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JAN ACHACY KMITA: AN ANTI-JEWISH WRITER OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE 17TH CENTURY

There is little information about the life of Jan Achacy Kmita. He was born around 1560, most probably in the family of townsmen settled in Olkusz and Bochnia, but it is also likely that he could have come from petty nobility of the Lesser Poland (Małopolska) region. In his young days he took part in King Stefan Batory's military expeditions in Livonia. Owing to his studies at the Academy in Cracow in 1587-1593 and bachelor's degree, Kmita had knowledge of literature, Latin and Italian. Later on he settled in Bochnia where he worked as an official in various town bodies: in 1588 he held the position of the underscribe (Polish *podpisek*) (the function that was frequently discharged by students), in 1594 he was a town judge (Polish *ławnik*), in 1602-1608 – a town council member (Polish *rajca*), and in 1608 - the town mayor (Polish *burmistrz*). He also held the position of the scribe in the salt mine company (after 1601), and then of its deputy administrator (Polish *podżupnik*). He died in Bochnia around 1628.¹

Kmita's literary output is copious and consists of original works², adaptations³ as well as translations⁴ of other pieces. Kmita also authored many short, mostly versified, occasional texts. His works reflect his dependence on the rich landowners, as his songs and speeches graced the weddings and funerals of his rich patrons (the Branicki and Zbaraski families), and it is to them that he dedicated his major works. Kmita's literary work was also connected with the activities of the acclaimed „Babin Commonwealth” (Pol. „Rzeczpospolita Babińska”) which was a satirical literary society of revelers of which he was a member.⁵

¹ M. Cybowska, Z. Wojs, "Jan Achacy Kmita" in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish Biographic Dictionary], vol. 13, pp. 93-94; J. Śląski, "Jan Achacy Kmita a literatura włoska (kilka rysów do portretu wierszpiska z pogranicza renesansu i baroku)" [Jan Achacy Kmita and Italian Literature (an outline of the Portrait of a Poet living at the turn of the Renaissance and Baroque)], *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 1984, no. 5/6 (224/225), p. 61.

² *Spitamegeranomachia* (Kraków 1595) – a heroic and comic allegorical poem about King Batory's wars based on an ancient story about the struggle between the pygmies and cranes; *Simbola officialium et officiorum famularumque Zuppae Bochenensis nec non regum et zuppariorum inclutorum antiquitates* (Kraków 1605) – epigrams devoted to the history of the Bochnia salt mining companies; *Początki królów rzymskich* (Kraków, around 1595) – epigrams about the history of ancient Rome; *Phoenix* (Kraków 1609) – an allegorical poem in which the story of the legendary bird serves as a starting point for the author's observations about Poland. One may suspect that the latter two poems were modelled on some other works (J. Śląski, *op. cit.*, p. 65).

³ *Zywoty królów polskich* (Kraków 1591) – a free translation into Polish of *Vitae Regnum Polonorum* by Klemens Janicki; *Łów Dyjanny* (Kraków 1588) – an adaptation of a hunters' poem by Adriano da Corneto; *Penlopea abo niewinność dziwnie dziwnie cudownej niewiasty siedm raz y ciełej* (Kraków 1610) – a versed transposition of St. Hieronymous letter.

⁴ *Pasterskie Publiusza Wergiliusza Marona rozmowy* (Kraków 1588) – a translation into Polish of Virgil's bucolics; *O Eneaszu trojańskim księgi trzynaste* (Kraków 1591) – a translation of the work by Maseo Vegio.

⁵ *Monogamia Jego Mości Pana Mikolaja Stradomskiego i Jej Mości Panny Katarzyny Pszonkówny, Jego Mości Pana Jakuba Pszonki z Babina Córki and Morocosmea babińskie* (Kraków 1617) – versed description of the “Babin Commonwealth”.

