

# Consuming Masculinity and Race. Circus Bodies in Strength Shows and Wrestling Fights

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**Abstract:** This article describes the mass consumption of masculinity and race within the entertainment landscape in Poland in the years 1850–1939. Focusing on the ever-increasing popularity of strength shows and wrestling fights held in circuses and performed in front of urban audiences, the article intends to demonstrate the strategies of presenting white and black athletes in circus arenas, and to examine the meanings and roles of strength shows and wrestling fights in the collective imagination on racial and gender differences.

**Keywords:** athletes, circus body, manliness, Poland, race, strength shows, wrestling fights

While reading the biography of Zofia Stryjeńska, a Polish painter whose most active artistic period coincided with the interwar period (1918–1939),<sup>1</sup> I came across a passage about the Staniewski Brothers Circus in Warsaw:

“It is a multistory building made of brick, with the auditorium of three thousand seats. The fights between Polish and Russian athletes were always most popular with the public. Athletes reached the arena (its diameter amounted to thirteen meters and it could be filled with water) walking along the red carpet, accompanied by the sound of *The Gladiator March*. Zocha is excited – Poddubny and Garowienko were supposed to fight ‘until knockout’.” (KUŹNIAK 2015:153)

The description of these 1934 events attracted my attention for two reasons. Firstly, because it relates to the circus, and in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first

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<sup>1</sup> Interwar period – the period in European history between the end of World War I and the outbreak of the Second World War (1918–1939). In the history of Polish statehood, this period is defined as the Second Polish Republic (II RP). In 1918, Poland regained independence after 123 years of absence from the map of Europe. In September 1939, the territory of the Second Polish Republic was invaded by the Wehrmacht as well as the Red Army, and subsequently annexed. In defiance of the provisions of international law, the occupiers announced the dissolution of the Polish state; their actions were, however, not acknowledged by the international community.

decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, circus was the prevailing entertainment genre in Europe and the United States. Secondly, it features the theme of strength shows and wrestling fights, which – along with the glorious and diverse array of clowns, jugglers, and trapeze artists – were positively loved by spectators.

Research on ethnographic and freak shows in Central and Eastern Europe between 1850 and 1939<sup>2</sup> has demonstrated that it was precisely through circuses (both stationary and traveling) that the main ‘arenas’ of displaying otherness had emerged and were developed, negotiated, and challenged. Based on the sources describing strength shows and wrestling fights in the Polish territories in the years 1850–1939, I consider these acts as the epitome of such practices. It should be mentioned, however, that even though these shows most often took place in circus arenas, they were not limited solely to circus spaces, as discussed in the present study.

Within the context of the present analysis, I consider strength shows and wrestling fights cultural practices encompassing policies of inclusion and exclusion, processes of forming individual and collective identities, as well as interdependencies between the local, national and global, and going beyond the scope of a form of entertainment that was widespread in a given time and place.

The aim of the present study is to observe the practices of displaying otherness in circus arenas using the example of strongmen and wrestlers’ shows, and to examine the meanings and roles of strength shows and wrestling fights in the collective imagination on racial and gender differences. Additionally, I intend to demonstrate the diversity and multidimensionality of exhibiting otherness in circus spaces, with special regard to ‘exotic’ otherness. Ethnographic shows, most popular in Europe between 1880 and 1914, were one of many models of displaying the ‘exotic’ Other, and the emergence of this model did not eliminate other practices of displaying otherness, which continued to grow and function simultaneously.

## THROUGH THE LENS OF ENTERTAINMENT

Pre-war circus traditions in the Polish territories were described in my article on circuses in post-war press photographs (CZARNECKA 2019:437–440). In this particular text, I emphasize that even though the emergence of this form of entertainment in Europe dates back to ancient times, the birth of the modern circus occurred in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the blossoming of European circuses, including the establishment of grand national circuses, took place in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (DANOWICZ 1984).

If we assume that all forms of entertainment prevalent in a given time and place constitute a manifestation of a culture, we should also acknowledge that circus as a cultural phenomenon, examined in the context of a given culture, reveals specific features of a society. Circus “is a kind of mirror in which the culture is reflected, condensed, and at the same time transcended; perhaps the circus seems to stand outside the culture only because it is at its very center” (BOUISSAC 1976:9).

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Moreover, it is worth emphasizing that while serving specific social functions and evoking impulses and emotions in people, specific forms of entertainment are usually arranged according to specific scenarios.

In the present analysis, circus is understood not quite as an institution (such understanding encompasses all circuses that have ever existed) but rather as a specific aesthetic category and atmosphere embodied by this institution. In the latter meaning, circus "(...) is something less tangible, a combination of spectacle with the unique and intimate connection that occurs between the performers and the audience, and evoke words like 'exotic,' 'anticipation,' and 'awe'" (LORING 2007).

Even though the circus has managed to maintain its identity throughout the centuries, it has also undergone significant transformations. Certain circus attractions that used to constitute key points in their programs have completely vanished over time. The parades announcing the circus entering the city, which used to function as one of the most iconic circus performances, started gradually disappearing around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainly due to economic pressures (LORING 2007).

The period between the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the era of what we know as the traditional circus (CIHLÁŘ 2017:171). Its origins are related to the development of equestrian shows, given that the majority of circus audiences at the time were aristocrats, noblemen, officers, and soldiers known for being passionate about horse-riding. As early as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, numerous circus troupes in Western Europe began moving into dedicated buildings defined as 'circuses', giving rise to a new genre of mass entertainment. From around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until World War I, large European cities, such as Paris, London, Berlin, Saint Petersburg and Vienna, operated as centers of the aristocratic circus, which specialized in performances aimed at members of higher social strata and officers. However, less famous and usually much smaller groups of circus artists also performed lower-quality shows for the poor.

In the partitioned Polish territories,<sup>3</sup> processes similar to those observed in the West were taking place with some delay. Alongside theatres, museums, wax figure cabinets, panoramas and variétés, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the proliferation of circus buildings in large cities (e.g., Albert Salamoński's circus on Włodzimierska Street [today Czacki Street] in Warsaw [1872]; the Ciniselli family circus on Ordynacka Street in Warsaw [1882]<sup>4</sup>).<sup>5</sup> Some circus troupes left their headquarters relatively rarely, visiting only a few cities per year.

<sup>3</sup> As a result of the three partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, 1795) by Prussia, Russia and Austria, the Polish state ceased to exist. It regained its independence in 1918.

<sup>4</sup> The building on Ordynacka Street was considered one of the most beautiful circuses of the time. The construction process, commissioned by the Italian Ciniselli family, began in July 1882 and ended in March 1883. The building changed owners over the years. In 1918, after a bid, it was purchased by Stanisław Mroczkowski and later taken over by the brothers Bronisław and Mirosław Staniewski. Towards the end of the interwar period, the circus began to decline. In 1938, it was 'rescued' by the *Okręgowy Związek Bokserski* [Regional Boxing Association], which initiated the organization of boxing events there. The circus building continued to function until September 1939, when it partially burned down as a result of German bombing. In 1944, it was completely damaged by fire and dismantled after 1945 (Warsaw, *Archiwum Państwowe* [State Archive], *Zbiór Korotyńskich* [The Korotyński Collection], sygn. 1995, *Wycinki z prasy warszawskiej* [Excerpts from the Warsaw press]; BIŃCZYCKA 2017:114–115, 122).

<sup>5</sup> The first circus in Warsaw was established in 1782 at the intersection of Bracka Street and Chmielna Street; BIŃCZYCKA 2017:113.

Others relocated rather frequently, a feature that became relatively common in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when, inspired by the American examples and undertaking higher risks, circus entrepreneurs started embarking on longer tours to acquire new audiences. In addition to evoking basic emotional reactions, circus performances also started featuring the theme of the romantic errand (CIHLÁŘ 2017:171–173), which was technically and logistically enabled by the development of railway tracks, among other things.

