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The Jan Laski Society of Lovers of the History of Polish Reformation in Vilnius (1918–1939) – Genesis, Legal Structure and Activity

The Jan Laski Society of Lovers of The History of Polish Reformation in Vilnius, established in 1916, played a significant role in the propagation of history of the Reformation in Polish lands. It owed its achievements to the intensive efforts of its members who organized numerous meetings and lectures and published books on the Evangelical-Reformed Church and the influence the Reformation had on national culture and language. Towards the end of its existence the Society doubled the number of its members, which clearly shows that it was growing in prestige and popularity.

Keywords: Reformation, The Jan Laski Society of Lovers of The History of Polish Reformation, Vilnius, Evangelical-Reformed Church

On 20 July 1916, the German-occupied city of Vilnius saw the establishment of the Jan Laski Society of Lovers of the History of Polish Reformation. Owing its rise to Szymon Czarnocki¹ and Dr. Priest Konstanty Kurnatowski, a representative of the Evangelical-Reformed Clergy,²

¹ “Ś.P. Szymon Czarnocki,” *Szlakiem Reformacji* 1, no. 1 (1937), p. 9.

² W. Gizbert Studnicki, *Stosunek Wilna do Legionów. Kartki bez retuszu z pamiętnika 1916–1917* (Wilno, 1928), p. 10; “Jubileusz ks. prof. Konstantego Kurnatowskiego,” *Szlakiem Reformacji* 2–3 (1938), p. 33.

the Society, based in Vilnius at Zawalna Street 1, in the building owned by the Vilnius Synod of the Evangelical-Reformed Church,³ was the first Polish institution that aimed to explore the history of the Reformation in Polish lands. In offering his justification for the establishment of the Society, Priest Kurnatowski said: "Enough of this deadness [– –] we should stir to life both for ourselves and for others".⁴ Elsewhere it was added: "It was the only Vilnius institution that held us the Poles together despite all the divisions that exist between us today".⁵

At first, the German authorities saw no formal obstacles for the functioning of the Society. Only later did they begin to restrict its operation, ultimately revoking the permit it had initially been given.⁶ The repressive measures were probably a response to the growing interest which the Society was beginning to attract among the members of the Evangelical-Reformed Church⁷ and other religious groups.⁸ As a result, the organization went underground and the clandestine activities in which it became involved lasted, in all probability, until the end of 1918.⁹

The Society's first meeting, attended by 26 people, took place one month after its establishment (on 22 August 1916). Formed in its course was the organization's Board which included: priest Konstanty

³ M. Brensztejn, "Towarzystwo im. Jana Łaskiego w Wilnie," *Reformacja w Polsce* 2, 1921, p. 159; W. Urban, "Towarzystwo Badań Dziejów Reformacji w Polsce," in: *Słownik polskich towarzystw naukowych*, vol. 2, Pt. 1: *Towarzystwa naukowe i upowszechniające naukę działające w przeszłości na ziemiach polskich*, ed. B. Sordyłowa (Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków, Gdańsk, and Łódź, 1990), p. 204; "Do Starostwa Grodzkiego. Referat stowarzyszeń w Wilnie, [MS., dated:] Wilno, 10 III 1934," in: "Zespół Wileńskiego Starostwa Grodzkiego, Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii Reformacji Polskiej imienia Jana Łaskiego," Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas [hereafter: LCVA], fond 53, ap. 23, apr. 1679, fol. 22.

⁴ Quoted after: S. C[zarnocki], "Nasze czwartki," *Szlakiem Reformacji* 1–2 (1936), p. 21.

⁵ Quoted after: *ibidem*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ E. Alabrudzińska, *Protestantyzm w Polsce w latach 1918–1939* (Toruń, 2009), pp. 87, 207. See also J. Kłaczek, "Vilnius Evangelics in the 20th century," *Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis* 4 (2007): "Baltijos regiono istorija ir kultura: Lietuva ir Lenkija. Socialinė istorija, kultūrologija", pp. 134–139.

⁸ E. Alabrudzińska, *Kościół ewangelicki na kresach wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej* (Toruń, 1999), p. 201; M. Kosman, *Litewska Jednota Ewangelicko-Reformowana od połowy XVII w. do 1939 r.* (Opole, 1986), p. 93.

