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A Double Child Coffin from the Southern Crypt of the Holy Trinity Church in Radzyń Podlaski (19th Century)

Abstract

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The lives of children in the past were both ephemeral and fragile. The birth of a child, although expected and prayed for, was inevitably connected with the fear of death of both the mother and child, and every childbirth was a kind of a challenge. Unfortunately, in many cases, it finished with death during the delivery or just after. Surviving childhood safely was a constant struggle for the smaller members of a community. This information is evidenced during archaeological explorations of churches and burial grounds. No matter whether they were rich or poor, death took its toll on every social group. There was only the difference in the way of burial ceremony and accessories attributed to it. Some of the child burials were comparable with the richest burials of adults. One of them, a burial in a double coffin, attracted archaeologists' attention at the very beginning of exploration in Radzyń Podlaski. A child burial in a double coffin can be classified as a unique find, not only in the area of Poland but also in Europe.

Keywords: child, crypt, coffin, wood, microscope, 19th century, Radzyń Podlaski, Poland

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History of the town and the church

The history of the town of Radzyń reaches back to the 15th century. In 1456 Mikołaj Cybulka and his brother Zbigniew took up the attempts to establish a parish there and they built the first wooden church in Niżna Białka, i.e. in Kozirynek Stary (a part of Radzyń Podlaski, the old name of the town) – Sitkowski st. at present, probably at the site of the present chapel of The Guardian Angels (erected in the 17th century, thanks to the financial support of the vice-chancellor Stanisław Antoni Szczuka, supposedly located on the site of the oldest wooden church). In 1540, the parish

priest Jan Kazanowski (buried in the old church of the Holy Trinity – the information is not confirmed in any source) converted to Calvinism and donated the Radzyń churches to the dissenters. The church of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary was given back to the Catholics in 1583, while the old church of the Holy Trinity remained in the hands of Protestants until the end of the 16th century (*Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1860, 533–538; *Liber beneficiorum* 1864, 559; Litak 2000, 291–293; Rogalski 2011, 127–128; Hapka 2017, 58–59).

In the middle of the 16th century, the town of Radzyń together with the suburb Kozirynek was rent-

ed by the king to the Mniszech family, who founded here a late Renaissance church of the Holy Trinity and the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the site of the current church of the Holy Trinity. The construction of the church was a drawn out process, lasting nearly 30 years. It was started in 1612 by Jan Mniszech (1541–1612), the Łuków starost and the oldest son of Mikołaj. It can be supposed that the Mniszechs constructed it as a propitiation for the various sins of the family, not only for the participation of the *paterfamilias* in the Reformation movement against the Catholic Church. The church is the work of Jan Wolf, a mason from Torobin-Zamość, and it represents one of the best examples of the so-called Lublin Renaissance (Jarmuł 1995, 15–16; Kurzej 2009, 79–84; Michalska *et al.* 2011, 13; Zawada 2011, 135).

Archaeological exploration of the church of the Holy Trinity in Radzyń Podlaski

The exploration of the crypts in the church was carried out in 2017 and 2018. The program focused on excavating the contents of three crypts, two situ-

ated under the chapels (northern – under the chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary, and the southern one – under the chapel of Jesus), as well as one in the nave (Fig. 1). Our main goal was not only to document and estimate the state of preservation of these three crypts, but also to identify the burial of Konstancja from the Szczuczyna branch of the Potocki family in the southern crypt. The works in the two remained crypts were limited to conducting basic documentation.

The southern crypt was the same size as the chapel above (4.5 m long, 2.5 m wide), and was prepared at the request of Konstancja Szczuczyna, who lived in a palace opposite the church. Despite the fact that her husband Stanisław Antoni Szczuka and their four children (Michał, Anna, Jan, and Marcin) were buried in the family crypt in Szczuczyn (Dudziński *et al.* 2013, 15; 2015, 48–57, 84–86; Grupa *et al.* 2014, 60–63), she wished to be laid to rest in her favorite place where she had spent most of her life. Hence, her wish concerning the southern crypt, the planned place of her eternal rest. Entering the crypt, one can appreciate the care taken with implementing all of the projects ordered by Konstancja. The architecture of the interior was



Fig. 1. Radzyń Podlaski. Plan of the Holy Trinity Church with marked crypts (drawn by T. Dudziński).