The output of Jan Achacy Kmita also includes six short, several-page long anti-Jewish brochures.⁶

The initial two anti-Jewish works feature a widely publicized case when Bochnia Jews were accused of the Host profanation⁷. In 1599, Maciej Dudka, a miner working in the salt mine, stole the Host from the church persuaded by another miner, Maciej Mazur, who had been allegedly talked into that theft by Jakub Bodek, a Jew, and bribed with a very high reward. After a year had passed, remorseful Dudka confessed to his wicked deed in front of the town council, which led to a court trial. By king's verdict Dudka was sentenced to death at the stake, and burnt along with him was the casket with the corpse of Mazur who had been earlier tortured to death (1601). During the trial Bodek, along with two other Jews, the Jewish community elders, who had guaranteed his good behavior, fled Bochnia. As the Jewish community was unable to find the escapees and to bring them to the court, all the local Jews were expelled from the town (1605). The events of 1599-1605, in which Kmita participated himself as the town council member, were then described by him in his *Proces sprawy bocheńskiej z Żydami o Najświętszej Eucharystię Sakrament od Żydów u świętokradzów kupiony i cudownie okazany* [The case of Bochnia versus Jews about the Holy Eucharist purchased by Jews from the perpetrators of sacrilege and miraculously unveiled], which was published in 1606. This work seems to be the most "traditional" of all his anti-Jewish publications. Apart from describing what had happened, Kmita also quotes the text of the royal decree by which Jews were expelled from Bochnia and shares a number of observations about Jews (i.e., there is a tirade about the doggedness of Jews which could not be overcome by various holy men from Abel to Messiah). The work ends with an epilogue in which Kmita explains why Jews needed the Host – to make their matzah and for medical treatment. Although similar claims are frequently made in anti-Jewish literature, but it is the second use that needs additional explanation: in the years directly preceding the trial a few Bochnia Jewish women were said to have given birth to little monsters and the Host was to prevent the same happening in the future.

What has survived of the second Kmita's text regarding the Bochnia case, *Lament Żydów bocheńskich dla wygnania z Bochnie o Sakrament Naświętszy Ciała Pańskiego kupiony* [The lament of the Bochnia Jews expelled because of the purchase of the Holy Sacrament of the Divine Body], published in Cracow in 1606, is only a fragment in the Kórnik Library. Kmita dedicated his work to the Bochnia authorities and populace, praising their piety and perseverance in punishing the Jews who were guilty of the Host profanation. The text is in the form of a dialogue between Jews who bitterly lament over their expulsion from Bochnia. It is a fictitious conversation of authentic Bochnia Jews. The dialogue is so structured as to „reveal” the real story about the activities of Jews in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; both speakers describe treacherous advise that they offered, gifts and black magic they performed, and also the felonies committed by their ancestors in earlier times, including the crucifixion of Christ.

⁶ In some works about the anti-Jewish literature we can find an information about another anti-Jewish brochure written by Kmita, entitled *Peszach hoc est Pascha* (1623). In fact it is not an anti-Jewish text, but a Latin poem with Polish translation dealing with Passion and Resurrection of Christ.

⁷ About this accusation wrote Stanisław Fischer ("Wygnanie Żydów z Bochni" [Expulsion of Jews from Bochnia], *Odbitka ze Sprawozdania Dyrekcyi Państwowego Gimnazjum w Bochni za rok 1927/1928*, Bochnia 1928) and Feliks Kiryk ("Z dziejów Żydów w Bochni" [History of Jews in Bochnia], *Buletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 1980, no. 2-3 (114-115), pp. 29-30).

The third Kmita's anti-Jewish brochure, *Talmud albo wiara żydowska* [The Talmud or the Jewish Religion], was published in 1610, to have two more editions later on (in 1622 and 1642). It opens with a preface addressed to the rabbi of Prague, Mardocheusz Ribenleib (a fictitious character) whom Kmita praises for being a learned, pious and virtuous man. However, at the end of this fragment of the text there is a hand with a pointed finger which commands to begin reading from the end, and then the Jews are featured negatively. The proper part of the text is to highlight the Talmud's contents. The text consists of several stories and maxims, of which some do indeed come from the midrashic literature and from folk Jewish beliefs, but when put together they seem to be chaotic and strange. What is more, Kmita included a few fictitious fragments of the Talmud which are to serve as the evidence of Jewish hatred for Christians and their religion. He argues that Jews wish all Christians to be dead, especially those in power, they curse converts and pray for the fall of Christian kingdoms. To that end they say a special prayer three times a day which is included in the Talmud. Moreover, Jews ridicule and curse Christ, Holy Mother and the Sacred Sacrament which they try to get by all means available and to profane. The text also refers to constant efforts made by Jews to cheat Christians.