⁹ Brensztejn, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

Kurnatowski¹⁰ – president, Stanisław Bohusz-Sięstrzeńciewicz – secretary, treasurer – Helena Szeferówna – treasurer. At the beginning of 1918, the Society had 30 members and relied for its operation on the fees they paid.¹¹ From Michał Brensztejn’s account we know that the new institution was established mainly with a view to organizing lectures and meetings devoted to the history of the Reformation, including the history of the art and literature connected with the movement.¹² There were several lectures held in the period from 1916 to 1918. Addressed mainly for the Society’s members and the invited guests,¹³ the lectures were delivered as part of a series called “Evangelical Thursdays”.¹⁴ At the time under discussion, there was the same group of speakers and each of the meetings was usually attended by about 30 people.

Date	Author	Title	Number of participants
22 Aug. 1916	ks. Stanisław Kurnatowski	<i>O Janie Łaskim</i>	25
31 Oct. 1916	Stanisław Bohusz-Sięstrzeńciewicz	<i>Humanizm i jego wpływ na rozwój sztuki</i>	30
21 Dec. 1916	Szymon Czarnocki	<i>Reformacja i twórczość</i>	28
21 Dec. 1916	ks. Stanisław Kurnatowski	<i>Proroctwa polskie w XVI wieku</i>	28
1 Feb. 1917	Kazimiera Ostachiewiczowa	<i>Humanizm i Odrodzenie oraz stosunek ich do literatury polskiej</i>	30
8 Nov. 1917	ks. Stanisław Kurnatowski	<i>Koniec arjan polskich</i>	28
8 Nov. 1917	Szymon Czarnocki	<i>Człowiek przyszłości</i>	28
3 Jan. 1918	Stanisław Bohusz-Sięstrzeńciewicz	<i>O Józefie Chelmońskim</i>	51
23 Jan. 1918	ks. Stanisław Kurnatowski	<i>Światopogląd Juliusza Słowackiego</i>	27

Elaborated by the author based on: Brensztejn, op. cit., pp. 159–160.

The Society was very active until mid-1918, but, as Brensztejn noted,¹⁵ stagnated in the years that followed, and the period of the stagnation continued until 1922, that is until the Vilnius Region was granted

¹⁰ Kosman, *Litewska Jednota*, p. 139. He was succeeded in that position by Michał Jastrzębski.

¹¹ Brensztejn, op. cit., p. 159.

¹² Ś.P. Szymon Czarnocki, p. 9.

¹³ Brensztejn, op. cit., p. 159.

¹⁴ C[zarnocki], op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁵ Brensztejn, op. cit., p. 160.

a new status. Under the new political conditions the organization became involved in a variety of activities, and the acceptance of the new statute (6 June 1923) was indicative of the new developments to come. The document was drawn up by Bronisław Iżycki Hermann, a priest Michał Jastrzębski,¹⁶ Aleksander Proniewicz and by lawyers: Bolesław Szyszkowski and Eugeniusz Falkowski.¹⁷ The main (and apolitical) goals to be pursued by the organization involved studying the history of the Reformation, publishing the results of research work, collecting and preserving the “monuments of the Reformation”, organizing lectures, conferences and knowledge contests regarding the Reformation, awarding “school pupils” with prizes and scholarships, “granting allowances to the widows and orphans of the Society’s deceased members”, creating and funding scholarly institutions.¹⁸ The commemoration of particular events was given special attention, and so were the ideals of justice and toleration.¹⁹ The statute stressed the significance of the Reformation in Polish lands, including the role it played in shaping cultural heritage.

The Reformation contributed to the rise of the Vilnius Jesuit Academy. Established with a view to fighting Protestantism, it flourished as long as the Reformation gave it an incentive to maintain high standards and the ability to compete with the intellectual movement created by the Reformation. The new religious movement led to the appearance, both in bigger cities and in remotely located villages, of a great number of publishing houses that generated free word, most often for the first time in Polish, introducing mother tongue into the literature that had thus far relied on Latin. [—] Not the religious union but the Reformation and the intellectual movement to which it gave rise turned out to be the factor that contributed to the dissemination of Polish language and, consequently, to the expansion of Polish culture across the eastern parts of the Commonwealth.²⁰

Society members aimed to achieve the goals mentioned above by organizing meetings, lectures, balls and other social events, by publishing newspapers and books on the Reformation, by maintaining

¹⁶ J. Szturc, *Stowarzyszenia społeczno-kulturalne w polskim ewangelizmie* (Warszawa, 2006), p. 29.

¹⁷ *Statut Towarzystwa Miłośników Historii Reformacji Polskiej imienia Jana Łaskiego* (Wilno, 1927), p. 8, in: “Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii Reformacji Polskiej imienia Jana Łaskiego,” LCVA, fond 290, ap. 1, apr. 1, [s.p.].

