BRILL

Russian History 40 (2013) 352–363

RUSSIAN HISTORY

brill.com/ruhi

A Family Matter: The Case of a Witch Family in an Eighteenth-Century Volhynian Town

Kateryna Dysa*
National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy
hobot77@gmail.com

Abstract
Belief in the inheritance of witchcraft abilities from generation to generation is common to many cultures. Early modern Ukraine was not an exception. A series of cases from Volhynian town of Vyzhva is discussed here to illustrate how reputation for malevolent witchcraft could be once shaped and then continued to adhere to a family line, and how small town community preserved a memory about witchcraft for many years. This story is juxtaposed to other stories about succession of magical abilities by such magic practitioners as soothsayers, healers, wise men, etc. for whom the "magic reputation" of their parents was important to justify and support their own activities in the eyes of their clients.

Keywords
reputation; gossip; family; inheritance of witchcraft; the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Witchcraft and power are inseparably bound. On the one hand, witchcraft was believed to be implemented by the weak against strong and powerful (for instance cases when women were accused of bewitching men with love magic). On the other hand, accusations and trials against alleged witches were also modes of power demonstration. Accusation was a tool to assert oneself in power in cases when masters brought charges of witchcraft against their servants to the town courts (though they had the

* Kateryna Dysa is Associate Professor of History at National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. She has published on history of witchcraft trials in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ukraine, as well as on history of sexuality in eighteenth-century Volhynian towns. She is the author of *Witchcraft Trials and Beyond: Podolian, and Ruthenian Palatinates of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.* (Budapest: Central European University Press, forthcoming).

DOI 10.1163/18763316-04004006

opportunity to deal with their servants in private courts). In any case witchcraft and magical abilities in general were popularly associated with fear and necessity. It was feared for people believed it could cause many dangerous things and troubles. But at the same time there were many situations in which magic seemed to be the last hope when no other methods could help. Thus people who were believed to possess magical abilities could expect to hold certain power in their community – power to harm and help.

In this article, I will discuss some people belonging to this group – those who were believed to have inherited or learned witchcraft within the family. My example concerns Ukrainian cases from the trials that took place in the Volhynian Palatinate of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the eighteenth century. More precisely the focus of this article will be on a "family of witches" from the Volhynian town of Vyzhva. However, before turning to this particular story I would like to give some preliminary notes.

It is worth remembering that belief in the hereditary nature of witchcraft is nearly universal. It is shared by traditional societies of Africa, North and South America, Siberia, as well as by many European people. Alan Macfarlane in his already classical study of Essex witchcraft trials claimed that one out of ten Essex cases was connected with hereditary witchcraft.[1] According to English demonologist William Perkins witchcraft was an art to be learned, but at the same time this art was believed to be passed down within families: someone from the older generation had to teach younger family members; thus it was not rare that several relatives could be accused of witchcraft.[2] The situation was similar during 1609 witch panic in the Basque country: as Gustav Henningsen points out, six out of ten people accused of witchcraft in Zugarramurdi were relatives.[3] However, belief in inheritance of witchcraft abilities could sometimes be not that important, as say, in Salem where accusations against husbands, not children of

---

1) A. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (Prospect Heights, ILL.: Waveland Press, 1991), 170

2) C. Holmes, "Popular Culture? Witches, Magistrates and Divines in Early Modern England," *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe From the Middle Ages To the Nineteenth Century*, ed. S. L. Kaplan (Berlin, New York: Mouton, 1984), 96; M. Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 57; R. Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 197.

