

Tomasz Wiślicz

THE TOWNSHIP OF KLECZEW
AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD FIGHTING THE DEVIL
(1624–1700)

The problem of the witch-hunt in the 16th–18th c. Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth is one of the greatest challenges for the historians of this period. Research into this subject makes one confront several myths functioning not only in the social consciousness but in scholarly milieux. The basic problem is Bohdan Baranowski's book *Procesy czarownic w Polsce XVII i XVIII w.*¹ (*Witchcraft Trials in 17th and 18th Century Poland*), printed over half a century ago, a dubious but popular work. The author of this study, far from scholarly reliability, made a methodologically doubtful estimate of the victims of the witch-hunt in Poland. The number he arrived at in this way, of 10 thousand burned witches, was unfortunately printed in the French resumé, placed at the end of his book, and thus entered the scholarly circulation in Western Europe². It also functions in Polish popular publications as a kind of confirmation of the myth of the downfall of culture in Poland in the second half of the 17th century, caused by the activity of the Jesuits. At the same time the researcher into the history of witchcraft trials must face another popular myth:

¹ B. Baranowski, *Procesy czarownic w Polsce XVII i XVIII w. (Witchcraft Trials in 17th and 18th Century Poland)*, Łódź 1952. See the critical analysis of this book: M. Pilaszek, *Witch-Hunts in Poland 16th–18th Centuries*, "Acta Poloniae Historica", vol. 86, 2002, pp. 103–132.

² The reader with no knowledge of Polish may also refer to J. Tazbir's article, *Hexenprozesse in Polen*, "Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte", J. 71, 1980, pp. 280–307. See also the study by S. Salmonowicz, *Procesy o czary w Polsce. Próba rozważań modelowych (Witch-trials in Poland. An Attempt to Build a Model)*, in: *Prawo wczoraj i dziś. Studia dedykowane Profesor Katarzynie Sójce-Zielińskiej*, ed. G. Bałtruszajtis, Warszawa 2000, pp. 303–321.

Poland as a country without stakes, a country of refuge for heretics and Jews, elsewhere persecuted for religious reasons.

Having acknowledged Baranowski's estimates as exaggerated, historians rather refrain from giving other numbers, and confine themselves to detailed local and fragmentary studies. All of them prove that the witch-hunt in Poland was not very intensive. One can hardly speak of a "witch-hunt"; rather of individual trials which from time to time assumed the form of a series. According to our present knowledge, the incidents that took place at the township of Kleczew and its neighbourhood, as seen against the background of the whole Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, must be regarded as exceptional.

Kleczew is a township situated about 20 km. to the north of Konin, in the old-Polish Kalisz voivodeship, Konin district, on the borderline between Great Poland and Kujawy. According to the census of 1673 it was inhabited by 230 plebeians, a number approximately amounting to half the population of the district's capital town, Konin. Among the townships in its closest vicinity it could only be compared to Kazimierz Biskupi (made up at that time of two separate urban organisms — the other was Krystynów). Other urban settlements in this region could rather be called bigger villages (Wilczyn — 95, Ślesin — 80, Skulsk — 62 people subject to taxation)³.

What prevailed in the region of Kleczew was petty and middle-size gentry property. The largest complex of estates was the Kazimierz demesne, embracing, apart from the township, some villages. However, estates embracing only a part of a village were here very numerous. Kleczew itself was divided into several parts, which frequently changed their owners. It seems that about the year 1680 this township consisted only of two parts⁴. Due to complicated ownership relations and inheritance lawsuits, Kleczew was the subject of many litigation processes, especially in the 18th century⁵.

³ Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw (henceforward: AGAD), ASK sec. I, 74, fol.40, 76v, 831. According to Irena Gieysztorowa the censuses showed at the most barely a half of the actual population of a given locality, thus these numbers should be doubled to achieve the quantities close to the actual ones, see I. Gieysztorowa, *Wstęp do demografii staropolskiej (Introduction to Old-Polish Demography)*, Warszawa 1976, p. 196.

⁴ See State Archives in Poznań (henceforward: APP), Konin Gr. 60, fol. 75.

⁵ Cf. *Dzieje Kleczewa (The History of Kleczew)*, ed. J. Stępień, Poznań-Konin 1995, pp. 68-69.

The activity of the municipalities of Kleczew is documented by a set of *advocatus*' and assessors' books preserved from 1594 onwards. From other townships in the vicinity, we have at our disposal only two books concerning the 17th c., that of the *advocatus*, and of the mayor of Kazimierz and Krystynów⁶. In all those books it is only exceptionally that we come across some evidence of the investigation of criminal cases by the local urban courts of justice. As far as witchcraft is concerned, only one trial is mentioned — in the will of Katarzyna Gawłowska of 1686, which she made "being accused of witchcraft, in the last term of her life". The judgement was pronounced by the lawcourt at Kazimierz, and the will was entered both in the Kazimierz and Kleczew records⁷.

The problem of the witch-hunt in the vicinity of Kleczew appears in quite a different light if we examine the unique criminal register of this town from the years 1624–1738⁸, preserved in the collections of the Poznań Society for the Advancement of the Arts and Sciences (*PTPN*), where we can find extensive records of the witchcraft trials of 131 people, at least 92 of whom were condemned to the stake. Other offences did not take up so much attention of the Kleczew assessors, since only 18 trials coming under other clauses were recorded, including 17 death sentences.

The Kleczew criminal register for the first time ever arrested the attention of a scholar, Karol Koranyi, in the 1920s. On the basis of the material it contained, he wrote, among others, the article *Łysa Góra. Studium z dziejów wierzeń ludowych w Polsce w XVII i XVIII w. (Łysa Góra. A Study in the History of Folk Beliefs in 17th–18th c. Poland)*⁹. He also made a manuscript copy of the whole register, assisted in this task by a renowned archivist, Helena Pola cz k ó w n a. This copy is now held in the Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw¹⁰. During the

⁶ AGAD, Kazimierz 3 and 4.

⁷ AGAD, Kazimierz 4, p. 107, APP, Records of the town of Kleczew 1/5, p. 74.

⁸ The Library of The Poznań Society for the Advancement of the Arts and Sciences (*PTPN*), MS 859. This is the source of all the quotations in the further part of this work, unless the footnote cites other sources.

⁹ K. Koranyi, *Łysa Góra. Studium z dziejów wierzeń ludowych w Polsce w XVII i XVIII wieku (Łysa Góra. A Study in the History of Folk Beliefs in 17th–18th Century Poland)*, "Lud", series II, vol. 7(27), 1928, pp. 57–74.

¹⁰ The Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, The Bequest of Karol Koranyi, no call number.

Second World War the original register was lost, and Koranyi started thinking of publishing his copy, prepared before the war. PTPN grew interested in the idea; Karol Koranyi delivered a report on the subject at the session of the Society's Historical Commission¹¹ and set to preparing a typescript copy of the register. Having typed 22 pages, he dropped the project, probably realising that his copy did not stand up to the standards of source editions. Fortunately, the original register was found. However, it did not attract the attention of historians for a very long time. It was only in the 1990s that Jerzy Łojko looked it up while preparing the pre-partition part of *Dzieje Kleczewa (The History of Kleczew)*¹², and was followed by Jerzy Stępień, who wrote an amateur, sensational book *Kleczewskie procesy o czary (The Witchcraft Trials in Kleczew)*¹³, which in fact was a compilation of citations from the source.

As the records in the register show, the lawcourt in Kleczew investigated criminal cases not only in this town, but was also invited in cases punishable by death by the owners of the nearby villages and even townships — Kazimierz, Ślesin and Wilczyn. It seems that it practically acquired a monopoly for conducting criminal cases within a radius of 12–15 kilometres of Kleczew. However, the Kleczew criminal register certainly did not enter all the witchcraft trials in the region. We have mentioned above the death sentence on Katarzyna Gawłowska issued by the lawcourt of Kazimierz in 1686 — the records of this trial have not been preserved, only her last will. The records of Kleczew also mention other witches burnt in the nearby villages and townships, and even in Kleczew itself, the trials of which had not been recorded in the criminal register of this town, although, one can suppose, these judgements were passed by the Kleczew lawcourt (e.g. fol. 46v, 107v, 155). Finally, one cannot rule out the activity of other urban lawcourts in the area, e.g. the lawcourt of Konin, of which we know that in 1702 it investigated a case of brutal murder in Kleczew itself¹⁴. Besides, the criminal register of Kleczew is in

¹¹ Its summary appeared in print: K. Koranyi, *Księga miasta Kleczewa (1624–1730) (The Book of the Town of Kleczew [1624–1730])*, "Sprawozdania PTPN", No 1 (42), 1950/51, p. 84.