The fourth text is a satire titled *Jerycho nowe* [A New Jericho] which was published in 1615. Kmita describes the coming of the Messiah and of Messianic times. As it is very unlikely that Turks could be beaten and Jerusalem recovered, the Messianic times will come in the Cracow quarter of Kazimierz where Jews founded their new Jericho mentioned in the title. It is there that the Messiah will settle down and will reward those who treated the Jews well and punish those who persecuted them. Then the Jews will take their pitiless revenge on their persecutors, especially youngsters and students who used to tease them. The Messianic times will be marked by the reversal of the traditional social order: Jews will take gentry's place, and townsmen will turn into peasants. Jews will be the ones to enact laws, and Christians will seek their protection. The fields around Cracow will be planted with onion and garlic, and the Vistula River will be widened as far as Wieliczka to accommodate the Leviathan. Ultimately, Poland will be so attractive that the Messiah will establish his kingdom there and will give up on the idea of going to Jerusalem. The text also offers an irreverent description of the Messianic commotion in Poznań. Lewek, a lame shoemaker, set his eye on his neighbor's beautiful daughter and told her through the wall that she would give birth to the Messiah conceived by a lame shoemaker. The girl told her father about the prophecy and he, in turn, told the community elders. A decision was taken to remunerate Lewek generously so that he would have his input into the birth of the Messiah, but a girl was born instead of the awaited boy.

Although Kmita's fifth anti-Jewish text *Ein Send Brief abo list od Żydów do Mjasza* [Ein Send Brief or a Letter of Jews to the Messiah] is not dated, its contents allow to place it in between 1614 and 1620⁸. It opens with a safe conduct letter issued by the

⁸ Karol Streicher gave in his bibliography the year 1601 (with a question mark) (*Bibliografia polska* [Polish Bibliography], vol. 19, Kraków 1903, p. 326). It was repeated by another authors, e.g. by Kazimierz Bartoszewicz (*Antysemityzm w literaturze polskiej XV-XVII w.* [Antisemitism in the Polish literature, 15-17th c.], Warszawa 1914, p. 72) and Daniel Tollet ("La littérature antisémite polonaise, de 1588 à 1668. Auteurs et éditions", *Revue française d'histoire du livre*, Nouvelle série, 1977, 14, p. 100). But the very brochure contradicts this data: Kmita writes about the expulsions of Jews from Bochnia (1606), Ujście Solne (1610) and Frankfurt am Main (1614), he

Kraków synagogue to a few scholars (whom Kmita gave mocking names) setting out on a diplomatic mission to the Messiah. In the same letter Jews complain about their plight and list their hardships and sufferings: expulsions, trials, restricted freedom of earning for their living, mandatory charges and performances, forced conversions and other harassments. The text also offers a description of the acclaimed execution that took place in Prague where a Jew was subjected to sophisticated tortures for his sexual relationship with a Christian woman. At the end of the letter the Jews plead with the Messiah for some kind of response and for his coming as quickly as possible. The envoys arrive with the letter in heaven and hand it over to the Messiah along with expensive gifts. In reply the Messiah hands them a list of ten preconditions that must be met in order for Him to descend to the Earth (some of the items are nothing but ridiculous). In the epilogue Kmita comments on their mission and gives Jews a piece of advise: instead of undertaking costly missions, they should prey to God for their enlightenment, and then they will immediately see the Messiah (naturally in the person of Christ).

