

Starzewski treatise “On Fencing” in the eyes of his era.

Michał Starzewski is the author of the third oldest known Polish fencing treatise, after Ivanowski (1834) and Aigner (1794). As the first manual focused on sabre fencing on foot, it contains many peculiarities. There are some studies of the topic in Polish, but few if any of the authors try to analyze the subject in the context of the fencing traditions of the era, comparing the author's work to a much later Barbasetti or even modern fencing methodology. These have generally very little in common with the style used by Starzewski himself.

Because of that there isn't much of available insight about Starzewski's work, to the point of certain authors outrightly suggesting that the entire manual is a scam, as the work was eventually published in print a hundred years after it was created by the grandson of the author along with his biography.

The aim of this article is to analyze the possible connection to other fencing traditions, analyze its connotations with the possible earlier Polish traditions and naturally to present the possible interpretation of Starzewski's work in a new light, outside what has been produced in this area so far.

Historical background of the text

Michał Starzewski was born in Poland, in 1801 in the then- Austrian partition, thus named after the third and final Partition of Poland in 1795. Trained by his father and then sent for his early education to a monastery school, where he obtained both classical education and practiced Polish singlestick fencing. His tutor father Gwardjan, a former Napoleonic cavalry soldier, taught him many “knightly feats”, as he had mentioned in his memoirs. Later the young Starzewski attended a gymnasium (middle school) in Tarnów, which he started at around the final part of the Napoleonic Wars. This school was strongly Germanised, as his memoirs state, a substantial part of his teachers were Czech. It is said that during his summer vacations he visited a part of his family that taught him about the French culture¹.

He started his career as a teacher when he finished a school K. K. Kreis-Hauptschule in Tarnów with a private teacher's degree. He then started to tutor nobles' children.



Figure 1: Writing on the ring, given by the mother of Prince Sanguszko, to Michał Starzewski, after he saved her son life during the uprising.

In 1830 the November Uprising began. It became a major event in the life of Michał Starzewski. He not only took part in it, but managed to score many formidable feats as well. War had made him very disdainful to violence, as according to his grandson, he very rarely talked about the events of the war and he would rarely even dare to harm a fly. After his return he settled down for several years.

In 1839 he travelled to Tarnów with his family, where he was appointed as a fencing master of the emperor Ferdinand's Chevau-leger regiment. His grandson had suggested that Starzewski's treatise had been written at around this time, especially since he later mentions that he met many German fencers during that time, which might have had an influence on his style of fencing.

¹ It is a common aspect of these times to learn at least several foreign languages. Most of the nobles knew at least 3 or more.

In 1846 he had survived the Galician Slaughter, a wave of violence on the landowners and nobility in the Galician region in Poland, orchestrated by the Austrian government. In 1848 he became the instructor of the National Guard², an official voluntary army for the next uprising in Galicia, which never took up, except for a few minor battles. After the formation was disbanded in 1849, Michał moved to Kraków, where he opened a private fencing school, which he ran almost to the end of his life in 1894. During that time in 1850, he was given the position of a fencing master at the Jagiellonian University.

Michał Starzewski's manual was printed as a part of the memoirs published by his grandson Józef in 1930. According to them, the manual was written in late 1839, after the Polish November Uprising, when Starzewski moved to Tarnów, however they were never published due to the author not finishing them. The entire manuscript was found by his grandson after his death. Józef Starzewski stated, that he found them among many papers his grandfather left him. Because of that, there arose many doubts about the system's authenticity. Furthermore Józef underlined that the treatise was written on old, period- appropriate, handmade paper, rather than a more modern one³.

Michał Starzewski wrote his treatise in several attempts, but never managed to finish it and so it was never published while he was still alive. Józef stated that when he took the papers, he wanted to print them as they were, only adding his own preface, but had ultimately concluded, that he would not have been able to deliver the additional information required to finish the text and thus to create a complete manual of his grandfather's school. Yet he never had the chance to do so, and the manuscript laid dormant for more than 30 years. In the end Józef published it as a part of the print "On Memoirs of Michał Starzewski" which was partially made of his grandfather's papers, letters combined with his own memories of the great fencer.

