

VAIDA KAMUNTAVIČIENĖ

CATHOLICS AND JEWS IN THE DIOCESE OF
VILNIUS IN THE 17TH CENTURY ACCORDING TO
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH VISITATIONS

The Diocese of Vilnius was the largest diocese in the 17th-century Europe in terms of area it covered. In 1669, according to the Synod of the Diocese of Vilnius, it contained 26 decanates and 410 churches¹. One of the Council of Trent decrees stated that all dioceses must be visited once a year. But the sheer size of the Diocese of Vilnius made this impossible. Materials of the 17th-century Diocese of Vilnius visitations have been discussed in the articles of Polish historian Waldemar Franciszek Wilczewski². There are only a handful of fragments of the 17th-century Diocese of Vilnius visitations, which cover only several decanates, surviving in Lithuanian and Polish archives. The most valuable of these include the visitation of Hrodna decanate for the years 1660–1662, conducted by the Dean of Hrodna

¹ *Acta synodi diaecesis Vilnensis praesidente Illustrissimo ac Reverendissimo Domino D. Alexandro in Macieiov Sapieha Dei et Apostolicae Sedis gratia Episcopo Vilnensi*, Vilnae: Typis Academicis, 1669.

² Waldemar Franciszek Wilczewski, “Wizytacja diecezji wileńskiej przeprowadzona przez biskupa Mikołaja Słupskiego: czas trwania i zasięg”, in: *Tarp istorijos ir būtovės: Studijos prof. Edvardo Gudavičiaus 70-mečiui*, eds. Alfredas Bumblauskas and Rimvydas Petrauskas, Vilnius: Aidai, 1999; Waldemar Franciszek Wilczewski, “Fragment księgi wizytacji dekanatu lidzkiego i nowogródzkiego z roku 1669 w zbiorach Biblioteki Czartoryskich w Krakowie”, in: *Archiva temporum testes. Źródła historyczne jako podstawa pracy badacza dziejów: Księga pamiątkowa ofiarowana Profesorowi Stanisławowi Olczakowi*, eds. ks. Grzegorz Bujak, Tomasz Nowicki, ks. Piotr Sawicki, Lublin: Towarzystwo naukowe KUL, 2008, pp. 628–635; Waldemar Franciszek Wilczewski, “Wizytacje generalne diecezji wileńskiej w XVII–XVIII w.: Ewolucja problematyki”, in: *Soter*, Kaunas: Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, 2010, no. 35 (63), pp. 99–110.

Jonas Kazimieras Vaišnoravičius³; the visitation of Kaunas, Simnas and Alvitas decanates for the years 1668–1669, conducted by the canon of Vilnius cathedral chapter, parish priest of Kaunas Parish Benediktas Žuchorskis⁴; and the visitation of Vaūkavysk, Ruzhany and Slonim decanates for the years 1668–1669, conducted by the scholastic of Vilnius cathedral chapter, kings' secretary and the regent of the grand chancellery of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Aleksandras Kotovičius⁵. Visitation materials of these seven decanates were the main sources of this research. In this paper, I discuss only the territory of these seven decanates of the Diocese of Vilnius, namely Hrodna, Kaunas, Simnas, Alvitas, Ruzhany, Vaūkavysk and Slonim. Some additional sources, in particular inventories from certain parishes, mostly from the 1670s⁶, will contribute to this research as well. The official position of the Catholic Church towards the Jews was expressed in the Councils of the Diocese of Vilnius for the years 1669 and 1685⁷.

In the 17th century, these decanates lay on the borderland between the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, while today this area spans across Lithuania, Belarus and Poland. In the 17th century, this territory was largely rural and covered with forests, while the largest towns were Kaunas and Hrodna.

According to the decrees of the Vilnius Diocesan Synod of 1669, the largest decanate among these was Hrodna⁸, which had 20 parish

³ Visitation of Hrodna decanate, 1660–1662, in: *Lithuanian State Historical Archive* (henceforth – *LVIA*), f. 694-1-3969.

