

Pictures with history

In *Memorial book of Łomża Jewish commune*¹ we can find verbal and immortalized in photos picture of Rybaki – once a settlement in vicinity of Łomża. This early estate was specially imprinted in memories of Łomża community of Jewish descent. Until now it remains in consciousness of many inhabitants of the city by the Narew River an association of former Jewish district of *Rybaki* with the population of the Mosaic faith. It is still said, that one or the other Łomża inhabitant lives at *Rybaki*, while in reality he/she lives at Rybaki street.

In this elaboration I took a try to restore a picture of that place, which after the war was extracted from their memories some of its former inhabitants. It consists of subjective, kept in memories of different people, elements of the world, which aura is shown by tales about places and people. Previous Łomża and its inhabitants was preserved in several of their fragments.. Let's restore their memory. .

„(...) Ninety percent of inhabitants of the Rybaki settlement, former district of fishermen, constituted Jews. The rest, ten percent of the Rybaki estate dwellers, were those who were not Jews and majority of whom lived in Polish houses by the high road to Piątница, belonging to “underworld” suspected of theft and robberies, prostitution and drunkenness, card games and factoring in criminal matters. Majority of Jewish inhabitants were hardworking people. To those belonged: peddlers, who from morning to evening hovered around markets with their merchandise or stood whole day at the marketplace by their fruit stalls, baked from the sun during summers, covered by frost and snow during winters, porters, dwellers of tiny and dark cubicles, carters with haggard horses hitched to long wagons for transporting goods. Carters brought and distributed to warehouses and stores bags of flour from Gielczyński's mill, sugar from Butkowski's and Moshe Aaron Hepner's trading house. Significant position among them reached a carter Zevl with his brother and father. To the inhabitants of the settlement who had their source of income in Chevra Shas alley belonged Hershl Medek's father², a Jew with a

¹ Now, by efforts of the Brothers Waga Łomża Scientific Society in Łomża and Polish Historical Society Łomża Branch it is being prepared for printing. *Memorial books* are called *pinkases*. *Łomża pinkas* was mainly created based on Jewish witnesses of history as an expression of memory about Polish Jewry and contains some kind of synthesis of Jewish Łomża history.

² In the *Book* ...there are following words written about him: “Worth mentioning is Abraham Hershel Kanowicz, called Medek, whose name will remain linked to the Łomża Jewish commune. He was a simple boy, son of a carter from Rybaki, who transported on his wagon loads from Czerwony Bór to wholesalers in Łomża, such as Moshe-Aaron Hefner and others. He was studying a bit at the summer school “Talmud –Torah” and he did not stand out in his studies, because from early childhood he was attracted by horses and carts.

short, black beard, of oriental looks, who for all his life sat in the kerosene store of Jakobi and sons, forwarding companies and others, but at the end he emigrated to America, where he lived to the end of his days, spending time studying Torah and serving God in one of the small houses of prayer. Here lived mostly all the water carriers in the city. It was convenient for them, close to the place of drawing water, near the river, in which they drunk their horses, immersed and washed them in fresh waters of the Narew River. During Sabbaths and summer nights they used to find here some pasture with grass and bulrush for their skinny horses, leading them here or there at the river banks. During the summer Sabbaths, after consuming a warm meal water carriers were coming out with their horses, they were grooming them by meadow, they were tiding their front legs, so they would not escape and bolt, and they lay down in grass, among bushes, in shadow of willows, to read psalms and Parables of Fathers (*Pirke awot*), being half asleep and half awake. At Rybaki lived also a community of baggers, who used to circle in big cities from door to door, every day or on certain days, on the eves of Sabbaths and holidays, at the beginning of month (*rosz chodesz*) and on days of holidays. Some were real baggers, but some were wealthy people, who pulled out their hands and after their death some could find real treasures in wholes and bags...

As it was not enough confusion, a group of organ-grinders also found their place at Rybaki. They were circling the streets and backyards of the city with their playing boxes, with a green parrot on top. An organ-grinder was turning a special crank with one hand and the sounds of melody of some Russian waltz were flowing, popular love song "Naprijasno Wan'ka liubish". The second hand he put to a small can where he could find small pieces of paper with the lottery. A child or a peasant at the market paid a penny and a parrot predicted their future by drawing with its beak a coupon that stated what was awaiting him or her. There were also many craftsmen repairing shoes or remaking clothes, coopers and bakers, sawyers and tinsmiths in the district. They were people of hard work, in the sweat of the forehead earning their piece of bread. The activists of the workers movement in Łomża came from here: of "Bund" and "Poale Zion", communists and anarchists. They noticed also sons of poor, because out of that group there was sometimes coming phenomenally capable scholar, outstanding in yeshiva and future rabbi, melamed or exercising other honorable position in synagogue. And there were some who even in their young age emigrated to America with tickets, which they received from father or uncle and they were growing up there, working as peddlers or shoeshine boys during days, but during evenings they attended evening courses, colleges and finally became doctors, engineers or millionaires, like Warner brothers from Hollywood, whose grandfather was a Rybaki dweller... There were also such inhabitants who were slowly leaving the neighborhood and moving to apartments in the city itself, first to Woziwodzka street or to Capuchin slope, and finally to Dworna, Długa streets or even to New Market..."³