The treatise remained unchanged without any additions, except for some brief notes on the subject of finding and preparing it. The treatise history itself is shrouded in mystery, as Józef states that many of his students have been told by Michał Starzewski, that he was writing a manual on his system, however since there aren't many other Polish fencing manuals, it is hard to determine the exact period of its origin.



Figure 2: Uhlán trooper of the Polish National Guard of 1848, by Juliusz Kossak

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- 2 Polish National Guard was a voluntary formation created in Galicia, that was the major part of the Polish partition under the Austrian dominance. It was created as a base troop for the oncoming Polish uprising. Austrian government dealt with it by making a
 - 3 Gottlob Keller has invented in 1840s a woodpulp machine for mass production of paper, prior to that the paper was still hand made in a recognisable design.

Technical aspects of the manual

The manual is very peculiar, as it has been written in a more anachronistic dialect of the Polish language. Rather unusual for its period. Since it has more of a romantic character than the style of genuine Polish Baroque era memoirs, it may be a fantasy of the author himself done so that the book sounded more poetic, as was the custom of the Polish *Belles-lettres* of the era.

The structure of the text and the way it presents its content is much different from the later military oriented texts, bearing more similarities to older writers whose major clients were higher educated salle fencers or nobles, there are many parts written in *oratio vincta*. Such structure was anachronistic, as one can find examples of it among Napoleonic Era veterans such a Chatelain or earlier works in English (Godfrey) or French (l'Abbat) or German (Roux). There are examples of this style found even later, written by Starzewski's contemporaries such as Augustin Grisier (his *Les Armes et le Duel* has the same chatty narration.)

This style of narration is much more problematic for the reader, as most of the rules of fencing are often concealed within long sentences. It requires some knowledge of fencing of the era or earlier styles, to understand how these mechanics work and what do they relate to.

The Weapon

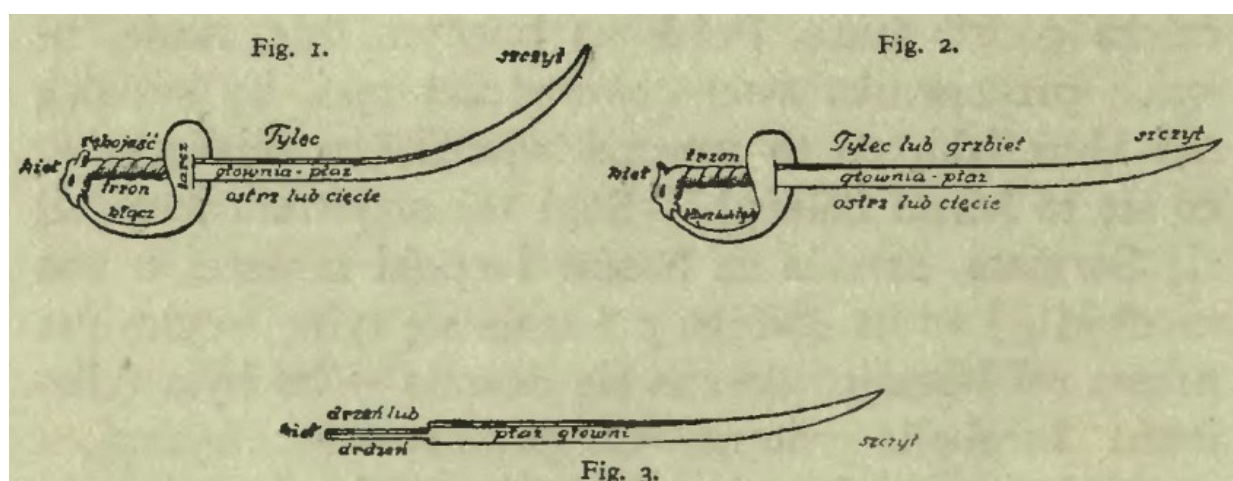


Figure 3: Starzewski drawings of the parts of weapon.