⁴ Visitation of Kaunas, Simnas and Alvitas decanates, 1668–1669, in: *Manuscript Department of the Wróblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences* (henceforth – *LMAVB*), f. 318-28550.

⁵ Visitation of Ruzhany, Vaūkavysk and Slonim decanates, 1668–1669, in: *Manuscript Department of Vilnius University Library* (henceforth – *VUB*), f. 57-B53-41.

⁶ Most of the inventories compiled in 1670s are held in the file: Inventories of parishes of Vilnius diocese, Second half of the 17th century, in: *LVIA*, f. 694-1-3970.

⁷ *Acta synodi diaecesis Vilmensis; Acta, constitutiones et decreta synodi diaecesis Vilmensis praesidente Illustrissimo ac Reverendissimo Domino Domino Alexandro Michaele Kotowicz Dei et Apostolicae Sedis gratia Episcopo Vilmensi*, Vilnae: Typis Academicis, 1685.

⁸ *Acta synodi diaecesis Vilmensis*; Parishes of Hrodna decanate were: *Hrodna, Przewalka, Oża, Jeziora filia Grodnensis Eccl., Kwasowka, Ejsmonty, Brzostowica Mała*,

churches and one filial church, 21 Catholic churches in total. Kaunas decanate was the second-largest, it contained 19 Catholic churches, 2 of them were filial churches and 17 parochial churches⁹. The number of Catholic churches in other decanates ranged between 12 and 14: in the decanate of Slonim¹⁰, 14, Simnas¹¹ and Ruzhany¹² decanates had 13 parish churches each, Alvitas¹³ decanate had 12 parish churches and one filial church, decanate of Vaūkavysk¹⁴ had 12 parishes.

Seventeen churches were visited in Hrodna decanate in 1660–1662, while some churches, including Eysmanty, Malaya Bierastavitsa, Pryvalki and Różanystok, were not visited. It must be emphasized that this particular visitation was conducted right after the end of a war with Russia and is particularly revealing in terms of the effects this war brought on the Diocese of Vilnius. During the visitation in Ruzhany decanate in 1668–1669, Lahishyn and Ivanava churches were not visited. Veisiejai church belonged to Simnas decanate, but it was visited along with the churches of Kaunas decanate. At the same time, all churches in Kaunas, Alvitas, Vaūkavysk and Slonim decanates were visited.

Krynki, Sudziałowo, Odelsk, Indura, Kuźnica, Kondźyn, Sokołka, Sokolany, Dąbrowka, Zalesie, Nowydwor et Altaria, Krasnobor, Lipsk, Rożanystok.

⁹ *Ibid.*; Parishes of Kaunas decanate were: *Kowno, probostwo S. Krzyża, Jezno, Stokliszki, Wysokidwor, Sumiliszki, Zyżmory, Zosle, Poporcie, Kormiałowo, Łopie, Giegużym, Skorule, Wadziogoła, Rumszyszki, Uzugoście filia eccl. Stokliscensis, Dorsuniszki, Preny, Bersztany filia Prenen.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; Parishes of Slonim decanate were: *Slonim, Darewo, Połonca, Mysz, Lachowicze, Stwołowicze, Zadźwieie, Gorodyszczce, Jelna, Wśielub, Zdździeciół, Dworzec, Rohotna, Mołczadź.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*; Parishes of Simnas decanate were: *Urdomina, Łozdzieie, Siemno, Balwierzyszki, Udryia, Metele, Sereie, Swieteieżioro, Leypuny, Wiewsieie, Berźniki, Seyny, Puńsk.*

¹² *Ibid.*; Parishes of Ruzhany decanate were: *Rożana, Łukonica, Łyszkwow, Porozow, Strubnica, Zehwia, Masty, Dereczyn, Miedźirzyc, Kossow, Olszewo, Łahiszyn, Janow alias Castrum Cassinum.*