Traveling circuses crossed national borders and performed their shows not only in large cities but also in small towns and villages. When entering a particular political, social and economic landscape, circuses had to adapt to the local conditions they encountered. Upon arrival, circus entrepreneurs and artists obtained certain information (about expected crops, strikes, living standards, etc.) and used their creativity (e.g., by modifying performances) in order to adequately respond to the needs of local communities and adjust to their sensitivities. Sources suggest that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Polish territories were abundantly visited by numerous circus troupes (particularly on the route between Germany and Russia). They performed in many Polish cities, including Łódź – Wincenty Sposi Circus in 1860 and Albert Salamoński Circus in 1886 (PAWLAK 2001:49), Poznań – Ernst Renz Circus in 1853 and 1876 (KUREK 2017:81, 85), Krakow – Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1901,<sup>6</sup> Toruń – Blumenfeld Brothers Circus in 1912<sup>7</sup> and Staniewski Brothers Circus in 1926,<sup>8</sup> and many others.

In large cities, both in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and especially up until World War I), circus arts, “often scornfully referred to as ‘jugglery’” (DANOWICZ 1984:5), were often seen as competing with ‘highbrow’ arts, particularly the theatre (BIŃCZYCKA 2017:113). Municipal authorities received numerous petitions from representatives of the theatre industry proposing that, for the sake of the theatre, circus performances be banned or, at the least, taxed.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding, the statistics from the period between 1875 and 1900 show that circus performances in the partitioned Polish territories attracted three times more audiences than theatres did (BIŃCZYCKA 2017:114).

Complex transformations associated with the development of the modern era in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the expansion of large cities, technical and scientific transformations, industrialization, the migration of people from villages to cities, and women’s emancipation, among others, necessitated a reorganization within the entertainment industry which had to constantly adjust to

<sup>6</sup> Krakow, Archiwum Państwowe [State Archive], Zbiór prof. Teofila Klimy [The Professor Teofil Klima’s Collection], sygn. 29/680/6, Von Clarence L. Dean, *Das Buch der Wunder in Barnum & Bailey’s Grösste Schaustellung der Erde*, Vienna 1901.

<sup>7</sup> *Gazeta Toruńska*, 1912 no 173 (August 1):2.

<sup>8</sup> Toruń, Archiwum Państwowe [State Archive], Magistrat m. Torunia. Sprawy dot[yczące] produkcji cyrkowych 1921–1929 [Files of the town of Toruń. Circus production matters 1921–1929], sygn. 463, Program cyrku [Circus Program]; Podanie Cyrku Staniewskich do Magistratu m. Torunia [Request from the Staniewski Brothers Circus to the Town Hall in Toruń], July 4, 1926.

<sup>9</sup> Toruń, Archiwum Państwowe [State Archive], Magistrat m. Torunia. Sprawy dot[yczące] produkcji cyrkowych 1921–1929 [Files of the town of Toruń. Circus production matters 1921–1929], sygn. 463, Pismo do Magistratu m. Torunia [Letter to the Town Hall in Toruń], June 18, 1929.

changing consumer sensibilities in order to survive. As early as the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the need for the construction of a new commercial landscape, to be used by men and women of different social classes, became apparent. Urban spaces faced not only more commercialization but also more challenges. The emergence of new places, practices and initiatives in urban spaces was to a large extent linked to the fact that new types of social actors (protesting laborers, feminists, males of low social status, glamorized ‘girls in business’) were entering the public domain in order to enforce their rights through self-creation and by undertaking certain actions. The development of the modern circus, with its quasi-universal popularity, was one of the forms that epitomized these transformations in progress, seeing that entertainment constitutes social action that can express change and drive it, too (cf. COMBS 2011:153). At the same time, the dominant ‘top layer’ of society became increasingly interested in the ‘low Others’ (representatives of marginalized groups, including the poor, women, laborers, ethnic Others), which undoubtedly reinforced the symbolic significance of the latter in the imaginative repertoire of the dominant culture (WALKOWITZ 2004:207–209).

The circus attracted ‘outsiders’.<sup>10</sup> Its functioning was largely based on exploiting otherness, its fundamental focus not as much on evoking emotions or satisfying the audiences’ curiosity as it was on earning money. “The circus oddness would account for its attractiveness” (BOUISSAC 1976:6). In this context, it should not be surprising that, alongside classic acrobatic or horse-riding routines, the circus constituted a space for ‘encountering’ otherness. “Circus artists, known in the past as jugglers or goliards, were recruited from different races, nations and religions” (DANOWICZ 1984:13). Otherness was exploited by circus entrepreneurs, but it was also performed (HOLLAND 1999).

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when circus arts in Europe began expanding at an unprecedented rate, European citizens’ interest in other cultures and ‘primitive’ peoples increased. Shows of ‘exotic’ Others, which in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were considered elite, became democratized in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (BERTINO 2013:3) and adopted by the dynamically developing entertainment business. Consequently, shows of visitors from distant lands were gaining popularity not only in zoological gardens (CZARNECKA 2018; DEMSKI 2018; 2018a) but also in museums, variétés, and circuses (see BARANIECKA-OLSZEWSKA in the present volume). The partitioned Polish territories were no exception. For instance, in 1884, the Ciniselli Circus featured a show of ‘real Indians’ in Warsaw<sup>11</sup> (TOMICKI 1992); in 1888, the Schumann Circus advertised performances of African Ashanti people to Warsaw audiences;<sup>12</sup> and in 1911, the Devigné Circus promoted shows of a Japanese troupe in Łódź.<sup>13</sup>

With derogation from norm as its underlying principle, the circus developed practices of presenting and exposing differences. Circus artists were able to satisfy the requirements of the entertainment business of the era due to both their atypical inherent

<sup>10</sup> One interesting example is the story of a couple of circus artists – Harry Cardella and his wife (HOLLAND 1999). The Cardellas’ story was strictly related to the politics of Australian Aboriginal identity and race positioning in Australia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>11</sup> *Kurier Warszawski*, 1884 no 137 (May 18):2.

<sup>12</sup> *Kurier Codzienny*, 1888 no 22 (January 22):5.

<sup>13</sup> *Nowy Kurjer Łódzki*, 1911 no 38 (September 29):1.

qualities and their extraordinary skills. Circus strongmen and wrestlers functioned on the peripheries of both categories, as their 'otherness' resulted from extremely demanding physical workout on the one hand and genetic predispositions on the other.<sup>14</sup> In the case of 'exotic' athletes, these were accompanied by racial and cultural differences.

## CIRCUS BODIES AND SYMBOLIC TYPES

The cultural phenomenon of the circus in Europe between 1850 and 1939 can be analyzed from a number of perspectives, including technology, advertising, or animal training methods, among others. In the context of the present study, the circus, as the epitome of a particular aesthetic and atmosphere, remains tightly bound to an animate human body. "Circus, that most international and physical of art forms, presents a cultural history which unfolds through and as bodily phenomena" (TAIT 2006:26). Moreover, from this perspective, the circus emerges as a 'gallery' of human bodies – light and emaciated, muscular and heavy, dexterous and fat, beautiful and ugly, young and old, black and white, complete and devoid of limbs, excessively hairy, tattooed, and of many more characteristics – which were being displayed and exploited while simultaneously contributing to the process of creating a spectacle dedicated to mass audiences. "Circus represented a 'human menagerie' (a term popularized by Phineas Taylor Barnum) of racial diversity, gender differences, bodily variety, animalized human beings, and humanized animals that audiences were unlikely to see anywhere else" (DAVIS 2002:10).