After introducing the reader to some general rules of fencing and its tactical issues, Starzewski presents the history and construction of the weapon and its basic handling features. Additionally he uses the term „kord” to refer to the sabre. This most probably comes from an old saying from 16th century – „Kord do boju, szabla do stroju”⁴. This is very interesting as this distinction of the kord and szabla was used in the late 16th and early 17th century. The difference laid in the tradition of using the two distinct types of sabres by the Ottomans. Straight or slightly curved, heavy cavalry sabre was called Kord, while the much more curved lighter and shorter Szabla, was used for self defense, often on foot. This distinction did not last through the 17th century, leaving only a rather peculiar differentiation between weapons used either by cavalry or on foot – Pałasz and Szabla. Even though these often meant the exact same weapon, there was a lot of significance put on the proper use of each term.

4 This literally means „Kord is for battle, sabre is for dress”

Starzewski does not use this distinction anymore, as he sees the typical sabre as the kord and the oręż as the name for the straight broadsword. This underlines that his view of the earlier eras was influenced by the romantic culture of his times, suggesting that he used the old terminology to underline the roots of his system.

The chapter follows with a very interesting story of how the process of buying a good sabre should look like. Basic testing, ways to recognize carbon steel and other such, it is not so unusual as some might think, as one can find similar processes explained suggested in other fencing books like Angelo l'Ecole d'Armes.

The most important part of the chapter presents how the entire arm mechanics are corresponding with the structure of the weapon. This is of utmost importance to the reader, as he learns about the most significant aspects of the system.

Grip

Starzewski describes a grip typical for his period, thumb put along the backpiece of the sabre, pushing the backedge so that the cutting edge is controlled by the position of the index finger and thumb. Considering the depth of the grip, this bears resemblances to the Saxon and Austrian fencing of the era, even though that similar pattern of grip can be seen in the French fencing of the era, this elongated form is much more specific to the southern German countries.

To strengthen this issue, Starzewski suggest using the finger loop located in many types of Austrian and later German sabres, which are a reminescence of one of the earlier designs of training weapons originating from the rapier, the hiebrappiers.

The most important issue is the exact placement of the thumb, as there are two options that are both historically correct and may be well interpreted based on Starzewski suggestions. Both of these provide connections to different traditions of fencing contemporary or predating Starzewski's period.

Starzewski states that the thenar should be placed beneath the pommel, for most of the support and underlines, that the most efficient grip comes out of putting the thumb along the backpiece leaving some space between the guard and the tip of the thumb. This may mean :

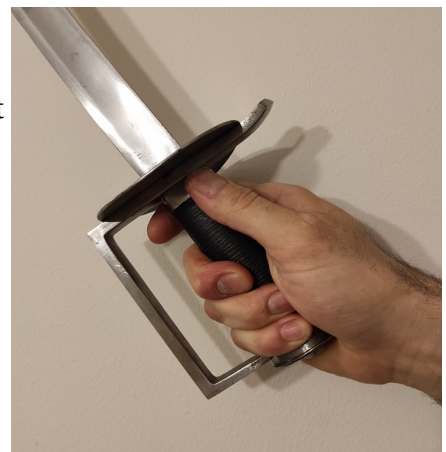
- 1) that the thumb may be placed either exactly on top of the back of the handle, or
- 2) it should be put next to the back of the handle keeping the finger tightly attached to it.

As a comparison two methods of grip are presented below.



Figure 4: Left, first type of grip, characteristic thumbgrip enhances point control. Presented on a light German fencing sabre of 2nd half of 19th cent.

Figure 5: Right, second type of grip. A deeper handshake grip, most popular method handling of 18th century. Much more reliable for heavier weapons. Presented on standard issue Polish National Cavalry sabre from late 18th cent.



