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SELF-EDUCATED AS AN ETHNOLOGIST: JAN WITORT (1853-1903), 'AN
ETHNOGRAPHER FROM LITHUANIA'

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In my paper I will discuss Jan Witort's road to ethnology. I will speak about how he became interested in social issues, gained theoretical knowledge and got engaged in practicing research. Witort's case illustrates the ways in which ideas travel across political boundaries, and make an impact on intellectual contexts; how ethnological and anthropological thinking developed in the West reaches geographically distant places. I will describe the specificity of the epoch and the region, and Witort's biographical experience. The sources of my discussion are Witort's autobiography, memoirs and ethnological works as well as the studies of his biography and ethnological legacy presented by Lithuanian and Polish ethnologists – Vacys Milius (1985, 1993), Anna Gomóła (2011, 2017), Antoni Kuczyński (1994, 1998, 2007) and the others.

The epoch

The second half of the 19th century was a time when anthropology in the West was establishing and institutionalising its paradigmatic route. Lithuania at that time was a part of

the Russian Empire. It lost its statehood in 1795. The university, and other schools of higher learning or any school which taught in Lithuanian were abolished; Lithuanian in Latin alphabet and any kind of associations were forbidden. Vilnius University was closed in 1832 after the uprising against the tsarist rule in 1831. The printed word in Latin alphabet and Lithuanian language was forbidden after the second uprising of 1863. The students had to get their education at the universities of Russia and Poland as well as Germany, Austria, or Switzerland. The Lithuanian elite spoke Polish and was inured in Polish culture, although some of them strongly underlined their Lithuanian belonging and identity.

However, it was the intellectual environment of Vilnius University of the late 18th c. and early 19th c. where cultural reasoning of human phenomena emerged. The early influence of French, Scottish and German Enlightenment nourished the emphasis on the cultural aspect and the discovery of the peasant as the local 'noble savage'. Johan Georg Forster was invited to head the Chair of Natural History at Vilnius University in 1784-1787. The Chair of History was established in 1783 with its discipline influenced by Volterian understanding of history as a science of nations. Montesquieu's and Rousseau's ideas and the development of the science of law; the polemics of professors of Vilnius University with Kant and the ideas of Herder; anthropological approach to medicine and significance of indigenous or ethno-knowledge for development of science assisted in establishing anthropological and ethnological thinking at Vilnius University. Professors and students of the university, as well as amateurs took part in collecting folk knowledge, rural customs and artifacts, which were conceptualized within the ideas of antiquity, comparison, and progress. But then Vilnius University was closed in 1832.

The ethnographic aspect was later developed by the Vilnius Temporal Archaeological Commission. It established the Museum of Antiquities in 1855 in the buildings, which had formerly housed Vilnius University. The ethnographic section of the museum is the first attempt to include an ethnographic collection in a museum in Lithuania and Poland (Jasiewicz 2011: 143-144). In 1857 the Commission organized a complex expedition along the river Neris to collect geographical, historical, archaeological, folklore, and ethnographic data, artifacts and materials. It was the first scientific expedition in Lithuania where ethnographic research had its place. But after the uprising of 1863 the Commission was closed (in 1864). Nevertheless, curiosity about the life of the 'others', living nearby and in far-distant countries, travel literature, interest in folklore, local lore and ethnography

nourished the fascination with the difference, exotics and primitivism of Lithuanian and Polish researchers and amateurs during the entire 19th century (Libera 1995: 138; Jasiewicz 1976, 2011).

In the second half of the 19th century Lithuanian ethnography and folklore was also of an interest to the Societies in Russia, Prussia and Austria – the Russian Imperial Geographical Society (Императорское русское географическое общество) established in 1845 and its Ethnographic Section in St. Petersburg, the Lithuanian Literature Society (*Litauische Literarische Gesellschaft*) in 1879 in Tilzit, at that time Prussia (today Sovietsk, Kaliningrad region, Russia), and Polish Ethnological Society (*Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze*) in 1894 in Lviv, at that time Austria (today Ukraine).

Jan Michał Witort (1853-1903), an ethnologist and ethnographer of 19th-century Lithuania, a researcher of customary law and a representative of evolutionism who contributed to both Lithuanian and Polish ethnologies, was a member of Polish Ethnological Society (*Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze*). The title of his “Autobiography”, which he wrote for the Society, has a note - “by Witort, an ethnographer from the land of Lithuania”. It confirms the fact that Witort is inextricably linked with Lithuania.