Fig. 2. Radzyń Podlaski. The interior of the crypt under the Chapel of Our Lady (photo by J. Michalik).

comparable to the structures of other churches of that time (Grupa *et al.* 2015, 11–14), although it differed in terms of the wall decorations. They are usually white-washed, with one exception of the southern crypt in Byszewo (Nowak and Kaźmierczak 2019, 173–183). The Radzyń crypt's walls were covered with frescos associated with *vanitas* subjects (Białostocki 1961, 105; Grupa and Grupa 2015, 92). The southern wall had images of two dancing skeletons (Fig. 2), holding in their hands a spade and a scythe, and a sandglass and an axe. It seems that Konstancja Szczuka had planned her funeral ceremony precisely together with the place of burial. Frescos and a bier standing in the middle of the crypt were decorated by the same person who put his signature there in 1733 and this is the same year in which Konstancja died. The brownish color of the painting is not probably identical with the original one. It might have been originally a red paint (it can only be confirmed or denied by archaeometrical tests), but time and microbes have changed it to brown. It is difficult to establish how long she had been deposited on the catafalque and if she was the only person buried in the crypt at the time. One thing is certain – in the 19th century, the next burials were deposited there (it may have happened at the end of the 18th century), and her coffin was removed from the bier

and placed behind it. Examining the decomposing relics of a wooden coffin mixed with rubbish, we were able to decipher information concerning Konstancja Szczuczyna, the Lithuanian vice-chancellor's spouse, on two small coffin sides (Fig. 3). The catafalque was occupied by a child coffin, in fact, two (double) coffins with the shield informing about the burial of three-year-old Antonina Bronisława Załoziecka.

Description of the child's coffin

The child coffin on the bier was the only complete and undamaged coffin in the crypt, therefore it was possible to make a detailed descriptive and photo documentation of the object and take some samples for analysis. The coffin was painted black, with the inscription painted with white paint from the head side: "R. P.", the date "1838". On the same side of the top, on the chest, there was a Christ monogram "HIS", with a cross emerging from central part of the letter H, with the symbol of a blazing heart below (Fig. 4). The external coffin was 117 cm long, head side 58 cm wide, feet side 38 cm wide, head side's height – 52 cm, feet side's height – 43 cm. Particular coffin planks were joined together using the wedging method, cutting in two