¹² See note 5.

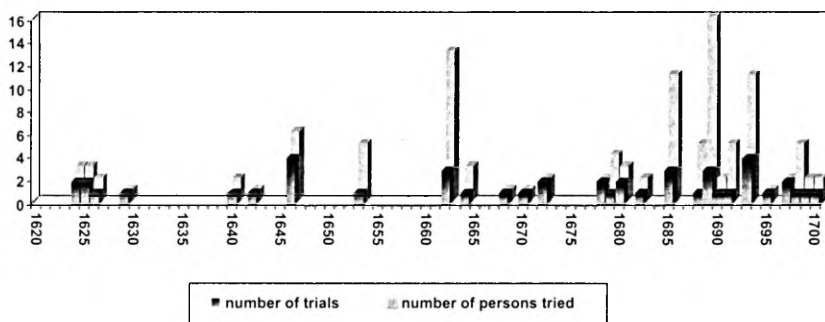
¹³ J. Stępień, *Kleczewskie procesy o czary (The Kleczew Witchcraft Trials)*, Poznań 1998.

¹⁴ APP, Records of the town of Konin, I/13, fol. 4v–5.

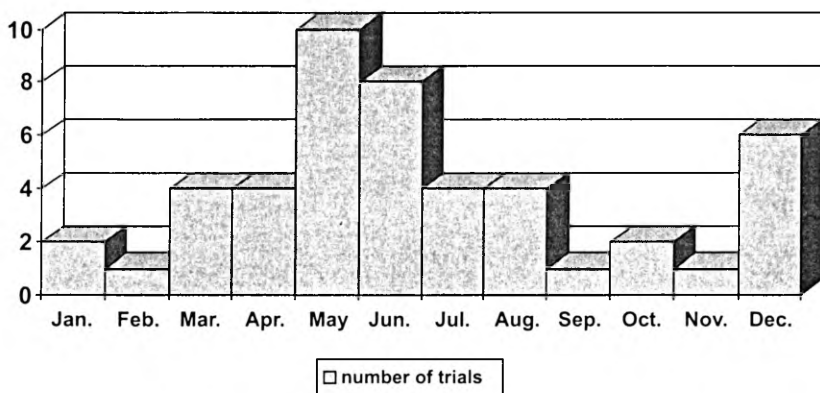
itself a defective source — its first pages are missing, the minutes are mixed together, some of them can be defined as rough copies, some records are unfinished, others have no beginning, sometimes only the *incipit* of a case, or the defendant's testimony was recorded. There are practically no entries of the 1650s and of the first quarter of the 18th c. Nevertheless, the register provides ample source material, especially for the 17th century.

In the years 1624–1700 the lawcourt of Kleczew conducted 47 documented trials for witchcraft, where judgements were passed on 116 persons: 111 women and 5 men. At least 65 sentences to death at the stake were pronounced, 5 persons were banished, and 10 were exculpated or told to solemnly disavow their guilt. **Graph 1** shows the chronological distribution of trials for witchcraft before the lawcourt in Kleczew in the 17th century, and the number of persons tried for this crime in particular years. The first period of the intensification of trials took place in the years 1624–1629, then they were reduced to isolated cases over several dozen years, to become more and more frequent in the 1660s and 1670s, and to reach their apogee from 1678 up till the end of the century. As it has been mentioned above, the register keeps silent for the whole of the first quarter of the 18th c., and the next trial for witchcraft comes only in 1725.

This distribution may certainly be the result of the incompleteness of the source. However, the fact that the last quarter of the 17th century saw an apogee of the persecution of witches is confirmed, too, by the annual ratio, shown in **Graph 1**, of the number of witchcraft trials to the number of persons on whom judgement was passed in particular years. It can easily be seen



1. Number of witchcraft trials and persons tried for witchcraft by the lawcourt of Kleczew in 1624–1700.

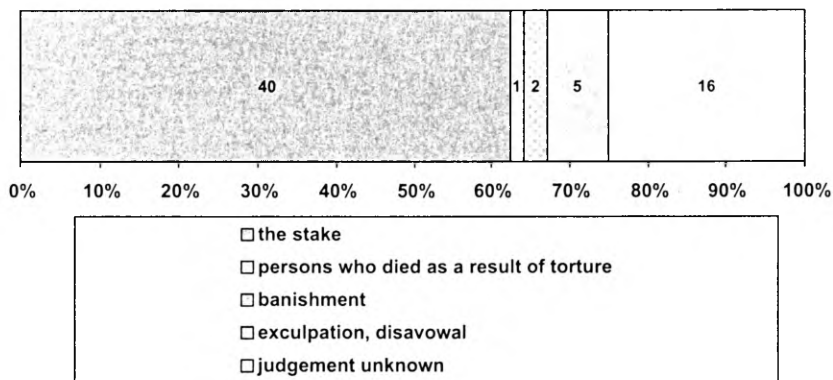


2. Distribution of witchcraft trials held before the lawcourt of Kleczew in particular seasons, between 1624–1700.

that the trials were not only more and more frequent, but that more persons were tried in each case. The practice was such that the persons summoned at inquisitions by the examined witch were immediately brought to the court.

Since in the majority of cases we know the dates of the trials before the lawcourt in Kleczew, we can establish the distribution of trials for witchcraft in particular seasons. This is shown by **Graph 2**. What strikes our attention is the greatest frequency of trials held late in the spring and in summer, especially in May and June. There are no premisses which would allow an explanation of this fact. Probably, in the preharvest period people were more sensitive to real or imagined offences against their food resources — indeed, the witches were most frequently charged with spoiling the crops and depriving the cows of their milk. This may also be connected with the fact that May and June in folk culture were months of intensive magic practices (this was a period of Rogation days, Whitsuntide, Corpus Christi and St. John's Eve).

For the analysis of the social background of witchcraft trials let us use the chronological period of 1682–1700, i.e. the apogee of persecution, at the same time providing us with the most complete data on the subject. The establishment of the beginning of this period as 1682 (and not 1678, as **Graph 1** would suggest), results from the contents of the minutes of the court sessions. In fact, the trials for witchcraft of 1678–1680 were connected with

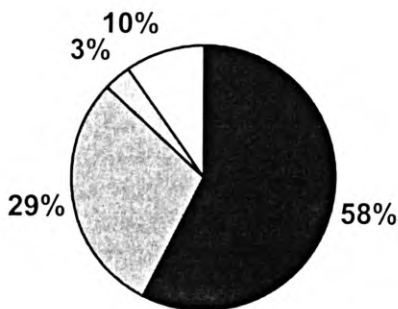


3. Judgements passed in witchcraft trials held before the lawcourt of Kleczew in 1682–1700.

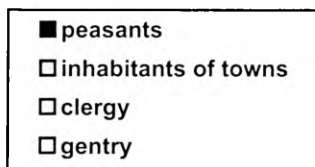
accusations from the turn of the 1660s. In 1682 a new circle of suspects appears, as if a new generation of witches, which arrests the attention of the lawcourt up till 1700.

Thus in the period from 1682 to 1700 we know of 21 trials for witchcraft held before the Kleczew court of justice. These trials took place in Kleczew itself, in the township of Ślesin, and the villages of Budziszław, Czastków, Marszewo, Nieborzyn, Paniewo, Ostrowąż, Ostrowite, Szyszynko, Wąsosze and Złotków. All these localities lie within a radius of at the most 12 km in a direct line from Kleczew. In these 21 trials 64 persons were accused, including 3 men. At least 59 defendants were tortured. We know of the fate of 48 accused persons — it is presented in **Graph 3**. Probably seven other persons were also condemned to the stake, and two were exculpated.

