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**Historical genealogy and contemporary social elite: The case of a prominent Polish online genealogical database.**

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**Abstract:**

Using the example of a prominent genealogical database of Poland's historical elites, [www.wielcy.pl](http://www.wielcy.pl), built by Marek Jerzy Minakowski, the paper will analyze selected broader social mechanisms of functioning of such databases. First, it will indicate the mechanisms for building the social credibility, recognition, and visibility of a given genealogical database. Secondly, the paper will indicate how the database is used to legitimize the social status of a selected faction of contemporary Polish elite. In particular, the case of the Polish community of descendants of former aristocratic and landed elites, which has managed to maintain a certain coherence as a multi-generational social network, will be discussed. The given group which can be called an extended family adopted a relatively consistent historical family ideology and managed to maintain a relatively high social status, primarily by joining the elite of the Polish intelligentsia after World War II. The efficient use of the base by a given milieu is possible because the family ideology of the given elite factions is tied to the national ideology of historical elites of Poland which strongly privileges the nobility and its heritage. The given genealogical database may be, in fact, seen as a mechanism of operationalization of that relationship. Therefore, it allows for the mutual legitimization of a given database by its ties to a given elite group, as well as of a given elite group by a given database. Hopes of joining contemporary elite circles with the ability to present themselves as heirs to "historical elites" offered to other base users are usually not fulfilled, even if they are able to prove fairly close kinship ties to them. Such disappointment concerns especially the real social advancement or the possibility of joining historically formed elite circles.

## Introduction

The paper proposes a sociological analysis of the functioning of the online genealogy project of Polish elites built by Marek Jerzy Minakowski. It is the most systematic and socially recognized genealogical database of Polish elites, also one of the oldest and systematically expanded. On its example it is possible to show what are the social uses of mass genealogy that has become available in recent years. The case in question also illustrates the mechanisms of building the social credibility of historical databases and their wider social recognition. On the other hand, it shows how databases of this type can serve to use historical sources to strengthen the status of selected factions of contemporary elites for whom narratives of historically defined family ideology are particularly important.

An important thesis of the paper is also that, despite what some may think, the advent of the availability of genealogical data doesn't seem to have changed all that much when it comes to the structures of the family world, and the social world more broadly, particularly when it comes to elites. In other words, one can pose the thesis that mass genealogy, of which the study discussed here is an excellent example, may rather be a tool used by representatives of different social classes, but at higher levels of the social hierarchy it is the most effective tool for pre-existing social elites, and in particular their specific factions for whom historical family ideologies and narratives of elitism are a key legitimization strategy.

## Minakowski's genealogy database

The database which is the subject of this paper is run by a one-man enterprise, which was created by Marek Jerzy Minakowski. He is a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy at Jagiellonian University and holder of a doctorate from the same university. Initially he worked at the Polish Internet portal "onet.pl", one of the pioneers of the Polish Internet market. There he gained IT competence and at the same time began to build a genealogical database of Polish historical elites as a hobby. In time, around 2010, it became his only source of income. The project developed by Minakowski has at its core a large genealogical database which is called "Minakowski's Great Genealogy" <https://wielcy.pl/>. From this large base containing more than 1,200,000 individuals, Minakowski has separated the so-called "small" base. This is the so-called "Genealogy of Descendants of the Great Sejm (or Polish