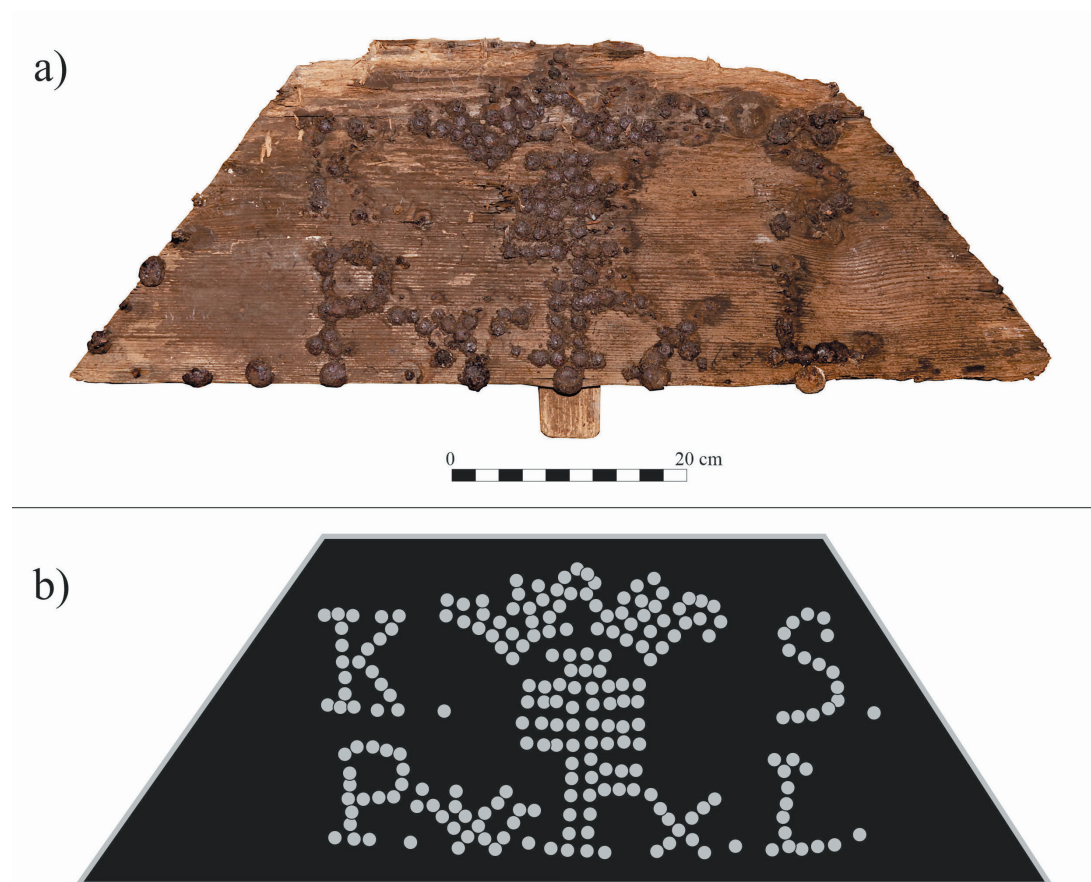


Fig. 3. Radzyń Podlaski. The top of the coffin of Konstancja née Potocka Szczuczyna; reconstruction of inscriptions arranged from studs (prepared by W. Nowosad, T. Dudziński, J. Michalik).

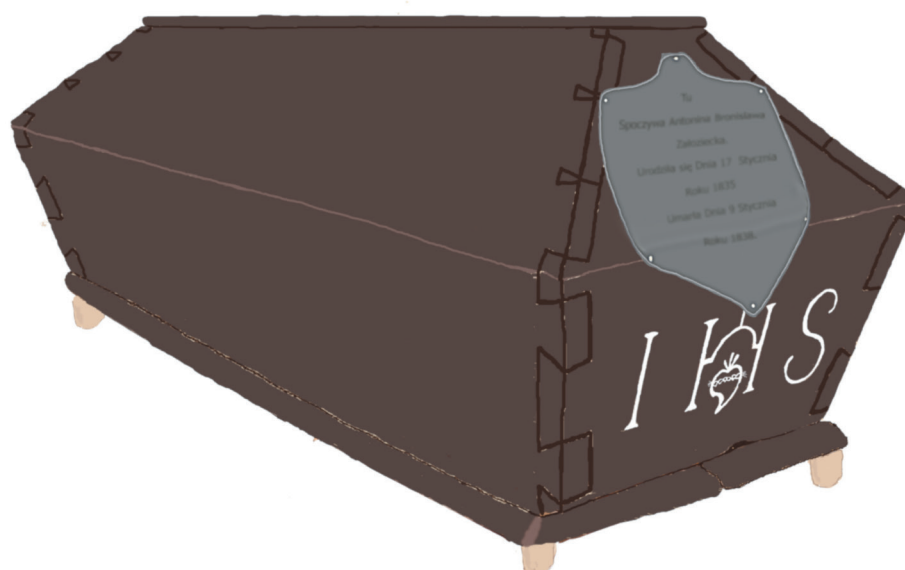


Fig. 4. Radzyń Podlaski. External coffin belonging to Antonina Załoziecka (drawn by I. Dabralet).

joined elements tenons placed in special holes, sometimes strengthened with glue (Skuza 2006, 49). Signs of the carpenter's indentation made with a sharp instrument are seen, which were helpful in cutting tenons and holes in the right place. To make these precise works, craftsmen used a small handsaw, a chisel, and a woodcarving knife (Skuza 2006, 49). Having joined together the side and top walls, a bottom was added, usually made of one broad plank, sometimes two, glued together. The side walls and the bottom were fixed together with wooden pegs (Skuza 2006, 49–50). The coffin rested on four wooden legs narrowing downwards, 5 cm high, with a diameter of 2–3 cm.

