

The Battle of Posen

9 August 1704

by

Oskar Sjöström

© 2004 Oskar Sjöström
(oskar@kungkarl.se)

(Translated by Dan Schorr)

Translated and Published with permission of the author.

This translation is intended for private use.

No publication or sale is permitted

(Translation © 2006 Dan Schorr)

Why should one remember a battle, and as with the one at Posen in 1704, furthermore a quite meaningless one? It has long been considered from a national perspective that the battles from the nation's history that did not have any great significance or, consternation, were defeats, did not need to be illustrate to any great extent. Instead, the focus here was placed on the battles that showed a real result and that in any great sense increased the national self-consciousness. Now and then, it has also been under consideration to emphasize the great defeats, so one of our time's greatest popular history bestsellers deals with the Battle of Poltava. However, smaller battles in the great war's periphery have for the most part been overlooked, consciously or not. Next to battles like Narva, Kliszow, Fraustadt, Holowczyn, Poltava, Helsingborg and Gadebusch, names such as Pyhäjoggi, Rauge, Systerbäck, Wesenberg, Malatitze, Sokolki, Starie Senszary and Pälkäne are left in the background. They reappear in personal records and journals only as small parenthesis and for scholars they often have only a curiosity value for inflexible genealogists and pedants. One can certainly remember the smaller battles in connection with an anniversary, as a small exclamation point on a calendar to think about for a short moment. I myself consider it to be an opportunity to always remind oneself even about the history of the small battles. Not just to broaden an otherwise standardized overview perspective of the war, but that in fact people died and were wounded in them and that on this occasion to understand the significance for those who were actually there. For example the unlucky Ryttmästaren (Captain) with the Norra Skånska Cavalry Regiment, Anders Cronberg, can be named, who during the battle had a knee smashed and was taken prisoner by the Saxons. After three days, he was exchanged but died immediately there after. We do not know when he was born, but he had been in service since 1688. One only knows his name because he was an officer, and with him died a good 300 Swedes whose fate and face will always be anonymous. Including the Saxon losses almost 1,000 individuals died there that summer day and they remained lifeless and bloodstained on the fields around Posen when the armies after many hours fighting broke away from each other. For what had the soldiers given up their young lives?

*Earth has waited for them,
All the time of their growth
Fretting for their decay:
Now she has them at last!
In the strength of their own strength
Suspended – stopped and held.*

The Battle of Posen is interesting in many ways, and perhaps the battle itself has been forgotten to the advantage of the successful storming of the city by 400 Swedes under Arvid Axel Mardefelt's leadership completed by two columns without the loss of a man on 7th September 1703, or the longer siege as the meager Swedish garrison endured and survived in the fall of 1704. The battle of 9th August is counted generally as a Swedish victory, but both sides claimed to have won. The armies who flew against each other were led by two celebrities, on the Swedish side Johan August Meijerfelt and on the Saxon Johan Mathias von der Schulenburg.

Posen was the chief city and key point in Great Poland, the northeastern part of the Republic where the Swedish cause had its greatest support. However, in spite of this unrest was great and the divisions were obvious. Corps of August's supporters ravaged the region where the noblemen who supported Charles XII had their resources, and many places had out of fear of ending up in difficulties declared themselves neutral in the conflict. Posen itself was geographically an element of unrest. The fortress lay along the Warta River barely 20 kilometers from the Silesian border from where Saxon troops now and then came trudging to the theaters of war in the east. At the same time it lay within the comfortable reach of the army under Carl Gustav Rehnskiöld who was located in Great Poland in order to procure contributions. In that way the city lay between two impending threats, and the storm cloud must have seemed unusually frightening during the fall of 1703. As a result of the Swedish siege of Thorn the pressure on areas in Great Poland was heavy, and the Swedish contribution authorities practiced severe tax collection among the Poles. Opposition was vigorous in places and Swedish commissaries' attacks frequent. The Swedes answered with "plundering and fire" at times with blind retribution regarding "guilty or not guilty". During the summer repeated exhortations from the King to Rehnskiöld to increase contribution activities, "because from your side we must seek to obtain most of our provisions". "The General", the King wrote in June, "must march as far away and widely around as anyone can manage to find the means to collect and seize contributions". When Posen's turn would come, was only a question of time.