Parliament)" (<https://www.sejm-wielki.pl/>). The small database is available to anyone for free, but is limited to the families of the participants of the Great Sejm (the so-called "Four-Year Sejm", i.e. the last parliament of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which passed the famous Constitution of May 3, 1791, the second constitution in world history after the American Constitution). It contains more than 130,000 people. Thus, it is a narrow core base of descendants of the Polish noble elite of the late 18th century, which seems to be a kind of "decoy", a slice of a larger base to attract potential customers to the rest of the paid part, which may contain data of potential interested parties. The basic idea of the whole database seems to be that it offers anyone interested the opportunity to find kinship with members of the Polish historical elite. This offer seems to be directed first of all to the members of the Polish intelligentsia who more often than representatives of other social classes may be interested in the given social game and at the same time may have at least some ancestors belonging to historical nobility. Since the noble stratum was quite large in Poland, and many kinship ties have grown between its elite and lower sections over the centuries, there is a statistically significant probability that people with ancestors of even low-ranking noble descent will be more or less distantly related to members of the families of the historical social elite. Such a connection, even a distant one, may appear ennobling to many people in Poland given the nature of historical roots of the Polish citizenship model (Zarycki, Smoczyński, Warczok 2022). This is probably why Minakowski's large database is advertised as follows: "it contains more than 1,200,000 people from the Polish elite from Piast Kolodziej until now. Practically complete. One big family: Rej, Kochanowski, Krasicki, Mickiewicz, Sienkiewicz, Copernicus, Skłodowska-Curie, Zawisza Czarny, Kościuszko, Hubal, Herbert, Miłosz, Kaczyńskis, Komorowski, Buzek.... There are those famous writers, painters, musicians, actors, journalists, explorers, historians, military men, philosophers, churchmen, lawyers, politicians: pre-partition, 19th century, pre-war, post-war, contemporary.... And more than 1,200,000 people who are one family with us. How about you, too?"<sup>1</sup> So here we clearly have a strategic, commercial use of the concept of family. The question, however, is to what extent do the data offered by Minakowski affect the real structures of families? I will address this in a moment below. In the meantime, I wanted to complete the description of his project. The latest part of Minakowski's project is the "Obituary" (Nekrologia) service <https://wielcy.pl/nekrologia/>. It contains nearly 500,000 found obituaries of major Polish newspapers from February 1845 to September 1939. He identified more than 200,000

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wielcy.pl/>

different people in them and linked them to his main genealogical databases mentioned above. Added to this is his publishing activity. In particular, Minakowski published extensive directories of the historical noble elites of the various regions of the respective Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Minakowski also supplemented his database with data on cemeteries, particularly the detailed location of graves in Poland's major historical cemeteries, such as the Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw (also the Jewish cemeteries located nearby, and Protestant cemeteries), and the Rakowicki Cemetery in Cracow. This was a significant enhancement of its database, also increasing its symbolic capital, since having graves in Poland's historic cemeteries, is a visible sign of the multi-generational history of the high status of individual families.

### Ways of social legitimization of the database

I will now analyze here selected legitimization strategies that Minakowski adopts. First of all, it is worth mentioning that he was the initiator of the founding of the "Association of Descendants of the Great Sejm". It was defined as an association of the descendants of the deputies and senators of the Great Sejm who signed the "Act of General Confederacy" <https://www.spsw.pl/> on October 7, 1788 and December 16, 1790. On the association's website, Minakowski wrote in the following way about the idea of its founding: "I decided to choose a group so large that it would include the lion's share of people whose ancestors belonged to the elite of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic in late the 18th century, and yet small enough that their genealogy could be mastered. I needed a definitive criterion to unambiguously indicate who is and who is not a "descendant of the elite of the Republic of the 18th century.".... My choice fell on the list of deputies - signatories of the General Confederation of the Sejm States, or to put it in today's terms - the list of deputies and senators of the Great Sejm who completed the oath of office. .... Since this group turned out to be a bit too small, I expanded it to include other members of these families, namely the descendants of nephews, nieces, nephews and nieces of these deputies and senators."<sup>2</sup>

Minakowski wrote to the association's potential members in these words: "Dear Cousins, Ladies and Gentlemen - descendants of the deputies and senators of the Great (Four-Year) Sejm. In three weeks it will be 215 years since our ancestors - who formed the Sejm, later

