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Witches and witch-hunt in Kalisz region in XVI–XVIII century

Abstract: In this article the Author shows, the situation of witch-hunt in Kalisz region in XVI–XVIII century. He uses, broad, anthropological and historical perspective supporting his work with latests available publications. This text also attempts to build an multifarious image of so called „withches” that could be found in the historical sources. On the basis of local trials one can precisely observe the genesis, development, and collapse of the witch hunt in the whole country. Mentioned region played the leading role in creating the bill that contributed to the end of hunt for accused of witchcraft in Poland.

Keywords: Witches, Witch, occultism, women history, Kalisz, Regional history, Poland

Nowadays, when one hears the word witchcraft or witch, a world of various connotations appear in his or her mind. Fortune-telling, cartomancy, healing with herbs, crystal balls, broom flights or dowsing are just a few examples. When one combines these connotations into one, a very broad image appears, which, instead of explaining this phenomenon, seems to be too blurred and fuzzy. In order to create this image we resort to the knowledge taken from various sources such as fairy tales, movies, proverbs, sagas. Most of them are rooted in the most important source, namely history. Examining magic (understood here as a set of all magical actions and rituals) by means of history leads us to a surprising observation. It is a sphere in which fantasy builds historic facts, which, afterwards, lead to fantasies depicted in myths, movies, tales. Fiction of human mind, fueled by brutal tortures, leaves its trace in court records, which are used to reconstruct extremely rich spiritual world of people from bygone ages. In order to understand it, particular notions need to be explained and confronted with historical reality.

The history of magic and witch trials is present in a range of Polish and foreign publications. The investigators of causes for this phenomenon can be found even in times when the so called *witch madness* had not faded completely. Since the end of modern era two trends in witch historiography can be distinguished: romantic and rational (Pilaszek 2008: 17–20). In the 20th century, when the emotions evoked by witch hunting began to ebb away, people started to look at the whole case from a more psychological perspective – especially in French historiography (Pilaszek 2008: 21). The first Pole to investigate witch trials was Tadeusz Czacki, who conducted his research at the beginning of the 19th century. However, the best known Polish historian describing Polish witches was Bohdan Baranowski, who created his works in PRL (Polish People’s Republic). His work had great effect on numerous publications, and among them, a work crucial to this essay containing records of the court in Kalisz dealing with the trials of women accused of witchery in XVI and XVII century. Contemporary historians, such as Małgorzata Pilaszek, devoted a lot of attention to

witches' history in our area. *Procesy o czary w Polsce w wiekach XV–XVIII* by Pilaszek has recently been published and inspired me to write this work.

My goal is to present in close-up the history of witches and witchcraft trials in Kalisz district. Furthermore, the context and peculiarity of this phenomenon in my country will be taken into account. A country, which was believed to be an asylum from burning stakes and where tolerance and freedom of belief was supposed to reign.

I have chosen Kalisz not only because I was born there, but also because on the basis of local trials one can precisely observe the genesis, development, and collapse (connected to the Doruchów case apogee) of the witch hunt in the whole country. It is also worth mentioning that the governor of Kalisz district, August Sułkowski, played the leading role in creating the bill that contributed to the end of hunt for accused of witchcraft in Poland (1776) (Pilaszek 2008: 222).

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In this chapter I would like to introduce a couple of key notions necessary for better understanding of the subject and the genesis of the phenomena of *witch madness* and *witch-hunt*. The nomenclature of wizardry and magic uses two terms: hag and witch that tend to be considered the same in meaning. Nonetheless, a witch is a woman who needs to learn magic or receive it as a gift, for instance from an evil spirit. Whereas hag, is a woman who possesses magical skills since the day of her birth. Both tend to be malicious, yet it is witches who were believed to be the partners of Satan after the Trident reform (Pilaszek 2008: 48–51).

The term *witch-hunt* comes from the 20th century and is connected to the USA. When taken literally, it may mislead and distort the image of the phenomenon as it suggests to be an organized action of chasing witches, which is out of the question as far as Europe is concerned (Pilaszek 2008: 54–55). Still, I will use this name in my work in much more free manner as it refers to witch trials unconnected with one another and random.