A detailed analysis of the records of these years enables us to identify 483 people involved in some way in the trials for witchcraft, i.e. the judges, accusers and witnesses, as well as those injured, accused, summoned and mentioned in other roles. All the localities from which these persons came have been placed on **Map A**. Together they create a close-set complex of townships and villages within a radius of 15 km., i.e. a region we have called “the vicinity of Kleczew”. Only a few of the localities mentioned are separated by 25–35 kilometres from Kleczew. Although they do not lie at a much bigger distance, they do not belong to “the vicinity”. They appear in the context of “moving” from there into the vicinity of Kleczew, or the other way round. A nobleman from



4. The social background of persons identified on the basis of the records of witchcraft trials held before the lawcourt of Kleczew in 1682-1700.



one of those villages, Wronowy, who wishes to support the accusation of one of the witches, does not come to the trial personally, as was the custom among the local gentry, but sends in a letter with the description of the defendant's offences (fol. 61). The vicinity of Kleczew, as it emerges from the records of the trials for witchcraft, has nothing in common with any administrative units, for it ignores completely any political boundaries (of voivodships or districts), marked on the map, or ecclesiastical borders (of dioceses, or deaneries) (see **Map A**).

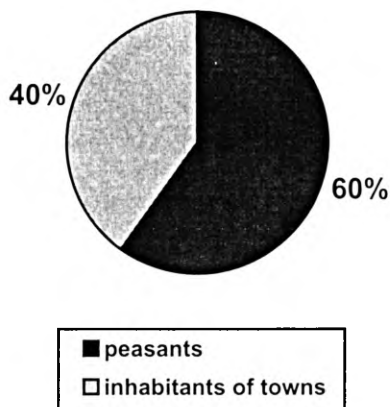
As regards the social stratification, the persons we have identified belonged to all social estates. The proportional share of particular social groups is shown in **Graph 4**. The category "inhabitants of towns" includes all the plebeians living in towns, not only the burghers. However, at least 67% of this group probably enjoyed civic rights, while only 5% can certainly be defined as servants or the poor. The social status of the rest of the mentioned inhabitants remains unknown.

As regards the role these persons played in the trials, they can be divided into five basic groups:

1) defendants;

2) accusers and witnesses — these functions frequently overlapped, since according to the Magdeburg law, in order to

5. Defendants in the trials between 1682-1700.



start a witchcraft trial the court of justice needed an avowed testimony of the instigator; thus this group embraces the persons that were ready to declare upon oath that the defendant was guilty;

3) those injured by witchcraft — they were frequently the accusers and witnesses, or their relatives, but above all the victims of witchcraft mentioned by the defendants during the interrogation;

4) those summoned by the defendants as female or male witches, or participants in the witches' sabbaths who had not been brought to the lawcourt in Kleczew;

5) the judges.

The defendants in witchcraft trials were usually peasants, less frequently inhabitants of towns (see **Graph 5**), in a definite majority women (95%). It is hard to define their age. Only a few supposed witches were described as "old", and approximately the same number were teenagers, or simply children (the youngest defendant was 10 years old). The rest, it seems, were in their prime, often wives of craftsmen, or innkeepers. So there is no confirmation of the stereotype of a witch as a poor old woman, pushed to the margins of society.

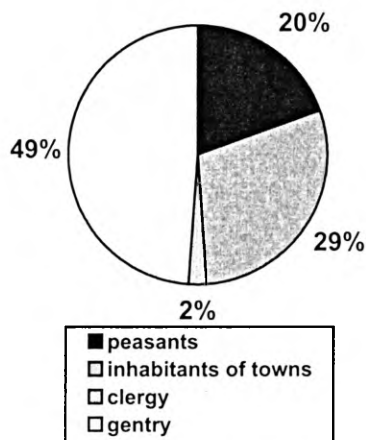
They were accused of doing harm to the victims' health or property, and frequently of the theft of the Holy Sacrament, which

seems to be a local characteristic. On the other hand, of little significance for accusations were the discovered items of material evidence — e.g. the “pots with filth” or “magic ointments”, so popular in Little Poland. The summoning by another witch was treated as an important proof of guilt, since “there can be no better proof than such a summoning up till the very death” — as Wojciech Żyliński, the owner of Budzisław (fol. 207), justified his accusation. In the extreme case of the supposed witch Jadwiga Wieczorkowa of Szyszynko, the court recognized even two summons of her by the peasant-women burnt at the stakes in other villages as sufficient proof for sentencing her to death, although she did not plead guilty of anything under torture (fol. 155).

The accusation of witchcraft was usually caused by magic practices in husbandry, or ineffective quackery. However, we can come across some cases that defy such pragmatic explanations. Of interest are, for example, the threads combining witchcraft with merry-making. E.g., Regina Ślosarka confessed that “being on the booze I renounced the Lord and the Holy Virgin, and joined the Devil”, and “I learned wizardry from drink” (fol. 134v). The witness in Regina Serbakówna’s trial, Katarzyna, a daughter of a town servant, confessed: “when I was lying in the brewery, she persuaded me to dance with her, and I wanted to go to “gościniec” or to “Goczałka” [names of inns in Kleczew], but she did not want to, but rather she told me: better let us go to Toruń [a city lying approximately 80 km. away from Kleczew], we will be there in an hour (...) She persuaded me to renounce Our Lord, and join the Devil, promising me I would be happy until death. I said it would be long before I returned from Toruń. She clasped me and kissed insisting on me to go with her: we would easily be there before we say a prayer, for they play there beautifully” (fol. 132).

Finally, of some significance could also be mental disturbances. Sixteen-year old Marianna, caught while “having tied the hands of St. John and the Holy Virgin in the local church [i.e. in Wąsosze] with raw threads from her underwear”, even before the trial told all and sundry that “the Devil followed her, forcing her to have intercourse with him. Also when she slept with another girl behind the stove, he came to her, told her to move aside, and planted himself between them, saying: move aside, I will sleep here” (fol. 146).

6. Accusers and witnesses in witchcraft trials in 1682–1700.



Among the accusers and witnesses the most numerous group consisted of the gentry (see **Graph 6**), usually owners of the nearby villages, convinced of the evil deeds of their subjects. Among them is, e.g., a certain Gordziński, the tenant of Nieborzyn village, who “lodged a complaint about Anna Muszina, his subject, for as soon as I had beaten her I fell ill through her doing and I swear she is guilty” (fol. 73). This was the mode of thinking shared by the gentry with the inhabitants of towns and peasants. For example a peasant from Marszewo village, Jan Czekaj, bore witness during the trial of Maruszka — a witch — that “when my wife saw the said Maruszka take a parsnip from her sister, I quarrelled with her that night, and our child suffocated to death” (fol. 61).

An exceptional example of a fearless witch-hunter was Wojciech Breza of Wąsosze, a nephew of Wojciech Konstanty Breza, voivode of Kalisz, and later of Poznań¹⁵. Convinced that his son Franciszek was put to death by the witches, he brought about a trial of his four subjects in 1688. Then he made the tenant of

¹⁵ See genealogical materials concerning the Breza family in: *Teki Dworzaczka v.1.2.0. Materiały historyczno-genealogiczne do dziejów szlachty wielkopolskiej XV–XX w. (Dworzaczek’s Folders v.1.2.0. Historico-genealogical Materials for the History of the Gentry in Great Poland in the 15th–20th Centuries)*, dir. J. Wislocki, monographs — file BOR-BRON.B-4.

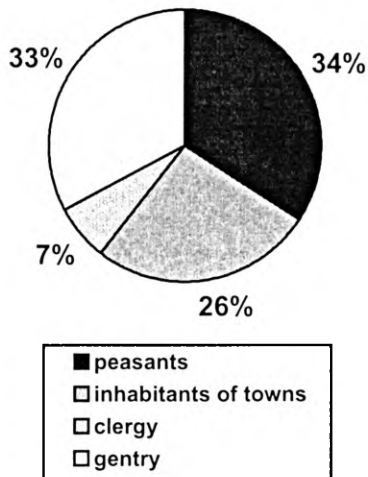
the township of Ślesin, Jakub Rościerski, bring to court (in 1689) five townswomen summoned by them. During this trial he appeared as a prosecutor on a par with the tenant Rościerski. At the end of May 1691 he again called the court of Kleczew to Wąsosze in order to try his subjects charged with witchcraft and the theft of the Holy Sacrament. Altogether, during four years, Breza brought to court 13 witches, 10 of whom were burnt at the stake, and two banished, since they did not admit any guilt under torture (the fate of one remains unknown). As many as five of those burnt women came from Wąsosze, Breza's ancestral village, and two others were servants in his manor-house there (the records of trials: fol. 48–53v, 138–152, 156–160). Let us add that Wąsosze was a tiny settlement — according to the census of 1673, only eight peasants were there taxpayers¹⁶, and Breza's activity cannot even be called “decimation”, it was an outright slaughter of his subjects.