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.spsw.pl/potomkowie-sejmu-wielkiego-stopnie-wtajemniczenia.html>

known as the Great Sejm - enacted the May 3 Constitution, the anniversary of which is rightly celebrated as a national holiday of Poland. At [www.sejmwielki.pl](http://www.sejmwielki.pl) I have posted our genealogy - all 12,500 descendants of those 436 "angry people" that I know, built by me with great help from Jerzy Czartoryski. I do this because I believe that we have a special responsibility to uphold our traditions and the memory that the Republic did not fall from the sky, but was the work of our ancestors. Because if we forget this responsibility, who will take it? In the United States, the Society of Sons of the American Revolution (descendants of participants in the War of the Independence USA 1775-1783) has 26 thousand members. Does such an institution also in our country couldn't it be created - at least virtually? Before it is created, however, I would love to I will take on "contact box" duties. However, should they find themselves willing to organize a society/institute/foundation - I will be happy to step down places of more worthy people”<sup>3</sup>

A necessary, but not sufficient condition for the great success of the described project was that Minakowski was the first to collect in electronic form and make available on the Internet a database that was based on the digitization of all major Polish armorials and data on the genealogy of Polish noble, aristocratic and landed elites. However, it is worth noting that a number of similar databases were later created, which did not achieve the same high status and social visibility. Thus, it is possible to point out the factors that may have determined Minakowski's advantage. First was the gaining of the trust of the elite descendants of the Polish aristocracy and rich landed gentry (Jakubowska 2012). Although Minakowski himself does not belong to these circles, he got to know many of their influential representatives, which was also helped by the establishment of the aforementioned Association. They also started sending him their family data. Both those of historical family members and distant cousins, as well as those recently born. In this way, Minakowski became a useful partner of an important milieu of the Polish elite. In our earlier research conducted together with Rafał Smoczyński we identified the given milieu in its contemporary incarnation as an important faction of the Polish intelligentsia (Smoczyński and Zarycki 2021). It formed immediately after World War II and brings together the descendants of many historical families whose ancestors are important characters in Polish school history textbooks. It is a fairly cohesive group whose core consists of families of wealthy landowners who only lost their property status only as a result of World War II, and forms a broader social network, a kind of coalition

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.spsw.pl/historia-stowarzyszenia-potomkow-sejmu-wielkiego.html>

of dozens of families who maintain close social contacts and retain a degree of marital homogamy. Our detailed research results presented in our book published so far only in Polish (Smoczyński and Zarycki 2017) prove that this group managed to maintain its elite status throughout the communist period, because it joined the intelligentsia elite, which became the dominant elite of Poland after 1945, alongside the communist nomenklatura. Over time, the nomenklatura project collapsed, and the intelligentsia emerged as the sole dominant Polish elite today, allowing the discussed circles of descendants of the former aristocracy and landed gentry to benefit from their intelligentsia elite status and to freely reproduce it in subsequent generations. We suggested that the term "extended family" can be used to refer to this milieu, as it has the characteristics of a pre-modern family network. Among its features is the maintenance of contacts with often genealogically distant relatives, who nevertheless belong to a common social field cultivating a common identity and customs. Importantly, a number of members of this circle are publicly recognized as descendants of famous Polish historical families. Members of other factions of the Polish intelligentsia have a special respect and vision about these families. Polish popular magazines and other media also regularly write about these families and currently living descendants. An important aspect of this milieu's symbolic capital is its kinship ties with Western aristocratic families, including some reigning royal families. This allows this milieu to present itself as a living symbol of Poland's ties with Western Europe. It can even be noted that on the basis of these ties, as I argued earlier, these circles (and even more so their admirers) sometimes seem to portray their biological (racial) superiority to average Polish citizens, whose origins are usually peasant, and therefore implicitly more Eastern European, less Western, and in a metaphorical sense less white than the former noble elite (Zarycki 2022).

By coming into contact with this symbolically important faction of the Polish intelligentsia, the database's author has gained a key means of building credibility. Even if specific errors in his data are sometimes pointed out by other genealogists, there are no serious doubts about his status as a reliable source of knowledge about the affinity between historical and contemporary members of the Polish elite.

