and as many as 30 ostriches in 1851 (*Hampshire Advertiser* 1851: 7). In addition, His Majesty ‘had honoured the Zoological Society of London by the gift of a pair of ostriches, recently arrived from Morocco’ (from Tangier to Plymouth) which were then shown to the public at the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens (*Morning Post* 1850: 2; *Liverpool Mail* 1850: 6; *Glasgow Chronicle* 1850: 2). Ostriches were also brought to the British Isles from Australia, as evidenced by the display of ‘the ostrich and emu of Van Diemen’s Land’ in the aviary of Hylton’s Menagerie of Trained Animals (*Norwich Mercury* 1844: 1).

It is not without reason that ostriches were most often donated to menageries where mostly exotic animals were kept in special enclosures or spaces. The birds were exhibited, for example, in the Royal Menagerie at the Exeter Exchange on the Strand in London, where one ‘stupendous African Ostrich’ arrived in 1814 (*Bell’s Weekly Messenger* 1814: 8). A similar exhibition was also offered by Polito’s Travelling Menagerie (*Cheltenham Chronicle* 1815: 1). In 1822, another large menagerie of ‘wild beasts, birds, crocodiles and serpents’ exhibited an amazing ostrich from Africa, describing it as ‘the Bird that produces those valuable feathers, and so strong as to be able to bear a man on his back, and run faster than the race horse – the only real Ostrich living in Europe’ (*Glasgow Herald* 1822: 3). The Immense Royal Menagerie in Bristol advertised its ostrich as ‘a rare and valuable bird’ and as ‘the only traveling ostrich in England’ (*Bristol Mercury* 1823: 2; *Morning Advertiser* 1823: 1). ‘A full-grown Southern Ostrich’ was also kept by Atkins’ Unrivalled Menagerie (*Norwich Mercury* 1828: 1), which advertised it as ‘the stupendous Male Ostrich, whose size and bulk by far exceed any other ever exhibited’ (*Salisbury and Winchester Journal* 1829: 4). In addition, Wombwell’s Royal Grand National Menagerie showed, in Brighton, a ‘male ostrich, the only one seen in England for the last century, and in full feather’ (*Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* 1828: 1), and in Bathwick, ‘the Great African Ostrich, the largest of the feathered race’ (*Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* 1828: 2). Later, the menagerie also featured an ‘ostrich or emew of enormous size’ (*Nottingham Review* 1835: 3), and in Cheltenham ‘the finest male African ostrich ever imported into England’ (*Cheltenham Chronicle* 1848: 2).

Apart from the menageries, ostriches were also exhibited at fairs and in museums. In October 1791, a pair of royal ostriches arrived in Chester and could be admired by the public at a fair there (*Chester Chronicle* 1791: 3). Since the fair was an itinerant one the birds were also exhibited in November in Manchester (*Manchester Mercury* 1791: 4), in December in Derby (*Derby Mercury* 1791: 4), in January of 1792 in Lincoln (*Stamford Mercury* 1792a: 3), and in January and February in Stamford



(*Stamford Mercury* 1792b: 3; *Stamford Mercury* 1792c: 3). In November 1811, a touring exhibition of the Museum of Natural History was displayed in Oxford, consisting of more than 1200 species of birds, including ostriches (*Oxford University and City Herald* 1811: 3). In 1838, the National Museum of Natural History within the Jardin des Plantes in Paris received a male and a female ostrich which were placed in an enclosure specially designed for them, and then, as the author of the press release wrote, began swallowing small pebbles in it with extraordinary greed (*Morning Advertiser* 1838: 3). In addition, 'a fine specimen of the female Ostrich' was donated to the museum of the Natural History Society of Warrington by the Earl of Derby in 1840 (*Manchester Courier* 1840: 6).