Jan Witort: biography and works

Jan Witort was born in Lithuania, Panevėžys county, Pauslajys estate on 10 November 1853. Panevėžys and its surroundings were his home in childhood and after exile until the end of his life. An orphan, he was brought up and later supported by his relatives until his death. Witort died on 23 April 1903 in Mikolajavas, currently a part of the Panevėžys city. He is buried in Panevėžys.

Witort ‘s ethnological legacy, his thematic interests, observations and insights, analysis of ethnographic material and the comparative approach remain relevant to Lithuanian ethnology, its history and development to this day. He drew special attention to the fields of customary law, property relations, kinship and family, village community and its organisation. He was also interested in folk economy issues, emigration, education, folk medicine and beliefs. His researches concern mainly the ethnography of Lithuanians of

Middle and West Lithuania, where he was working as a tutor. He also studied the Kazakhs (Kirgiz), local people of the north of Russia, and Byelorussians. Among his works there are three books: *The Patterns of Lithuanian Customary Law* (Witort 1897, 1898), *The Patterns of the Primitive Law* (Witort 1899), and *Primitive Philosophy (Animism)* (Witort 1900), the articles in the periodical of Polish Ethnological Society - *Lud*, the journals *Wisła*, *Głos*, *Ateneum*, *Przegląd Powszechny*, and short columns in periodicals *Kraj* and the others. All his works are in Polish. In 2017 his two major studies *The Patterns of Lithuanian Customary Law* and *The Patterns of the Primitive Law*, which he himself evaluated as his main works, were translated into Lithuanian (Vitartas 2017).

The study *The Patterns of Lithuanian Customary Law* analyses Lithuanian customary law. The work is based on the cases and judicial decisions of local courts, official and statistical material and observation-based research. The study has four chapters: 'Family law'; 'Tangible law'; 'Agreements'; and 'Customary criminal law'. Witort discusses the structure of Lithuanian extended family, which he considers to be a significant stage of communal life, the relationship between family members including property rights, disintegration of extended families and the process of individualisation, the concepts of marriage and kinship, the cases of uxorilocality, the relationships between generations, and the legal aspects of interpersonal relationships. The rights of ownership, including land ownership are analysed keeping in mind the local tradition and the context of official laws of the Russian Empire introduced during the period of post-Emancipation in 1860's. The chapter on customary criminal law presents Lithuanian folk concepts of crime and punishment, and their practises. In the book *The Patterns of the Primitive Law* Witort applies, according to him, a comparative method, and brings together in a systematic manner the examples of customs of various peoples of the world organized in an evolutionary pattern. The study comprises twelve chapters. They include the methodological and theoretical introduction and the themes about the origin of law and legal institutions, interpersonal and family relations, social structures, equality, folk gatherings, development of governance, evolution of concepts of property and land ownership, emergence of criminal law and the forms of punishment. In the concluding chapter Witort summarizes that a human being, on the one hand, tries to adapt to the environment and to develop abilities that would increase his/her success in accommodating to a particular environment and circumstances, and, on the other hand, he/she tries to modify the environment to best suit human nature. In this developmental process, he

notes, the items that constitute an ethnic group are involved unequally. In ‘Autobiography’ he underlines that this statement is the basis of his attitude on social evolution.

But, as other ethnologists and anthropologists of that time, Witort had neither received any formal training in the humanities, nor had he graduated from any university. As a teenager he was taught at the Polock military school for the orphans of the gentry, but did not graduate. Later he passed the graduating exams at Vilnius gymnasium. Then he studied chemistry at the Riga Polytechnical School and spent a semester as a student at the Technological Institute in St. Petersburg, but was arrested for political reasons. Although he intended to become an engineer, he was interested in social and political ideas and decided to devote his life to politics. Beginning with his school years he studied various literature on his own including the works of French encyclopaedists, and got acquainted with Warsawian positivism. *Cours de philosophie positive* by August Comte was like a comprehensive handbook in his future studies on social theory.