The external and another one inside (Fig. 5, 6), are 102 cm long, 48 cm wide at the head side, 28 cm

wide at the feet side, 44 cm high at the head, and 32 cm high at the feet. The planks are also worthy of our attention because they were decoratively polished and made the impression of being decagonal. Only wooden pegs were used to fix all the construction. The coffin also had four decorated legs, made of precisely cut square wooden blocks 5 cm high, with sides of 10 cm.

The internal coffin was unpainted, with the bright natural wood color remaining. The head side also had the inscription “R. P.” and the date “1838”, painted (or rather drawn) in black, using a thinner tool than in the case of external coffin inscription (Fig. 5, 6). The coffin cover was equipped with the sign of the cross, consisting of two beams topped with a trifoliate shape. The

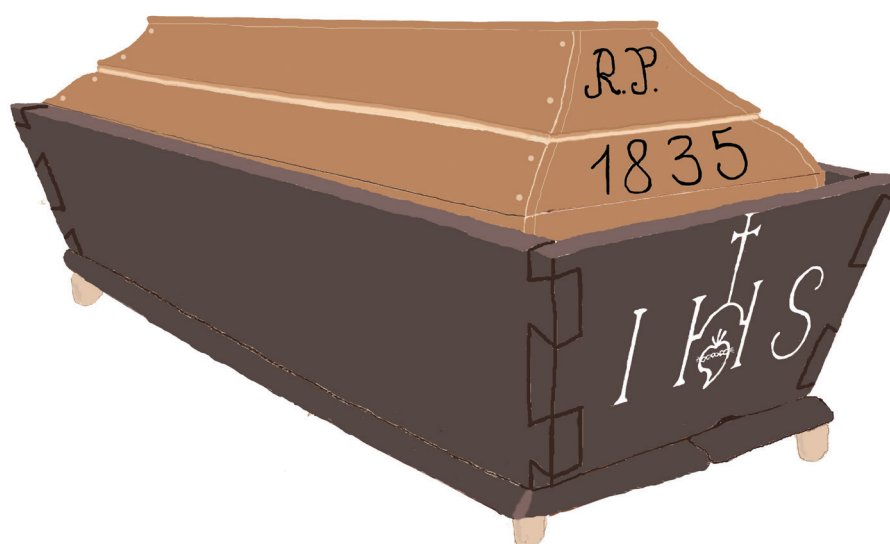


Fig. 5. Radzyń Podlaski. Burial of Antonina Załoziecka after removing the lid of the outer coffin (drawn by I. Dabralet).

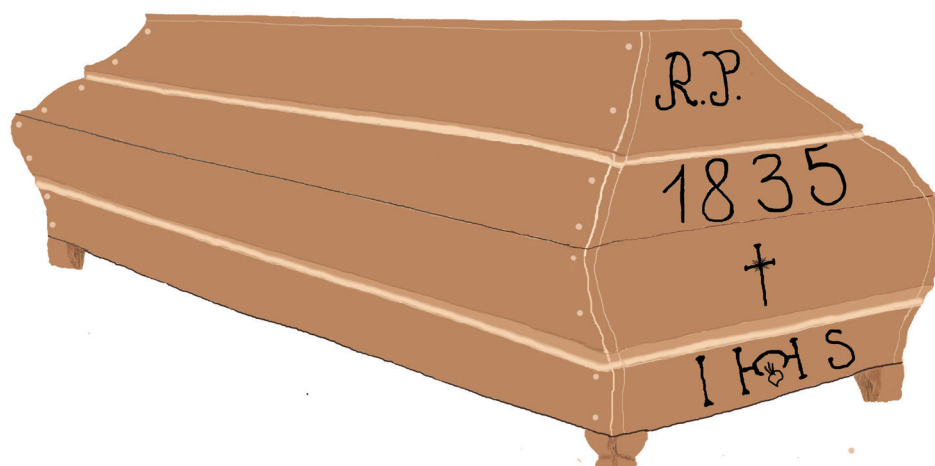


Fig. 6. Radzyń Podlaski. The internal coffin belonging to Antonina Załoziecka (drawn by I. Dabralet).

precision in the cross outlines suggests that the carpenter used a readymade pattern or a ruler to make it.