The British press also reported on sports and entertainment involving ostriches taking place in other countries. In 1825, a certain Mr Adamson published a story about a recreational activity with ostriches sighted by a British man on the south bank of the Niger River. The activity involved small African boys climbing and riding on the backs of ostriches. Fascinated by the scene, Adamson requested an African adult man to ride an ostrich by himself. While watching this competition, he compared the speed of ostriches to that of partridges and English horses, which, although extremely sturdy, certainly ran slower than ostriches (*Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* 1825: 7). Horses were later often tested for their agility and strength while chasing ostriches (*Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser* 1840: 8). Moreover, in 1834, at the request of Khaun-e-Jahaun, a fight show was held between two ostriches which 'attacked each other with such fury that the blood was seen streaming from their beaks' (*Wolverhampton Chronicle and Staffordshire Advertiser* 1834: 4). In 1850, the press reported on ostrich races held at hippodromes in France. This was the first time ostriches were used for this type of entertainment. The earliest reference to ostrich racing comes from late September 1850, when the hippodrome in Paris had 'another attraction in a quartet of real ostriches, who race with boys on their backs, and who make the same noise as geese do' (*Woolmer's Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* 1850: 8). A similar press note appeared in the *Standard of Freedom* on the same day, and it stated that the new attraction was initially met with a rather cool reception, but in time it elicited satisfaction and ripples of laughter from the audience (*Standard of Freedom* 1850: 3). Ostrich races quickly won the affection of the Parisian public, as evidenced by subsequent reports informing of 'thousands of grown-up children to stare at ostrich-racing' (*Fifeshire Journal* 1850: 1). As it turns out, ostrich shows at the Parisian hippodrome proved so popular that it was feared they would supersede other amusements, including the famous ballooning shows (*Liverpool Albion* 1850: 3). Hence, Madame Poitevin decided to combine the two attractions and ascended on the back of a live ostrich in a balloon over Paris (*Huddersfield Chronicle* 1850: 3).

As early as 1825, the Extraordinary and Novel Chase had been held at the Richmond Barracks in Dublin under the auspices of the Commander of the Forces, during which 'a royal ostrich was pursued by greyhounds' (*Dublin Evening Post* 1825: 2). One of the pioneers of public shows of ostrich races in the British Isles was William Batty, director of Batty's Grand National Hippodrome.

Having acquired several ostrich specimens, he put them through special training so that they could then be ridden by Arab jockeys and ultimately take part in entertaining competitions, arousing great interest from the public (*Morning Advertiser* 1851b: 1; *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette* 1851: 5; *Globe* 1851: 3; *Illustrated London News* 1851: 15; *Sun* 1851: 2; *Sun* 1852b: 6). In some other shows ostriches were ridden by little boys (*Waterford News* 1851: 2). The races involved various incidents caused by the clumsiness of the running birds, horsemen whipping the birds, or shouts of the crowd (*Morning Herald* 1851: 6). According to one press note ostriches often provoked people to play with them (Era 1851a: 10), and – according to another – it was sad to watch the utter chaos of the ostriches running with their tongues out and bulging eyes, trying to get away from the screams of the audience (*Weekly Dispatch* 1851: 10). Batty's Hippodrome also featured ostrich hunts (*Morning Advertiser* 1851a: 6) and ostrich flat races (*Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* 1852: 10). When Batty announced the programme of his second season, in order to make his shows even more professional, he employed the famous founder of the Paris Hippodrome, Henri Franconi. Under Franconi's supervision numerous herds of trained horses, ponies, deer, elephants as well as a flock of ostriches were exhibited, thus 'producing the most elaborate piece of antique entertainment ever shown in England' (Era 1852c: 1).

Ostriches were also used in performances of William Cooke's equestrian company in Cooke's Circus (Era 1851b: 11), and later in Cooke's Hippodrome (*Bristol Times and Mirror* 1852: 4), and in William Cooke's Colossal Hippodrome (Era 1852b: 1). Circus races with trained ostriches also provided much entertainment for spectators (Era 1852a, 12) as evidenced by the fact that this type of amusement was also included in the circus programme the following year (*Hull Daily News* 1853: 1). There were also extraordinary performances by American and French circus riders staged in Britain, in which three ostriches from the Paris Hippodrome, which had previously enjoyed great popularity at the London Hippodrome, danced a polka and then took part in a race in which their riders faced off against an Arab steed (*Liverpool Standard and General Commercial Advertiser* 1851: 1). Ostrich races and ostrich hunts were also held in the Royal Amphitheatre and in Cirque National in Leamington (*Liverpool Mail* 1852: 5; *Liverpool Albion* 1852a: 1; *Liverpool Albion* 1852b: 1; *Leamington Advertiser, and Beck's List of Visitors* 1853: 3). During the World's Exhibition, Professor Richard Risley and Thomas McCollum, late Proprietors of Drury Lane Theatre, constructed a moving hippodrome and showed, among many other attractions, ostrich races (*North British Daily Mail* 1852a: 3). Two splendid ostriches were displayed as 'wild birds of the desert hunted by an Arab horseman' (*North British Daily Mail* 1852b: 2). In addition, the Cremorne Gardens hosted the Grand Cirque Oriental under the Proprietorship and Direction of M. Louis Soullier and presented a stud of 50 highly trained steeds, ponies, ostriches, and an 'Olympic column' by Herr Spriter (*Globe* 1852a: 1). According to the press, Soullier's stud was 'a remarkably fine one, and additional interest was created by the introduction of that singular biped, the ostrich, in the arena' (*Sun* 1852a: 7). In addition, Franz de Bach's Equestrian Celestial