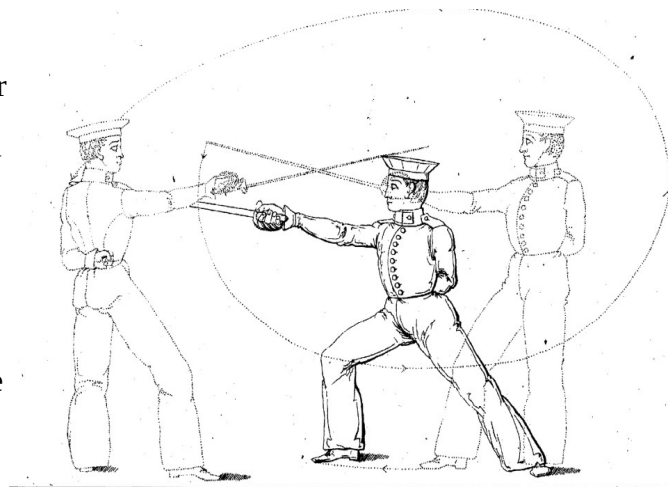
In the former case, that is one of the most typical traditions of duelling sabre of both German and French traditions. It may be supported by the fact, that the author suggests at the end of his manual that one of the best methods of dueling is under the German Menzur ruleset, which is one of the styles that is heavily focused on the use of the thumb grip.

In the latter case, there is a much more specific style of fencing that is connected to this methodology, mostly to cavalry sabre. It is well argued by the position of the index finger, that without the fingerloop it is advised to be put on the right side of the handle as straight as possible. This way of gripping is well documented in several treatises (Timmlich, Muller, le Marchant) dealing with heavy sabre fencing and strongly connected to horseback.

The chapter also deals with one of the most important features of the system, that is its arm movement mechanics. Starzewski strictly underlines, that his entire system of fencing relies on the wrist movement without any use of the elbow and with the minimal use of the shoulder, that is mostly right or left. This is a very important lesson as this is a very specific method, as since the style of fencing mostly relying on the wrist use is a very common pattern especially among first half of 19th century. However the strictly straight arm is something much earlier and of much more narrow design.

This style of fencing is purely connected to mounted sabre of late 18th century Austria and some particular French Espadon systems. More importantly there are some parrying and cutting rules that are provided suggesting several important features. That topic will be dealt more broadly with in the following chapters.

The features of wrist based mechanics are a typical designs of both Contre-Pointe and German cut fencing schools, these on the other hand are brought into motion with actions that use the elbow to some lower extent, especially while parrying or performing actions of potentially offensive intent. Starzewski on the other hand is very strict about not bending the elbow at any moment. Such an action is very peculiar and can be seen mostly in cavalry systems, which prefer long parries for the sake of protecting both the horse and the rider, but as well due to the obstruction created by the head of the horse. One can trace such actions to many treatises. They often recommend the elbow action only to support a thrust directed at the infantry. This is yet more interesting as this feature is explained by the author's grandson in his commentaries as a feature of the smallsword fencers, and the work of the point. There are several examples of non cavalry systems of cut fencing such as Werner and Roux, whose traditions are the base of the later schools of German Academic Fencing – the so called Menzur and the fencing style of the German Studentsverbindung. It is important to note that this branch of fencing is well placed in the aspect of old cavalry styles, but adopted to work in the duelling environment. While one can trace the Academic fencing back to the 17th century, a very specific transition from the older guild fencing. It is important to see that the method eventually evolved into what can be seen as the Roux method, which eventually laid the base for the later 19th century academic fencing fashion.



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Figure 6: A picture from the Sokolov 1843 treatise. a student of Valville, who presents a typical cut oriented contre-pointe mechanics. Major feature are many moulinets based mostly on wrist mechanics.

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Posture and footwork

The next chapter of the manual deals with the subject of body and leg position. It bears several individual features, that cannot be found in any contemporary manuals. It portrays six body positions that feature several rules of fencing presented by Starzewski.

First of all, each position portrays a different moment of distance from the opponent. Depicting a typical fighting ward, an open waiting guard with a point down, as well as the positions of body while making the cut and while disengaging. Yet the most mysterious is what is called the Enganging stance⁵, while the five other stances named The Initial Stance, The Face up Stance, The Cutting Stance, The Defending Stance and The Retreating Stance are rather common designs, presenting the body positions in different parts of the fight, be it movement, disengagement, the cut etc. The 3rd stance or a stance that emerges between the Face Up stance and the Cutting Stance is a very peculiar one. This position is like a modern appell movement, a form of feint or distance preparation which is an extremely rare thing among the cut fencing sources of Starzewski's era. This stance allows to treat a cut in a much more detailed and prepared way, where once the fencer sees the opportunity he can check whether the cut will be safe or is a trap put down by the enemy.