¹³ *Ibid.*; Parishes of Alvitas decanate were: *Olwita alias Poszyrwinty, Grazyszki, Wizayny, Łankieliszki, Poiewonie filia Olitensis Eccl., Bartniki, Przerosl, Filipow, Bakalarzow, Raczki, Janowka, Witkowiszki.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; Parishes of Valkavysk decanate were: *Wołkowisk, Gniezno, Świsłocz, Jałówka, Brzostowica Wielka, Szydłowicze, Repla, Wołpa, Łunna, Roś, Krzemienica.*

People of various confessions lived in the territory of the Diocese of Vilnius in the 17th century. Materials from visitations and inventories have recorded Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Uniates, Lutherans, Calvinists, Jews, Muslims and even pagans¹⁵ living in this area. This multiconfessionality had evolved through the ages and had been influenced by cultural customs of local, historical traditions as well as the political life of the state and the evolution of European states. After Jews had been expelled from Western Europe in the Middle Ages, a populous Jewish community had settled in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Jews enjoyed privileges that guaranteed them their legal and social status in the Lithuanian society. Interconfessional relations in the 17th-century Grand Duchy of Lithuania were also influenced by the reforms of the Council of Trent and Counter Reformation. After the reforms of the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church established itself as the state religion and enjoyed exceptional conditions for its activities.

The multiculturalism of the Diocese of Vilnius has been noted by various historians and described in their works, but nobody has used these Catholic Church visitations as a source to investigate Catholics' attitudes towards others. Visitors were obliged to visit all the parishes and write a so-called *status animarum*, i.e., to analyze the make-up of parish populations, to describe their faith. Of course, not all visitors were diligent in describing *status animarum* of the parishes, but from the information which was recorded in their reports we can understand some aspects of the relations between Catholics and Jews in the 17th century. It must be emphasized that sources used in this paper present only one side, the position of the Catholic Church, and it would be worthwhile to compare it to other sources.

One of the biggest towns in the area in question was Hrodna which can also be labeled as one of the older centers and historically densely

¹⁵ About pagans see more: Vaida Kamuntavičienė, "Jelnios parapijos gyventojai XVII a. (*Stara Litwa*, arba jorvingių pėdsakais Vilniaus vyskupijoje)", in: *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis*, 2011, no. 2, Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 2012, pp. 21–30.

populated by Jews¹⁶. Hrodna was a royal town and all Lithuanian rulers since the times of Vytautas were favorable to Jews issuing privileges that guaranteed their livelihood and relations with the state and society. Unlike Hrodna, Kaunas was not so much inhabited by Jews, though a big Jewish community lived on the other bank of the river Neris, just opposite Kaunas, in the territory named Sloboda or Vilijampolė.

It is impossible to specify the size of the Jewish community that lived in the area in question in the 17th century, because visitation materials do not contain such data. The least information about the Jews was recorded in Kaunas decanate, whereas the most informative are the records from Hrodna decanate. This investigation does not give the entire picture of the life of Jews among Christians in the Diocese of Vilnius, but it does present the most significant aspects of the situation of the Jewish community in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The first problem we have encountered while researching the parishes in question was the identification of the area where the Jews were allowed to reside. According to contemporary regulations, it was prohibited for them to disturb Christians. In Hrodna, for example, the Jews were forbidden to live closer than 300 meters from Catholic temples¹⁷ in order to show proper respect to the Catholic Church and to avoid unnecessary confrontation. Jews had to respect Catholic holidays and to act accordingly during them¹⁸. Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė has presented data which shows a custom in Hrodna to insult Jews who refused to get out of the way during Catholic feast processions¹⁹. It is probable that the separation of areas inhabited by Jews and Catholics was meant to guarantee the safety of both communities.

In certain locations, even sterner measures were in place. On 11 February 1662, a decree was issued in Sokółka, requiring Jews to

¹⁶ Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė, *Žydai Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės visuomenėje: Sambūvio aspektai*, Vilnius: Žara, 2009, pp. 42, 69.

¹⁷ Visitation of Hrodna decanate, p. 29.