It should be noted that the special activeness of the Kleczew lawcourt in its fight against the witches was not inspired by the owners of this town — at any rate we can find no traces of such an inspiration. Only one witchcraft trial in Kleczew took place at the request of the owner of a part of the township, Eufrozyna Rusocka and her sons (fol. 34). The records of other trials do not even mention the owners and tenants of the town, although there can be no doubt that they must have known and appreciated the activity of the Kleczew lawcourt.

Among those injured we can as frequently find the gentry, as the townspeople and peasants (see **Graph 7**), and even clergymen, whose involvement in witchcraft trials seems disproportionately small (considering the fact that the cases in point were a breach of the first of the Ten Commandments). The reason for belonging to this group was extremely subjective, it was based on personal prejudice, belief in somebody's ill will, malicious gossip, and sometimes it reflected the actually hostile attitude of alleged witches, perhaps even their real acts. For example, it does not seem that the story about the peasant Jan Białas of Paniewo, who insisted on the maid of the village owner Tomasz Tomicki, that she serve the Devil to her master in hot beer, when her “master forced him to plough too much” (fol. 59v), can be attributed to the raving of a woman tortured by a hangman. This was one of

¹⁶ AGAD. ASK sec. I, 74, fol. 38.

**7. Those injured by witchcraft
in 1682–1700.**

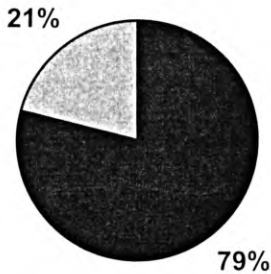


the methods of solving conflicts at that time, applied even by the gentry. Half a century earlier the owners of the nearby Czastków, the Jeziorkowski brothers, tried to treat to such “spiced” beer the parish priest of Dobrosłowo, during his post-Christmas visit, with whom they had a dispute over the tithe¹⁷.

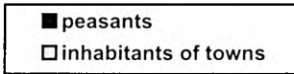
Thus one can hardly wonder that Michał Jezierski, the tenant of Ostrowite village, who sent to the stake two of his subjects, became the object of malicious magic and finally fell victim to the witchcraft of Jadwiga Pasturka “through whom he embraced death” (fol. 161). And when the horse of the above-mentioned Wojciech Breza was killed by magic, “when he had sent for the master [i.e. the hangman]”, the witches of Ślesin — according to the eye-witness’s testimony — “boasted of it at their sabbath, dancing and clapping their hands” (fol. 134).

The magic attack could thus be a result of helplessness in the face of an opponent who could not be reached by other methods, but not necessarily. For example the teenager witch Marianna Czubatka confessed “I spoilt Tomek of Licheń, son of the peasant Szczęsny, by magic, [for] he wooed some girl and

¹⁷ APP, Konin Gr. 53, fol. 685.

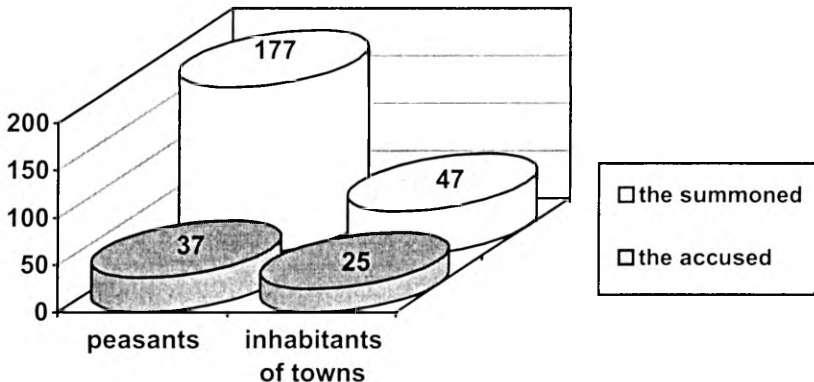


8. Those summoned in the trials in 1682-1700.



I was jealous” (fol. 150), while the wife of Bartosz Misiak, out of spite “put four head of his cattle to death, because he used to beat me” (fol. 113v).

Just as the accused, those summoned were mainly peasants and inhabitants of towns (see **Graph 8**). The clear predominance of peasants in this group can be explained by the greater effectiveness of the Kleczew lawcourt in bringing to justice its own citizens. Indeed, to try a peasant from another village this court had to be invited by its owner. This can be clearly seen in **Graph 9**, presenting the comparison of the number of the accused to the summoned inhabitants of towns and peasants.



9. The comparison of the number of persons accused to those summoned in the trials in 1682-1700.

The relation between the two sexes among the summoned was more equal than between the accused, since only 78% were women, and 22% men. It should be noted, however, that the majority of men were accused not of active magic practices, but only of playing on queer instruments at the banquets in the places of the witches' sabbath.

The credibility of the summons forced by torture did not arouse then any doubt, while at present it is questioned, as they are regarded as symptoms of an imaginary "conspiracy of the witches". A part of the summons might have indeed been suggested by the interrogators or by the circumstances of the trial — this concerns especially the mutual summoning of the persons who were tried together. We can, however, specify some other categories. In the first place, the persons summoned were sometimes local witches on whom judgement had already been passed, and the interrogated probably had never seen them in person. Secondly, the persons summoned were those who had managed to flee before the trial. Thirdly, the interrogated summoned the quacks, e.g. Maruszka of Marszewo pointed out some woman from Drażna, "who told me to apply an adder to my daughter's leg", probably as a cure (fol. 61v). This might have also been the case of Reina Wątrobina from Rostoka village near Kleczew, regularly summoned from 1685 to 1698 by the inhabitants of this town tried for witchcraft.

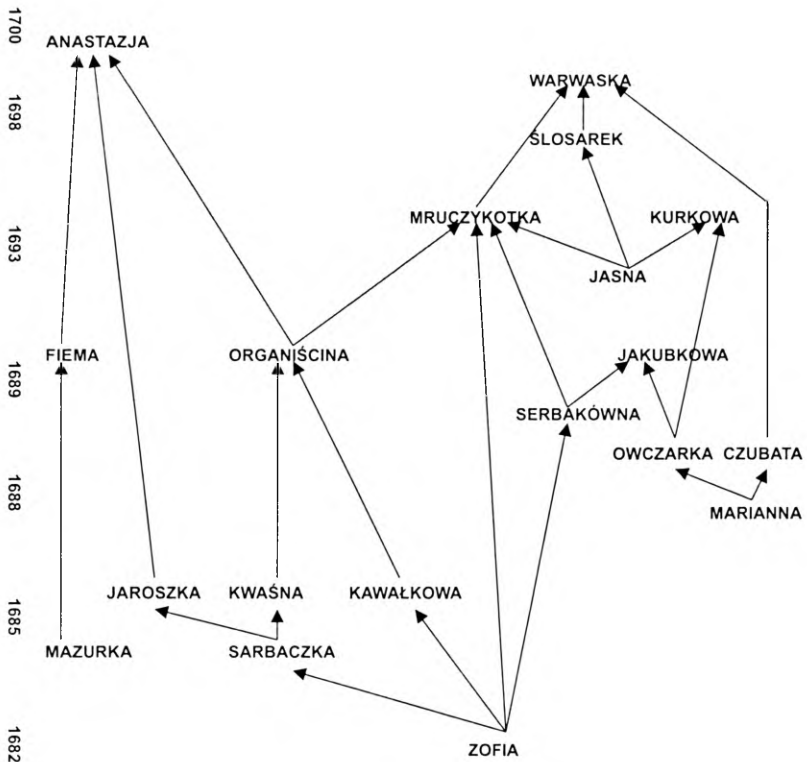
Other summons probably concerned the people personally known to the accused. The criterion of selection might have been private enmity, e.g. a boy Teodor, tried for witchcraft in 1693, summoned Zofia Owczarżówna — "for she used to beat me" — as he confessed himself, having called off his accusation after she had been tortured (fol. 118v). The witch Maryna, burnt at Kościeszki (the record of this trial is missing from the Kleczew books), was said to have summoned Jadwiga Wieczorkowa of Szyszynko, since the latter "quarrelled with her over some calves" (fol. 154v). The motives of some summons are quite mysterious to us, e.g. why Agnieszka Sarbaczka accused of witchcraft the housekeeper of the parish priest of Kleczew (fol. 196). Or why Zofia Balcerka and Jagna of Wąsosze summoned in 1691 the *advocatus* of the town of Ślesin, Grzegorz Szajda, who two years earlier had gone bail for two witches who were pardoned (fol. 141, 143, 159).