Globe presented a combat between ostriches and their trainer (*Globe* 1852b: 1). A sort of novelty in Scotland was the New Grand Hippodrome owned by Ginnette & Co, which exhibited in Aberdeen and featured a large stud of horses, ponies, and several huge ostriches. The shows staged there were similar to those of the Cirque Olympique in Paris (Astley's of France), and among the most entertaining was a race in which ostriches played the role of horses and monkeys played the role of jockeys (*Elgin Courant, and Morayshire Advertiser* 1852: 2).

### **Ostriches in Nineteenth-century Poland**

As in Western Europe, exotic animals first appeared in Poland most often for three reasons: as gifts during diplomatic meetings, as souvenirs from journeys made by representatives of the noble classes, or as attractions in travelling menageries. The first mention of an exotic animal on Polish soil probably dates back to the end of the tenth century, when, according to the chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg, the first ruler of Poland, Mieszko I, gifted a camel to the future Holy Roman Emperor, Otto III, during the Congress of Quedlinburg in 986. In 1000, Mieszko I's son, King Bolesław I the Brave, offered Otto III a similar gift as a demonstration of the power of the Polish state and its commercial outreach (Jakóbczyk-Gola 2021). According to the Polish chronicler Jan Długosz, three camels were also presented by Tatars to the Polish King Władysław Jagiełło during his stay in Buda in 1412 (Długosz 1869). During the reign of the Jagiellonians (1386–1569) the possession of exotic animals became a sign of inquisitiveness in Polish courtly culture but also a desire of the rare and the unique. A little earlier, in 1406, Władysław Jagiełło received two lions from Florence, perhaps the most popular exotic animals in medieval Europe at the time. Other exotic animals owned by the Jagiellonians included parrots and leopards. During the reign of the House of Vasa (1587–1668), a royal menagerie was established in Warsaw, featuring, among others, suricates and cockatoos (Jakóbczyk-Gola 2021).

In the eighteenth century, the so-called 'baiting houses' became very popular in Europe, in which dogs were made to chase game, or wild animals were baited with dogs (Linde 1859). In 1779, a wooden amphitheatre was opened in Warsaw called *Szczwalnia* or *Heca* (Kondrasiuk 2017) modelled after its Viennese counterpart. The name *Szczwalnia* (lit. 'baiting house' in Polish) came from bearbaiting spectacles that were originally held there (Gloger 1900). The name *Heca*, on the other hand, was a Polonized and abbreviated German word *Tierhetze* (lit. 'animal hunt') which meant 'wild animal baiting' (Raszewski 1980). These spectacles were initially attended mainly by the lower classes of Polish society. This changed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Jordaki Kuparenko became the director of *Heca* in 1808, and bloody entertainment featuring wild animals was banned in circus shows (Gloger 1900). Animals were also exhibited in travelling menageries, usually operated by foreigners. To attract audiences, the menagerie owners put on various shows featuring feeding the animals or the owner entering a cage with a lion or a tiger,

giving various commands to these wild animals, including standing on two legs, kissing, or laying at the owner's feet (*Kurjer Warszawski* 1825a: 116; *Kurjer Warszawski* 1825b: 133).

While baiting houses were unknown in the Polish territories annexed by Austria and Prussia, travelling menageries with exotic animals also appeared there, although surviving press notes permit a conclusion that there were far fewer of them than in Warsaw, or simply that information about them did not appear very often in the local press. One of the earliest references from the area of Prussian-controlled Poland is an 1844 brief announcement in the *Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego* (*Gazette of the Grand Duchy of Posen*) about a menagerie from Paris visiting the city of Posen (*Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1844: 1432). A little more is known, thanks to a surviving poster, dated 1820–1850, about animals exhibited in menageries in Austrian-partitioned Poland (*Przybyły z zagranicy... 1820–1850*). It can be assumed that travelling menageries, like circuses, spent many months on the road visiting a number of Polish cities. This can be confirmed by a note from 1822 from the *Kurjer Warszawski* newspaper, where it was reported that an Italian menagerie had been in Warsaw for several days, having toured various Polish cities for nine months (*Kurjer Warszawski* 1822: 1).