To build his legitimacy as the central knowledge base of Poland's intelligentsia elite, Minakowski also invokes a number of other strategies. First of all, one can mention the emphasis he makes on links with the academic field. A good example is the inclusion in the database of the presence of individuals in the Polish Biographical Dictionary (PSB), which is

a immense undertaking by several generations of Polish historians in which they publish biographies of people who are considered by them to belong to the Polish elite of all periods. Minakowski even created an interesting indicator of social status based on the presence of a person and his ancestors as well as relatives in the dictionary. It allows for color-coding in family trees of people (including a person's ancestors) of higher and lower status. At the same time, he stresses that the logic of this indicator is based on the presence of individuals in the aforementioned dictionary, which is officially affiliated with by the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Minakowski occasionally publishes academic articles, mainly in journals on demography and also speaks at scientific conferences (Minakowski 2016, 2017). An important success of his database is that the license to access it has been purchased by several Polish universities. A key dimension of the public recognition of the database is also the presence of it and its author in the media. He gives interviews, both to daily newspapers, weeklies and television stations. He is asked to speak in particular when it comes to the family background of well-known politicians or celebrities, and more broadly the family ties of the Polish elite, both among themselves and with foreign elites. However, he also speaks on broader historical topics, such as when talking about the origins of Polish elites and their transformations. He also gives advice when it comes to private genealogical research. His database is quoted in the media in various contexts, especially among the basic genealogical databases that are recommended to those interested in genealogy.

### Users of the database

The extended family, that is, the circle of descendants of well-known Polish landed and aristocratic families, seems to be the main beneficiary of Minakowski's genealogical base. This is because there is a clear synergy between the historical ideologies of this milieu and the dominant public ideologies of national history. Thanks to the base, the extended family can prove that it is the most legitimate heir, the heir to the historical Polish elites.

At the same time, from our interviews with members of this family network, as well as people in its social environment, it appears that people who, through genealogical searches, find close ancestry ties to a given environment are usually not accepted into it, especially if they come from a different social environment, even more so if they have a different class status. As a rule, a given elite milieu does not conduct searches for "lost relatives" and treats people who try to claim common ancestors as suspicious strangers, even if, according to

genealogical data, their family ties are close and confirmed. This is because we are dealing with an environment that has strong family ties, but at its core is a shared multi-generational socialization, a common image of the group's past and a relatively high social status that the milieu has managed to maintain. Individuals whose ancestors broke away from a given group in the past, and in particular, did not become part of the social network that consolidated in its present form in the 1950s mainly in Warsaw and Krakow, are not considered "cousins" even if they are able to prove formally close kinship ties with the extended family. "Cousins," on the other hand, can be very distant relatives and even sometimes people who are completely unrelated, if their ancestors socialized in the same social network after World War II, and are therefore also members of the intelligentsia elite.

Thus, we can talk about two parallel family ideologies, which use each other, but have limited influence on each other. On the one hand is the ideology of "objective" genealogical data, which are systematized in databases. On the other hand, it is the family ideology of the really existing family networks, particularly our case of the extended family milieu of the descendants of historical Polish aristocracy and landed gentry. The extended family uses data from databases, in particular Minakowski's, and uses his ideology which, in its assumptions, descendants the historical feudal elites of old Poland as the only true Polish elites.

Minakowski, on the other hand, uses the extended family, both in the sense of his relationship with this milieu through which he gains symbolic legitimacy as a credible and recognized genealogist, as well as access to data on the family and the knowledge of the family which he presents to a wider audience to valorize his base as particularly elite. Members of the extended family also use the base in question for pragmatic purposes, such as to check the degree of kinship between members of a given community who are less familiar with each other, or to publicly confirm (demonstrate) their historical ancestry. Thus, it can be said that Minakowski's base is a certain informal substitute for the Polish heraldic authority that did not exist in republican Poland. This substitute authority, however, has much more restricted power than the original one. Presence in Minakowski's base, even with a list of high-born ancestors, does not automatically translate into high social status or the possibility of joining elite circles, especially the extended family mentioned above.