In the beginning of September orders went out to the Colonel of the Kronobergs Regiment, Gabriel Lilliehöök, that with 200 of his men and the same number from the Södermanlands Regiment, together with a couple of squadrons of cavalry and four 3-pounder cannon, to move at a hurried pace to Posen in order to force the citizens to open the city gates or alternatively to blow them up. Outside of there Captain Thomas Funck of the Livdragons waited together with Lieutenant Colonel Georg Johan Wrangel of the Bremiska Cavalry Regiment and few hundred cavalry. They had arrived at the city before then while on a contribution errand, but only were met with bolted gates and moving

shadows on the city's ramparts. After having stayed in suburbs a night, they started reconnoitering and isolating the city. One found the most suitable place for an attack, a relatively open place between two bastions, when otherwise the ramparts were "spiked with pikes, morning stars and all types of war instruments", and prepared ferries for transport over the water in the moat. At the same time, the four regimental pieces were rigged up on a small height in order to cover the ramparts where the attack would take place. A deputation of the city's magistrates was called out from the city in order to present them with the Swedish ultimatum. They were warned of the difficulties resulting from barring the gates for the Swedish troops and that they by that "with their disobedience, would bring about total ruin on themselves and the city, and they had only themselves to blame for this action". The city then received an hour to either accept or take the consequences. During the time that hour passed, the Poles continued to reinforce the ramparts, and as an answer, the Swedes assembled ladders and other storming material. Soon Arvid Axel Mardefelt arrived, as a Major General, he was senior in rank, and was disposed to attack. As soon as the hour passed without any sign of cooperation from the city, he had two assault columns formed. In spite of incessant trumpeting and the brandishing of white flags on the ramparts, Mardefelt immediately threw the troops against the walls. Disorder rose among the defenders when "some wanted to defend themselves and others wanted to prevent it", and as a result the Swedes were not met by any firing. Quickly they climbed the ramparts and opened the gates for the cavalry. With rolling drums the Swedes were assembled in the city square where the major and council were dragged in order to be held responsible for their answer. The leadership of the city was placed under arrest together with the absurdly inadequate garrison – 47 men –, and a small payment was demanded for the upkeep of the Swedish troops. The citizen militia was disarmed and a Swedish garrison was established in the city with Lilliehöök as the commandant. Immediately work was started to reinforce the city's ramparts, the soldiers were quartered in houses, and a Lutheran priest was summoned to look after the spiritual needs of the Swedes. The fall then passed calmly in Posen, and the regions around were placed under contribution.

In the spring of 1704 incidents began to be more frequent. King August had been formally dethroned by the Polish Republic, but had still succeeded in frustrating the practical threat to his crown by kidnapping the Princes Jakob and Alexander Sobieski, both potential pretenders to the throne and supported by the Swedish King. Therefore, the war went on, and without a native candidate for King the process was lengthened with the appointment of a new King of Poland. Following drawn out negotiations and pulling of strings, the poor assembly finally elected, in connection with this article a little ironic, the Vojvoden of Posen, Stanislaw Lezszynski, to King in July. Immediately thereafter the Swedish Main Army broke up from its quarters with Charles XII at its head, who had his headquarters at Blonie, about 250 kilometers east of Posen and only 20 kilometers from Warsaw. The march headed south in an attempt to catch up with King August, who was known to be located in the vicinity of Jaroslaw in Small Poland.

In connection with the Swedish Army's departure the concerns for Posen naturally became greater. When the Swedish march column disappeared along the roads to the south, the garrison in Posen became isolated and exposed. It was only the Main Army

that prevented the enemy from attacking the city, and with the Royal Army out of the way the possibilities had suddenly appeared. Already at the end of May smaller enemy forces had begun to get closer to the region of Posen and harass Swedish foraging patrols, and during the summer months, when the Royal election occurred, the troubles escalated. These skirmishes did not pass by the Swedish generals unnoticed. With the departure of the Main Army, Major General August Johan Meijerfelt was dispatched to the relief of the city with three cavalry regiments: Meijerfelt's own dragoon regiment, the Silesian Dragoon Regiment under Colonel G.A. Taube, together with the Norra Skånska Cavalry Regiment under Colonel Gustav Horn (of Marienborg), a strength combined of 1,800 men. They arrived on 2nd August and made camp in one of Posen's suburbs. This caused problems for the Swedish garrison when they forced to share their meager supplies with the reinforcements.