Ostriches had certainly been known to the Polish reader, at least in theory, in the seventeenth century, as exemplified by a work by Jakub Kazimierz Haur, *Skład albo skarbiec znakomity sekretów oekonomiej ziemiańskiej* (*A Repository or a Superb Treasury of Secrets of Landowning Economy*) published in 1693, in which the author listed various species of animals including the ostrich (Haur 1693). It is also known that ostriches were bred in Warsaw during the reign of King Stanisław August Poniatowski (1764–1795) as reported in *Kurjer Warszawski*:

During the reign of King Stanisław August there were kennels and different hunting facilities in the Royal Baths Park near the Botanic Gardens in Warsaw. The area was managed by a certain Baudisch; it included rare animals, among them ostriches gifted to His Majesty by the King of Naples. (*Kurjer Warszawski* 1844: 1134)

After the final partition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, ostriches were brought to Poland with travelling menageries. In 1825 a South American ostrich (rhea) was exhibited for the first time in Warsaw by Van Acken and Martin's menagerie (*Monitor Warszawski* 1825: 9). Another mention dates to 1845, when the Advinent and Zeneboni menagerie visited Warsaw, showcasing, among dozens of animals, an Australian emu (*Kurjer Warszawski* 1845: 1578). It can be assumed that the aforementioned menagerie owners also exhibited ostriches and other animals in other areas of Poland at the same time.

Ostriches as part of circus shows first appeared in Poland in 1853 in the Prussian-controlled Grand Duchy of Posen, with the arrival of Ernst Renz's Olympic Circus in Posen. This was not the first visit of the German master artist in the city, who was familiar with the region owing to his earlier circus tours, including one in 1839 (*Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1839a:

1084; *Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1839b: 1250; Rozmiarek and Włodarczyk 2021). Performances involving exotic birds were staged at Cannon Square in the Posen city centre (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853a: 5; *Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853b: 4; *Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853d: 4; *Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853e: 4). The square contained a huge and expensive edifice, where circus performers, including Messrs Victor, Carré, Leon and Nesnami, Mrs Tourniaire, Misses Liphard and Mathilde, and Ernst Renz himself demonstrated their tricks. According to the account of a spectator or correspondent of the *Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego* the circus tricks ‘emulated the best paintings and woodcarving artworks’ (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853c: 3). The repertoire of the Olympic Circus from this period included an ‘extraordinary demonstration of seven horses led by Mr. Renz himself’ (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853m: 4), ‘a grand spectacle’ (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853l: 4), ‘great leaps by Messrs. Mariano and Leon’ (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853m: 4), ‘Styrian *pas de deux* on two horses by young Kasiula Renz and little Jules’, ‘Persian games featuring Nesnami and Leon’ (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853n: 4), ‘*La grande double Concurrence*’, ‘a grand battle scene’, ‘Arab and His Faithful Steed’ (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853p: 4), and ‘*Contredanse française* performed by six men’ (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853q: 4). However, the audience’s special attention was drawn to the press-announced premiere of an all-new show featuring two large black African ostriches (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853g: 3) on 8 and 9 June (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853g: 3; *Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853h: 4). Ostriches were used in the performance ‘Riders on large black ostriches chased by three Bedouins’ (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853j: 4) interspersed with two other premiere shows: ‘The Great Steeplechase’, which featured six women and eight men; and ‘Chinese Fair or Celebration in Beijing’ (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853k: 4).

Ostriches were mounted by young Turks (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853n: 3) and the circus arena was always packed with spectators to the maximum during shows featuring exotic birds (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853n: 3). The proof of the popularity of spectacles with ostriches was the size of the crowd that gathered, in that the circus arena with a seating capacity more than 2000 people was overcrowded (one report even indicated a possible attendance of 3000, suggesting the seating capacity of 1500) (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853n: 3). This was because the audience was presented with a completely unknown species of bird, taller than horses, with strong legs and a great running speed, and extremely difficult to raise in the northern climate and, therefore, unheard of in the region. All these shows testified not only to the instructors’ mastery, but, above all, to the birds’ savviness. During the show, the birds chased mischievous horsemen, flapping their wings, hissing, and snapping their beaks at them. The horsemen were then finally rescued from the ostriches by Bedouins (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853i: 3).