Interest in social critique

In his ‘Autobiography’ (Vitartas 2017) Witort wrote that his fate is the fate of those who have lived after the uprising of 1863. Since his schoolyears he took part in illegal self-educating groups and the leftist movement of the Narodniks. Due to his underground activities he was arrested and sentenced to exile twice. According the words of American journalist George Kennan, ‘unfortunate young men and women who perhaps had assembled merely to read and discuss the works of Herbet Spencer and John Stuart Mill were arrested and send to Siberia as conspirators’ (Kennan 1891: 30). The first time he was exiled to the North of Russia, the Archangelsk governate, the town Onega in 1875-1879; the second time – to Siberia, Tomsk governate and Semipalatinsk in 1880-1887. Significantly, it was in exile where he became engaged into the studies of social theory, anthropology, ethnology and ethnography systematically.

During his first exile in the town Onega he returned to his previous study of Comte’s work, and the other literature he had brought with him or was able to find at the other deportees’ private libraries or sometimes the public library. Significantly, Witort became a good friend of some English engineers who worked for an English forest trading company and had been granted concession rights there. The company had established its trading agency, and

workshops, smithies, large steam sawmills, storehouses and grain storehouses, hospitals and a drugstore there. It also had an extensive library, with newspapers in English, Russian and French received from St. Petersburg by diplomatic post (Witort 2017: 76-78). Witort actively used the library for his studies, and was greatly impressed by Herbert Spencer's and Edward B. Tylor's works – they became the main authors whom he followed. In his memoirs he wrote that while in Onega he tirelessly studied the disciplines of history, political economy, history of law and sociological works:

This reading gradually convinced me that the basics of sociology one needs to find in ethnography; that so-called social truths are relative and are, to say, historical categories. At that time I studied the works of great thinkers and philosophers, such as Herder, Kant (*The Critique of Pure Reason* translated into Russian), Spencer, Mill and the others (Witort 2017: 87).

This influenced the clear formation of my outlook at the world; diligent scientific work finally made me the follower of scientific positive philosophy; the doctrine of evolutionism left a deep imprint in my mind and heart; I became its supporter and used it in the science about the society and in ethics; then I truly understood that contemporary social forms are transitional and relative and, shortly speaking, historical categories (Witort 2017: 104).

To underscore, Witort's views about culture and human phenomena were different than that of the other Lithuanian authors of that era. His views are based on social critique and the emphasis of sociological aspects instead of folkloristic-philological approach which dominated in Lithuania in the late 19th and the early 20th century. Sociological approach is his contribution to Lithuanian ethnology.

The second exile to Siberia in 1880-1887 gave him a chance to practise ethnographic research although he had already attempted to record his observations during the first exile. During the second exile, in 1883, he became seriously ill and this made him to reconsider his plans – he decided to devote himself to writing and scientific endeavours. In Siberia he had an opportunity to become acquainted with Kazakh culture. In Semipalatinsk he met his old friend, a lawyer from Vilnius, Seweryn Gross, a fellow deportee, and they were both asked to participate in the research of customary Kazakh law. It was a study that was based on the material of local courts and the data of the Semipalatinsk Statistical Committee. Gross' and Witort's ethnographic field experience in the Kazakh steppes became a significant its part.

However, their names were not mentioned in the printed publication of the research. It was only later that Witort published an article 'From the steppes of Central Asia' in the journal *Lud*. While in Siberia Witort studied ethnographic literature on Siberian people, and collected, as he says, systematically, material on primitive law, thus establishing the basic schedule for future publication. George Kennan who met Witort and the other deportees in Siberia was surprised that deportees, despite their limited finances, obtained substantial scientific literature and periodicals (Gomola 2011: 253).

The third and fundamental turn in Witort's engagement in ethnology occurred when he returned to Lithuania, to his native town Panevėžys, and to his ethnographic studies. It was in 1887 when Lithuanian national movement, called *litwomania* by local Polish people, was accelerating. He says that the discussion on the so-called *litwomania* that is anti-Polish determination of a group of the young Lithuanian people stimulated his desire to study Lithuania and the history of its folk, customs, and economic situation at its very roots (Vitartas 2017: 93). His first article which he presented to the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Krakow was 'Jus primae noctis'; it already includes Lithuanian material (Witort 1896).

Witort and anthropological and ethnological theory

Jan Witort is a representative of social and cultural evolutionism. The contribution of the works by Herbert Spencer and Edward B. Tylor is fundamental to his theoretical views. Spencer's ideas about social organization and society as an organism, and Tylor's concept of 'survivals' Witort sets as his main analytical and theoretical tools that classify the material and form his insights and generalizations. It even seems that in some cases such as, for example, in the book *Primitive Philosophy (Animism)* he follows Tylor so closely that he establishes only a compendium of Tylor's *Primitive Culture* with regional materials added. But in the introduction of the book Witort raises a question about the relationship between primitive philosophy and religious beliefs which, seems, became the inspiration of this book.