¹⁸ Jan Kurczewski, Summary of the visitation of the years 1674–1676, conducted by the bishop Mikalojus Slupskis, *LMAVB*, f. 318-26479, p. 53.

¹⁹ Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

move out of Sokółka estate. They were only allowed to visit Sokółka during market and fair days, but for no longer periods than three days. Jews were forbidden to acquire houses and landholdings and if a Jew already owned one, it would be confiscated by the Church. It was even forbidden to rent residential housing to Jews; infraction of the ban carried a fine of 10 sexagens of Lithuanian coins (*groszy*) for the benefit of Sokółka church²⁰. In a similar fashion, Jews in Puńsk were ordered to leave the church foundation landholdings within four weeks in order to avoid a scandal²¹.

The decree against the Jews was announced during Vilnius Diocesan Synod in 1669, which was summoned by the Bishop of Vilnius Aleksandras Sapiega. In this decree, it was stated that all contracts with Jews had to be called null and void and they were forbidden from renting church properties. The requirement was based on the idea that Christian peasants ought not to be placed under the authority of Jews²². A similar decree regarding Christians working for Jews was issued during another Vilnius Diocesan Synod, called by the Bishop of Vilnius Aleksandras Kotovičius in 1685²³.

According to traditional customs, the landlord was not only the employer, but also had to take care of the religious life of his subordinates and to make sure so that they attended the mass on holy days. Naturally, Jews did not care for religious life of their Christian tenants. On the contrary, they could cause obstructions by forcing their Christian dependents to work on Sundays and other Christian holidays. On the other hand, a Christian who was too lazy to attend the mass on Sunday could put the blame on his Jewish superior. Therefore Jewish landlords who employed Christian peasants were uncomfortable in dealing with local parish priests. For example, the parish priest of Indura

²⁰ Decree of the canon of Kraków, royal commissioner Małachowski, Sokółka, 1662-02-11, Visitation of Hrodna decanate, ff. 48–48v.

²¹ Visitation of Kaunas, Simnas and Alvidas decanates, 1669, in: *LMAVB*, f. 318-28550, p. 128.

²² “Bona ecclesiastica iudaeis non arendentur”, in: *Acta synodi diaecesis Vilnensis*.

²³ “De iudaeis familia christiana abutentibus”, in: *Acta, constitutiones et decreta synodi diaecesis Vilnensis*, p. 34.

in Hrodna decanate once tried to ensure that nineteen Christians who were employed by Jews were able to attend services on Sundays²⁴. The visitor to Balbieriškis parish in Simnas decanate was concerned that Jews were forcing Catholics to work on Sundays and holidays and demanded the parish priest to focus more of his attention on pastoral care of parishioners who were working for Jews, to conduct more frequent visits to villages for catechesis in order to teach religion to peasants who were Jewish servants²⁵. It seems that these attempts were not always successful. For example, in Masty parish of Ruzhany decanate, a Jew was living with a Christian woman and had children, something that was considered scandalous²⁶. During the Vilnius Diocesan Synod of 1685, it was pointed out that Christian governesses to Jewish children were susceptible to Judaization, since they were prone to forgetting Christian holidays and the sacramental life²⁷.

Whenever Jews wanted to build a synagogue, they had to get a permission from the bishop of Vilnius. On the basis of materials that we have analyzed, it can be seen that the Jews of Indura rebuilt their local synagogue in the early 17th century, after receiving a permission from the local bishop²⁸. The Jews in Balbieriškis flocked to a synagogue that was considered “new”. It was built on land owned by Duchess Czartoryska and served local Jews as well as those from neighboring villages and landholdings of other noblemen²⁹. The life of Jews and Christians was regulated by edicts. On 17 June 1616, the Bishop of Vilnius Eustachijus Valavičius issued a privilege to the Jews of Novy Dvo, stating that the Jews of Novy Dvor had to provide the Church with two sexagens of Lithuanian coins, two pounds of pepper, a pound

²⁴ Inventory of Indura church, 1705, in: *VUB*, f. 57-B53-471.