Presence in the database, on the other hand, may have some significance in status and social games in less privileged and smaller social circles. These include formal associations attempting to bring together descendants of historical elites, such as the aforementioned



Association of Descendants of the Great Sejm. Such associations also include the Union of Polish Nobility or the Polish Landowners Society. Within their framework, the possibility of proving one's "historical" origin may play a role, but outside of them, it is questionable.

The social significance of the presence in genealogical databases of representatives of other elite backgrounds is no longer as obvious as in the case of the extended family described. Thus, for example, the descendants of the once great and wealthy Polish bourgeois families of the late 19th and early 20th centuries are a good contrast. They are not able to derive similar symbolic gains from their presence in the Minakowski base or others, because they do not function as a cohesive elite social group whose important ideological dimension of legitimacy would be some ideology of familism.

In an expanded version of the paper, I will discuss why the great Polish bourgeois families failed to create a social network similar to the descendants of the Polish aristocracy and landed gentry that is still active today, and why they do not have a comparable ability to use genealogical databases, particularly on a collective and public level.

### Main conclusions

At the level of social elite, genealogical databases, even those of high status, seem to have limited ability to influence existing family networks in a tangible way. Instead, they can be effective tools of reinforcing social status of existing family networks developed through multi-generational joint socialization. On the one hand, they can reinforce their wider social recognition and their inscription in national ideologies of history. On the other hand, they can strengthen the internal cohesion of such groups by providing them with useful tools for learning about and studying their structures, in particular the connections between individual members of the milieu, and their relationships with representatives of other elites (foreign and domestic; historical and contemporary).

At the individual level, however, genealogical databases, as Minakowski's database discussed in the paper does explicitly, can promise all their users some access to historically defined elitism. As has been discussed, in exchange for buying access to the database, the database author promises the ability to find genealogical connections between oneself or one's family and the country's historical elites. This may also raise, arguably, hopes for some to have a

chance to socially join elite circles, especially those for whom genealogical connections to historical elites are an important part of legitimizing their social status. However, these promises, or hopes, appear to be mostly unfounded. Indeed, even well-proven individual connections to historical elites do not, as our research has indicated, offer any real chance of joining contemporary elite social circles, or of significant advancement within broader social elites. Genealogical databases, if the example of Minakowski's database proved representative, would thus be tools for legitimizing and socially integrating real already existing social networks, rather than their co-creators, or tools for joining them.

Thus, it is probably possible to put forward the thesis that elite genealogical databases, and perhaps genealogical databases in general, operate similarly to dating portals. For as Andreas Schmitz has shown on the basis of very systematic empirical data, the actual sociological mechanisms of operation of dating portals, that is, when analyzing their structural effects, are different from the advertising visions they promise. What I have in mind here is first of all the promise of equal access of participants of dating portals to the resources gathered in them, similar chances of finding a suitable partner, perhaps limited only slightly by factors age or look. Meanwhile, as Schmitz has shown, the real beneficiaries of dating sites are primarily the actors whose resources are strongest in the offline world. So, in particular, better-positioned men, whose access to female partners deemed attractive is incomparably greater than that of all other portal users (Schmitz 2017). In the case of elite genealogy databases, one can speak of a similar effect, that is, a particular ability to benefit from them by members of elite circles who already belonged to them and had a high social standing. Those standing lower in the social hierarchy, carried by the hope to join the "historical elite" are much more likely to support the development of genealogical databases with their resources and social recognition, rather than benefit in a measurable way from their presence in them. This is not to say, of course, that their gains at the level of smaller social groups or lower levels of the social hierarchy may not be more real, but this was not the subject of this paper.

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