The final, sixth brochure is titled *Kruk w złotej klatce abo Żydzi w świebodnej wolności Korony Polskiej* [A Raven in the Golden Cage or Jews freely enjoying the freedoms of the Polish Crown] and it was published in 1648 (which is most probably not its first edition). The raven stands for a Jew: dressed in black, involved in theft and black magic and plotting with Satan, and the golden cage symbolizes the Commonwealth - a granary and bulwark of Christian Europe. Jews are omnipresent: they are inn-keepers, lease-holders, they trade in all possible goods, and they also employ Christian servants. The text levels a number of typical accusations against Jews: Jews poison Christians with food and medicines, they melt good coins and import counterfeited ones, they bring noblemen's estates to ruin and reduce King's subjects to penury, they blaspheme against Christ's name, murder Christian children, profane the Host, they are incapable of military service, but at the same time they are very willing to disclose secrets to the Commonwealth's enemies. In order to mitigate this situation Kmita proposes to force Jews to pay a fair poll-tax, to defend the Commonwealth and to forsake trade for farming. He also proposes to expel Jews from Poland or to forcefully baptize them, which would bring both spiritual (gaining new souls for God), and practical (better the plight of impoverished serfs) benefits. The transformation that Jews undergo is featured by a metaphor of the raven turning into a nightingale.

Jan Achacy Kmita is frequently described as a second-rate and mediocre writer, which seems to be true for some of his works, but does not apply to his anti-Jewish publications which are original and inventive. Their literary concept is original and this is what makes them stand out among the other anti-Jewish texts of the time which confine themselves to listing accusations against Jews and of Jewish "crimes", and which are frequently copies of other works.

Kmita's texts reflect his ability to wield a pen, especially to rhyme, even though his rhymes and metaphors are not always highly sophisticated. Kmita likes to play with words, makes use of quotes from other languages (Latin, Greek, or Italian), coins new words (e.g., he refers to the Jewish people as "kozowoński" (stinking of goat),

“Śleporodny” (born blind), “śmiechorodny” (inspiring laughter). Mentioned above was a piece of text that one could also read from the end.

Quite surprising is Kmita’s familiarity with Jewish writings, customs and beliefs, much more profound than of other anti-Jewish writers, and more profound than what he could not have learnt in everyday contacts with his neighbors.⁹ Kmita also uses Hebrew words which are written down in Hebrew letters on the title pages of his brochures. Most of them are correctly used (a word misspelled now and then) which is the evidence of at least basic knowledge of this language. Another anti-Jewish writer, Sebastian Miczyński, wrote with appreciation about Kmita’s linguistic talents, noting that he was „familiar with their [i.e., Jewish] language”¹⁰. It will remain a secret where Kmita acquired his knowledge of Judaism and Hebrew, maybe at the time of his studies at the Cracow Academy, or maybe it was the outcome of his own studies or under a guidance of some Jew.

His use of Hebrew terms must have been inspired by his willingness to show off his erudition, but it cannot be ruled out that Kmita wanted to convince his reader that those were original Jewish texts. What makes the latter suggestion even more likely is the fact that anti-Jewish arguments are frequently hard to spot, especially on the first pages of such brochures.

Kmita’s anti-Jewish texts are a valuable source to study the mentality of Polish society in the 17th century. They allow to reflect both the level of education and the sense of humor of their readers, and to „fish out” particularly attractive and popular catchwords of anti-Jewish propaganda. It is worth to mention that despite of the original literary concepts and better knowledge of Jewish language and culture, the list of the complaints and accusations against Jews was very similar to those given by other anti-Jewish writers.

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⁹ About interest in the Hebrew language and in the Jewish religion and culture see R. Kaśkow, *Zainteresowanie językiem hebrajskim w XVI wieku w Polsce* [Interest in the Hebrew Language in the 16th Century in Poland], in K. Matwijowski (ed.), *Z historii ludności żydowskiej w Polsce i na Śląsku*, Wrocław 1994, pp. 41-54, and also unpublished Ph. D. dissertation of this author *Zainteresowanie Żydami i kulturą żydowską w XVI i na początku XVII w. w Polsce* [Interest in Jews and Jewish Culture in the 16th and in the Beginning of the 17th century in Poland], Wrocław 1996 (Archiwum Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego).

¹⁰ S. Miczyński, *Zwierciadło Korony Polskiej. Urazy ciężkie i utrapienia wielkie, które ponosi od Żydów wyrażające synom koronnym na seym walny w roku 1618 przez M. Sebastiana Miczyńskiego philosophiey doktora wystawione teraz znowu porządniej y dostateczniewy wydane*, Kraków 1618, p. 24.