3) G. Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition (1609-1614)* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1980), 34.

witches prevailed.[4] This whole theme of witchcraft within the family in Europe is best summed up by Robin Briggs who wrote:

> European witchcraft was not conceptualized like that of the Azande, as a physical substance one might inherit quite unawares; the idea that the witch deliberately chose to serve the wrong master was an established part of popular belief.... Nevertheless, the idea of a taint in the blood was just as firmly rooted, so that the children and siblings of convicted witches were always in danger of being drawn in after them.[5]

Returning to Ukraine, one can trace some echoes of similar tendencies in folklore (collected by the 19th-century ethnographers), in particular in popular stories and fairytales about daughters and sons of witches and sorcerers. In stories about witches two specific kinds of witches – natural-born (*rodyma vid'ma*) and learned witch (*vchena vid'ma*) are distinguished.[6] A natural-born witch is claimed to have no choice but to become a witch by the fact of her birth. These witches are easy to be recognized since along with magical abilities they inherit a specific physical feature. This can be a short tail and/or a strip of black hair on the back. This physical defect made Ukrainian natural-born witches slightly similar to Azande witches described by Edward Evans-Pritchard, with their witch-substances hidden somewhere in their abdomens, but unlike Azande witches, natural-born witches of Ukrainian folklore are claimed to be harmless and unwilling to accept their fate: they would rather help people than harm them. In these stories about natural-born witches it was sometimes mentioned that such witches needed to pass down their abilities to someone else before passing away otherwise they would die in terrible sufferings. Unlike a natural-born witch, a learned witch is described as a person who became a witch as a result of her conscious choice. Learned witches are claimed to learn magic from natural-born witches, and they are usually associated with 'evil magic'.[7]

---

4) J. Demos, *Entertaining Satan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 70-71.

5) R. Briggs, Witches and Neighbours, 215.

6) Another kind of witch, the learned witch (*vchena vid'ma*), was a counterpart of the natural-born witch. In contrast to a natural-born witch, a learned witch made her own decision to become a witch through specific ritual and learning that followed.

7) For the examples of the popular stories about natural-born and learned witches see: V. Hnatiuk, "Znadoby do ukrajins'koji demonolohiji" [Materials about Ukrainian demonology], *Etnohrafichnyj zbirnyk* vol. 34 (2, 1912), 98-100, 106, P. V. Ivanov, "Narodnyye rasskazy o ved'mach i upyryach" [Folk stories about witches and warlocks], in *Ukrayinci: narodni*

However, this rather late ethnographic typology of Ukrainian witches is hardly represented in trial records. Neither natural-born, nor learned witches were ever mentioned in town courts by accusers or witnesses. Only slight hints of this belief in natural-born and learned witches can be traced in cases about passing down magical abilities within certain families. In trial materials we would rather find two types of people accused of witchcraft: those who were accused by others (often slanderously) not for actual practices, but for a quarrelsome, ugly character, cursing others and a bad reputation in general; and those who actually practiced witchcraft and/or magic on more or less regular basis, and proposed their services to other people. In both cases magic abilities could be either inherited, or learned.

The site where our case about a 'witch-family' unfolded was the Volhynian town of Vyzhva. Eighteen out of 300 cases of witchcraft accusations from my sample are from this place. In 1548 the town was granted Magdeburg law privileges which meant that it had the right of municipal self-government which consisted of two bodies: the *rada* and the *lava*. A *rada* (council) consisted of several elected members called *rajtsias*, who had administrative functions and were led by the *burmystrs*. A *lava* (bench) functioned as a body of jury called *lavnyks*, who were elected from among the residents. A *vijt* was the head of a *lava* who, though, did not have the right to issue a verdict on his own – this was the prerogative of the *lavnyks*. Most of the criminal cases, including witchcraft cases, were the concern of the magisterial courts, the *lavas*.

Like many other Volhynian towns of the eighteenth century, Vyzhva was multi-confessional and multi-ethnic (its population included Ruthenians, Poles, and Jews), its citizens specialized in crafts (though the town's economy was mainly agrarian). In towns like Vyzhva, gossip was the main means of local news circulation, and reputation was one of the most important personal symbolic capitals. The role of gossip and reputation in witchcraft trials was crucial: in many cases witnesses could even reconstruct the details of how the gossip about witchcraft of a certain person began a dozen years earlier. Sometimes the beginning of a reputation for witchcraft could be associated with parents accused of witchcraft.[8]

---

viruvannya, povir'ya, demonologia [Ukrainians: Popular beliefs, superstitions, demonology] (Kyiv: Lybid', 1991), 432, 438, 441-442.