The holes and scratches present around the girl's coffin are also worthy of our attention (Fig. 7) because they were not made intentionally and are not man-made products. The permanent visitors and crypt inhabitants are their authors: animals (e.g. small rodents, cats, martens), which enter crypts most frequently through ventilation holes, attracted by peaceful solitary places, which are cool on hot days and provide protection from the cold in winter (Grupa *et al.* 2015, 15, 36–37; Grupa 2019, 193–195). The Szczuczyn crypts reported pine marten activity and the presence of a mole, whose mummified remains were spotted among the coffins.

Coffin signboard

The coffin board was placed on the external coffin and it was lying on the coffin top when archaeologists entered the crypt, although signs of nails indicated that it had originally been fixed to the top, from the head side. It was cut from a steel sheet and its sharp edges were turned downwards. The tin was 32.5 cm high, and 25 cm wide. The inscription carved on it enabled us to identify the dead girl: “Here Antonina Bronisława Załoziecka rests in peace. She was born on 17th January 1835. She died on 9th January 1838” (Fig. 8). The decorative shape of the board suggests

that its intention was to be placed on the internal coffin, more precisely at the feet. The decision to make another external coffin may have been taken after the board had been prepared or it was meant to be visible when entering the crypt, therefore it was placed on the external coffin from the head side. Thanks to the nail holes, we were able to reconstruct the place in which



Fig. 8. Radzyń Podlaski. Coffin plaque of Antonina Załoziecka (photo by J. Michalik).



Fig. 7. Radzyń Podlaski. Traces of animal activity on the coffin (photo by W. Nowosad).

it was fixed – one hole was on the lid in the upper part from the head side, and another one on the chest in the central part of the top. The board was too small to cover all of the coffin top with its surface.

Coffin wood analyses

The exploration in Radzyń Podlaski delivered numerous samples of coffin wood, including the one belonging to Antonina Załoziecka. They were taken from the inside part of the coffin's feet side and from the joints of the external chest. We were unable to obtain test samples from the joints of the internal coffin, mainly due to the poor condition of the pegs and the risk of damaging the historical object.

In the Toruń Laboratory, wood samples were examined to identify wood growth ring composition and to find the perfect section to chip off thin slices of wood tissue for tests. Wood tissue structure observation requires uncovering and flattening a small section of an object on three surfaces (transverse, tangential, and radial). The identification process of these wood elements was performed using a microscope with transmitted light (Scope.A1, Zeiss, with the magnification of $\times 50$ – 200 , and a microscope with reflected light, Leica M205 C with a Leica MC190 HD camera). Moreover, to observe objects using the microscope with transmitted light, it was necessary to take additional thin slices from three surfaces. The collected slices were placed on microscope slides and tested in order to identify wood types, comparing them to the database from the catalog of F. H. Schweingruber (2011), P. Greguss (1959), D. Grosser (1977), and its online version (Schoch *et al.* 2004). Observing general differences in the anatomy of transverse composition, it was possible to establish that the coffin was made of a deciduous wood – diffuse-porous, without a clear distinction between early and late growth rings. The next step was to identify more particular dependences and common features in tissue structure, which could be helpful in obtaining a more precise identification.

The wood of the external coffin was identified as alder. Its tissue observed in the cross-section has irregular vessels joined in groups in radial rows from 2 to 7. Alder wood characteristics are bending the border of annual growth in wood rays. In the tangential section, wood rays are homogenic and most often single-layered, built of 4 to 10 narrow cells, separated by one or two layers of fibers. In both longitudinal sections, ladder vessel perforation is seen (Warywoda 1957, 162; Grosser 1977, 96; Schweingruber 2011, 170; Antkowiak 1999, 34–35; Kokociński 2005, 130).