It bears mentioning that circus artists were exceptionally pragmatic in taking advantage of their unusual 'body capital', viewing it as an opportunity to make a living. It is also beyond doubt that circus entrepreneurs used their 'outsider' status to maximize profits. Simultaneously, one must remember that the circus provided a space for relative freedom otherwise unavailable to those 'outsiders'. It was precisely in the circus that the 'low Others' – marginalized by society on the basis of their race, origin, religion, atypical physical condition or disposition, deemed unsuitable for the moral standards of the era – had a chance to find acceptance, a sense of relative equality and belonging (see, e.g., HOLLAND 1999).

The multiplicity and specificity of human bodies in the circus space both astounded and confused audiences. The bodies of the circus artists 'dragged' the spectators into visual 'games' based on juggling racial, ethnic, gender and sexual stereotypes. Paradoxically, the exhibitions of human bodies in the circus space simultaneously reinforced and challenged social, moral and aesthetic norms. Despite the enormous diversity of human bodies in the

<sup>14</sup> The description of Katia Sandwina, one of the most famous circus athletes to have performed feats of strength in all grand European circuses and variétés, as well as at Barnum's in the United States wearing a Russian costume, features the following statement: "Sandwina was born to an artistic family of Brumbach, one of the oldest ones in Germany and Europe. The circus director, Xawer Brumbach, was a Bavarian Hercules alongside his brother Philipp, Sandwina's father. It turns out that adequate biological constitution combined with mental inclinations for athletics were dominant hereditary qualities in this family of circus artists" (DANOWICZ 1984:212).



circus space, the present analysis pertains solely to strongmen and wrestlers representing a strictly defined model of corporeality and masculinity. Moreover, it is worth noting that even though circuses were often promoted as sites of athletic manliness, in reality, the world of the circus was a site of male gender flux (DAVIS 2002:143). The circus was a place of performative male gender play where androgynous acrobats, gender-bending clowns, players in drag could be seen by spectators within and outside the ring.

From the perspective of bodies moving and performing in circus arenas, of which athletes are only one example, we must also refer to the so-called symbolic types (HANDELMAN 1991). Symbolic types do not stand for symbols, signs or icons. They constitute 'figures' which exist through the living and performing body, with its capacity to be perceived as holistic (HANDELMAN 1991:206). In the perception of show-goers, symbolic types are not inhuman or superhuman – they resemble cultural constructs rather than personalities of specific people. Symbolic types are self-referential, signifying nothing but themselves and referring to nothing else apart from themselves. This condition differs significantly from that of the actors playing various roles on stage.

"The totalism of the self-referential body prevents any metaphorical escape from its performative being. The spectator, the other, can then be trapped in the praxis of the symbolic type – for the annihilation of metaphor is the destruction of alternatives. In its perfect praxis, its total actualization of itself as the synthesis of the real and the ideal, the symbolic type becomes wholly itself (...) it lives its own signifying nothing beyond itself, and thereby encompassing everything and everyone beyond itself (...)." (HANDELMAN 1991:212–213)

Circus bodies in performance as symbolic types are exactly what they demonstrate in the arena: they hide nothing, they do not refer to metaphors, analogies or allegories. Their perfection in using their body blurs the boundary between real and ideal. All in all, even though the symbolic type pertained to the figure of the wrestler and his role in the circus, not every wrestler that appeared on stage was able to develop the mastery of using his body and, therefore, not every 'figure' could be perceived as holistic.

## STRONGMEN AND WRESTLERS COME INTO FASHION

As emphasized above, the multiplicity of human bodies that filled circus arenas in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was characterized by immense diversity. The present study intends to examine strategies of presenting circus strongmen and wrestlers – a group of men characterized by psycho-physical attributes embodying a particular ideal of masculinity whose European origins date back to the ancient era (DANOWICZ 1984:211; CHELMECKI 2012:13–15). Despite the fact that women were also successful in strength shows (Katia Sandwina, Joan Rhodes, among others), the link between athletic activity and that of a manly character was neither new nor accidental.

In the modern era, the presence of strongmen and wrestlers in arenas had a long tradition. The ancestors of circus 'Herculeses' performed in Greek stadiums and Roman colosseums. In the period preceding the industrial revolution, individual athletes, as well as clowns, jugglers, acrobats, wandered from town to town presenting their skills in

theatres, taverns, streets and squares.<sup>15</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with the development of the entertainment industry, athletes' shows in circus arenas became one of the highlights of their agenda for several reasons.

Firstly, "the circus was a relatively apolitical institution, it was well-organized, profitable and, at the same time, it satisfied the social need for entertainment dedicated to members of lower social echelons in rapidly urbanizing cities" (CHELMECKI 2012:18). Circus performances usually followed an organized scenario composed of three parts: "at the beginning there were magicians and vaulting; then athletes, cyclists and wild animals appeared; mime and ballet were presented at the closing of the show" (PAWLAK 2001:51). Athletic shows then became an integral part of the program. A significant modification in the structure of strength shows occurred at the turn of the century as the traditional formula of individual shows was replaced by group performances in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (DANOWICZ 1984:211). Agendas in the so-called sports circuses, which were most popular in the Polish territories in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were different. The fact that all acts were related to demonstrating strength, muscles and physical stamina is confirmed by a poster of a sports circus visiting Puławy in June 1926.<sup>16</sup> The world champion Wajsberg, the Romanian champion Anzelesko, and a female athlete Pytlasowa presented a show that included crushing chains in their teeth and tearing them by hand, cracking a stone on an athlete's head with a 20-pound hammer, a musculature contest, and several other acts of a similar nature. Cracking stones on an athlete's bare chest by local amateurs was advertised as an additional attraction. A second poster of the same event promoted an act in which two cars and five horses were supposed to drive across Wajsberg's chest.<sup>17</sup> The active participation of spectators was a distinctive feature of the event, which undoubtedly increased the show's attractiveness, encouraging local volunteers to 'try out.' It is worth emphasizing that similar cases of audience involvement had already taken place in the history of strength shows. For instance, in 1838 in Poznań, with a group of strongmen led by Jean Dupuis and Katarzyna Teutsch,<sup>18</sup> or in 1895, also in Poznań, with a wrestling match organized by the Jansky & Leo circus. It featured

<sup>15</sup> Some athletes still worked alone in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, "the King of Iron and Chains" Stefan Ursus-Piątkowski applied for permission from the Police Office in Toruń to place a street advertisement of his shows in a local park; Toruń, Archiwum Państwowe [State Archive], Akta m. Torunia 1920–1929 [Files of the town of Toruń 1920–1929], Reklama w ogóle. Wystawy i targi gospodarcze [Advertising in general. Exhibitions and trade fairs], sygn. 1095, Pismo S. Ursus-Piątkowskiego do Urzędu Policji w Toruniu [Motion of S. Ursus-Piątkowski to Police Office in Toruń], September 10, 1926.

<sup>16</sup> Archiwum Cyfrowe Biblioteki Narodowej [National Library Digital Archive; henceforth ACBN], Magazyn Druków Ulotnych [Printed Ephemera Collection; henceforth MDU], sygn. DŻS XVIII A 1c, Afisz: Cyrk sportowy w sobotę 19 czerwca 1926 r. Wielka sensacja! Arena Rzymu! Przybyli królowie świata atleci i artyści [Poster: Sports circus on Saturday, June 19, 1926. Great sensation! Roman Arena! Kings of the world, artists and athletes have arrived]. <https://polona.pl/item/afisz-inc-cyrk-sportowy-w-sobote-19-czerwca-1926-r-wielka-sensacja-arena-rzymu,MjYwODIzOTI/#info:metadata> (accessed April 1, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> ACBN, MDU, sygn. DŻS XVIII A 1c, Afisz: W niedzielę 20 czerwca 1926 r. cyrk sportowy. Wielka sensacja! Przejazd dwóch samochodów przez piersi atlety Wajsberga [Poster: Sports circus on Saturday, June 19, 1926. Great sensation! Two cars drove through the chest of the athlete Wajsberg]. <https://polona.pl/item/afisz-inc-w-niedziele-20-czerwca-1926-r-cyrk-sportowy-wielka-sensacja-przejazd,MjYwODIzOTQ/0/#info:metadata> (accessed April 1, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> *Gazeta Wielkiego Księstwa Poznańskiego*, 1838 no 168 (July 21):1015.



circus strongman Maksymilian Beer in a fight against Gustaw Pohl, a construction worker living in Poznań at the time.<sup>19</sup> The confrontation between the ‘familiar’ and the ‘other’ was widely commented on in the local press and incited emotions in local audiences.