8) Robin Briggs discussed this phenomenon in details in his *The Witches of Lorraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 153-179.

Notoriety for being a witch was a serious stain on somebody's reputation and could hold for several generations. There is not much evidence of this in Ukrainian trial materials of the early modern period, which are in general rather stingy with details and are little more than laconic reports of complaints. That is why a series of rather detailed cases from Vyzhva that tells us about three generations of one family accused of witchcraft is precious. During the 1730s two family names were constantly repeated in town-court records of Vyzhva in connection with witchcraft accusation: the Koładyczes and the Zaderejczuks.

The main figures repeatedly accused of witchcraft were two sisters. One, called Olianuszka, was the wife of Fedor Koładycz, and the other, whose name was never mentioned, was the wife of Łukian Zaderejczuk. The whole affair started in January 1731 when Łukian Zaderejczuk brought charges against Olianuszka Koładyczewa (his sister-in-law).[9] He started his complaints by recalling an old quarrel between his wife and her sister that happened the previous summer. It was precipitated when Olianuszka accused her sister of stealing hops. In the heat of the fight, Olianuszka shouted that Zaderejczuk's wife was a witch. This could have been a mere insult, as it was the case in many other instances, because 'a witch' was often used as an abusive word and was almost as popular as 'a whore', but not this time. Olianuszka meant what she said, because she further substantiated her accusation by mentioning that her sister had bewitched a man called Suproniuk, who died as a result of this bewitchment. However, Zaderejczuk's wife kept her head and answered that these accusations were impossible to prove. To this, Olianuszka replied that it was also impossible to prove that she stole those hops (which means that she was suspected of this). All this had happened almost half a year before Łukian brought his complaint to court; however, the story and the clash between the two sisters continued. In January 1731 Łukian Zaderejczuk finally came to the court, accusing Olianuszka Koładyczewa of slandering his wife, calling her a witch and his children 'the witch people' (*narod czarownicki*).

The case faced legal difficulties because the judge could not initiate an investigation on the ground of mere complaints. The articles of the Magdeburg law that were the main source of reference for the courts of autonomous cities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth demanded the presence of at least three trustworthy witnesses. Knowing this, Łukian

9) *Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi istorychnyi arkhiv Ukrajiny* (*Kiev*), *fond* 32, *op*. 1, *no.* 5, *f*. 216b rev.

Zaderejczuk made an attempt to present one witness to the controversy between his wife and her sister.

This witness was a Jewish woman called Beiła Beskowa, who told court officers a brand new story about the quarrel between the two sisters. Beiła recalled that once Olianuszka Koładyczewa came to her, complaining that she was scared that her sister was conspiring against her. She said that her sister had even managed to involve a priest in her dark plan, so that during church service the priest turned the chalice upside down in order to harm Olianuszka. After all these disturbing manipulations, Olianuszka was anxious and was not sure if she would survive this bewitchment. Beskowa said that she was struck by this story of Olianuszka Koładyczewa and that is why she once attempted to reason with Łukian's wife when she accidentally met her on the street. Beiła tried to persuade her that it was not good to do harm to her own sister. Łukian's wife answered her, "I have heard from other people what my sister was saying about me but it is not true."[10] It is hard to say how this information was supposed to establish Łukian's wife's innocence. In any case, Beiła Beskowa as a Jew was not considered a trustworthy witness, and there was still a need for two more witnesses in order to start an investigation of the case. Stating that neither side was able to present enough witnesses, judges dismissed the case.