It seems that the basic criterion of choosing people for the summons were actual relationships of a social character. Indeed, many summons concerned kinsfolk or relatives, neighbours or people of the same profession. It is probable that the names of those who took part in the banquets at the places of the witches' sabbath, mentioned during torture, happened to reflect the list of the participants in actual social meetings, especially because innkeepers and musicians figured in it quite frequently. The geographical distribution of the summons, prepared on the basis of the testimonies of eight selected witches (**Map B**)¹⁸, seems to present the scope of the social contacts of the peasants and inhabitants of towns in this region.

In the testimonies of those accused of witchcraft in the years 1682–1700, a part of the names of the summoned are repeated in various configurations, which gives the impression of some separate group of people who exercised magic practices. **Graph 10** shows the mutual summons by the people tried for witchcraft by the lawcourt of Kleczew. Account has been taken of 19 persons (i.e. 30% of the totality of those tried in 1682–1700), coming from Budziszlaw, Nieborzyn, Kleczew, Wąsosze and Złotków. The density of their mutual connections may suggest their membership in some "sect of witches", which was acknowledged by their contemporaries with horror. However, this is a false impression. Almost each defendant, while tortured, summoned several or a dozen-odd persons, and the record-breaker even about 40 people. In fact, the community of Kleczew and its vicinity was relatively small, which, of necessity, reduced the group of possible acquaintances, so that the names had to be repeated.

However, the potential circle of those accused of witchcraft was not defined by the summons. This circle was defined, indeed, by the adequacy of the lawcourt. That is, any inhabitant of Kleczew and any peasant from a village to which the court of Kleczew was invited, might become the victim of a trial. The summons, however, gave the trials a special dynamic and helped to sustain the atmosphere of menace by the evil powers. Given a larger number of the accused, it was not hard to reach the

¹⁸ They are: Zofia Mazurka of Budziszlaw (fol. 202–204v), Jadwiga Pasturka of Czastków (fol. 161–163), Anna Jaroszka of Kleczew (fol. 194v–201), Jadwiga Czekajka of Marszewo (fol. 207–210), Katarzyna Pawliczka of Nieborzyn (fol. 97–102), Regina Skotarka of Ostrowite (fol. 106–110), Anna Kowalka of Paniewo (fol. 59–60v), and Marianna of Wąsosze (fol. 48–53v, 146–152).



10. Diagram of the summons by those tried for witchcraft before the lawcourt of Kleczew in 1682–1700 (only a part of the mutual summons of those judged in successive trials are shown here).

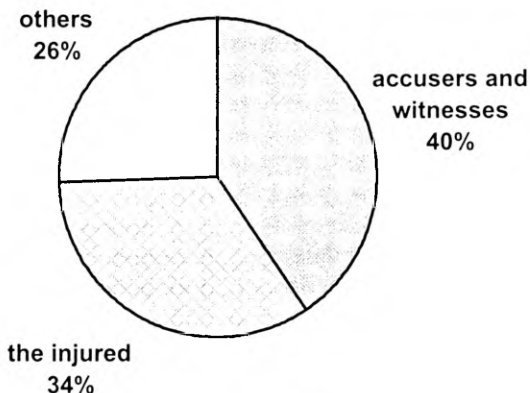
“critical mass” of the summons, in face of which nobody could feel safe and the cohesion of the local community underwent a destruction. The proof of such a situation is “The decree about the refugees and vagrants, summoned both by those departed from this world and tried at present” issued by the *advocatus*’ lawcourt and the town council on 30 May 1685, during a several-day-long trial of six witches of Kleczew. It said that “whoever is summoned at the present term, both by those who departed this world and who will meet their death today, and has failed to

appear, or avoided this term, without having given any testimony of his innocence (...) is deprived of any dignity in the neighbourhood, and he cannot have anything in common with his neighbours any more" (fol. 199v–200).

The group of the judges was, of course, the most homogeneous — it consisted exclusively of male burghers. Unfortunately, we do not know the names of the members of the bench in all the trials. From among those we know, the most deserving was Wojciech Narożny, *alias* Morisen, who passed judgements in six trials for witchcraft — once as mayor, and twice as *advocatus*. Thus he tried for witchcraft altogether 18 persons, 13 of whom he condemned to the stake. Another very active judge was Jan Prusak (at least 12 death sentences in 6 trials). Stanisław Siedlimowicz, *notarius iuratus*, was mentioned as the official scribe in 5 trials (at least 10 sentences to the stake).

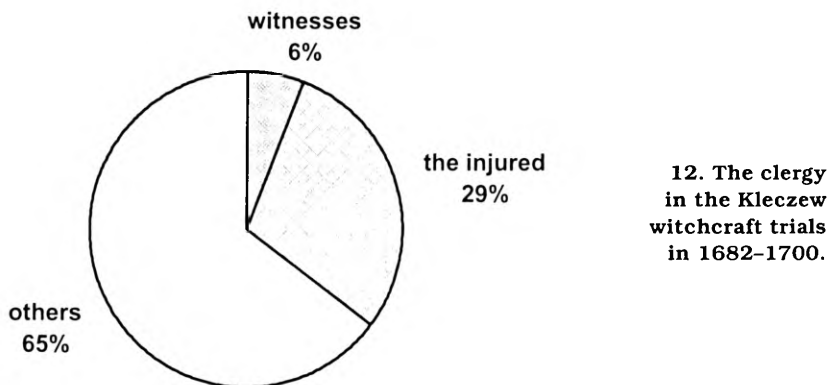
The latter two were members of the bench invited in 1691 by Paweł and Marcin Zbierzchowski, the owners of the village Szy-szynko, in order to try two subjects whose witchcraft allegedly damaged the health of the accusers' mother. This case stands out from other witchcraft trials before the Kleczew court over the 19 years under discussion. In fact, this was the only trial where the judges showed their distance to the act of indictment. Having carried out the initial interrogation of the defendants, the bench "acknowledged the bare complaint of Their Honours as unjustified, and refused to try the said women, for the lack of any proof". However, it was not for this purpose that the bench was invited. The possessors "demanded from the court that [the accused] be put to torture, especially taking all responsibility for the sentence on Jadwiga Wieczorkowa", and they committed themselves "not to bother the court with anything, but verily to answer for everybody before Our Lord". The court made an inquiry of Wieczorkowa, during which she did not admit anything. The Kleczew court washed its hands of the whole case, but formulated a queer judgement: "Thus the above-mentioned gentlemen take all responsibility for your [Wieczorkowa's] fate before Our Lord Crucified and relieve the court of any responsibility. Thus such a decree is passed on you, that you be burnt with fire" (fol. 154–155). This trial was in fact a beguilement of the court into giving its assent to murder.

11. The gentry in the Kleczew witchcraft trials in 1682–1700.



In the trial of the women inhabitants of Kleczew in 1685, which resulted in six death sentences and the above-mentioned “Decree on the summoned refugees”, one of the judges, Andrzej Sitkowski, acted both as the injured party and witness, and attested under oath the guilt of three defendants (fol. 195, 206v). By the way, let us add that half a century later, the daughter-in-law of another judge in this trial, Wojciech Wrąmblikowic, was burnt at the stake for witchcraft by his successors (fol. 74–80).