²⁵ Visitation of Kaunas, Simnas and Alvitās decanates, fol. 98v.

²⁶ Visitation of Ruzhany, Vaūkavysk and Slonim decanates, p. 8.

²⁷ “De judaeis familia christiana abutentibus”, in: *Acta, constitutiones et decreta synodi diaecesis Vilmensis*, p. 34; Andrzej Kakareko, “Synod biskupa Aleksandra Kotowicza z 1685 r.”, in: *Rocznik teologii katolickiej*, Białystok: Uniwersytet w Białystoku, 2004, vol. 3, p. 143.

²⁸ Inventory of Indura church, 1705, in: *VUB*, f. 57-B53-471.

²⁹ Visitation of Kaunas, Simnas and Alvitās decanates, fol. 98v.

of ginger, a quarter of a pound of saffron every Easter and a pound of ginger and a pound of pepper for every Christmas. At the same time, they were exempt from all other taxes³⁰.

Christians recognized Jews as capable financiers and willingly used their services. Bannerman (*chorąży*) of Slonim Andzej Przeclawski and his wife Anna Krzycka endowed the Church of Kosava with 250 coins, which were given to the Jews of Kosava, who in turn pledged to provide the local church with 20 coins annually³¹. In 1705, Teresa Winska Morzyna gave 500 Polish coins for the sanctuary lamp of the Blessed Sacrament at Indura Church. But since she did not trust the capability of the local parish priest to handle finances and in order to protect the endowment, she entrusted the money to the Jews of Indura qahal, who in turn had to provide the Church with six stone of tallow: three stone of tallow had to be delivered on 2 February (Candelmas, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple) and the remaining three, on 29 September (St. Michael's day)³².

But these idyllic relations could go sour very easily. In the middle of the 17th century, the discussed parishes were badly ravaged during a disastrous war with Russia, they suffered under the occupation of the Muscovites for several years and almost all churches were plundered and a majority of them burned. For example, the church of Indura suffered this fate. Its inventory notes that the rectory of the church was burnt down by the Muscovites, while the church itself was set on fire by a Jew from Hrodna, a son of Jacob³³. On this occasion, a Jew was compared to an enemy who had ravaged the country.

Another interesting aspect of Jewish-Christian relations is recorded in the inventories of parochial peasants. In Ražiai village (Kaunas parish), there lived peasants with surnames Jew (*Žydąs*) and Little Jew (*Žydėlis*): *Nicolaus Zidelis* ir *Matthiasz Żydowicz*³⁴. It is not known whether these

³⁰ Visitation of Hrodna decanate, fol. 36v.

³¹ Visitation of Ruzhany, Vaūkavysk and Slonim decanates, p. 24.

³² Collection of Church documents of Indura church, in: *VUB*, f. 57-B53-475, pp. 63–72.

³³ Visitation of Hrodna decanate, fol. 55.

³⁴ Visitation of Kaunas, Simnas and Alvitavas decanates, fol. 8.

people were of Jewish origin. Most probably, they were Catholic and had been nicknamed thus because of specific character or physical traits, the nicknames having gradually turned into their surnames. Without any doubt, there existed specific image of the Jew in the Diocese of Vilnius in the 17th century, but we do not have any specific details about it.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the Jews were a very important part of the society of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and occupied a specific niche in its everyday life. From the point of view of the Catholic Church, Jews were a threat to Catholics. Consequently, Jewish settlements were separated and located at a distance from Christian temples and Jews were only allowed to reside in specified areas. Without the consent of the bishop, Jews were not allowed to build synagogues. There was a very big problem related to Catholics who served in Jewish households because it was seen as a direct threat to their religiosity and an impediment to properly adhering to Catholic customs. From the economic point of view, Jews were extremely useful for Catholics. Their prowess as financiers was highly valued. In spite of mutual benefits, in the times of extreme hardship, Jews were the first ones to be blamed and persecuted. Jews could freely live in the area of the Diocese of Vilnius under conditions imposed by the Catholic Church, which were generally were fairly favorable to them.