Sports performances, including strength shows, were also organized in circuses, which additionally involved performances with animals. According to a poster, during the performance of “Roman Arena”, which took place on July 25, 1922 in W. Muszyński’s Circus in Warsaw, a “young Hercules – athlete and wrestler” J. Bruszewski engaged in “a fight against two horses” and “a fight against a giant bull”.<sup>20</sup> The poster encouraged horse and bull owners to bring their strongest animals to the circus. If an animal managed to defeat the athlete, its owner was assured a financial reward. Acts featuring animals were often perceived through the lens of masculinity, contributing to the contemporary construction of the male gender (DAVIS 2002:12), especially in the case of animals generally perceived as dangerous or very strong.

Secondly, circuses quickly became one of several urban spaces promoting the idea of self-control through bodywork. This process was, however, complex. The dynamics of the transformations in progress at the time manifested quite distinctively, particularly in performances of strongmen and wrestlers. 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas of embodiment and movement, which quickly rose to dominant status, involved transforming, elevating and politicizing the body through movement. A disciplined body became associated with state power and subjected to regulations, aiming to increase its efficiency and productivity (e.g., REICHARDT 2008; WEBER 1971). My research has demonstrated that in the modern era, within the dominant social order, circus bodies were of a different social status than the bodies of soldiers or gymnasts. Beyond any doubt, the bodies of circus artists counted as disciplined bodies, falling into one of the categories of embodiment at the time; however, this variation was based on a set of different principles. Circus bodies were not modeled to meet the needs of the state but shaped according to different norms, principles and training forms, which often originated in experimentation and circus artists playing with body and movement. Moreover, as opposed to heroic bodies whose constant presence in urban spaces was meant to remind people of the authority of the state, symbolic types were characterized by temporality and a transient presence associated with the essence of traveling circuses. They were at once completely real and completely absent, leaving behind only semiotic signs. For decades, strongmen adhered to this so-called ‘circus’ model of embodiment and movement. However, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this condition started to evolve when circus arenas began to introduce ‘professions’ (e.g., wrestling, boxing), which more and more resembled actual sports competitions performed in a circus, and models of embodiment corresponding with the dominant social order started to enter the circus. Circus athletes and wrestlers became more and more open to manifesting their national affiliation, which became the standard

<sup>19</sup> *Dziennik Poznański*, 1895 no 161 (July 17):8.

<sup>20</sup> ACBN, MDU, sygn. DŻS XVIII A 1c, Afisz: Dziś we wtorek dnia 22 lipca 1922 roku, odbędzie się Wielkie Galowe Sport-Atletyczne Ostatnie Pożegnanie Przedstawienia pod nazwą „Arena Rzymska” [Poster: Today, on Tuesday, June 22, 1922 a Grand Sports-Athletic Gala will take place – the Last Farewell of the “Roman Arena” Performance]. <https://polona.pl/item/afisz-inc-dzis-we-wtorek-dnia-25-lipca-1922-roku-odbędzie-sie-wielkie-galowe,MjYwODI0Mzc/0/#info:metadata> (accessed April 1, 2019).

during the interwar period. As the changes progressed, circus athletes and wrestlers came to be seen as symbols. When fascism was glorified, for instance, strongmen and strength jugglers came to be identified as incarnations of the “Übermensch”, especially in Germany (DANOWICZ 1984:211). Furthermore, the popularization of battles in circus arenas introduced the continuous comparison of male bodies and the creation of ‘heroes’ and ‘antiheroes’ on stage.

Starting in the 1870s, sports and gymnastics associations were being established in the partitioned Polish territories, which significantly contributed to the increase in the popularity of strength and fighting shows. Their protégés often embarked on a circus career (BIŃCZYCKA 2017:120). Initially, in the territories annexed by Russia, sports and gymnastics associations operated secretly. They facilitated physical development but also propagated Polish national values and patriotism. In 1883, the *Warszawska Szkoła Atletyczna* [Warsaw Athletic School] was established, directed by Walenty Pieńkowski, a physical education teacher (BIŃCZYCKA 2017:121).<sup>21</sup> Pieńkowski’s students, including Władysław Pytłasiński,<sup>22</sup> played a key role in the development of amateur wrestling. They established numerous training centers in the territories of the partitioned Kingdom of Poland and Galicia. In 1896, the first public wrestling demonstration was organized at the gathering of the *Towarzystwo Gimnastyczne ‘Sokół’* [‘Sokół’ Gymnastic Association] in Lviv. General interest in wrestling was additionally boosted by the fact that in 1896 it was included in the First Modern Olympic Games in Athens. The Olympic Games were the type of international arena in which state power and aesthetics were epitomized through individual bodies. Athletes were not allowed to compete in the games unless they were officially sponsored by a state. The organization of the First Modern Olympic Games demonstrated, on the one hand, that the entire ‘world’ was deeply invested in sports, and on the other hand, that national authorities were becoming more and more specific in regulating the politics of movement and embodiment in pursuit of their own goals (see, e.g., HARGREAVES 1986). In this context,

<sup>21</sup> In *Historia polskich zapasów 1922–2012* [History of Polish wrestling 1922–2012] published by the Polish Wrestling Federation, there is no remark on the establishment of Warsaw Athletic School in 1883; however, information appears concerning Pieńkowski’s founding *Zakład Gimnastyki i Atletyki* [the Institute of Gymnastics and Athletics] in Warsaw in 1890 (TRACEWSKI 2012:6).

<sup>22</sup> Władysław Pytłasiński ‘Pytlas’ (1863–1933) – a sportsman considered the father of Polish wrestling. He began his trainings in athletics in Warsaw. In 1882, he illegally left the Kingdom of Poland for Switzerland, where he graduated from a technical school and became very successful in sports. In 1888, he returned to Warsaw and began his cooperation with Pieńkowski in the field of athletics trainings for youth. Difficult economic conditions forced him to become a professional wrestler. He appeared in Ciniselli Circus, Bush Circus, and in “Panorama”. He contributed to the development of wrestling in Finland and Russia, earning the title of the ‘father of Russian wrestling’ as he founded the Petersburg Athletic Association in 1896, which included mainly officers and aristocrats. He also published an innovative wrestling textbook entitled *Francuską borba* [The French fight]. He often performed in arenas of Russian towns. During the world championship in Paris in 1900, he won the title of professional world champion by defeating the famous Turkish wrestler Kara Achmed in Greco-Roman style. Pytłasiński obtained numerous other titles, including champion of Wrocław, Moscow and Petersburg. After several years spent in Łódź, he moved to Warsaw permanently and established *Polskie Towarzystwo Atletyczne* [the Polish Athletic Association] there in 1922. When performing abroad, “he was a steadfast patriot who always demanded that the organizers of the contests in which he participated put the world ‘Poland’ or ‘Polish’ on the posters next to his name” (CHELMECKI 2012:26–29).