Capitalizing on the particular popularity of Renz’s circus performances featuring the African birds, the circus owner personally assured the press that during the last nine days of his stay in Posen, ‘ostriches mounted by riders will be shown’

(*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853o: 4). This sheds a completely different light on the repertoire of Olympic circuses at the time, presenting its uniqueness and the inclusion of new forms of culture, including physical culture, in premiere productions that had been unknown in Prussian-partitioned Poland.

On 1 July 1853, the press summarized the almost one-and-a-half month stay of Ernst Renz's circus in the Grand Duchy of Posen. It was estimated that his visit to the city turned quite profitable as Renz earned about 130,000 Polish zlotys. As it was reported, 'Mr. Renz, having left Posen, will not take off his boots outside the city and shake off the sand from them as a sign of the ungrateful country' (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853r: 3). The artistic level of Renz's company was widely discussed in the press, which also published poetry written in honour of the circus director, as exemplified by a poem in French by J. Brancovich (*Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* 1853f: 4). According to the surviving sources, this was the only time Ernst Renz brought ostriches to Poland and displayed them in his circus shows. The famous German circus entrepreneur did not travel further to other Polish cities so it can be concluded that only residents of Posen had the opportunity to get acquainted with shows featuring ostriches and, as it turned out, they enjoyed them greatly.

### Conclusion

The earliest use of ostriches for entertainment is attested in the United Kingdom and France, where the birds began to be exhibited in travelling menageries. Ostriches were then used by circus entrepreneurs as one of the elements of their attraction-rich shows. The birds were first exhibited in this way in September 1850 in France, and by the following year ostrich shows had become one of the highlights of circus performances in the British Isles. The popularity of ostriches quickly spread throughout Europe as shown by the use of the birds by German circus entrepreneur Ernst Renz while in Posen in 1853. This indicates that Renz must already have acquired ostriches earlier as he probably first staged shows involving the birds in the Kingdom of Prussia before he set out for the annexed Polish territories.

This current study has revealed numerous similarities relating to the use of ostriches throughout Europe, particularly in Britain and Poland. These birds, initially imported as exclusive gifts, were then placed in menageries (and in the British Isles also in royal gardens, travelling fairs, and museums) where they were exhibited to the public. With time, ostrich riding and racing became part of circus performances in both countries. The only differences were the numbers of ostriches on show – i.e. much greater numbers and more frequent in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, an imperial power at the time – and the time of their first appearance – i.e. first in the British Isles and later in partitioned Poland.

Posen was the only Polish city that witnessed entertainment featuring ostriches, as Renz did not continue his tour to other Polish regions. Having visited the partitioned Polish territories a few more times after that, Renz did not bring ostriches

with him. This fact is puzzling, since, as reported in 1875 by the *Gazeta Lwowska* (*Lviv Gazette*), Renz kept organizing African hunts with elephants, giraffes, and ostriches as well as ostrich riding shows by African boys in Berlin (*Gazeta Lwowska* 1875, 3). How Ernst Renz learned about the possibilities of using ostriches and adapting them for circus shows is yet another question. It is possible that he was told about them by William Batty himself, with whom he worked in the 1860s and may have remained in touch (*Kurjer Warszawski* 1864: 531). However, it is impossible to confirm this conclusively, and Renz could just as well have learned about it from the press or another source.

The final issue is the reception of ostrich shows among the public. As already discussed, ostriches enjoyed great popularity in different European countries, regardless of the countries' political, economic, or social situation. Spectators watching exotic shows enjoyed the opportunity to interact with otherwise unfamiliar animals before the first zoological gardens were even established. Renz's circus company, made up of Europe's top performers, also risked their health or even lives in an effort to satisfy Polish audiences' hunger not only for entertainment but also for knowledge. This is because the circus, by demonstrating through its art elements of exotic culture and sports, unfolded the possibilities for Poles to learn about the world, possibilities that had hitherto been limited owing to the social and political situation of their partitioned homeland.

### Competing Interests

The authors declare there are no competing interests.

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