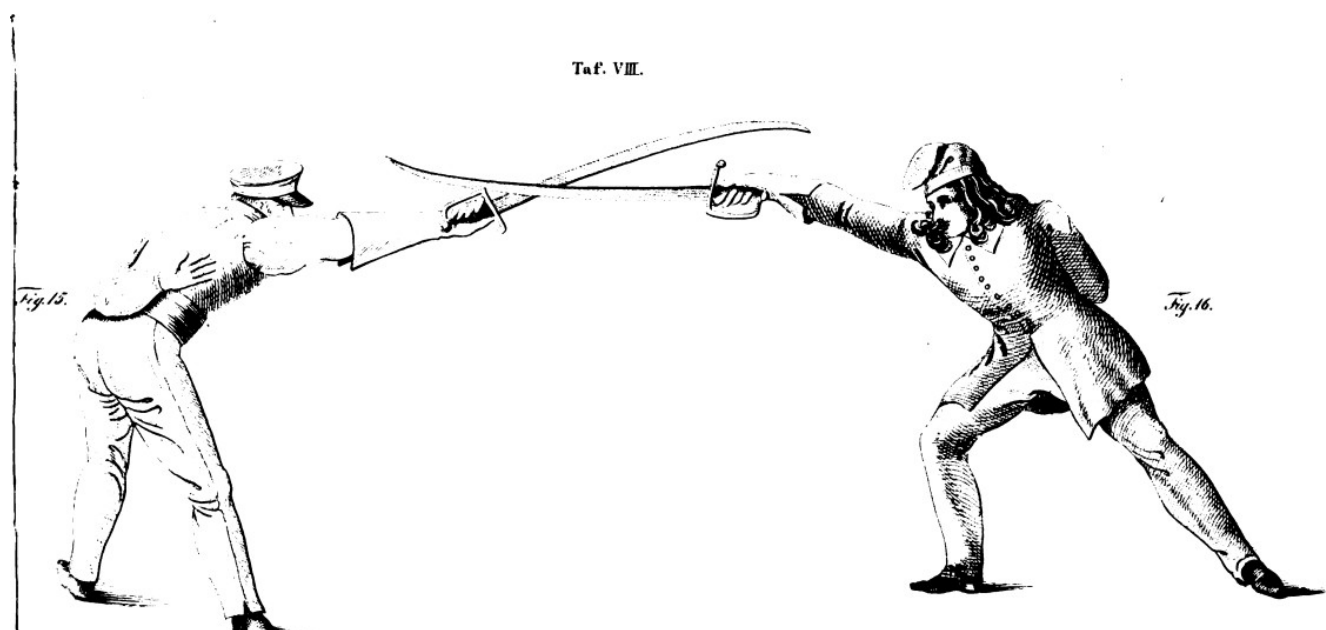


Figure 7: Postures presentation from Wilhelm Roux 1840 treatise on cut fencing. A very similar mechanics of cutting and many other features of the Starzewski system can be found in his book.

All the other stances rely on a very popular methodology of the early 19th century fencing. While out of measure or on the bridge of measure, one is putting slightly more weight on the rear leg, a lunge is most typical, with a forward lean, made along the line of the rear foot, and the Retreating Stance puts the weight again on the rear leg. The Engaging Stance is something outside this area.

This is one of the most unique aspects of the system, adding an additional type of footwork to the very basic arsenal of movement performed by Starzewski. These are the step forward, step backward and lunge. The Engaging stance becomes a pseudo step, which is not made with a typical length and allows for a very broad area of forward and backward lean. This is mostly due to the fact, that the 3rd stance has to have equally distributed weight on both legs.