“The function of athletics was to improve individual ability in order to be able to withstand the demands of modern industrial society. This plan, however, was not independent of the notion that individuals were subject to military service and as such had to consider not just their own fitness but also the duty to supply the nation with their improved ‘qualities’.” (REICHARDT 2008:225)

After Poland regained its independence in 1918, new wrestling clubs and units kept emerging, particularly in large urban centers and industrial areas. The young wrestlers who were trained there (recruited primarily from working-class and craftsmen families) were linked more to professional sports than the vagabond lifestyle of circus artists. Nonetheless, the circus spaces in which strength shows and wrestling fights were still held did affect the form of the performances and the emotions of their audiences.

Lastly, physical strength was ‘worshipped’ in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially by the lower social classes. Circus fights went beyond the sheer use of physical force. They combined physical strength with discipline and self-control – qualities fundamental in establishing an industrial society – as well as with entertainment. The entertainment aspect of circus strength shows turned out to be quite appropriate for demonstrating qualities that constituted the key indicators of manliness, especially for males without social position or money. It should come as no surprise that strength shows were particularly popular among representatives of lower social strata. These processes were not unrelated to the laws governing the capitalist market – laborers were mostly appreciated for their physical strength and healthy appearance. Spectators were captivated by the uncomplicated formula of circus shows and strength fights as well as the intensity of sensations and emotions this genre of entertainment evoked (CHELMECKI 2012:18).

Yet, in spite of the incredible popularity of such shows in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “not all circus audiences appreciated the performance of strongmen. Sophisticated spectators with higher cultural aspirations were more eager to watch mime shows in circus arenas” (PAWLAK 2001:52). Nevertheless, strength shows and fights “(...) took place mainly in circus arenas accompanied by the immense interest of political and cultural elites as well as broad audiences” (TRACEWSKI 2012:6). The association of strength shows and fights with the circus significantly affected the formula of the performance, which resembled more a theatre performance than a sports competition. Circus fights were usually preceded by overtures played by an orchestra. Contestants, who were decorated with numerous medals and covered in oil, entered the arena on a red carpet. All contest participants paraded around the ring to the sounds of *The Gladiator March*. Participants often earned additional money during tournaments by appearing in strength shows and bodybuilding contests. A successful marketing practice developed by circus entrepreneurs at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century consisted of introducing the so-called ‘Black Mask’ (or, less often, the ‘Red Mask’) to wrestling tournaments (particularly in the Greco-Roman wrestling style), which added an element of intrigue that elicited stronger emotional responses from the audience. The nickname ‘Black Mask’ was given to a contestant who disguised his face and identity throughout the entire tournament. They were revealed only upon the wrestler’s departure from the town. This trick was employed, for instance, during the Grand International Tournament of French Fight, which took place in August 1927 in the arena of the ‘Colosseum’ Grand Summer Sports Circus in

Białystok.<sup>23</sup> Because of their skin color, black athletes did not wear masks as it would be too easy for the audience to guess who they were. Consequently, they were always playing the role of the ‘Black Mask’s’ opponent. It is beyond any doubt that such tricks did not affect the contestants’ physical fitness or the final results of the contest. They did, however, introduced a distinction in performance created by the entertainment industry and professional sports shows in order to maximize profits. Moreover, they facilitated the process of defining a situation as play, because “when people define particular situations as play, they automatically become more inclined to play” (COMBS 2011:17).

### ‘MODERN-DAY SAMSONS’

Long before fighting shows emerged in circus arenas, strongmen had already enjoyed popularity among audiences and many of them participated in wrestling competitions. Their performances often took the form of one-man shows featuring individuals of extraordinary strength and particular psycho-physical attributes.<sup>24</sup>

A group of famous circus strongmen who performed regularly in the Polish territories at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century included a Jew of Polish origin named Zygmunt ‘Zishe’ Breitbart, known also as the ‘Iron King’, ‘The Strongest Man in the World’, and ‘Modern Samson’.<sup>25</sup> After an accident during one of the shows which resulted in Zygmunt’s death in 1925, his brother, Gustaw Breitbart, started appearing in circus arenas.<sup>26</sup> Another member of this group of audience favorites was the Polish strongman Wacław Badurski.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Dziennik Białostocki*, 1926 no 220 (August 8):4.

<sup>24</sup> When Jean Dupuis arrived in Poznań in 1838, the local press published the following comment: “His posture and bodily structure resembles a hero and could be seen as a model of manliness which was proven by a scholarly physician from Petersburg that reads: Fabulous ancient myths described the images that we can now observe. When looking at Mr. Dupuis, we learn that the products of ancient sculpture and painting, often considered exaggerated and excessive, actually may exist in nature and reality of the human body” (*Gazeta Wielkiego Księstwa Poznańskiego*, 1838 no 165 (July 18):995–996, quoted in KUREK 2017:74, footnote 7).

<sup>25</sup> ACBN, MDU, sygn. DŻS XVIII A 1c, Afisz: Z powodu wielkiego zainteresowania Dziś! We wtorek dn. 28 lipca 1925 r. o godzinie 8.30 wieczorem król żelaza Zygmunt Breitbart urządza w cyrku swój pożegnalny benefis [Poster: Because of great interest Today! On Tuesday, July 28, 1925 at 8.30 the king of iron Zygmunt Breitbart is organizing his farewell testimonial match in the circus]. <https://polona.pl/item/telegram-inc-z-powodu-wielkiego-zainteresowania-dzis-we-wtorek-dn-28-lipca-1925-r,MjYwODIzOTU/0/#info:metadata> (accessed April 1, 2019). ‘Zishe’ is considered to be the prototype for superman. In 2001, Werner Herzog directed a movie describing Breitbart’s life entitled ‘Invincible’.

<sup>26</sup> ACBN, MDU, sygn. DŻS XVIII A 1c, Ulotka: Cyrk „Adria” przybył do Łukowa i rozbił swe namioty przy D-ra Chęcińskiego 27 na pl. p. Kozłowskiego. Występy odbyły się w 1933 r. [Leaflet: The “Adria” circus arrived in Łuków and pitched their tents at 27 Dr Chęciński Street at Mr Kozłowski’s square. Performances took place in 1933]. <https://polona.pl/item/ulotka-inc-cyrk-adria-przybyl-do-lukowa-i-rozbil-swe-namioty-przy-d-ra,OTE2NjcOTg/0/#info:metadata> (accessed April 1, 2019); Lublin, Archiwum Państwowe [State Archive], Akta miasta Lublina 1918–1939, seria 7.4.5/Afisz: nadsyłane do rozplakatowania [Files of the town of Lublin 1918–1939, series 7.4.5/Posters sent for distribution], sygn. 4156, Imprezy widowiskowe i rozrywkowe, Afisz: Król Żelaza, 1930 [Shows and entertainment spectacles, Poster: Iron King, 1930].

<sup>27</sup> *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny*, 1926 no 96 (April 8):1.

As mentioned earlier, the athletes' bodies, most often presented half-naked and covered in oil, were exhibited in postures that enabled muscle tightening and thus emphasized musculature during particular feats of strength. Such presentation strategies affected the ways in which notions of male corporeality and sexuality were conceptualized. They contributed to constructing and propagating a model of manliness that embodied the combination of extreme athleticism and extraordinary physical strength, which in turn partially corresponded with the process of the reinvention of an idealized masculinity of the modern era.