The Swedish Main Army's departure from the immediate combat zone provided space its enemies and an army from Saxony crossed the Silesian border in the summer and arrived on Polish soil.

On 9th August a Swedish reconnaissance patrol snapped up a Saxon deserter who reported that a large corps under Johan Mathias von der Schulenburg was approaching with the intention of attacking the Swedish camp. Despite not wanting to believe the Saxon deserter, Meijerfelt sent Cornet Edvard Gyldenstople to Posen with an appeal for reinforcements. Mardefelt himself was sick in bed, plagued by the gout (he had been on leave during the spring and took the cure in Breslau), and apologized for not being able "to take part and in such circumstances do his duty for his Gracious Lord". Lieutenant Colonel Gabriel von Weidenhajn of the Södermanlands Regiment was quickly ordered out with two of his infantry companies, four squadrons of cavalry and two cannon. Meijerfelt deployed his troops in a line and waited. Between the mounted units, the infantry was deployed and behind them a few mounted squadrons in reserve.

Soon a scout arrived who warned of the enemy's immediate arrival. Immediately thereafter, one heard the rattle of the outpost's musket salvos. Thereafter, the enemy's battle line revealed itself and marched straight toward the waiting Swedes. The Swedish cannon opened fire and "just as day is separated from night so the action began". The battle itself became much confused and at times furious. On the right side the Swedes were outflanked, notwithstanding that the largest part of the army was grouped there, by the Saxon cavalry and infantry. Meijerfelt had in an attempt to save his exposed flank been forced to counterattack the assaulting Saxons. This resulted in the infantry that stood posted on the left being left alone. Two Saxon squadrons that rode on were forced to waver from the cannon shot and platoon fire from the musketeers. The visibility must have been extraordinarily poor and the smoke wrapped itself quickly around the combatants. The infantrymen, who could not have seen very much of the other fighting, took shelter behind a small wall. In the cavalry struggle the Saxon infantry, two complete battalions, suddenly appeared just at the moment that the Swedes had succeeded in getting the Saxon cavalry to retreat, and without support of its own infantry forced the Swedish cavalrymen instead to bounce before the advancing bayonet wall. Meijerfelt could neither see nor contact the rest of the army on the Swedish left flank, but clumps of

fleeing Swedish dragoons indicated that even there the Swedes were driven back. The Swedish infantry was now exposed to the numerically superior Saxon infantry, and Gustav Horn collected a few of Norra Skånska squadrons in order to aid them. The Saxons formed square and the cavalrymen did not prevail against this. Suffering large losses, “officers as well as men” the cavalry retreated. The two field pieces that the Södermanlands infantrymen had dragged out to the fight were left behind. The retreat drew back to Posen, and Meijerfelt ordered the gates to be opened; in the beginning the garrison in the city flatly refused entrance to the first fugitives and hoisted the drawbridge. The infantry held off the pursuing Saxons with their salvos and most of the enemy satisfied themselves, certain of victory, with throwing themselves on the Swedish camp and the prizes that could be seized there. This gave the Swedes a needed breathing space to collect themselves and without the chaotic blanket of panic to withdraw into the city. Over at the Swedish camp it became clear to the Saxons that the Swedes had succeeded in saving the most valuable and gathered their wagons and valuables in Posen. Therefore, the Saxons set fire to the camps remaining items.

On the Swedish left flank, however, the action did not take the same course that Meijerfelt had feared. Colonel Taube, who led his dragoon regiment and the garrison cavalry on the left side, had earlier succeeded in hitting the Saxon right flank in a critical moment. Surprised and broken the Saxon right flank was thrown back and Taube pursued them a good five kilometers. It was probably in this phase of the battle that the Saxons suffered the greatest number of losses, precisely as most of the Swedish who died did so in the Swedish left side’s collapse. The whole “field and roads were littered with dead, and the enemy completely amused”. At this point in time the situation was such that both the Swedish and Saxon armies collapsed on the respective right flanks.