5 For the sake of order the names and expression will be used from Darias Izdebska-Farrel translation of the manual.

Both of Starzewski's systems are using the 6 cut system, while the Rdzenne part is adding 6 more actions, and Wręczne 2 more, all of which seem to have their root within the Austrian sabelexercitio. Therefore Starzewski introduces a total of 20 cuts in his manual.

The system itself in both parrying and cutting strongly relies on bending the knees forward and backwards in the action for not only extending the reach and recovering, but as well in the very basic mechanics of parrying and cutting. As mentioned before, the system relies on as little shoulder movement as possible. The author underlines, that the only possible plane of shoulder movement is within the horizontal plane. This strengthens the use of the body action to support the cutting and parrying movement, which in turn emphasize the minimalistic arm actions and wrist centered focus of the Starzewski's system.

Miscellaneous

Starzewski ends his manual with a few information on the subject of good habits during a duel. The chapter mentions the subject of Mensur fashion, which uses the same rules of combat as what he presented.

The manual does not include a separate chapter on tactics, but features many hints and suggestions on different tactical situations and use of the techniques introduced in the script. These are most often put as if between the lines. This is nothing unusual for the period, as many manuals reference many actions before even explaining them and familiarize the reader with their existence before they are formally introduced. There are many examples like advice to perform undercuts while retreating, how to approach the enemy with the Engaging Stance, or how to resolve body and hip rotation during an exchange. There are some mentions on feinting and method of picking targets in different situations as well.

The construction of the weapon presented by the manual strongly resembles the typical German fencing sabres of the era. Equipped with a fingerloop and basket, these are a very recognizable type of swords used throughout the fencing schools of that region of Europe. Naturally Starzewski suggests the weapon to have more lethal features and to treat it that way. There were indeed many types of military sabres of the period that had similar construction features to the fencing weapons of the day.

Starzewski and earlier Polish sabre traditions

Starzewski's system has strong roots in the German (Saxon) academic fencing of the early 19th century. This particular branch of the system is one of the few heavily connected to cavalry use. The highly extended arm is a very common aspect of cavalry manuals of the era both in Germany, Austria and France.

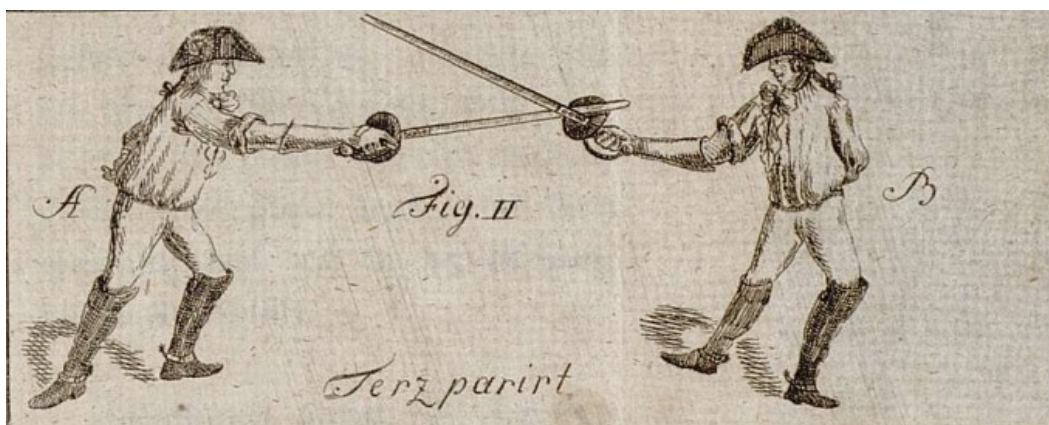


Figure 9: Friedrich Behr 1792 parry of the Terz cut (from left). Characteristic point up finish of the action.

Both the author of the treatise and his grandson suggest in their work that the Saxon system has strong connection to the Polish tradition of fencing. The style Werner depicts in his 1824 manual, is also suggested to have more archaic roots. Starzewski underlines, that the system depicted as fencing “auf krummen Sabel” depicts a school that is an amalgamation of both Polish and German art of fencing developed in the 18th century, when both Saxony and Poland were ruled by a common king.