It is noteworthy that many circus strongmen and wrestlers were involved in breaking the law, which was related to the fact that circus artists' communities often included people from the so-called underworld. "In reality, there were numerous ordinary criminals among them" (DANOWICZ 1984:23) – which resulted in an ambivalent attitude of the local communities towards this professional group. However, Paul Bouissac claims that the source of this ambivalence was much more complex and stemmed from their extraordinary feats and physical capacity. Living circus bodies were capable of seducing audiences in performance, but these very same physical qualities and skills could be used outside the circus arena for criminal purposes (BOUISSAC: unpublished lecture). Circus strongmen often clashed with the law, and the motif of a strongman using his physical strength was far from rare. For instance, in 1924, the Police Office in Chełmno sent an official document to the Town Hall in Toruń informing them that the 'Iron King' – strongman John Rozkwas from Sambor – had committed tax evasion: "The magistrate had serious difficulty in collecting taxes on his performances while his attitude towards the Magistrate and the officials proved arrogant, he even expressed threats of using physical force."<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, when the Dekadens Circus that featured wrestling fights arrived in Łódź just before World War I, their famous wrestler Sawa Rankowic went downtown after a lost fight. After getting drunk, Rankowic concluded that his defeat was unfair and decided to file an official complaint. The cabman, however, took him to his apartment instead of the headquarters of the magistrate. When the wrestler realized that he was in his room, he beat up the cabman and kept wrangling with him until the police arrived (PAWLAK 2001:52).

## WRESTLING FIGHTS IN CIRCUS ARENAS

As previously mentioned, wrestling fights were relatively late to emerge in circus arenas. This does not imply that individual strength shows became completely eliminated, but with the increasing popularity of wrestling, individual shows were gradually turned into complementary events.

<sup>28</sup> Toruń, Archiwum Państwowe [State Archive], Akta m. Torunia 1920–1929, I Wydział Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego dot.: koncerta, odczyty i pokazy [Files of the town of Toruń 1920–1929, First Public Security Division, regarding concerts, lectures and shows], sygn. 465, Zawiadomienie Zarządu Policji w Chełmnie do Magistratu w Toruniu [Notice of the Police Office in Chełmno to the Magistrate in Toruń], October 14, 1924.

Wojciech Lipoński claims that wrestling shows in the Polish territories were initiated by a tour of F. Schneider's Athlete's Society in the Grand Duchy of Poznań<sup>29</sup> in 1844 (CHELMECKI 2012:18). At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, it was the Kingdom of Poland that became the center of wrestling fights, with numerous circus troupes stopping there on their way to Russia. Apart from Warsaw, which attracted the best athletes from all over the world, circus fights took place in other towns of the Kingdom of Poland, including Ciechocinek, Włocławek and Płock, among others. Lviv, Stanisławów and Krakow were the most important locations in Galicia. Wrestling fights in Krakow were most often held at the *Teatr Rozmaitości* [Variety Theater] in *Park Krakowski*<sup>30</sup> (CHELMECKI 2012:19).

The Krakow press, for instance, commented extensively on a two-week-long wrestling competition in the Sarrasani Circus in Krakow in 1906.<sup>31</sup> Fights attracted crowds of spectators every day, the most popular of the confrontations being the one between 'Zbyszko'<sup>32</sup> and Jerzy Lurich:

"The very name of Cyganiewicz on advertising posters is enough to fill the auditorium of a rather large circus to the last seat. Mr. Cyganiewicz is particularly popular among young people (...) they simply love him (...). A Russian athlete, Jerzy Lurich, has gained a similar level of popularity in a relatively short period of time, namely, within a week. This is a particularly pleasant individual (...). He demonstrates immense physical strength and beautiful physique."<sup>33</sup>

"Both are young and finely trained in wrestling, as a result of which the fight between them constituted quite a sensation. (...) Their confrontation differs incredibly from that of the other wrestlers. One might in fact say that these opponents are appropriate adversaries. Their incredibly dexterous holds along with their confidence and exquisiteness attract the eye. They are devoid of any brutality so common in the holds of other athletes; additionally, the holds are almost always uncommon and rarely seen (...)."<sup>34</sup>

The above excerpts show that aside from physical strength, adequate physique, and dexterity, other values were also ascribed to qualities of movement, such as confidence, exquisiteness, lack of brutality, and peculiar sophistication in using one's body.

<sup>29</sup> Grand Duchy of Poznań – autonomous duchy, which became a part of Prussia and functioned between 1815 and 1848. The Duchy was established on the basis of agreements derived at the Congress of Vienna. In 1831, after the November Uprising, its autonomy became limited, and after the Greater Poland uprisings of 1846 and 1848, the autonomy of the Duchy was entirely revoked.

<sup>30</sup> Ethnographic shows also took place in Krakowski Park, including Dahomey shows in July 1892; for more, see CZARNECKA 2019a.

<sup>31</sup> For more on the shows in the Sarrasani Circus, see BARANIECKA-OLSZEWSKA in the present volume.

<sup>32</sup> Stanisław 'Zbyszko' Cyganiewicz (1879–1967) – a Galician wrestler born in Jodłowa near Jasło. He practiced various sports coached by Włodzimierz Świątkiewicz, the founder of a local *Towarzystwo Ginnastyczne 'Sokół'* [the 'Sokół' Gymnastic Society]. He became the richest Polish sportsman of the interwar period, with estimated earnings totaling almost three million dollars throughout his entire career. Cyganiewicz adopted the nickname 'Zbyszko' after the mighty character from the novel "Krzyżacy" [The Knights of the Cross] by Henryk Sienkiewicz (SMOLEŃSKI 2017). Apart from performances and victories, his name also gained recognition through Filip Bajon's movie "Aria dla atlety" [Aria for an Athlete].

<sup>33</sup> *Nowości Ilustrowane*, 1906 no 4 (January 27):16.

<sup>34</sup> *Nowości Ilustrowane*, 1906 no 5 (February 3):8–9.



According to theories dominant in the modern era, the aforementioned qualities were perceived not only as the result of physical predisposition but also as the effect of body training. This work was related to the development of self-control and discipline, which were ascribed to manifestations of spirit and character and, consequently, moral and civilizational superiority. It is also noteworthy that the qualities of wrestlers emphasized by the contemporary press (before World War I) largely corresponded with the model of masculinity propagated among aristocrats and officers (and earlier among the nobility). However, in the context of contemporary racial discourses, the ability to control one's body and instincts was considered a manifestation of civilizational development, with a disciplined 'white' European male at the top of the civilizational hierarchy (see, e.g., MACMASTER 2001; TOLZ 2014).

As mentioned before, circus entrepreneurs profited from the exposure of differences and the exploitation of otherness. Operating strategies based on such foundations were no different in the case of strength shows and wrestling fights. Capitalizing on the audience's interest in people who came from outside Europe, and continuously striving towards making performances more attractive, circus entrepreneurs often engaged 'exotic' athletes like Sarakhi from India, Mori from Japan, or Wajnur from Manchuria, to name just a few that performed in the Polish territories.

"In order to make the programs more attractive, circus directors invited wrestlers and strongmen in accordance with a specific plan so that they represented various cultures and nations, reaching as far as Asia and Africa. Consequently, rules and regulations of the fights had to become unified and standardized, which contributed to creating the foundations of a modern sports show." (CHELMECKI 2012:18)

As a matter of fact, 'exotic' strongmen and wrestlers did not come from only Africa or Asia. Nevertheless, due to space limitations as well as the fact that, as demonstrated by the sources, Polish audiences were especially interested in black athletes, this study only focuses on this particular group of 'exotic' Others.

## BLACK WRESTLERS IN CIRCUS ARENAS

The increasing interest of Europeans in 'exotic' peoples manifested in the development of ethnographic shows, which did not go unnoticed by circus entrepreneurs. For them, 'exotic' Others often became commodities (HOLLAND 1999:91), enabling them to multiply their profits. Physical characteristics that were different from European traits, accompanied by exceptional skills, resulted in the 'exotic' body being seen as "seductive in its strength, resistance, and sensitivity to musical rhythms. The armed forces would consider the exotic body to be a type that was well adapted to physical activity and, therefore, to combat" (BLANCHARD et al. 2008:20).