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹⁹ *W obronie prawdy i w sprawie akcji wyborczej* (Wilno, 1928), p. 2.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

a library and a reading room, by creating a fund from which to finance the distribution of allowances and scholarships and by purchasing real estates.²¹ The resources used for the pursuit of the statutory goals involved the membership fees, the donations, the revenues (both the “ordinary” ones and those drawn from the publishing activity and from the organization of social events) and the “movable and immovable property”. The “interest on capital”²² was also used to finance the execution of the tasks in question.²³

Based in Vilnius, the Society was allowed to operate across the Vilnius region and, from 1926 on, across the Vilnius district. It was also given the right to create its branches. The Society’s regular membership was granted to those who were Polish citizens, submitted written applications and were admitted into the ranks of the organization by the board’s unanimous resolution. Honorary membership was granted to Polish citizens provided they were accepted by a majority of “two-thirds of the votes of the Society’s General Assembly”.²⁴ Members of the Society could leave the organization of their own volition (the relevant request was submitted to the Board) or could be removed for failing to pay their membership fees (for at least three years).²⁵

The General Assembly and the Board made up the governing bodies of the Jan Laski Society of Lovers of the History of Polish Reformation in Vilnius. These two bodies ran the institution. The General Assembly selected the Board and the Audit Committee, approved the reports prepared during its sessions and the annual report prepared by the Board and considered proposals brought forward by the Board, the Audit Committee and individual members. It also introduced changes to the statute, approved new regulations and took decisions regarding property matters (including donations, inheritance issues and budgetary ones), the removal of particular members from its ranks and the delegization of the Society.²⁶ General Assemblies were called by the Board every year, assuming a reporting character. There were

²¹ *Statut Towarzystwa Miłośników Historii Reformacji*, pp. 2–3.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 8; as noted: “Kapitał [– –] lokuje się w papierach procentowych, w instytucjach finansowych lub na pierwszych numerach hipoteki”.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 3. One could be an honorary and ordinary member at the same time.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 3, 4. Fees to be paid by members were symbolic and ran at the level of 1 *złoty* per year. The General Assembly’s decision was required in order to change the fee. In 1925 it was set at 5 *groszy* per month.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 4, 5.

also monthly sessions held on the first Sunday of every month and extraordinary ones held in “emergency” situations. Motions to call monthly and extraordinary meetings were put forward by the Board, by the audit committee or “by at least ten regular members”. Information about meetings was published “in one of the Vilnius newspapers”, while regular members were individually informed of their holding one week beforehand. One-tenth of the total number of the Society’s members, excluding the members of the Board,²⁷ formed a quorum required to pass valid resolutions (annual and extraordinary meetings). The introduction of changes to the statute and the dissolution of the Society required the presence of at least one-third of all the members.²⁸ New rules were passed by an ordinary majority.²⁹

Consisting of five regular members and three substitutes, the Board, elected by the General Assembly for a term of three years, represented the Society outside and dealt with its current matters. Responsible for calling General Assemblies and enforcing its resolutions, it also prepared the Society’s budget, including the budget draft, and managed the Society’s accounts.³⁰

Made up of people designated by the General Assembly, the Audit Committee was established with a view to “checking the accounts”. It contained three regular members and one substitute. Those who made up the Audit Committee weren’t allowed to sit on the Board. They met at least once a year with the goal of examining the documents.³¹

In the inter-war period the Society published a variety of works on the history of the Reformation in the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, including *Monumenta Reformationis Polonicae et Lithuanicae*.³² In the first half of 1938, the publication by the Vilnius Synod of the Evangelical Reformed Church of *Akta Zboru kiejdańskiego*

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 5.

²⁸ Ibidem, pp. 5, 6.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 6.

³⁰ Ibidem, pp. 6, 7.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 7.

