

On 26 June 1755, the court of the demesne of Drohobycz sentenced Zelman Wolfowicz to be hanged for numerous cases of fraud and embezzlement and for terrorizing the inhabitants of the demesne. Zelman, formally serving as factor to the former starost's wife, Dorota Tarłowa, and overseer of the local salt springs, took control over the entire estate and for over a dozen years ruled it in a despotic manner, coming into conflict with the citizens of Drohobycz and with the Jewish community whence he came. According to the court documents, he induced starost's subjects to drink alcohol, beat and terrorized the citizens, forged measurements and entries in the court records and stole a Torah from the synagogue in order to force Drohobycz Jews to accept his son as a rabbi. According to the growing dark legend surrounding Zelman, he seduced the starost's wife, used the help of witches, attempted to assassinate his enemies and, after his death, turned into a vampire who frightened the population of Drohobycz. As late as the end of the 19th century, local peasant women scared their naughty children that Zelman would come to them.

Who was Zelman, and did he really deserve the reputation of a criminal and blood-sucker? The answer to that question is not easy. Although Zelman was a historical figure and we have quite detailed documents about his trial, in these documents it is difficult to separate fact from fiction, stereotypes and fantasy. A part in shaping and propagating the legend of Zelman was also played by later historians and ethnographers, who were fond of concentrating, not always objectively, on sensational features of his life and, in doing so, sometimes even consolidated anti-Semitic stereotypes.

We have decided to take a look at tales about Zelman Wolfowicz from a different angle. We wish to treat his story, both the real history and the legend, as a prism through which we will examine various issues regarding the functioning of local communities in the mid-18th century, the position of Jews in the pre-partition Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and collective mentalities. We shall consider Zelman in major social and cultural contexts such as power, corruption and exploitation among local communities in pre-partition Poland, the role of Jews in the administration and management of estates, Hasidism, Frankism and the Haskalah, anti-Judaism, and even witchcraft and belief in vampires. In this way the burden of analysis shall be shifted away from the uniqueness of Zelman Wolfowicz's life story towards the significance thereof, and it will be possible to make comparisons and generalizations.

The detailed research will allow us to formulate a new model of functioning of local communities in the pre-partition Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, transcending social divisions and religions, a model that combines a multidimensional analysis of microsocial and biographic data with a reflection on social and cultural phenomena that is broad in scale and possesses crucial significance. The methodological inspiration for the procedures of research and interpretation shall be a critical view of the values and faults of microhistory, narrative historiography and the biographical method in the context of modern research trends and current requirements and tasks regarding our knowledge of the past.