Taube arrived back at the Swedish camp where the Saxons were pillaging at the same time that the Swedes were pressing into Posen. The Swedish squadrons that had fled into Posen, therefore, were order in full force beck out to battle. The Saxons withdrew a bit in good order, but did not succeed in rallying again. Instead they went “immediately in the greatest confusion on their way”. The day was won for the Swedes.

Among the items left behind by the Saxons when they fled the field, were the cannon with which the Swedish infantry were armed during the battle. The battle itself was a textbook example of how badly it could go for an army that did not succeed in keeping the troops together in the excitement of success. Another seems to be that winning a battle could change to panic and flight if one did not succeed in keeping control of the units. The importance of the unbroken line was clear here: as soon as gaps formed in the battle order, the battle changed to an unmanageable mush where chance came to be decisive before tactical skill. The battle outside Posen also witnessed the adverse conditions under which a commander had to direct his army. In spite of the fact that it concerned here only a few thousand men, Meijerfelt never had real control over the progress of the battle or his troops. He quickly lost communications with his left flank, and the extremely limited visibility made a complete picture impossible. Meijerfelt did not know, for example, that his army was successful on the one side, and this uncertainty about the course of events caused him to order a retreat. In the same way misfortune

befell Schulenburg who did not know how badly it went for his right flank, for that reason he quickly lost control over the troops as soon as they got the opportunity to ransack around within the Swedish camp. Much of that times art of war was about guessing, chance and drive.

The following day Saxon negotiators arrived, who together with Swedes discussed issues that had occurred in many similar discussions. A number of prisoners were also exchanged, among them the above mentioned Ryttmästaren Cronberg who mortally wounded was transferred to the field hospital in Posen with other colleagues. There began the persistent work of taking charge of the wounded. Also among the wounded was Colonel Taube together with a lieutenant colonel who in the future would have a prominent roll at the King's side, Kristian Albrekt Grothusen. From captured Saxons one found out that Schulenburg's plan was to first defeat the Swedes located outside Posen, in order to then place the city under siege. However, as Commandant Gabriel Lilliehöök noted in his relation, "God be praised who has given us victory and helped us again". On 4th October, on the anniversary of the fall of Thorn, a large Russian-Saxon siege army arrived. Under difficult conditions the Swedes succeeded in holding their own, and after twenty days of intensive bombardment, the besiegers withdrew. Posen's strategic roll was also evident during the following years' campaigns. It was in this area that Rehnskiöld operated against Schulenburg before Fraustadt in 1706, and where his army was located in quarters outside the city prior to joining the Royal Army and the march into Saxony.

Sources:

- Adlerfelt, G., *Krigsjournal (Karl XII:s krigsföretag 1700-1706)*, utg. av S. E. Bring, Sthlm 1919
- Artéus, G., "Arvid Axel Mardefelt", i *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, Bd 25
- Gyllenstierna, N., Relation ("Öfversten grefve Nils Gyllenstiernas berättelse om polska och ryska kriget 1702 i juli – 1709 d 16 juni"), utg. av A. Quennerstedt i *Karolinska krigares dagböcker jämte andra samtida skrifter*, Bd VIII, Lund 1913
- Kagg, L., *Dagbok ("Leonhard Kaggs dagbok 1698-1722")*, utg. av A. Lewenhaupt i *Historiska handlingar XXIV*, Sthlm 1912
- Karl XII., *Brev (Konung Karl XII:s egenhändiga bref)*, utg. av E. Carlson, Sthlm 1893
- Lewenhaupt, A., *Karolinen Edvard Gyldenstolpe*, Sthlm 1941
- Lilliehöök, G., Relationer ("Relationer af öfversten vid Kronobergs regemente Gabriel Lilliehöök d 2 maj 1703 – 1 jan 1705"), utg. av A. Quennerstedt i *Karolinska krigares dagböcker jämte andra samtida skrifter*, Bd XII, Sthlm 1918
- Rehnskiöld, C. G., *Journaler ("Generalen friherre Carl Gustaf Rehnskiölds anteckningar och dagböcker 1701-1702; 22 dec 1702 – 19 okt 1704; 28 juli 1705 – 13 aug 1706")*, utg. av A. Quennerstedt i *Karolinska krigares dagböcker jämte andra samtida skrifter*, Bd IX, Lund 1913
- Rosen, C. von, *Bidrag till kännedom om de händelser som närmast föregingo svenska stormaktsväldets fall*, Bd I. Sveriges ställning till Polen 1701-1704, Sthlm 1936
- Villius, H., "Johan August Meyerfeldt", i *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, Bd 25