Let us see now what was the role of particular social estates in the context of witchcraft trials. **Graph 11** shows the role played by the gentry. It should be noted that the accusers and witnesses were frequently at the same time the injured party. Thus the gentry was set in the position of a victim of the magic practices of their subjects. The instituting of a lawsuit and inviting the town court of justice to their estates was a defence against the attack of dangerous criminals, and the theological or rather demonological character of this attack receded into the background. It was not the Devil who threatened a gentleman, but this gentleman’s subjects, who would not shrink even from scheming with the Devil. Hence the special emphasis on the estate solidarity of the gentry in the face of witchcraft. Wojciech Żychliński, the owner of Marszewo, having invited the assessors of Kleczew to his manor-house, lodged the following complaint: “Gracious Court, I have heard from the village of Budziszław that His Honour Chrząszczewski having carried out an execution, and tried his female subject criminals, who departing this world summoned my subject Czekajka and others, said that he was eager to sue



12. The clergy in the Kleczew witchcraft trials in 1682-1700.

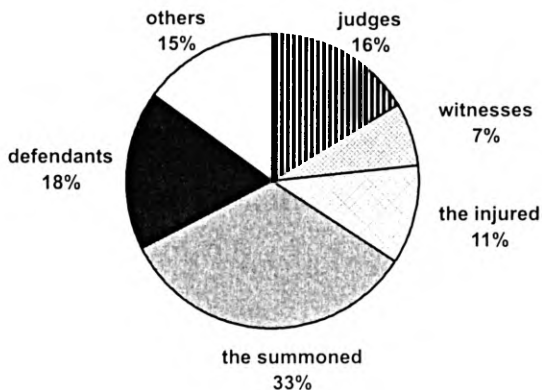
his neighbours who would not try their subjects for the same, (...) so I request the execution of those women who stay in prison now, since there can be no better proof than such a summons up till their death" (fol. 207).

The only nobleman we know of who broke out of this solidarity in the vicinity of Kleczew was Jan Cieliński, the *subcaptaneus* from Ostrowite village. He was said to shut his eyes to the magic practices of Regina Skotarka and Regina Matuszka in return for so enigmatically called "various gifts" (fol. 106). The new tenant, however, made short work of the problem and brought the witches to the court.

As has been mentioned, the involvement of the clergy in witchcraft trials seems disproportionately small. **Graph 12**, showing their role, requires a commentary. An active attitude of the clergy was encountered very seldom. Over 19 years only one trial had been initiated by a priest — in 1691 the parish priest of Licheń, Stanisław Wojciech Walichnowski, sent Zofia Balcerka, detained while attempting a theft of the Holy Sacrament, to Wojciech Breza, ordering "to tell him about this great dishonour to Our Lord" (fol. 139). However, he did not testify against her before the court of justice, but sent the parochial teacher, Jan Dziubiński, to do that.

In modern times the Catholic Church in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth maintained as a matter of principle that witchcraft trials were the task of spiritual, and not lay courts of justice. At the beginning of the 18th c. the consistory of Gniezno went as far as to sentence the judges of witchcraft trials to

13. The inhabitants of towns in the Kleczew witchcraft trials in 1682-1700.



ecclesiastical punishment, and to threaten the accusers with the Crown Tribunal¹⁹, however the parish clergy in their everyday practice consented to use the Magdeburg law in the cases of witchcraft. One of the examples might be Rev. Sierakowski, the heir of Złotków village, who in 1700 gave his consent to the invitation of the court of Kleczew by his tenant Łukasz Goleniewski, in order to try the witch Anastazja Kaczmarka (fol. 65).

Although the clergy generally kept aloof from witchcraft trials, yet the witches willingly chose them as their target. Two women from the hospital injured the horses (fol. 60) of the priest of Siedlimowo, while the priest named Parul from Ślesin “through the work [of a witch, Marianna Kazimierzówna], had a hand pierced” (fol. 148). Regina Matuszka and Regina Skotarka of Ostrowite confessed that “through our witchcraft a cow of the parish priest died, and more would die, but he ordered to drive his cattle into the cemetery, said the Holy Mass and sprinkled them with holy water, this helped, for he would have lost more of them” (fol. 108v).

Indeed, clergymen had a certain power to prevent the damage caused by witchcraft, and at least knew how to recognize and foresee its effect. The priests who could disclose the wicked deeds of the witches make up almost a half of the “others” indicated in **Graph 13**. There is e.g. a priest-exorcist (i.e. an expert in these

¹⁹ M. Aleksandrowicz, *Z badań nad dziejami religijności wiernych na przykładzie archidiaconatu gnieźnieńskiego w początku XVIII w. (From the Studies in the History of the Religiousness of Believers as Exemplified by the Archdeaconry of Gniezno at the Beginning of the 18th c.)*, “Roczniki Humanistyczne”, v. 24, 1976, fasc. 2, p. 10.

matters), who foretold Szymon Komorowski of Nieborzyn that his daughter “would not live more than four weeks; but it was not the daughter who was the target of evil deeds, but her mother” (fol. 97v). But ordinary parish priests were also able to provide such kind of information. The parish priest of Ślesin explained to the burgher who was the victim of witchcraft that the witch used the wrong kind of powder: “if she had spilled on you that made of human bones, you would have immediately burst, but she used one of cattle bones” (fol. 157). Another priest was said to have informed Wojciech Breza that a certain Jędrzejka “acted upon his eyes”, i.e. “had passed his hair through the eyes of a frog” (fol. 144v).

The inhabitants of towns were the social group, which was the most antagonized by the witchcraft trials (see **Graph 13**). Any neighbour could be a witch, and the only rescue could be found in the ruthless persecution of evil. However, the activity of the “holy justice” also aroused fear because of its haphazard character, since it was directed by unpredictable summons. This is how Sobestian Wiechetek, the later *advocatus*, described the behaviour of his wife, Zofia, during a witchcraft trial in 1698: “First when she heard of [Kazimierz] Ślosarek’s torture, she spoke to me, weeping out of sympathy: I am so sorry for him as if he were my own husband, then she said, the ladies from the town, that is Toruńska, Warwaska, Gabaszka and Kowalka Lekka will not have fun any more. Then she went to the cemetery, knelt down and said her prayer. Asked why she was doing that, she answered: so I did once when they were burning the witches, and no hair of my head was touched. This happened in the evening *alias* sunset, she wore only a shift and a petticoat” (fol. 168). This time, however, she did not get away with it and was burnt. It is possible that this was also due to the testimony of her husband.

The witchcraft trials often involved whole families of townspeople. In Ślesin, the townsmen Giełoża, Szwed and Szajda together with their wives were summoned; Katarzyna Kazimierka was burnt, and her daughter Marianna was banished on the strength of a court judgement (1689). In Kleczew, Regina Ślosarka (probably 1689) and her son Kazimierz (1698), Agnieszka Sarbaczka (1685) and her daughter Regina (1689) perished at the stake; Paweł Popiołek and his two daughters were summoned, and one of them — Małgorzata Mruczykotka was sentenced to

death. It is more difficult to establish the relations between the defendants on the one hand and accusers and judges on the other. We know that the summoned Szajda was the *advocatus* of Ślesin, the husband of the witch Zofia Wiechetskowa in time became the *advocatus* of Kleczew, and it is possible that the other witch, Słosarka, was the wife of an assessor from Kleczew.

What was it like living in a town where everybody could harm everybody else with witchcraft, or become his prosecutor in a trial which almost certainly ended in a ruthless judgement? The everyday life of this township is best illustrated by town books which registered business transactions, disputes over property, quarrels and mutual complaints of its inhabitants. As was noted at the beginning, the extant series of *advocatus*' and assessors' records of Kleczew contains only one passage about witchcraft, and this relates to a townswoman from Kazimierz. However, if we read these records through the prism of the criminal register, we discover the context of everyday life in Kleczew that was hard to perceive at first glance. Let us take for example the testament of Andrzej Warwas of 1691 and two acts of execution appended to it in 1693. The testator makes his son Walenty his heir whom he orders to pay off his sisters Magdalena and Anna and his second wife Marianna²⁰. We know, from other sources, the fate of Warwas's first wife: Anna Warwaska, summoned in the trial of 1685 as the alleged queen of the witches (fol. 196v), talked under torture about her intimate contacts with the Devil Janek, "who lay with her and had better [sexual organs] than her husband" (fol. 44); she finally perished at the stake. The daughter of the Warwases, also named Anna, was summoned, too, but did not land in the dock. As the legacy of the property shows, between 1691 and 1693 she married Mikołaj Kołodziej of Śródka (a suburb of Poznań)²¹ and left her native town where the old summons might always surface on the occasion of another trial. Andrzej Warwas probably died in December 1695²² asking that his second wife be not wronged in the legacy. His widow probably found a new husband, but in the summer of 1698, summoned by Kazimierz Śłosarek, she also perished at the stake (fol. 163–168).