The internal coffin, in turn, was made of linden wood. In cross-section, the vessels are irregular and are combined radially into nests from 2 to 6. Wood rays are placed widely and are laminated, evidently expanding at the border of annual growth. In the longitudinal section, on vessel walls, the clear thickness of the spiral composition is visible. Fibrous coils with spiral thickness are also seen (Warywoda 1957, 128; Grosser 1977, 186; Antkowiak 1999, 38, 41; Kokociński 2005, 132).

Coffin contents

The coffin contained a child's relics and fragments of grave goods. As the board informs us, the burial should belong to A. B. Załoziecka. The skeleton was incomplete, with only single bones being preserved and a skull with a mandible which was helpful in estimating the child's age at three years. Apart from the bones, the coffin included various haberdashery products of different widths, made of silk, which might have decorated a linen grave gown. Half of the child's skull was colored red, perhaps indicating the decomposition of a dyed bonnet (linen, woollen). We can also assume that the bonnet was decorated with a wreath of artificial flowers which were also red in color because such flowers were found inside the coffin. Silk flowers were fixed to iron stems (Fig. 9, 10). Around the girl's feet, archaeologists found painted leather laced boots, which might originally have also been red.

Antonina's burial – exceptional or common?

A child burial in a double coffin is a unique find since to date we have only found such burials in the cases of adult and eminent persons, and who usually died far from the place of their eternal rest. St. A. Szczuka died in Warsaw at the end of May 1710, and he was transported to Szczuczyn, where he was buried in a catafalque in his family crypt. His body was placed in two coffins and this is perhaps unsurprising due to the long distance of transportation and the warm May temperatures (Majorek and Grupa 2013, 76–77). However, the burial of Antonina in a double coffin is rather curious. Her date of death is placed on the coffin board, and the date of the funeral is reported briefly in the death register of Radzyń parish on the day of 1st February 1838. In fact, there is inaccuracy in this note, as the source informs us of her death one day before, in the afternoon (Fig. 11; *Księga urodzeń, małżeństw i zgonów* 1838, 91). This difference can be



Fig. 9. Radzyń Podlaski. The remains of Antonina Załoziecka in an inner coffin (photo by S. Nowak).

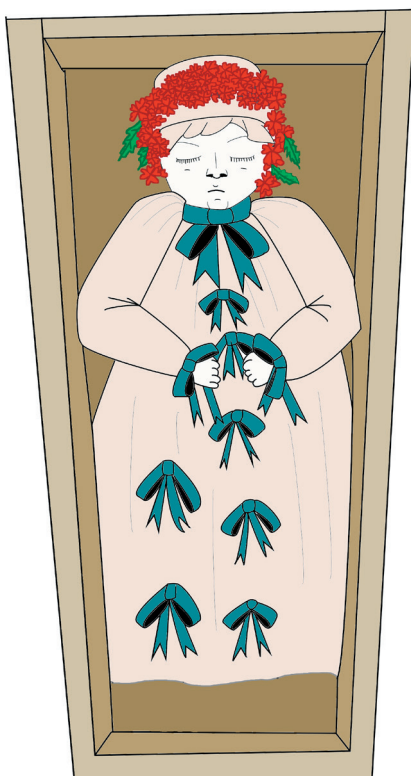


Fig. 10. Radzyń Podlaski. Reconstruction of the sepulchral attire of Antonina Załoziecka (drawn by B. Galka).