As well as Spencer and Tylor there are other authors who influenced him. Julius Lippert (1839-1909), an Austrian cultural historian, is the first. By the way, Lippert was mentioned by other Lithuanian authors of the end of the 19th century as well. According to Polish sociologist Ludwig Gumplowicz 'Comte, Spencer, Bastian and Lippert are the leaders in

sociology. What others have done is of secondary importance'. George Murdock begins with these words his 'Introduction' to English translation of Lippert's book 'The Evolution of Culture'. (Murdock 1931: V). Lippert is an evolutionist, says Murdock, but is not a unilateral or monotypical evolutionist and does not confine cultural evolution to a single universal line, but emphasises that human ingenuity has strived in different places to achieve the goal set by the care for life with elements here at hand (Murdock 1931: XIV). Lippert's concept *Lebensfürsorge* Murdock translates as a 'care for life', or 'provision for life' or as 'self-maintenance'. Witort adopted this concept as a significant key-point, together with Spencer's and Tylor's ideas in forming his outlook to social and cultural evolution.

The second author who influenced Witort's work *The Patterns of the Primitive Law* is Albert Hermann Post (1839-1909). Post was a German legal anthropologist, who was the founder of comparative law studies and the first to suggest the study of legal relations of indigenous peoples. Witort considers the novel studies of comparative law an independent field, the essence of which is to study ethnic life. He refers to the Post's concepts *ethnologischen Jurisprudenz* 'ethnological jurisprudence' and *Volksleben* in his book *The Patterns of the Primitive Law*. The *Volksleben* he translates to *życie etniczne* - 'ethnic life'.

Among the authors Witort whom he mentions and to whom he refers there are anthropologists who were well-known at that time and participated in forming the field of anthropology and ethnology: not only Henry Lewis Morgan, Adolf Bastian, or Henry Maine, but also George A. Wilken, Theodor Waitz, Andrew Lang, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, Charles Letourneau and many others. British as well as French and German anthropologists and ethnologists indirectly 'educated' him in his own understanding of ethnology.

Conclusion

Witort's interest in ethnology and anthropology seems to have emerged not from his original determination, but by chance. His interest in social theory or in August Comte at a young age was the same as that of many other students or deportees of that time. Later he got acquainted with the English authors due to the English engineers and their library, which just happened to be in the place of his exile. He decided to leave political activities and to turn to scientific endeavours after he became seriously ill. He got field practise among Kazakhs when he met

his old friend in exile. It seems that anywhere he was he used to happen upon a variety of situations which established an intellectual atmosphere and fostered the exchange of ideas, thoughts, theories and literature. Deportees received literature in various legal and illegal ways. They had libraries, gave lectures, organized discussions, and collected ethnographic materials. But such activities depended just on individual activities. Witort's erudition and his road to becoming an ethnologist shows that the ideas, as well as people travel freely crossing political boundaries and obstacles. Ideas reach far-distant, remote and closed places ignoring distances, language barriers, censorship and any attempts to limit the transformation of knowledge.

Witort's case suggests one more aspect. His primary fascination was not with social theory, but with revolutionary ideas for changing society. It was his interest in understanding of how society works that anchored his curiosity on social theory and social critique. There are many more cases in Lithuanian and Polish ethnology when strong personal political involvement and views opposed to the government gave impetus to curiosity about social theory, ethnography, anthropology, ethnology, and the study of indigenous people. This includes the cases of Joachim Lelewel, Bronislaw Pilsudski, or the Lithuanian ethnologist, Pelikšas Bugailiškis. Polish ethnologists have also underlined that Polish dissidents of the 19th century who were educated, politically active, competent in the field of social issues, acquainted with ethnography have presented comprehensive descriptions of the indigenous society in the places of their exile. Their works are considered as forming a separate trend in Polish anthropology in the studies of the 'others' who are outside of the country, often in the far-east of the Russian Empire.

This leads me to approach Han F. Vermeulen's discussion and his premise that anthropology was not born of colonialism, but developed within its context (Vermeulen 2015: 28). Witort's case as well as the other cases from Lithuanian and Polish ethnology suggest that curiosity about how society works is the first significant inspiration. The intentions and the shape, which this inspiration gains, is another issue to discuss.

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