Even though the case ended with nothing, it signified the beginning of troubles for the family of Łukian Zaderejczuk. Whatever the initial aim of Olianuszka Koładyczewa was when she publicly denounced her sister as a witch, the result was unambiguous – she spoilt her sister's reputation. Consequences of this can be traced in court records of the following year. We can only imagine that there were many other smaller squabbles between Zaderejczuk's wife and her neighbors that were not significant enough to get to the court. What we learn from the court records is the following story: the next year, in May 1732, the wife of Łukian Zaderejczuk was called a witch again. This time it happened during a quarrel between the family of Paweł Ohorelczuk and the Zaderejczuks about the pasturing of cattle (the two families were sharing same pasture). The Zaderejczuks complained that Ohorelczuk was blocking the entrance to the common pasture, while Ohorelczuk claimed that Zaderejczuk was too stingy to pay a professional shepherd, sent his son to look after the cattle instead and the boy was not a good shepherd and caused many troubles. As a result of this

10) *TDIA* (*Kiev*), *fond* 32, *op.* 1, *no.* 5, *f.* 216b rev.

conflict, the relationship between the two families soured. Among other mutual accusations, one can find a report according to which Ohorelczuk's wife called Zaderejczuk's wife a witch when she met her on a street.[11] In another context, this episode could have easily been taken as a mere slander. However, from the further development of events it is obvious that Ohorelczuk's wife had a clear idea why she called Łukianycha a witch. However, this case also did not move beyond mutual accusations because as in the previous case, both sides lacked witnesses who could support their claims.

In the meanwhile the conflict between the Ohorelczuks and Zaderejczuks continued. In the previous case one more member of the Zaderejczuks family was mentioned in passing: Olexa Koladęcz, the step-son of Łukian. This man became the main actor of the next confrontation. As we can learn from the records, Olexa was one more victim of the family's bad fame. Shortly after the first recorded incident, Olexa met Ohorelczuk's wife on the street and, as he said, she immediately started to insult him, "calling him an evil witch person, saying that his grandmother, Łomazianka, ate Tokaryk and Chilczuk and his mother, also a witch, ate the Suproniuks."[12] Probably, the use of term "eating" in this context needs additional explanation. Reading some of the trial materials, I often came across a reference that the witch 'has eaten' (*ziadła*) someone. This phrase was used to describe the alleged effect of bewitchment on victim's health. Probably it was used as a variation of a specific witch disease. If someone was thought to be 'eaten' by a witch it meant that this purported victim had fallen ill with a long-lasting illness, the victim's strength gradually decayed, and the sufferer faded away. The illness could be fatal.

Olexa's testimony contains several noteworthy details, the most obvious one being that the wife of Łukian Zaderejczuk was not the only one associated with witchcraft. Her kinsman Olexa too was bluntly called "a witch person." Another important detail: the gossip about Olexa's mother bewitching Suproniuk that was at least two years old by the time of the conflict was still powerful and people of Vyzhva (at least those who personally knew the characters) still remembered it quite well, and could relate it to current events. But the most important information mentioned by Ohorelczuk's wife was about one more "witch" in the family – the

11) Ibid., ff. 263-263 rev.

12) *TDIA* (*Kiev*), *fond* 32, *op.* 1, *no.* 5, *f.* 266 rev.

grandmother of Olexa and mother of Łukian's wife, Łomazianka. This accusation of witchcraft against Olexa's grandmother might have been written off as a casual slur with no further evidence surviving to establish whether or not the insult had any relation to her actual reputation, except that by extraordinary good fortune, I managed to find the mention of grandmother Łomazianka in connection to witchcraft accusation in earlier court records from Vyzhva.

In July 1716, sixteen years prior to the incident with Olexa Koladęcz, his grandmother Łomazianka was involved in a scandal that was also reflected in court records. Łomazianka brought charges of slander against Suproniova (the wife of Suproniuk) and her family. She complained that children of Suproniova came to her house several times, offending her. Among other insults, the son of Suproniova told Łomazianka, "you have already eaten Tokaryk and Chiłczuk and now you are trying to eat our mother; beware, you witch, you won't escape, we are harnessing oxen and will send for the hangman, you shouldn't have send your hens to our house, making them call up misfortunes."[13] This was a rather long list of serious accusations (even though, all of them were pronounced privately, bypassing official justice). It becomes clear, that Łomazianka already had a reputation as a witch before the conflict with the Suproniuks. "Eating" of some Tokaryk and Chiłczuk must have been the first incident in the series of events leading to establishment of the reputation of a witch.