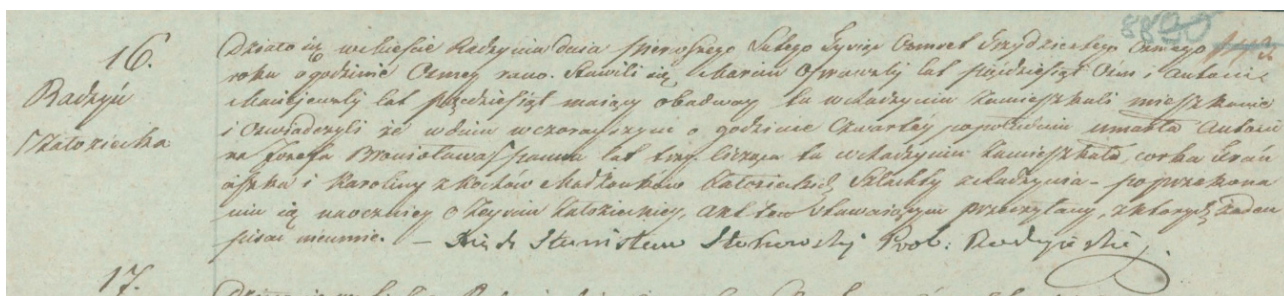


Fig. 11. Radzyń Podlaski. Note from the death register on the death of Antonina Załoziecka (photo by W. Nowosad).

explained in many ways, although nothing is known about the circumstances of her death. She might have died away from Radzyń and been brought home as late as the 31st of January, which could explain why her body had been placed in two coffins. However, since it was January and the temperature was almost certainly low, there was no danger of rapid bodily decomposition. Yet here we should remark that the profession of the girl's father is probably very significant. He had been a medical doctor since 1829 and he was aware of all the dangers resulting from any delay in burying a dead body. He had contact with death every day, and his participation in the November Uprising only increased that knowledge. Dr. Franciszek Dobina Załoziecki, together with General Chłapowski, crossed Prussian border after the defeat of the Uprising, possibly saving him from exile to Siberia. After the amnesty decree and swearing allegiance to the Russian tsar, he was allowed to return to Radzyń and practice as a powiat vice-doctor (Jabłoński 2003, 105–108). In 1833 he married Karolina, a daughter of Jan Oświata Koch, and two years later a daughter Antonina Józefa Bronisława was born. The reasons for her death are unfortunately unknown but she was certainly a beloved daughter and her premature death was a disaster for her parents. Her burial in the southern crypt at a time when there were already strict regulations prohibiting burials inside churches can be proof of that parental love.

The perception of a child's position in a family during the late Middle Ages and modern periods was reported in the literature as unimportant, increasing with time and the development of medicine. There existed a schematic opinion that a child was only valued when it grew, achieving some age and the prospects of its premature death decreased to some extent. This was meant to be due to the much higher rates of infant mortality as a result of childhood diseases such as scarlet fever, measles, influenza, and others. Low levels of hygiene also generated favorable conditions for the development of food poisoning and diarrhea, which dehydrated younger and weaker organisms (Kizik 1998, 22; Grupa 2005, 28). The high fertility rate in families and frequent deaths supposedly meant that the deaths of children in the Middle Ages and in modern times were treated as inevitable. The situation changed a little at the end of the 16th century, when children started to be treated as a part of a functioning family, although mortality amongst them was still very high. From birth until the age of one, only about 65% survived, until the 5th year – about 45%, and maturity was only achieved by 35%. This propor-

tion applied to all children, regardless of their family wealth, status, or access to medical care. Evidence for this claim would be the examples of the premature deaths of the children of Stanisław A. Szczuka and Konstancja from the Potocki branch of the Szczukas (Szymańska 2010, 28; Kozłowski and Krajewska 2013; Grupa *et al.* 2014, 13–14).

However, the latest archaeological explorations negate the general opinion that referred to child deaths as unimportant and neglected. During our studies, we found rich child burials in decorated coffins of expensive wood, buried in locations reserved for eminent Church people or nobles, and in graves dug inside churches and crypts (Grupa *et al.* 2014; Grupa and Łukaszewicz 2019, 137–139; Dudziński *et al.* 2020, 248; Kolaska *et al.* 2020, 57–70). These rich coffins, deposited in important places, could not have belonged to children who were indifferent to their parents.

The case of Antonina Załoziecka's burial depicts the important role of a child in a family, despite their young age. The fact is also confirmed by the fact that the girl was buried in clothes decorated with silk bands, wearing leather boots, and with a wreath of artificial flowers imitating red poppies. What was untypical for a child burial was the use of a double coffin made of an untypical wood, since coffins are usually made of pine or oak. The coffin was placed on the catafalque occupied originally over one hundred years before by the vice-chancellor's spouse, Konstancja Szczuka from the Potocki family.

