

KONSTANTY TYSZKIEWICZ : WILIJA I JEJ BRZEGI (Viliya and its banks)

pp. 129-141

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Translated by Vital Zajka

(annotated by R.C. Clarke)

It was well into the sunset when in the evening twilight there became visible on the left bank two not very high but proportional towers of a catholic church in Italian architectural style with a cupola on the freshly painted roof. There was a brick whitewashed parish house next to it, and then blackened wooden houses on both sides of the Vilna-Polotsk highway. So, it is some town with a parish church! I was expecting a visit to the church and going to its archives, as the churches often contain documents and papers which tell a lot about the past of a place, and after the territory changed hands several times they retain the style and the taste of the previous times.

And so the town was Mikhalishki. The first thing I did when I got off the boat I went to the parish house hoping to find the priest, to get to know him and to find out about the materials at the church. There was the St. Anthony's day eve and the parish holiday of the church the next day, and so I had an opportunity to get to know Mikhalishki in all its festiveness. A young boy opened the door to the parish, and I saw there a young tall man, Father Strzelecki, conferring with several people about the festival's preparations. When I introduced myself and what I look for, he received me with all hospitality and politeness. There were also ten other priests, and among them a dean from Swir. The host introduced to me all of them, and I also got to know the one from Bystryca who helped me when I reached that town. We spent the whole evening in a pleasant talk.

Mikhalishki is situated at the left, low and sandy, bank of Viliya, and it does not differ from the other small towns of Lithuania: it is small, wooden, humble. All in all there are 62 houses there, with 351 [male] inhabitants. Of them, according to the recent census, 250 are Jews, 100 are Roman Catholics and 1 is Tartar. About the same number could be added for women. It has a square market place, not very well kept, at the center of which there are some small stores. The town is a residence of the head of police district [stan], has a doctor and that church which I visited first. A while ago, as goes the local lore, the area belonged to some family of Michalski, and then became a possession of Brzostowskis. Later their land was sold for debts and the part on which Mikhalishi is became property of a burgher Kotwicz. The town was some time ago a village, called Viliya. In 1689 it was elevated, with the consent of two kings, by Jan Wladyslaw Brzostowski, a petition judge [Referendarz] of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, to the status of a town [miasteczko, shtetl]. That status gave all free people a right to build on the designated lots and provided a 10-year exempt form taxation. After 10 years the burghers had to pay land and house tax, and some other taxes.¹

¹ The history of Mikhaliski as given herein by Tyszewicz is incorrect. See Słownik Geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego, naki, Filip Sulimiersky and Wladyslaw Waleski, Warsaw, 1880-1914, Vol. VI, p. 296, [Geographical Dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland and Other Slavic Countries]. However, it may accurately reflect what he was told by the Mikhaliskiers who he met during his visit.

The Referendarz settled disputes among the burghers and with the crown consent gave the town a privilege for the weekly market days and 4 fairs per year. Those privileges were later confirmed by several consecutive owners. There were frequent fires in Mikhalishki, which brought the town to the current state of deterioration and decline. Among the burnt objects were, among others, a town hall with a court of law, and the shops which made lively the trade in the town.

I would like to finish the description of Mikhalishki noting that nothing would raise my interest in that town but for that church which I mentioned before. Brzostowski family funded a wooden church, and then in 1622 there was built the existing church, by two Florentines, an architect Pens and a sculptor Perti. The first had designed the building with a cupola and two high towers, and the second decorated it with many sculptures. The interior was modeled on the church of St. Peter in Vilna. It has a main altar with the miracle working icon of the Mother of God and six side altars dedicated to various saints.

[Then there follow several pages of descriptions of the church, its history, its priests, vessels and drapery and inscriptions on the bells. It mentions intrigues of the church authorities, and decommissioning of churches and monasteries by Russian authorities. Then goes the description of the people visiting the church during the festival, their physical type which the author says is more typical for [non-Slavic] Lithuanians than for Slav Rusins [Belarusans in today's meaning], their types of dress and ornaments.]

[The only other mention of Jews is an expression "podniosl sie jak zyd michaliski" got up/ got elevated like a Mikhalishki Jew,' literally, *rose like a Mikhalishki Jew.*]

In that area exists an expression which is widely known and often quoted, "podniosl sie jak zyd michaliski." When I heard that expression, I asked about the origin of it. I was told that some time ago the Jews of Mikhalishki were engaged in the business of stealing horses. Then one of them got caught and was hanged on a gallows, which became the origin of the saying.²

Note: The feast day of St. Anthony of Padua is on 13 June, which in 1857 (when Tyskiewicz visited) fell on a Saturday (Shabbos).

² In the opinion of translator Vital Zajka, it is not a direct statement of the fact that someone was hanged. Rather it has something to do with becoming haughty-pushy and paying for it. A type of an allusion, which then lost its original meaning, describing anybody not to the liking of the person who uses the expression, and often rooted in envy.

RCC Note: Perhaps equivalent to *as uppity as a Mikhelishki Jew*. An *uppity* person is one who, in the opinion of the person describing them thusly, behaves as if they are above their station or rank in the social hierarchy.