Black wrestlers who participated in circus strength shows and wrestling fights in the Polish territories in the years 1850–1939 belonged to the group of performing Others who were exploited to a large extent on account of their race, an important element of exoticism and wildness. Among the most popular black contestants who appeared in circus arenas in Poland in the discussed time period were Salvator Bambulla from the

United States and Sam Sandi from Africa. Bambulla,<sup>35</sup> who had been fighting in the Russian Empire for years, “created either an admirable or a transgressive image of black masculinity. (...) Russians still use the word ‘Bambulla’ in vernacular speech to mean a strong dumb man. Today, however, very few are aware of the etymology of the word” (NOVIKOVA 2013:577).

Bambulla, referred to in the press as huge ‘Negro’,<sup>36</sup> ‘champion of North America’, ‘Negro champion’, ‘black giant’, and ‘black strongman’, was very well known to audiences in the Polish territories. The article describing what happened behind the scenes of Bambulla’s murder in Paris in 1926 reads:

“After leaving Łódź in 1924, Salvator Bambulla became engaged in the Warsaw circus, where, for a long time, he was considered an invincible strongman. His bull fights in the circus arena evoked enthusiasm in the audience, who bid Bambulla farewell with a lot of sorrow when he left for Krakow after the shows ended. Bambulla visited almost all of Poland. He was in Poznań, performed in Lviv, and demonstrated extraordinary strength while gaining the audience’s recognition.”<sup>37</sup>

Bambulla, who performed in circuses for white audiences, embodied the image of black masculinity, which reflected contemporary European fears, obsessions, and fantasies.<sup>38</sup> It is worth acknowledging the way Bambulla was described in press releases of the tournament of French fights which took place in Alexander Ciniselli’s Circus in Łódź in 1925. The ‘black giant’ fought with a couple of opponents, including the so-called ‘Black Mask’:

“One ought to recall the fact that the referee and the ‘jury’ forced Bambulla to fight according to the rules, otherwise the audience, who saw enough of Bambulla’s torturing his weaker opponents, would be eager to defend the contestants hurt by this animal and bring it to justice.”<sup>39</sup>

The fight between Bambulla and the Estonian champion Jago was commented on in the following way:

“The American Negro nibbled, kicked, scratched, bit, spat, howled, squirmed, boxed, twisted limbs and deadened the nerves – but the champion Jago overmatched him with strength, technique, intelligence and elegance. [...] The black beast had his way to manage everything. He protected against the first claw by pulling the opponent’s hair or putting a finger in his eye, and against the opposite claw, he found a wonderful mode of protection – breaking the opponent’s finger.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> In the Polish press, the surname Bambulla was sometimes polonized into Bambuła or spelled with a single “l”.

<sup>36</sup> The original terms that appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Polish press has been maintained, even though the author is aware that the current meaning of at least some of these terms is negative.

<sup>37</sup> *Express Niedzielný Ilustrowany*, 1926 no 204 (July 25):1.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the stereotypes of ‘black’ bodies and people from Africa in Poland at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see CZARNECKA 2020.

<sup>39</sup> *Express Wieczorny Ilustrowany*, 1925 no 90 (April 18):7.

<sup>40</sup> *Express Wieczorny Ilustrowany*, 1925 no 38 (February 17):7.

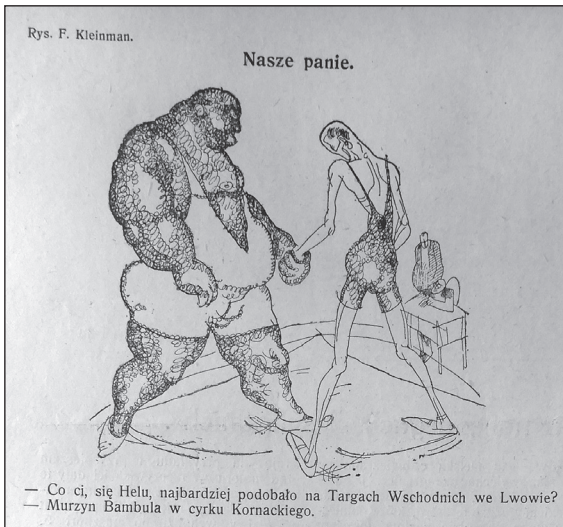


Figure 1. Salvatore Bambulla in a circus arena. Illustration in *Szczutek. Tygodnik satyryczno-polityczny* [Szczutek. A political and satirical weekly], 1924 no. 36 (September 9):4. After a drawing by Fryderyk Kleinman

The descriptions of the fighting style utilized by the black wrestler significantly differed from the accounts of fights between Cyganiewicz and Lurich quoted earlier. The dehumanization of Bambulla was brought on by the use of expressions such as ‘animal’ or ‘black beast’. Additionally, in the process of constructing ‘wildness’, the ‘champion Jago’ was characterized by strength, technique, intelligence and elegance, in contrast to Bambulla’s lack of discipline, brutality, rule breaking, lack of coordination, as well as nibbling, kicking, scratching, biting, spitting, squirming and other manners of movement and reactions typical of animals in situations of danger.

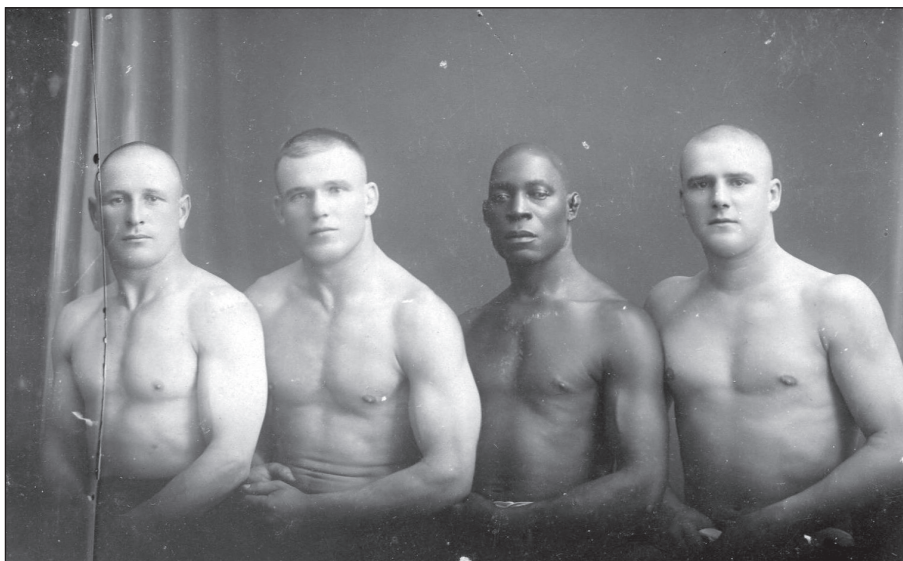
Caricatures of Bambulla could also be found in the Polish press

of the interwar period. The black wrestler was often portrayed as a half-naked, bald giant.<sup>41</sup> The strength and size of the ‘exotic’ athlete, often mentioned in contemporary press commentaries, were emphasized by presenting Bambulla in the circus arena during fights with visibly smaller opponents (Fig. 1).<sup>42</sup> There were also caricatures of the ‘black giant’ with a big belly and a scary yet dumb look. The overall image was complemented by numerous rhymes. *Pociągiciel* satirical weekly, for instance, published the following commentary on Bambulla’s arrival in Warsaw in 1926:

“The city is crowded and noisy with joy. There are gentlemen and simple people. Are they welcoming a king of any sort? No – the Negro Bambulla has arrived. Kornacki’s Circus on Kopernika Street, crowds are surrounding him, their shirts soaked with sweat. It is all because... the Negro Bambulla is about to perform. The athletes are already at the arena. Women are clapping their hands and the kids are shrieking, the wrestler enters at the very end with his belly like a big ball – it is the Negro Bambulla!” (quoted after PRZYBYLSKI, no date)

<sup>41</sup> I found caricatures of Bambulla in the Hungarian press as well. The black, half-naked wrestler was portrayed during a fight with a white opponent. The fighters were of similar size, but Bambulla’s body was presented as extraordinarily muscular, without any signs of obesity, his head covered in black hair. In the June 1893 issue, Bambulla’s dominance in fight can be observed (*Borsszem Jankó*, 1893 no 1327 (June 18):cover), whereas in the issue from July of the same year, the black wrestler is knocked out on the ground and crushed by his rival (*Borsszem Jankó*, 1893 no 1329 (July 2):cover).