The external coffin was made of alder, which is soft and easy in processing and valued for its orange-red color (Krzysik 1975, 648). It was commonly used as a main component of brown, black, and violet dyes for textiles (Fischer 1938, 13; Maciej *et al.* 2011, 361; Kujawska *et al.* 2016, 233). In the case of superstitions and beliefs concerning this wood type, opinions differed within communities. Some attributed devilish properties to it due to its red bark, while others saw it as a protective tree. During Pentecost, festive branches of black alder decorated windows and doors, and were meant to protect houses from storms, heavy rains, and thunder (Bystroń 1960, 61–62; Maciej *et al.* 2011, 359–360; Koprowska-Głowacka 2016, 127; Kujawska *et al.* 2016, 233–234). This wood type was also frequently used in furniture manufacturing. It perfectly absorbed dark paint and was applied to make an imitation of ebony wood (Kluk 1778, 30–31; Gerald-Wyżycki 1845, 26).

The internal coffin was manufactured of basswood, which was popular in furniture making due to its easy processing. It is a light wood, easy to chop

(Krzysik 1975, 650). There was a folk saying concerning its usefulness: “it is good for a wooden horn, and a fiddle, and a cradle, and a coffin and a cross for a grave” (Kujawska *et al.* 2016, 418). In Polish lands, linden is treated almost as a sacred tree, bringing happiness, and for centuries it has been regarded as a tree of reconciliation and friendship (Pleszczyński 1892, 100; Kujawska *et al.* 2016, 416). It was also believed that a linden coffin protected the dead from disturbances during eternal rest (Maciej *et al.* 2011, 333). That may have led to the selection of linden for Antonina’s coffin.

Typical child coffins were rather cheap. In the 17th century, a Gdańsk journeyman earned 2 pence for making a small unplanned coffin. Extra planing was 2 groshen more (Bogucka 1962, 344; Kizik 1998, 96). In the West, prices were different. In the 18th century in Nijmegen, a child coffin cost one gulden, while a double oak coffin for an adult person cost 16 guildens. A similar price list was prepared in Vienna at the end of the 17th century. A large coffin of cheap wood (one can suppose coniferous wood) cost 3 florins and 30 kreutzers, while a child coffin cost 45 kreutzers (Kizik 1998, 97). It often happened that expensive coffins made for elite funerals were not even included in price lists, as burial expenses were generally extremely high. The small coffin from Radzyń was rather more expensive than standard child coffins, and we can suppose that a double coffin was a cheaper counterpart to a tin sarcophagus, where usually a wooden coffin was deposited.

The burial ceremony preparation was finished by fixing a signboard on the coffin which placed little Antonina Bronisława Załoziecka on the charts of the history of Radzyń Podlaski. Boards informing about the dead person were usually prepared in the case of adults, not children, and they included data on their social status, distinctions, coat-of-arms, and individual information useful in the identification and characterization of the deceased person. They were names and surnames, like in the case of Antonina Załoziecka, dates of birth and death, functions, and notable acts performed for their town or country. Sometimes, short poems commemorating the deceased person or fragments of sermons were also placed on them (Kizik 1998, 99–100; 2001, 207; Grupa 2005, 102–103; Trybuszewski 2005, 64–65). Child boards were not so rich, of course. Similar information was found on the boards of Anna (died in 1619) and Zuzanna (died in 1623) Majerman, who were buried in the presbytery of the church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Toruń (Grupa 2005, 54–55).

Summary

Archaeological research rarely delivers complete or precise information concerning excavated persons. In the case of children, the possibilities are even more limited, therefore every instance, like the burial of Antonina Bronisława Załoziecka should be treated individually. Luckily, except for grave goods analyses and coffin tests, we were able to study the family history, first of all, her father, a participant of the November Uprising.

As already mentioned, we could not establish the reason of using a double coffin in this particular burial. It is an exceptional find, but is it really unique? There were some other ways of expressing parental grief and honoring the dead, like richly decorating the coffin, adding some ornaments to the grave attire, or *Pompa funebris*. We present various possibilities, but at this stage of the study, we can only make suppositions without any certainty.

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