This is nothing uncommon as during those times a certain development of Polish weaponry can be seen. Both August II and his son August III were interested in fencing and promoted its development and practice, though the history of that particular system (Werner and Roux) has mostly rapier roots, especially the forward arm and body mechanics, which can be traced directly to the Fabris tradition. At the same time in the early 18th century and earlier the construction of Polish sabre handles was much different, not allowing for the aforementioned methodology of highly extended point in the in-line type of cutting. It is also worth mentioning that several traditions of academic fencing existed during that time.

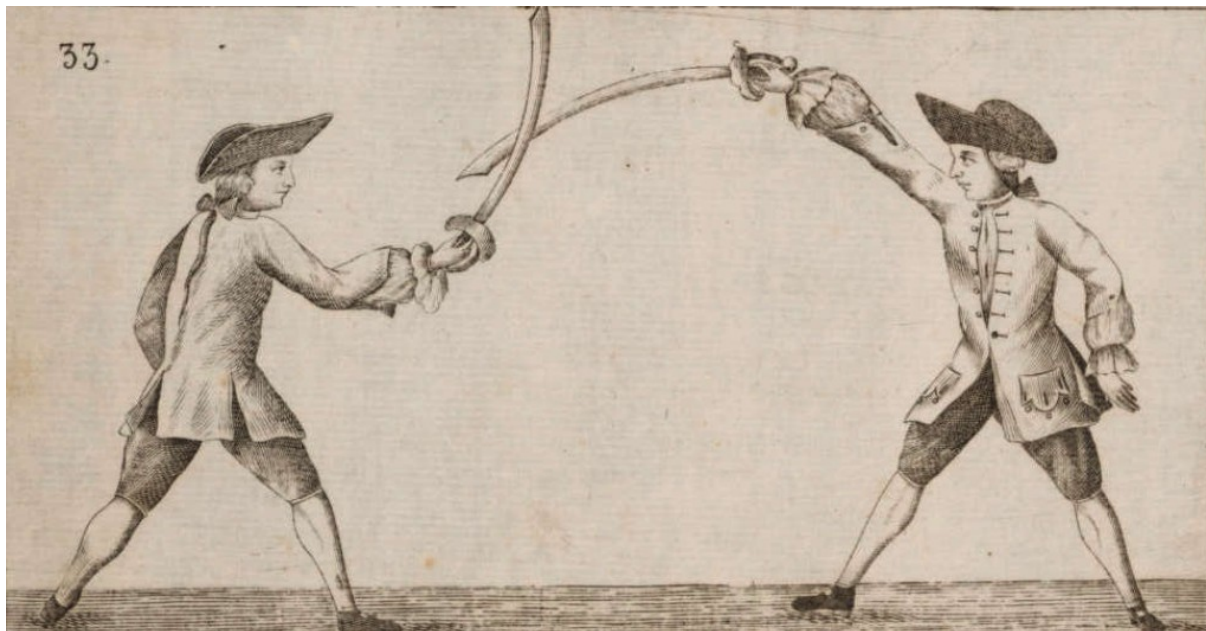


Figure 10: Two positions with the sabre from the Juan Perinat from the 1758. Before the cut in the hanging guard (right) and after performing the cut (left)

These differed on several levels, first being the alignment of point and hand. There are two methods presented in German tradition of cut fencing: point over the hand (Kahn, Timmlich, Behr, Roworth) and point in line of the hand (Starzewski, Kruszewski, Roux, Schmidt and Werner etc.). While the latter requires a more handshake or thumbgrip that allows the handle to remain extended forward, the former makes a more efficient use of the hammer grip.

In the context of Polish sabre the structure of handles prior to the second quarter of 18th century would be useless as majority had handles designed to accommodate a typical hammer grip. On the other hand, there is a slight and interesting aspect of that feature as for example Carl Timmlich treatise on the schlager from 1781 uses the point-up mechanics, while his cavalry treatise from 1796 uses the point in line mechanics. It is one of the few if any treatises taking into consideration the use of the thumb ring. Furthermore, Schmidt's treatise from 1713 does not explicitly mention any particular alignment of the point, the pictures suggest the point being in line, while retaining a hammer grip. A 18th century Polish cavalry manual suggests the use of thumb grip while wielding broadswords. French treatises on the Espadon rely strongly on those specific mechanics as well.