<sup>42</sup> *Szczutek. Tygodnik satyryczno-polityczny* [Szczutek. A political and satirical weekly], 1924 no 36 (September 4):4. This picture pertains to strength shows in A. Kornacki’s Circus in Lviv. The tournament took place in October 1924. *Targi Wschodnie* [Eastern Trade Fair] also took place there at that time; *Wiek Nowy*, 1924 no 6983 (October 3):9; *Ibid.*, 1924 no 7005 (October 29):5.



*Figure 2.* Circus wrestlers, including Sam Sandi, photograph, 1920s. Private collection, courtesy of Iryna Kotlobulatova

Importantly, the strength of the black wrestler, his skills and body training – which Bambulla had to regularly maintain in order to keep fit to successfully participate in wrestling tournaments for years – were being devalued by the white audience: the ‘exotic’ wrestler was perceived as ‘naturally’ strong, athletic, and sporty. In contrast to white contestants who developed the idea of self-control and discipline through body workouts and thus epitomized the highest level of civilizational development, the black wrestler was presented as someone who possessed certain ‘natural’ physical qualities that were characteristic of his race. Bambulla’s strength and fighting style were associated with an ‘animal’ character, which corresponded with the process of constructing wildness and primitivism. Not only did the images of participants of circus wrestling tournaments literally illustrate confrontations between black and white wrestlers, they also reflected the clash between the different models of masculinity that were based on the worship of physical strength and extreme athleticism. Yet, both the circus entrepreneurs and Bambulla himself participated in the process of constructing otherness and black masculinity in order to cater to the needs of the entertainment industry. The ‘black giant’ often entered the circus arena jangling his chains, likely to evoke associations with dangerous animals. That said, the practice of exoticizing the ‘exotic’ was common in the circus. Besides participating in wrestling fights, Bambulla also took part in weightlifting contests and ‘spectacles’ of consuming extreme quantities of food and drink.

Quite a different press image was associated with an African wrestler named Sam Sandi, who lived in Poland for many years (until his death in 1937), married a Pole, and received Polish citizenship. In the early 1920s, Sandi joined the Staniewski Brothers Circus in Warsaw (the circus was often away from Warsaw, performing all over the country). Sandi almost immediately became a part of the permanent international team of wrestlers (Fig. 2). Journalists emphasized his polite manners, beautiful fighting

style, and observance of the rules of fair play. In February 1928, during the wrestling tournament in the Staniewski Brothers Circus in Łódź, the style of fighting demonstrated by this “slender but iron-hard Negro” was described as “‘nice’ and ‘elegant’”.<sup>43</sup> Hence, even though a black wrestler’s strength and skills in using his body were perceived as ‘natural’, like in Bambulla’s case, Sandi’s fighting style and respect for the rules during confrontations with his opponents put him on a higher level of ‘being civilized’ and, consequently, of having the discipline and ability to control his instincts.

Since the circus industry treated Others as commodities, their individual identities were often ‘polished’ by adding “the glamour of exotic and the mystery of geographic distance” (HOLLAND 1999:101). There was no official mention of Sandi’s connections to Poland. Similarly, the athlete rarely appeared as a representative of Cameroon (his country of origin). Circus audiences were often only told that the black strongman arrived from East or South Africa. Such tricks spiced up the program, but above all, they were compatible with the process of constructing otherness and igniting the fantasies of European audiences.

In the 1930s, Sandi still fought in wrestling tournaments, even though he was no longer employed by the Staniewski Brothers Circus. Leaflets promoting his personal benefit galas demonstrate that both the circus entrepreneurs and Sandi himself knew how to capitalize on his constructed ‘otherness’. The leaflets feature information on other shows he performed for audiences in addition to the wrestling tournaments. For instance, during his shows in Toruń in 1933, Sandi presented the following routines: 1. “Negro dance on sharp nails with bare feet”, 2. “Deadly bed” – supporting the weight of four adult men while lying bareback on sharp nails, 3. “Hell blacksmith shop” – having a hot iron struck on his bare chest while lying on sharp nails.<sup>44</sup> Towards the end of his life, he even started making money with fortune-telling.<sup>45</sup>

There were not many caricatures of Sandi the wrestler in the contemporary Polish press. They only published photographs that adhered to the requisite model of how to present such athletes – a black, half-naked wrestler with a shaved head, emphasized musculature, and a serious look, facing the camera head-on.

The differences in the ways Bambulla and Sandi were presented correspond to a certain extent with the concepts of the noble and ignoble savage. While the strongman Bambulla was presented as ‘wild’ and ‘primitive’, the strongman Sandi took on the position of a ‘noble’ and ‘civilized’ Other. These images of them were embodied in their fighting style, body management, self-control, and compliance with the rules of engagement. We must remember that the entertainment industry had its own standards of utilizing diversity and otherness; the idea, however, was not to pursue ‘civilizing missions’ or make moral judgements but rather to capture the audiences’ interest and maximize profits by including ‘outsiders’ of various sorts.

<sup>43</sup> *Hasło Łódzkie*, 1928 no 37 (February 6):3; Ibid., 1928 no 42 (February 11):8.

<sup>44</sup> Toruń, Książnica Kopernikańska [the Copernicus Library], Ulotka promująca walki i pokazy z udziałem Sama Sandi w kinie „Palace” w Toruniu [Leaflet promoting fights and shows featuring Sam Sandi in the “Palace” Cinema in Toruń], February 16, 1933.

<sup>45</sup> *Orędownik*, 1937 no 100 (April 30):6.



## CONCLUSION

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, circus was the mainstream urban entertainment genre, and as such, it became one of the 'arenas' where displaying otherness and emphasizing differences was developed, negotiated, and challenged in order to meet changing consumer sensibilities. Diversity in the circus space manifested itself primarily through human bodies and their potential, thus displays of muscularity and physicality became central to contemporary popular entertainment.

In analyzing source materials pertaining to circus strength shows and wrestling fights in the Polish territories in the years 1850–1939, it is hard not to notice that the circus constituted one of the most significant urban spaces within which profound transformations associated with the development of the modern era took place. This becomes particularly apparent when observing a clearly defined group of acts and their evolution, namely, circus strength shows and wrestling fights.

On the one hand, the circus appears to have been the prevalent entertainment genre of the era wherein circus entrepreneurs unabashedly exploited the bodies of 'low Others' to maximize profits; on the other hand, it provided a space for relative freedom, enabling various 'outsiders' to achieve success that would not have been available to them in any other context. The circus promoted individuality while being based on group shows.

'Exotic' Others were presented in the circus in a variety of ways that functioned side by side – strength shows and wrestling fights were just two of them. When 'otherness' was presented through the lens of the individual, it was the individual body that took center stage – its qualities and skills in stage presentation rather than its adherence to a particular anthropological type. The group of circus acts described in this study clearly reveals that the 'play' the audience was pulled into was based on imaginary constructs of manliness, race and exoticism, the 'exotic' Other, however, was no longer just a visitor from a distant land but rather a steady fixture in the increasingly cosmopolitan urban landscape.

All in all, wrestlers, both native and foreign, contributed to the circus' atmosphere of amazement and supernaturalism, which were key in its power of attraction. And though the sources indicate a specific type of competition between 'familiar' and 'other', it was still consistent with the framework of the circus' attractiveness.

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