The alleged bewitchment of Tokaryk and Chiłczuk was only the beginning of the coalescing of her bad reputation. The confrontation with the Suprioniuks who believed that she has attempted to bewitch their mother and spoil their well-being with the help of hens, only worsened the situation. In a longer perspective, the memory of the "eating" of the Tokaryk, Chilczuk and Suproniuk proved long-lived and haunted three generations of the family, tarring them with a reputation as "witch people."

It is also noteworthy that all the above-mentioned cases were in fact accusations of slander, not of witchcraft per se. This was quite typical for Ukrainian witchcraft trials. Accusations of witchcraft were rather subtle matter for the secular courts to handle. Though they had legal manuals explaining how to punish witches, these manuals did not clarify how to prove witchcraft. The demand to have three witnesses of the crime made

13) No. 21 (1716), V. B. Antonovich, *Koldovstvo. Dokumentym-processy-izsledovanie* [Witchcraft. Documents-trials-study] (St. Petersburg, 1877), 64.

the process of collecting evidence extremely problematic. That is why it was easier for people to deal with witches by bypassing the legal system (for example, by disseminating the information about a 'witch' among the neighbours and/or by using counter-magic), and at the same time, the system equipped those whom their neighbours suspected of witchcraft with the opportunity to defend themselves in courts by bringing charges of slander, because it was much easier to find witnesses of a quarrel than of bewitchment. People were not afraid to come to the court and complain about being accused of witchcraft by the community, only because Ukrainian lands did not witness mass persecutions of witches: only five percent of cases ended with death-sentences.

However, the story of our heroes' mishaps was not over. The last victim of the bad family reputation, ironically enough was Olianuszka Koładyczewa, the person who initiated the litigation against her sister in 1731. In August 1732, she was summoned to the court because of an accusation of witchcraft. Daniel Czyzewski claimed that Olianuszka bewitched his child during a quarrel. The cursed infant died soon afterwards, and there were certain signs, such as blue stains on child's back, that the child had been "eaten."[14] We can suggest that after all the reputation of belonging to a 'witchcraft family' rebounded into Olianuszka.

* * *

This kind of comprehensive story of several generations of one family associated with witchcraft is extremely rare. More often one comes across separate stories about the passing on of magical skills by practitioners who proposed their services to the community. These local practitioners – healers, soothsayers, fortune-tellers, sorcerers – who were summoned to the courts as the accused or witnesses, often mentioned their parents or grandparents from whom they inherited their power or learned magic.[15]

For instance, in February 1710, the town court of Kovel' studied the case of Hryhori Kozłowski who was accused of magical healing. His former

---

14) *TDIA* (*Kiev*), *fond* 32, *op.* 1, *no.* 5, *f.* 229-230.

15) It is noteworthy that these magic practitioners were not necessarily the accused. Sometimes they did not even come to court in person, though they were mentioned by the opposing sides as a source of information about lost or stolen things, the identity of the witch who caused illness, drought or other misfortune, the place where treasure was hidden and so on.

patients and their relatives were witnesses against him. As follows from their testimony, Hryhori had been practicing magical healing in Kovel' for at least four years. Moreover, some witnesses stated that his attempts to heal were not always useless because some of his patients did recover. Hryhori, answering the accusations, confessed that he learned magical ways of healing insomnia and fever from his father who recommended this method to him, in order to help people. To the question if he also learned anything about exorcism or infliction of demons, his answer was negative.[16] Similarly, a magic healer from the village of Metelen, Ustymia Dudyczycha, accused of witchcraft in 1728, confessed in the town court of Olyka that she had learned the art of healing from her late father.[17]