A truly intriguing notion that meets Polish reality is *witch madness* which is a set of common beliefs and phenomena occurring within that epoch. The witchcraft itself is the name for all magical actions (usually related to the world of symbols) which are to cause particular effects in material world.

Witchcraft trials were usually a confrontation between the world of men, who were perceived as perfect beings connected to God, and the world of women, who were believed to be prone to sin and close to the devil. An ideal example of such belief is a 13th century cisterian pamphlet about women, in which one may read that *Eve passed an element of idolatry injected to her body by a snake (Satan) to her daughters, that is, stupid women* (Wrzesiński 2006: 9). It was such works that built the pyramid of hatred towards the opposite sex, which afterwards lead to so great a number of women sentenced to death.

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Who were Kalisz witches? What were their characteristics? We know that our local devil's associates differed widely from their western sisters and had much more pagan and folklore roots. They very rarely admitted to maintain contact with the devil unless they were tortured. Most frequently, as it also took place in Kalisz, they "zamawiały" (were casting spells) in the name of God, Holy Mary, and All Saints. Also our witches would attend Sabbaths less frequently. If they did, their meetings resembled feasts accompanied by singing rather than usual Sabbaths.

As far as the social background of our witches is concerned, the vast majority of them were villagers and townswomen, who, yet, claimed to meet with hooded witches that were

in contact with the devil elite. They meant most probably women nobles, who indulged themselves in witchcraft as well. When it comes to penalty, however, none of the latter was sentenced to death (Tazbir 1979: 57). Villagers were believed to be pagan or susceptible to it even in modern history. As an unknown writer claims, “they would rather go to the woods instead of going to church. And when they come to the temple, they prefer staying at the graveyard and having conversations so that they do not have to participate in the celebration” (Tazbir 2000: 108).

Polish witches frequently learned their profession while serving at the court, as it was in the case of Apolonia Porwitowa, who learned everything in the castle in Sieradz.

People involved in wizardry were often outsiders and they maintained contact with devils. As Kalisz women confessed after tortures, they could even tell the names of their demonic lords. The price for devil’s help was an unpleasant physical contact with him. Devils in Kalisz frequently forced their slaves to sexual intercourse by tossing them around rooms and inflicting physical wounds, as it was in the case of a group of women from Kucharki in Kalisz district. Occasionally, demons would take their female associates to Łysa Góra. Yet, the Sabbaths took place on local swamps, where, in addition to previously mentioned demons, various musicians and other witches used to come. Those satanic stories refer to trials from the beginning of the 16th century for the earlier cases investigated by the court in Kalisz touched upon devils’ interventions only vaguely.

Confessions made during tortures were in most cases very detailed, as in the case of previously mentioned women from Kucharki. Combined with the confessions of others, they created an opulence of demons’ world descriptions, according to which, devils used to wear nobles’ clothes and tended to be socially divided just as much as the inhabitants of the real world were.

A woman became a witch at the moment of accusation, the reasons for which might be various, but I have already mentioned this fact in the previous part of this work.

Who were the witches from Kalisz? The first example described in the following chapter comes from 1580. The record indicates that the sentenced belonged to lower class in local society – two wandering thieves and a prostitute, to whom any disgracing activity was not a novelty. A similar pattern appears in other trials, which seem to relate to peasants and women living further from the town center. What was the cause of the witches being taken to court? Most often, slanders which were based on true events. Kalisz women brought to town council dealt with healing, herbalism. It was enough to possess herbal amulets, and Kalisz case from 1580 can be an example of (Baranowski 1951: 19–21). Notwithstanding, in most cases, following priests’ worries, spiritual issues were confused with superstitions, to which Kalisz witches confessed in the first place. Not until they were tortured did they talk about Sabbaths, demons, and associations with the Devil.