²⁰ APP, Records of the town of Kleczew I/5, pp. 119–120.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²² This is testified by the insertion which confirms the testament, dated 6 December that year, *ibid.*, p. 134.

Sobestian Wiechetek, already known to us, who in 1698 testified against his own wife, Zofia, six years later — already as the *advocatus* — made his will. He bequeathed to his new wife Regina, among other things, a silver girdle “which he bought after the late Borowska”²³. This was a special souvenir, since its first owner might have been either Małgorzata Borowska, tortured as a witch in 1689, or — which is more probable — the previous wife of Wiechetek, Zofia, called the young Borowska, burnt, not without the complicity of her husband, in 1698. Thus life rolled on, and scheming with the Devil, summons by the tortured neighbours and fires burning each year remained enclosed in the criminal register, kept in a slovenly fashion. Even the records concerning the distribution of inheritance from the witches Jasna and Kawałkowa, burnt at the stake, do not include the slightest suggestion that they departed this world in an unnatural way²⁴.

The fact that the successive waves of persecution that rolled over Kleczew at the end of the 17th c. were consistently ignored by town books, may reflect the actual situation in this town — witchcraft trials were not discussed in writing or speech, and their victims were not mentioned apart from the very short but intensive periods of the trials themselves. It was then that the summons and gossips were recollected, and devilish interference was detected even in the smallest departures from everyday routine; the judges — in everyday life honest craftsmen — changed into the fighters against evil, and the interrogated women entered into a dialogue with them, giving their private animosities the form of diabolical stories. The subjective reality of witchcraft trials could not be a permanent context of human life, but it remained as a potential manner of describing the world. Its internal logic, different from ordinary, allowed only for complete commitment — by accepting it one accepted all its possible consequences²⁵. Therefore in everyday life people tried to avoid any reference to the world of witchcraft trials, however, at the time of any crisis or even any disturbance of the community’s emotional balance,

²³ Ibid., p. 260.

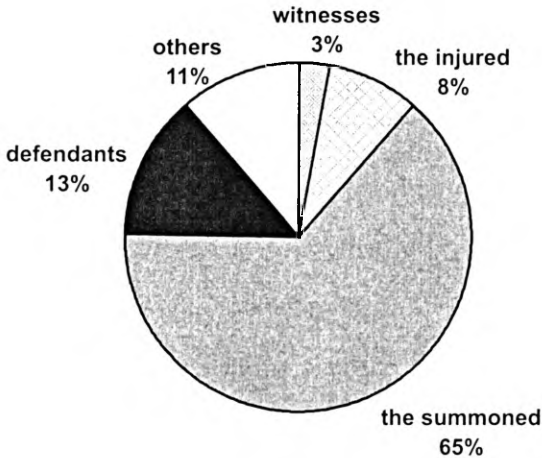
²⁴ Ibid., pp. 146, 225.

²⁵ Cf. R. Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*, London 1996, esp. p. 390 ff.; idem, *Circling the Devil: Witch-Doctors and Magical Healers in Early-Modern Lorraine*, in: *Languages of Witchcraft. Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, ed. S. Clark, Basingstoke 2001, pp. 161–178.

it was easy to set an avalanche into motion. But precisely for this reason, even at the climax of a trial, reference to everyday, mundane actions was bound to entail an essential change in the language of description, and this transition was equally abrupt, as that in the opposite direction. For example, when Katarzyna Kwaśna heard her sentence to the stake being read in Kleczew in 1685, this woman, who during the trial raved about banquets at the witches' sabbath, a story faithfully cited by the judges in the reasons for the judgement, made the following disposition of her debts: "The Mayor [he sat behind the bench and passed the sentence on her] should fear Our Lord because of this beer, for I distilled it myself into booze, and poured it into the barrels, and for this reason I ask that it be paid for the barrel (...) Let my son pay the headman [*advocatus*] for the beer. Let my girl sell the produce of the garden and pay the debts. For this year I owe [money] only to the Dłabibrzuskis, there is a tick for that. As for Brud, I do not know how to pay, for I don't know where to get the money from" (fol. 46).

There are no records on the pages of the *advocati*-assessors' books of Kleczew that would allow us to surmise that the accusation of witchcraft was used instrumentally for solving some other conflicts, for example regarding the property. Only in the case of Piotr Kowal's wife, of some significance might have been her husband's quarrel with the accuser's father, Stanisław Lekki, over the matter of guild subordination (fol. 31). Thus we do not have any premisses at our disposal to doubt the honesty of the accusations of witchcraft. By honesty, I mean the accuser's conviction of the actual application of harmful magic practices by the accused. This, however, does not change the fact that such a conviction was generally aroused by neighbourhood quarrels of a most mundane character.

The peasants in witchcraft trials constitute primarily a reservoir of potential witches (see **Graph 14**). They certainly shared the demonological ideas of other social strata, however suing the witches was very rare in this milieu. We have no proof of the work of rural courts in this region, although we happen to come across some mentions of the presence of rural officials. They certainly did not conduct any trials for witchcraft, even if they had any judicial powers. In the cases conducted in the countryside by the Kleczew court of law, peasants sometimes appear as witnesses

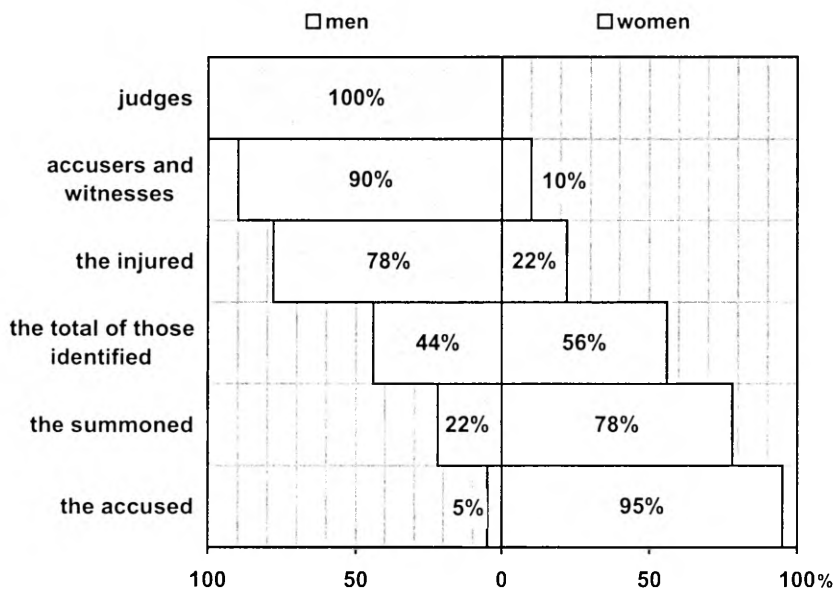


**14. Peasants
in the Kleczew
witchcraft trials
in 1682-1700.**

for the prosecution in the case of their landlord. An exception here is the trial of Anastazja Kaczmarka of Złotków and her daughter Regina, where the main prosecutor was Adam Kmieć from the same village (fol. 65-66). The court, however, was invited by Goleniewski, the tenant of the village, and it cannot be ruled out that he wanted to rid his village of the peasant-woman summoned several times over the previous 20 years, and thus ward off the harm that she could do him.

Another peasant-prosecutor was Jakub Lorek of Nieborzyn, who on the occasion of a lawsuit brought by the owner of the village against the witches Fiema and Pawliczka, accused of witchcraft his neighbour, Jadwiga Janiczka. The court put her to torture, but since she did not admit anything, she was exculpated, hence "because Jakub Lorek took an oath and made himself responsible for the charge (...) hence he ought to pay all the costs, both to the court and the hangman" (fol. 102). This is the only case where the court of Kleczew punished the prosecutor for the imputation of witchcraft to an innocent person.

