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GEORGIUS HELVETIUS, ASSAYER OF THE VILNIUS MINT

Eugenijus Ivanauskas

For many years the only copy of a document relating to Georgius Helvetius, the assayer of the Vilnius mint, which had been found in a Russian archive, lay in the library of S. Janušonis, a Lithuanian numismatist. At his untimely death his scientific heritage came under the guardianship of this author who thus had the chance to publish this paper and to introduce the unknown Swiss mint master who had worked in Lithuania.

Georgius Helvetius is first mentioned in 1616 in the financial report for the period of 16 Nov. 1615 to 17 Mar. 1618 which was compiled by the Land Treasurer of Lithuania, Jeronimas Valavicius.¹ At this time he was sent to Warsaw to reorganise the coinage, together with Jonas Jastžembskis, assistant to the mint master. They received 30 silver guilders to cover the travel expenses for 5 weeks and additional 15 guilders were allocated to hire a coachman. We also learn from the report that the invitation to come to Warsaw was brought by a *cossack* (letter carrier), Juozas, who received a payment of 7 guilders. These facts tell us that the assay-master and his colleague were invited to Warsaw to deal with various problems concerning coinage, but there is little else we know of his activities.



Poland, Sigismund III. (1587–1632), 10 ducats (*Portugalöser*) 1616 struck at Vilnius. Engraver Hans Stipel, assayer Georgius Helvetius (photo courtesy Staatliche Museen zu Berlin).

Another document which was issued by King Sigismund III Vasa on 27 Sept. 1618 says that Georgius Helvetius was «formerly» an assayer at the mint and «at the time being» had a free chemist's practice.² The paper also tells us how he got into trouble

¹ Archiwum główne akt dawnych (w Warszawie) (*The main archive of the ancient acts in Warsaw*). AR. Dz.11. LL.41v–42. – M. Gumowski, Z rachunków podskarbiego litewskiego H. Wołłowicza (*From the treasure book of H. Wollowicz, treasurer of Lithuania*), Ateneum wilenskie, R. XIII, Z. 1 (Wilno 1938), p. 240–241.

² Centralnyj gosudarstvennyj archiv drevnih aktov (Moskva) (*Central State Archive of the ancient acts, Moscow*). F. 389. D. 94. L. 6–6v.

on account of his family name. A man bearing the same name, a resident of Breslau (Wrocław), committed a crime and fled from the town. The Breslau authorities somehow got to know of the existence of a Swiss named Georgius living in Vilnius, and sent a letter to the sovereign of Lithuania, dated 10 Jan. 1617. Its content is unknown but it must have required that action was brought against Georgius Helvetius, and legal proceedings were started.

The court of the treasury of Lithuania, which dealt with the case, found that the chemist's proof of his identity, i.e. that he was not a person sought by the Breslau authorities, was insufficient. He was obliged to travel to Breslau and swear before the magistrates that he had never been to Breslau before and could therefore not have committed any crimes there. Helvetius returned to Vilnius with a letter from the Breslau authorities testifying to his innocence. At his request the King issued a document which stated that he, Helvetius, had nothing in common with the resident of Breslau of the same name, who was sought for a crime, and warned everybody not to reproach him for this crime. Moreover, the document entitled him to practice pharmacy.

The following questions arise now: who had denounced Georgius Helvetius, the resident of Vilnius, to the Breslau authorities and what prevented them from establishing a definite identification at first? We can guess from the date of the letter which the Breslau magistrate sent to the king that citizens of Breslau could have taken notice of him in Warsaw in 1616. There cannot have been many Swiss people living in Lithuania, especially chemists, so the people from Breslau did not make inquiries but simply wrote to the king.

Another question is whether Georgius Helvetius was really Swiss or whether he was a local person who bore the name because he had studied in Switzerland; we can safely discard the second assumption. The Lithuanian court would not have sent Georgius Helvetius to Breslau to defend himself if he had been a known local person. His career at the mint also points to a foreign background.

The position of assayer at the Vilnius mint was held in 1615 by Johann Symens³ and in 1617 already by Johann Trilner.⁴ It is evident that Georgius Helvetius, whose name is mentioned in 1616, only held the post for a short time. He possibly could not adapt himself well, being a foreigner, and we can guess that he was ousted by the ambitious Johann Trilner. From the fact that the King took Georgius, a foreigner, under his protection and issued the letter mentioned above, in which he recommended that all officials should allow Georgius the same rights as normal citizens we can deduct that he had suffered from his dismissal.

These few facts are all we know about Georgius Helvetius, assay-master at the Vilnius mint, but we can surely count him among the many pioneers who helped to spread crafts and science in Eastern Europe.

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³ Gumowski (note 1), p. 240.

⁴ Archiwum główne (note 1). AR. Dz. II. Ks. 11. L. 116.