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According to the records gathered by Bohdan Baranowski, the history of witch trials in Kalisz started at the end of 16th century. It was the time during which the *witch madness* was taking a heavy toll. The first cases of Zofia from Łekno and Barbara from Radom described by Baranowski took place in 1580, and the last, Regina Dereniowa’s trial, in 1616. Baranowski’s publication contains descriptions of six trials, few of which ended with the capital punishment. Only the last ones appeared to be related to contacts with the Devil. I will introduce two more trials which I found in the books that I inserted in the references list. The lawsuit against several witches from nearby Doruchów, which took place just before the constitution of 1776, deserves special attention. It was a mysterious trial which is not eagerly described by most researchers due to insufficient historical records. Nonetheless,

I will not evade touching upon this particular case since it matches the romantic vision of witches perfectly, and, because it is veiled in mystery, I find it even more intriguing. I will present this trial basing on descriptions from *Wspólniczki Szatana. Czarownice na ziemiach polskich* by Szymon Wrzesiński as it contains the most reliable information.

It can be assumed that not until 1616 an intensified witch-hunt in Kalisz district took place. Still, a full reconstruction of these events cannot be provided since we lack historical sources and records from that period (Baranowski 1951: 8).

The story begins with two market thieves: Zofia from Łekno and Barbara from Radom (Baranowski 1951: 13–24). They both were claimed to be immoral and dealt with prostitution, theft, and profiteering. They were not even afraid of selling crosses stolen from churches. They got to know each other through another thief, Szymek, and went to Kalisz to steal goods from stalls. However, somebody saw them wearing herbal amulets which rose suspicions. As a result, they were caught and taken to court. After questioning, Zofia was found not guilty, yet, it is what Barbara testified that one may consider really interesting. After she had been tortured she told her story which resembled German witches' stories. Barbara learned magic from her mother and acted in Gdańsk where she stole milk and used bread for wizardry. She was also notorious for performing abortions. Similar to German witches she celebrated magical events such as Walpurgian night. Further tortures brought her confession of contacts with devils who were summoned by her to serve her person with help of magical items. The difference is that the witch called devils to be at her disposal and not, as it is stated later, that she is devils' servant. Asked about her confession she said that the priest had told her initially to redress all the evil she had done. Later, she did not mention any wizardry acts during her confessions. Interestingly, while she was being drowned she begged the Devil to rescue her from death with the following words: *czarcie nie daj mię jeszcze topić, iż jeszcze będę na tym świecie wojowała i obiecaj mi to, że nie utonę* (Oh Devil, do not let them drown me yet so that I could fight in this world, and promise me you will not drown) (Baranowski 1951: 23).

The further story of these two witches remains unknown. The following case concerns Elżbieta from Tyniec, who was accused of witchcraft four years after the first trial (Baranowski 1951: 24–27). The record is very brief and informs us that the witch wore amulets and washed cattle in the water from a nearby river so that the cows produced more milk. She used wax for foretelling fetuses' faith. She did all of this in the name of God, Holy Mary, and All Saints, which is typical of Polish witches. We know Elżbieta's faith from the records presented by Baranowski. She was exiled from the town. One may claim that such a punishment was too lenient. However, taking into account the fact that the exiles did not know the world outside their town, it often meant a slow and painful demise (Pilaszek 2002: 16–17).

The third witchcraft case is related to wizardry only by its name since the woman was cleared of a charge. The trial concerns Małgorzata from Chmielnik, who was brought to court by her master, a noble called Paweł Pawłowski, and accused of witchery and theft (Baranowski 1951: 27–30). The woman denied using magic and confessed only of stealing her master's chest with some jewelry. She committed that crime only because she got to know that the man was not going to pay her for six months of her work. She was sentenced to flogging, and the request of tortures in order to prove her connections with the Devil was declined.

Apollonia Porwitowa from Glinki was a woman whose case from 1593 was entirely different (Baranowski 1951: 30–39). She was accused of witchery by her husband, which was caused by alleged adultery. Then she encountered an avalanche of further accusations, such as spoiling beer that belonged to a Mr. Sobek. She said her teacher was Jadwiga Pieczanowska from whom she had learned everything while serving at a castle in Sieradz. She dealt with casting spells on cattle and beer in order to heal it. According to the sources, she ap-

peared to help people rather than harm them. An example can be the day when a certain woman came to Apolonia to ask her for help in poisoning the woman's husband. Apolonia did not want to kill that man so she gave the woman ordinary water. The woman initially thought it was poison, but afterwards she came back and thanked Apolonia for that trick as she and her husband started to get on well again. During her trial Apolonia mentioned other women being engaged in superstitions rather than magic, who in fact, just like Apolonia herself, performed all the rituals in the name of God, Holy Mary, and All Saints. Her greatest adversary whom she accused was town's executioner's wife.