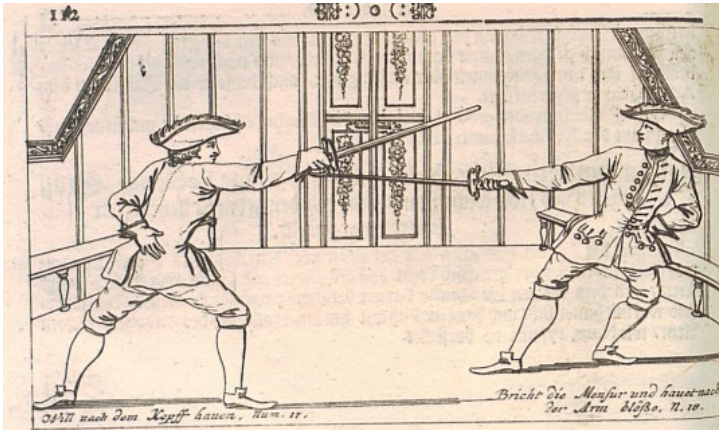


Figure 11: Schmidt (1713) plates, presenting a tempo cut. While both fencers use the hammer or handshake grip, one has point in line with the arm, the other not.

which were in his eyes more of a smallsword style of movement, which he adopted under the influence of his voyages to Paris. This is very true in consideration of French system popular in the 19th century. Contre-Pointe relied heavily on elbow extension in its basic mechanics. It is yet more interesting once taking into consideration, that the Espadon (French cavalry sabre systems) were focused on fully extended arm actions and long parries.

Timmlich's 1796 cavalry treatise seems to have all mechanics of the elbow, shoulder and wrist movement, also presenting a type of swing that is strongly suggested by much later Italian cavalry treatises (Parise 1883 and Radaelli 1876). In this case a third aspect had developed, describing when the cut fully extends the arm in its motion and how it is extended. Some systems like Behrs (1791) or Segers (1834) manual do not extend the arm fully in the motion of the cut. Also they have different approaches of how the cut should land. Some make the blade land as a consequence of circular motion around a certain joint (shoulder or wrist) or as a consequence of the body and arm motion making the blade fall more directly, facing the enemy. This way there are many differences between treatises, Timmlich's treatise makes all cuts fall from a circular motion instead of a direct push of the blade into the enemy, as in the contre-pointe system.

All these features determine how effective actions should look like. Cavalry based treatises mostly rely on strong arm extensions, circular motions as these allow an easy and effective cut in combat. Starzewski's system bears most of these features, while being strongly connected to the mechanics of an unmounted tradition. Its use of the blade is very well connected to what can be seen in many cavalry treatises prior to his period.

Conclusion

Starzewski system is a very peculiar system for its period. Having a vast amount of similar, easy to trace aspects, it also relies on some internal ideas of uncertain origins. Whether these are creations of the great experience of the author himself, or fall in the tradition of an older Polish system he had learned through his ancestors, we do not know for sure. Still, he seems to be using a mixture of different approaches of both German (Saxon and Austrian) and French cavalry systems. These represent a very developed and well trained whole.

Even though relying on very simple principles, Starzewski treatise is full of tiny hints that help out in more advanced tactical situations. Those create a system which is fully operational, but a little hard to interpret. It can serve both as a reliable duelling system and a training base for more developed research.

The second aspect would be the use of extended arm. There are treatises suggesting the use of a fully extended arm, without any use of the elbow, with only some support of the shoulder, therefore they either use solely the wrist like Starzewski or Werner or support its movement with some degree of shoulder movement like Kruszewski. Other system relies strongly on elbow movement, where the elbow drives the arm forward to full extension, either with greater swing like Schmidt in his 1797 cavalry treatise or smaller one as in Behr 1791 manual. This is more intriguing as the grandson of Starzewski mentions that author of the treatise had later adopted some elbow movement mechanics,

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