From Barbara Kostecka, who was a witness against her mistress, Wiktorya Rabczyńska, in May 1742, we learn about several magic practitioners from different villages around the town of Vinnytsia. According to Barbara, Wiktorya was attempting to get rid of her husband, Roch Rabczyński, with the help of witchcraft. This is why she sent Barbara to find a practitioner who could help her. During this quest, Barbara met several magic practitioners, among them was a man from the village of Svyniukhy. Barbara Kostecka learned about him from the recommendation of one person from the village of Dobryvody who told her, "Such a man lives in the village of Svyniukhy, but that man did not heal me, it was his mother who did. Though, he knows everything from his mother who has already died. And the name of that man is Liekarczuk."[18] Wiktorya Rabczyńska decided to personally visit this Liekarczuk. She promised him money, a couple of oxen and a cow, if he agreed to inflict an evil spirit on her husband. However, as Barbara Kostecka testified, she managed to come to that man first and persuaded him not to harm the innocent man, and for this reason Liekarczuk refused to help Wiktorya, referring to the unsuccessful experience of his mother in this area of magic, "I do not want to do it, because I remember that my mother once inflicted the evil spirit on one girl, and that evil spirit tortured not only that girl, but my mother as well. So I am afraid to do it, since I have a wife and children."[19]

We find similar tendencies of referring to the legacy of parents in trial materials from the Ukrainian lands under the Russian rule, the Hetmante.

16) *TDIA* (*Kiev*), *fond* 35, *op.* 1, *no.* 13, *f.* 234-236.
17) *TDIA* (*Kiev*), *fond* 1237, *op.* 1, *no.* 8, *f.* 86-86rev.
18) No. 49 (1742), V. B. Antonovich, *Koldovstvo*, 94.
19) Ibid., 95.

This was a case of Motrena, a woman from the village of Zhuravky, belonging to the Pereiaslav's monastery of St Michael, who was surprised to learn one day that she was able to undo *zakrutka*s – harmful magic knots in the fields – without any danger to her life. This happened when some widow named Levchykha "came to her and announced that she had a knot on the grain in her field, asking her, Motrena, to come to her field and unbind it."[20] However, Motrena "had reasoned that such knots are usually made by people who know some kind of witchcraft, so in order to prevent any harm which could have been caused to Levchykha or to herself, Motrena, in case she unbound that knot not knowing what kind of witchcraft was used, she refused, saying that she was afraid to unbind such knots and did not want to do it."[21] Nevertheless, Levchykha was able to persuade Motrena. She claimed that Motrena's late mother had a gift to unbind knots and remain unhurt, and Motrena inherited this gift. Her mother "knew how to unbind such knots and thus it is not possible that she, Motrena, was not able to unbind it."[22]

In June 1773, Prokop Prasolenko, a fortune-teller, was called to the town court of Hadiach where he confessed that he learned how to find stolen things and thieves by looking at stars "twenty years ago from his own grandfather, a Cossack of the Niezhyn regiment from the village of Popovka, Pavel Prasol who has already died."[23]

Thus having studied the stories of the people who claimed magical power (but not those who were slanderously accused of witchcraft), one can assume that a person who wanted to practice magic on 'professional' basis had to win credibility from potential clients, since it is hardly possible that people would ever trust just anyone who came out of nowhere and claimed that he or she had magical abilities. Probably in order to gain credibility, such people had to rely on the trustworthy authority of one of their parents. Such authority was a solid support and it also added a hint of legitimacy to the actions of the magic practitioner in the eyes of community, but at the same time, this magic legacy could make them look potentially more dangerous as bearers of magical power.

The situation of those who had bad reputations as witches among their co-villagers was different. As we have seen, people could acquire a

---

20) *TDIA* (*Kiev*), *fond* 990, *op*. 1, *no*. 535, *f*. 8.

21) Ibid.

22) Ibid.

23) *TDIA* (*Kiev*), *fond* 127, *op*. 1076, *no*. 135, *f*. 9rev.

reputation for witchcraft, not for the actual practices of witchcraft or black magic, but because of their ugly and quarrelsome nature. However, a quarrelsome nature was not enough to accuse someone of witchcraft. In most cases, suspicions arose only after some misfortune happened. Sometimes, as the case of witch-family from Vyzhva demonstrates, a bad reputation would infect an entire family and not just for one generation.