A real revolution in witch trials was the case of witches from Kucharki who were sentenced to burning at the stake in 1613 (Baranowski 1951: 39–58). The women depicted in the records maintained contacts with the Devil and match the definition of *a witch* perfectly. At the very beginning Dorotka from Siedlikowo, who was supposed to cast a spell on Maciej Gorczyca, was accused. The woman was captured in an inn where she was often seen arguing with Maciej. Tortures resulted in her confession of witchcraft. She said she had learned magic from her mother and fortune-teller Serbica. She claimed that she had been helping people to find their lost possessions with the help of a devil named Kacper. The devil was supposed to whisper in her ear about those possessions. She also said that she was choked and forced to sexual intercourse by devils on one Thursday in the windmill. Dorota betrayed her friend, Magda Młynarka, who also frequently argued with Gorczyca. Magda told in the questioning that she sold her soul to the Devil in order to make her life easier.

While she was summoning devils, a demon called Marcin appeared. He promised to help but at the same time he raped her. Another accused woman was Gierusza Klimerzyna, who denied all charges. Still, after the executioner tortured her by burning with a candle flame, she admitted that she had had an affair with one of devils. The other women also confessed of maintaining sexual contacts with devils in exchange for help. They were promised to be under devils' protection as long as they were having intercourses with them. Sabbaths (taking place at local swamps) and lycanthropy appear in the case of Kucharki witches as well. The witches were supposed to cover their bodies with ointment which allowed them to change their physical form to cats. Then they would drink milk straight from Mrs. Wysocka's cows. They also presented precise descriptions of their devil lovers. They said: *Ci wszyscy diabli w ręku mieli długie palce u nich pazury długie ostre i czarne, kosmaci byli, używali z nimi póki kur nie zapał a mówili im oddawajcie się nam będziecie się przy nas dobrze miały* (Baranowski 1951: 46). (All those devils had long fingers and black sharp claws, they were hairy, they were having intercourses with the witches till dawn, and they were telling them: let us make love to you and your lives will be better). After the trial all witches were burned at the stake, which pleased the locals.

Another witch trial concerned the alleged great fire of Kalisz. The accused, Regina Dereciowa from Stawiszyn, was sentenced to burning at the stake in 1616 (Baranowski 1951: 56–66). She was told to had been an acquaintance of recently burned Marusza. Dereciowa admitted that she had known Marusza, but claimed that she had learned witchcraft from a fortune-teller from Cholowo and from Jagnieszka Chorabska. Even though the witch tried to help people by healing their children, her magic turned out to be ineffective. Most enchanted people died and Dereciowa could not boast of a large number of successful spells. She also confessed of harming people, but she claimed to had made atonement for her deeds just as her confessor had ordered her. Still, being accused of setting the town on fire, she was sentenced to stake.

A less known, yet just as much interesting, trial was the case of Regina Organiścina, who was accused of witchery by Zygmunt Jaraczewski in 1680 (Pilaszek 2008: 71–72, 261). The witch lived in a country estate of her lord Adam Kurczewski, the owner of the village of Kowalew. Kurczewski did not want to give her away to court. However, Jaraczewski en-

couraged his friend Jędrzej Jaroszewski to persuade Kurczewski to taking the witch to the courthouse. When Jaroszewski accompanied by two servants entered Kurczewski's land in order to capture the witch, Kurczewski took his saber and attacked them to protect the woman. Regina was a well-known witch in that area. She was accused of killing cows and setting the windmill on fire, to which she confessed while still being free. Jaraczewski sent a letter of complaint to the castle in Kalisz which was considered as it diseussed public nuisance (assault on Mr. Jaroszewski and his men).