Just as in towns, the witchcraft trials in the countryside frequently involved whole families. In the trials in Paniewo for example, Jan Białas was summoned together with other members of his family: wife, daughter and two sons (fol. 59v, 113), while the witches of Ostrowite and Nieborzyn summoned Grac of Dankowo, his wife and son (fol. 98v, 107). Regina Czubata and her daughter Marianna perished at the stake at Wąsosze (fol.



15. The percentage share of the two sexes in witchcraft trials held before the lawcourt of Kleczew in 1682–1700.

151), and Sabina Pasturka with her mother Anna — at Ostrowaź (fol. 63–64). Anastazja Kaczmarka of Złotków, burnt as a witch, was accused together with her daughter, who managed to escape trial. Accusations of witchcraft were also brought against Anastazja's mother and her sister Maryśka, wife of a certain Werk, whose first wife had been tried and sentenced to the stake in 1678 (however, probably the judgement was not executed) (fol. 65v, 98v, 172–175v).

The distribution of the roles played in witchcraft trials, depending on the social status of the individual, overlapped with another, not less important division — that of gender. **Graph 15** illustrates the percentage share of the two sexes in the functional groups of those participating in the trials. Thus the numbers ascertained, unequivocally confirm the thesis that the persecution of the witches placed men in opposition to women. This antagonism was not, however, simple. The mixed groups consisting of the injured and summoned, and to a smaller extent, also

of witnesses, created some intermediate sphere, which softened the contrast between the genders characteristic of the trials. Moreover, in the court records of witchcraft trials we find no misogynic rhetoric, typical of the demonological treatises, and the moralistic and popular literature of those times²⁶. Nor do we find any traces of the emergence of any sense of gender solidarity among those involved in the trials. In this respect the witchcraft trials of Kleczew are completely “clear”, not to say “objective”: the questions of gender seem to reside completely outside the area of the interest of the parties. However, the statistical data speak for themselves. It seems that the gender antagonism was neither the reason nor the effect of the persecution of the witches. The reasons for the gender character of witchcraft trials should be rather sought in the very structure of early-modern society.

In the analysis of the attitude of the community of Kleczew and its vicinity to witchcraft, (which was an offence committed exclusively in the imagination of the interested parties and regarded as completely real), one cannot overlook the part played in it by fictitious creatures, yet really existing for the people of that era. The analysis of the records of the trials between 1682 and 1700 enabled the identification of 48 devils, involved in the criminal activity of the local witches. Among them there are only two she-devils, the others are of the male sex. As many as 31 fiends were called Jan, Janek or Jaś, other names are Wojciech, Jakub and Piotr. The most popular name, Jan, seems to be a local euphemism defining an evil spirit. The name Rokita/Rokicki was only beginning to gain popularity — only 3 devils bore that name.

The records of the witches' hearings provide only very general information about the devils, especially in comparison to the relatively precise descriptions of the sabbaths and magic practices. The picture of the fiend is very mysterious — the records on this subject are few and far between. Wojciech, the devil of Zofia Balcerka, was “completely black” (fol. 140), while Janek of Gertruda of Paniewo “has a nobleman's robe” (fol. 113), and of Anna Kowalka's Jan we learn only as much that he was “neither young nor old” (fol. 195v). On the other hand, almost all the

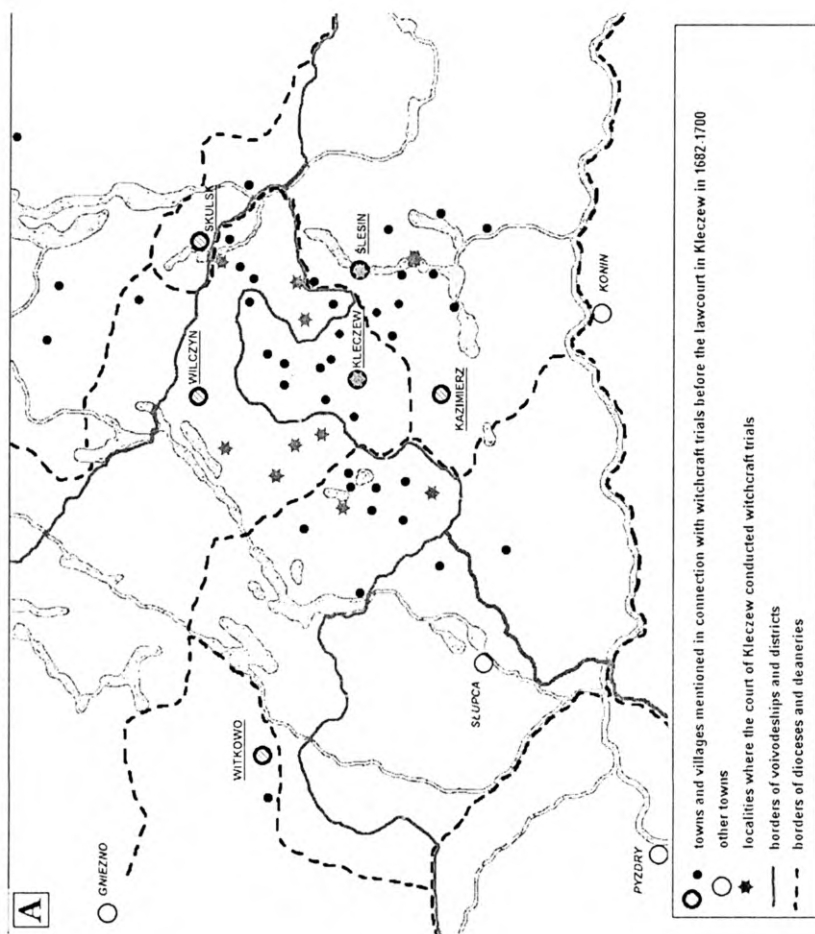
²⁶ M. Bogucka, *Białogłowa w dawnej Polsce. Kobieta w społeczeństwie polskim XVI-XVIII wieku na tle porównawczym (Woman in Old Poland. Woman in Polish 16th-18th Century Society Against a Comparative Background)*, Warszawa 1998, pp. 135-144.

witches admitted they had sexual intercourse with the devils, but these testimonies were extremely standardized: "Jan, my sweetheart, cold of his member lies on the left side" (fol. 196v). The contacts of wizards with she-devils were similar (fol. 117). Most probably these testimonies were suggested by the interrogators. Thus the images of demonic creatures seem to be quite simple. Quite a different picture is provided by the banquets in the places of sabbath (the latter word was not, however, used at all), to which Karol Koranyi devoted an extensive article²⁷, written on the basis of the testimonies of the witches interrogated by the court of Kleczew.

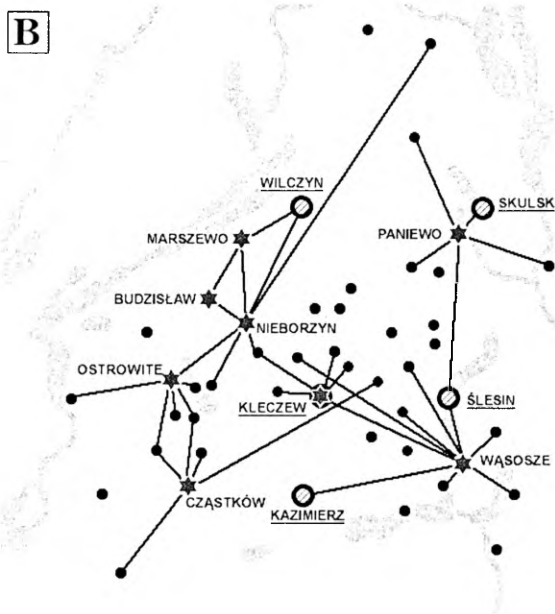
The fortunate survival of the criminal register of Kleczew made possible an analysis of the part played by the provincial community in witchcraft trials, which in the region under discussion reached an intensity almost without parallel in the early-modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was not the goal of my work to establish the reasons for this exceptional development, but to reflect upon the functioning of the local community in the context of the witch-hunt, which task was possible due to the profusion of source material concerning Kleczew and its vicinity. The question to what extent the relationships prevailing in this region can be related to other areas of the Commonwealth, where witchcraft trials were much less wide-spread, remains an open problem.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

²⁷ See note 9.



Map A: Kleczew and its vicinity.



Map B: geographical diagram of the summons in the testimonies of eight witches coming from various localities in the vicinity of Kleczew.