³² M. Kosman, “Badania nad reformacją w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim,” *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce* 16 (1971), p. 145; Alabrudzińska, *Protestantyzm*, p. 207; H. Merczyng, *Wilno ewangelickie* (Wilno, 1925), pp. 1–16; W. Gizbert Studnicki, *Rys historyczny Archiwum i Biblioteki Synodu Ewangelicko-Reformowanego w Wilnie* (Wilno, 1929), pp. 1–16; *Zarys historyczny wileńskiego kościoła ewangelicko-reformowanego i jego biblioteki* [with annexed text], ed. W. Gizbert Studnicki (Wilno, 1932), pp. 1–31; *Album zabytków ewangelickich w Wilnie* (Wilno, 1929), pp. 1–73.

z lat 1628–1665³³ was announced. The announcement was followed by the establishment of a special Editorial Board. Entrusted with the task of preparing the publication, the Board included Wacław Gizbert Studnicki, Walerian Kwiatkowski and Włodzimierz Sakowicz.³⁴ Members of the Society also took part in various social and cultural events. Commemorative events and different meetings, including academic ones, were held.³⁵ There were also “discussion evenings”. Organized once a fortnight, they were devoted to various religious and historical issues.³⁶ In addition, the Society provided a financial support to Vilnius nursery schools.³⁷

³³ Szturc, op. cit., p. 29. Because of the outbreak of the war the initiative ended in failure.

³⁴ “Sprawozdanie z działalności T-wa im. Jana Łaskiego za r. 1937/38,” MS, in: “Zespół Wileńskiego Starostwa Grodzkiego, Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii Reformacji Polskiej imienia Jana Łaskiego,” LCVA, fond 53, ap. 23, apr. 1679, fol. 3.

³⁵ “Synod Wileński Ewangelicko-Reformowany,” *Szlakiem Reformacji* 5 (1939), p. 2; K. Kurnatowski, “Kościół Ewangelicki w Litwie,” *Szlakiem Reformacji* 5 (1939), pp. 8–12; “Sprawozdanie z działalności,” fol. 3; “Do Starostwa Grodzkiego w Wilnie, [MS., dated:] Wilno, 24 IV 1936,” in: “Zespół Wileńskiego Starostwa Grodzkiego, Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii Reformacji Polskiej imienia Jana Łaskiego,” LCVA, fond 53, ap. 23, apr. 1679, fol. 16; “Do Pana starosty grodzkiego wileńskiego, [MS., dated:] Wilno, 26 X 1932,” in: ibidem, fol. 26; “Do Pana starosty grodzkiego wileńskiego, [MS., dated:] Wilno, 31 X 1931,” in: ibidem, fol. 32; “Do Pana starosty grodzkiego, [MS., dated:] Wilno, 17 I 1931,” in: ibidem, fol. 39; “Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii Reformacji Polskiej,” in: ibidem, fol. 29; “Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii Reformacji Polskiej zapoczątkowało cykl odczytów,” in: ibidem, fol. 37; “Do Starostwa Grodzkiego. Referat stowarzyszeń w Wilnie,” fol. 22. In 1931–1939 the following important public lectures and commemorative events were held: W. Sakowicz, “Konferencja Warszawska w r. 1573”; idem, “Rola M. Gruzewskiej w dziejach Kościoła Ewangelicko-Reformowanego na Żmudzi”; W. Gizbert Studnicki, “Stefan Oskierko, emigrant religijny w wieku XVIII”; idem, “Usiłowanie rusyfikacji Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego na terenie Ziemi Wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej”; idem, “Przyczyny walki kleru z rządem Litwy Kowieńskiej”; K. Kurnatowski, “Kościoły protestanckie w Litwie”; S. Kot, “O biblii Chylińskiego”; B. Szyszkowski, “Sztuka i religia”; P. Krzewski, “O reformacji w kulturze staropolskiej”; Sz. Czarnocki, “Wrażenia z pobytu w Małopolsce Wschodniej wśród Rusinów, ewangelików reformowanych”; events dedicated to Tadeusz Hołowko and in commemoration of the “fourth hundredth anniversary of a Swiss reformer, Huldrych Zwingli”.

³⁶ P. Dilis, “Rzut oka na pracę kościelno-społeczną Wileńskiego Kościoła Ewangelicko-Reformowanego w roku synodalnym 1936–37,” *Szlakiem Reformacji* 3–4 (1937), p. 20; “Synod Wileński Ewangelicko-Reformowany,” p. 2.

³⁷ “Księga kasowa 1931–1937, Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii Reformacji Polskiej imienia Jana Łaskiego,” LCVA, fond 290, ap. 1, apr. 2, [n.p.].