The last and, at the same time, the most controversial trial was the case of several witches from Doruchów. It may be considered controversial for it was a lynching that took place just before the constitution abolishing death penalty for witchery (Wrzesiński 2006:58–60). In 1775 Mr. Stokowski was the lord of Doruchów, and his wife went down with so-called Polish plait. A fortune-teller who was summoned to heal the woman claimed that the illness was a result of a spell cast on Stokowski's wife. Then, she pointed witches allegedly responsible for this spell. They were Dobra – a wife to a rich landlord Kazimierz, and an unknown widow, whom the villagers accused of the most terrible deeds such as murdering her own child. The third witch was a woman who used to throw leaves in the air claiming it was her way of creating mice. Stokowski arrested these and other suspicious women. As a result, five farmers' daughters, one widow and a servant were accused. A local rector begged the crowd not to lynch the women, but he failed. Nonetheless, the owner of the village was so motivated to hunt the witches that soon seven more women were captured. The landlord convinced the mayor of the village and the crowd to perform the trial by water. However, the women were not stripped off, which was supposed to save them from drowning for their long, thick dresses soaked slowly. Since the women did not drown, they were considered witches. They were quickly taken out of water and carried to the local granary. Afterwards, they were put inside barrels, with holes previously cut, which were so small that the women was able only to kneel. The upper parts of barrels were covered with linen. Small cards with words Jesus, Mary, Joseph were attached to the sides of the barrels as well. The women were kept in such conditions for certain time. Stokowski, seeking revenge for his wife's illness, called in a group of monks, an executioner, and juries, who came from nearby Grabów. Prefect's deputy's house was converted into a courthouse with a table full of makeshift torture tools. The trial started with stripping the women and hanging them on hooks, which was so painful for some of them that they died on the spot. The whole trial was a theater since the witches' faith was already known. While the women were being tortured, a huge stake was placed on the main square of the village. All women, even those who had already been dead, were burned at the stake. The news about that macabre event must have spread like wildfire all over Poland since such trials were soon abolished.

In my opinion that horrifying event presents perfectly where might have such distorted witch trials led to. Although its authenticity has not been confirmed yet, I consider it the last act of *witch madness* in Kalisz area. Even if not every piece of information on that trial is true, it must have been borne in people's minds as a part of the previously mentioned phenomenon. This is how we finally end the chapter devoted to *witch-hunting* in Kalisz, the region which was considered by Baranowski a place, where people fight with the Devil most eagerly (Baranowski 1951: 6).

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Soon after the events in Doruchów, the parliament, under the influence of humanitarian ideals, set a bill abolishing tortures and death penalty for witchery in 1776. King Stanisław August commemorated it by coining a special medal with the following inscription on it: *Mękami wyciągać zawsze wątpliwe wyznania zbrodni, pociągać do sądu obwinionych o rzekome*

związki z mocą szatańską zakazał sejm roku 1776 na wniosek Króla Stanisława Augusta (Wrzesiński 2006: 60) (to obtain doubtful confession by means of tortures, to take to the court accused of alleged contacts with Satan, the parliament abolished it in 1776 by King Stanisław August's suggestion).

One question that still remains is a suspiciously small number of witch trials in so big a country as Poland was (in comparison to other European countries). One of the reasons may be the low level of theological and law education concerning demonology (Pilaszek 2008: 195).

The main goal of my work was to present objectively the witch trials in Kalisz region that I was able to find in literature. I tried not to be influenced by emotions, which should never accompany historical facts. I leave the assessment of the reliability of the records to the reader, who, probably, has already shaped his opinion on the subject through reading this or other works. We do not have any device that would help us understand what in the minds of the interrogated women was. Nevertheless, numbers unveil an undisputed truth. *Witch hunting* was a cruel movement, merciless, and frequently accompanied by sick and immoral sexuality, aimed at women. It was fueled by simple human emotions such as envy, jealousy, fear of the unknown. The witches themselves often were not conscious of what they were saying or doing and the subsequent consequences. The example of Regina Dereciowa can prove the randomness of their actions effectiveness. All charges, in accordance with the Church's worries, concerned superstitions rather than acts of sorcery or pacts with devils. Still, superstitions were not legally punished. Furthermore, women of that time should not be blamed for superstitions for even in modern societies certain people believe in them. Perhaps, the judges' sentences were only a defense against their own dark sides of their personalities.

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