Translator's Notes

1. No map of the battlefield of Posen has been located to date.
- 2.

Swedish Order of Battle

(provided by Oskar Sjöström)

Commander: Major General A. J. Meijerfeldt

Norra Skånska Cavalry Regiment (8 companies/squadrons) (approx. 816 men)
Meijerfeldt's Dragoon Regiment (8 companies/squadrons) (approx. 492 men)
Taube's Dragoon Regiment (8 companies/squadrons) (approx. 492 men)
Bremiska Cavalry Regiment (4 companies/squadrons) (approx. 246 men)
Södermanlands Infantry Regiment (2 companies) (approx. 246 men)
2 cannon

Total: 28 companies/squadrons cavalry & dragoons – approx. 2,046 men
2 infantry companies – approx. 246 men

Total: 2,292 men

Deployment

The battle line was some 700 meters long

(Units from right to left)

Right Wing (A. J. Meijerfeldt)

6 companies Meijerfeldt's Dragoon Regiment (A. J. Meijerfeldt)
1 company Södermanland Infantry Regiment (G. von Weidenhain)
2 field guns deployed with this unit
6 companies Norra Skånska Cavalry Regiment (G. Horn)

Right Wing Reserve (Nils Gyllenstierna)

2 companies Meijerfeldt's Dragoon Regiment
1 company Norra Skånska Cavalry Regiment

Left Wing (G. A. Taube)

1 company Södermanland Infantry Regiment (K. A. Wendel)
6 companies Taube's Dragoon Regiment (G. A. Taube)
3 companies Bremiska Cavalry Regiment (C. G. Horn?)

Left Wing Reserve (J. G. Wrangel?)

1 company Norra Skånska Cavalry Regiment
1 company Taube's Dragoon Regiment
1 company Bremiska Cavalry Regiment

Note: Strength figures are a best guess approximation. They could be slightly more or less.

3.

Saxon Order of Battle

No order of battle for the Saxon forces has been located; however, there is some information that provides some insight into the Saxon forces. The book, *Leben und Denkwürdigkeiten Johan Mathias Reichsgrafen von der Schulenburg* (Leipzig 1834), indicates that Schulenburg's Army at Posen consisted of 2,000 infantry in 6 battalions and 2,000 cavalry and dragoons in 24 squadrons. If these figures are correct, then both infantry and cavalry units were seriously under strength, averaging about 330 men per infantry battalion and around 83 men per cavalry and dragoon squadron. Around 17th June the Saxon Army had a strength of 7,800 men in 12 infantry battalions and 3,500 men in 24 cavalry and dragoon squadrons. In a little less than two months there appears to have been a reduction of some 49% in the infantry and some 43% in the cavalry and dragoons. In all probability the main reason for the losses was desertion, which was a continuing problem for the Saxons. Service in Poland was not attractive, especially when the enemy was Charles XII and his Swedes.

On 17th June the Saxon Army consisted of the following units:

Infantry

Fuß-Garde (2)
Königin (1)
Drost (1)
Kurprinz (1)
Kanitz (1)
Fürstenberg (1)
Westromirsky (1)
Schulenburg (1)
Thielau (1)
Wackerbarth (1)
Sacken (1)

Cavalry and Dragoons

Leib Kuirassier (4)
Kurprinz Kuirassier (4)
Eichstedt Kuirassier (4)
Gersdorf Kuirassier (4)
Bayreuth Dragoons (4)
Oertzen Dragoons (4)

It is apparent that all of the Saxon cavalry and dragoon regiments were at the Battle of Posen, and 6 of the 12 infantry battalions; however, which ones they were, is unknown.

The Saxon Army deployed with infantry in the center and the cavalry and dragoons on the flanks. Lieutenant General von der Schulenburg was located with the left flank cavalry. He was assisted by Major Generals Brause and Oertzen for the cavalry and dragoons, and Major General Drost for the infantry.