Based in Vilnius at Zawalna Street 11/4,³⁸ a monthly *Szlakiem Reformacji* was, from January 1936 to August 1939, the Society's press organ.³⁹ Priest Michał Jastrzębski, a general superintendent of the Vilnius Evangelical Reformed Church⁴⁰ served (until 1938) as its editor, a priest Aleksander Piasecki was appointed its editor "responsible", and Bronisław Iżycki Herman, President of the Vilnius Consistory of the Evangelical Reformed Church⁴¹ became its first publisher, (later the role of the publisher was assumed by the Vilnius Synod of the Evangelical Reformed Church). In a foreword addressed to the readers, it was stated that the paper was designed to revive evangelical faith and to serve as a "symbol of our life in a free and reborn motherland".⁴²

Towards the end of its existence Waclaw Gizbert Studnicki was again placed in charge of the Society, having been re-elected its president on 27 March 1938.⁴³ A priest pastor Zygfryd Loppe⁴⁴ served as its vice-president, Włodzimierz Sakowicz was its secretary, Aleksander Meyer its treasurer and Walerian Kwiatkowski⁴⁵ a board member. On 2 October 1938 priest Kurnatowski was made the Society's

³⁸ From 1937 at Zawalna Street 11/5.

³⁹ In 1937–1938 bimonthly.

⁴⁰ Życiorys ś.p. Ks. Sen. M. Jastrzębskiego Superintendenta Gener. Jednoty Wileńskiej," *Szlakiem Reformacji* 4 (1938), p. 2.

⁴¹ "25-letni jubileusz p. B. Iżyckiego Hermana," *Szlakiem Reformacji* 3–4 (1936), p. 25.

⁴² M. Jastrzębski, "Słowo do Czytelników!," *Szlakiem Reformacji* 1–2 (1936), pp. 1, 2.

⁴³ Waclaw Gizbert Studnicki probably began to serve as the Society's president in 1930.

⁴⁴ Alabrudzińska, *Kościół ewangelickie*, p. 201.

⁴⁵ "Arkusz Ewidencyjny, in: Zespół Wileńskiego Starostwa Grodzkiego, Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii Reformacji Polskiej imienia Jana Łaskiego," LCVA, fond 53, ap. 23, apr. 1679, fol. 1; "Do Urzędu Wojewódzkiego Wileńskiego, [MS., dated:] Wilno, 21 III 1934," in: ibidem, fol. 21; "Do Urzędu Wojewódzkiego Wileńskiego. Wydział Bezpieczeństwa, [MS., dated:] Wilno, 23 XI 1932," in: ibidem, fol. 24; "Do Pana starosty grodzkiego wileńskiego, [MS., dated:] Wilno, 26 X 1932," in: ibidem, fol. 25; "Do Starostwa Grodzkiego w Wilnie," fol. 16; "Synod Wileński Ewangelicko-Reformowany," p. 2. In 1932–1934 the following people mad up the board of the Society: Waclaw Gizbert Studnicki (president), Zygfryd Loppe (deputy), Aleksander Meyer (treasurer), Gustaw Przewłocki (secretary). Members of the board were: priest Michał Jastrzębski, priest Paweł Dilis and Czesław Reychman. In the years 1935–1937 the board included: Waclaw Gizbert Studnicki (president), Zygfryd Loppe (deputy), Aleksander Meyer (treasurer), Jadwiga Loppe (secretary). Duties of members of the board were also perormed by: priest Michał Jastrzębski, priest Paweł Dilis and Czesław Reychman.

Honorary President.⁴⁶ Towards the end of the 1930s the organization doubled the number of its members. There were 53 of them now.⁴⁷

Created in 1916, the Society played a significant role in reconstructing the history of the Reformation in Polish lands. This goal was achieved through the intensive efforts of the Society's members who organized meetings, held lectures and published works on the historical role of the Evangelical Reformed Church and the influence the Reformation had on national culture and language.

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⁴⁶ “Synod Wileński Ewangelicko-Reformowany,” p. 2.

⁴⁷ “Sprawozdanie z działalności,” fol. 3.

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Abstract

The Jan Laski Society of Lovers of the History of Polish Reformation in Vilnius, established in 1916, played a significant role in the propagation of history of the Reformation in Polish lands. This was achieved thanks to an intensive activity of its members, including numerous meetings and lectures. In addition, the Society published books on the Evangelical-Reformed Church and the impact of the Reformation on the emerging culture and language. An important part in setting up the association was played by Konstanty Kurnatowski. Initially, the Society was open, but after the German authorities decided to suspend its activities, a secret period began, which lasted until the end of 1918. The Society was managed by the General Assembly and Board. From January 1936 to August 1939, the Society issued its own periodical under the title of *The Trail of Reformation*. The seat of the editorial office was in Vilnius. The growing prestige of the Society can be testified by the fact that at the end of its existence it almost doubled its membership in comparison to 1918.

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