He had however a soul of a folk actor and who knows what level would he reach if he received proper education in that direction. A circus is coming to Łomża and Medek is pushing in first and from acrobats he learnt their art, gymnastics, etc. and he was able to gather a nice company around himself and show them his zeal. He was a loyal film fan and he knew not only how to narrate what he saw, but also how to imitate several things and play big roles. Once, when to Łomża came a Jewish athlete Zishe Breitbard, he learnt several skits and tricks of the athlete, such as: bending iron, lifting heavy loads, braking iron hoofs, pulling out nails with teeth, etc. He started to visit towns and at the markets showed village folks his power, collecting full hat of pennies. He learnt how to dance and opened "a dance saloon" at Rybaki. Several young boys and girls rushed to learn modern dances.

When Mister Goldbruch and Mister Golwaser established first Łomża bus company, they employed Abraham Hershel as a busman. All the way from Łomża to Warsaw he cheered travelers by his singing, dancing, his jokes and tricks(...)" See *Memorial Book...*, op. cit., pp. 586-587.

³ *Memorial Book of Łomża Commune*, red. Jom-Tow Lewiński, translation from Hebrew Ewa Wroczyńska, typescript, pp. 664-666.

In other place of *Łomża Pinkas* we can read about the history of settlement of Rybaki:

“(…) Commerce was developing and it was difficult for Christian traders and craftsmen to wait for coming of Jews, often for many days. That is why after some efforts and adequate, secretive fee, they found estate closer to the city, fishermen village by the Narew River “Rybaki”. At the beginning the village was far from the city, located on the hill, was not included to the city until the 19th century. The place was swampy and during rain or specially during snow melting it was dangerous to live there because of floods. Almost every year in spring the whole area was changing into a big lake, when the Narew waters swelled. Sometimes the houses, stables and warehouses were flooded. There were also human victims and animal corpses.

Several dozen Jewish families settled here and continued mutual relations with inhabitants of Łomża legally or illegally. Two city gates once built to protect from Prussians’, Cossacks’, Kurps’ and Tartars’ assaults, were started to be called “The Jewish Gates”, because they were guarded each day, before evening, against creeping in and entering Jews after the dark. One of the gates, the one from the side of the village Skowronki, was made of iron and the second from the side of the village Gielczyn was made as a stone wall. The village of Rybaki became a developing place. The Jews were buying lots, building big houses, sometimes they were uplifting ground near the Narew River to protect from the floods. They built grain warehouses, lumber mills for sawing wood and by the road to the village of Szur, at the spot where the synagogue and the community house used to stand in the 15th century, before the exile, they again built a synagogue from scratches and renewed a cemetery. That place, which was later known as “The Old Cemetery”, was crucial between the city and the Jewish settlement of Rybaki.

That place had also one more advantage. It was on the main way between Stara Łomża and Łomża and Stara Łomża was inhabited by Jews who had connections with the city.

Topographic conditions of the Jewish settlers were not extraordinary. Christian fishermen had their source of income there. Jews lived there for the necessity and not because of their occupation or their material needs. Also at Rybaki they concentrated close to one another, as they always did, not to be dispersed among Christians. As much as it was possible they also tried to stay away from the river and settled the slopes of the hill, closer to the city. With each occasion the owners of the city expanded their borders so they were getting closer and closer to the western gates of the city. The Jewish settlement at Rybaki got later name of the Jewish street. First Jewish houses, which became a part of the city were built on the slopes of the Capuchins hill, on the outskirts of the Woziwodzka street and were turning left in the direction of the water pump, which was constructed after certain time and for a long period provided city with cleaned drinking water from the river. There were always live bonds between Piątnica and Rybaki. Shochets, rabbi and others connected to religious rituals from Piątnica took also care of Rybaki. It should be noticed that Piątnica was populated by richer Jews, who dealt also with studies, whereas poorer Jewish element dwelled in Rybaki. Small merchants, artisans and others, thanks to their meagre businesses had to live near the river.”⁴

⁴ *Sefer zikaron li-kehilat Łomża = Łomže; a izker-buch= Łomża; In memory to the Jewish community [The Memorial Book of Łomża Commune]. Irgun Olej Łomża be-Israel [Landsmanshaft of Łomża in Israel], editor Jom-Tow Lewiński, translation from Hebrew Adam Bielecki, Tel Awiw 1952.*

Below some photographs which capture that settlement adjoining Łomża are presented. We can see the landscape, different buildings, the river and people. All these elements contributed to that characteristic space. It was preserved in old pictures.

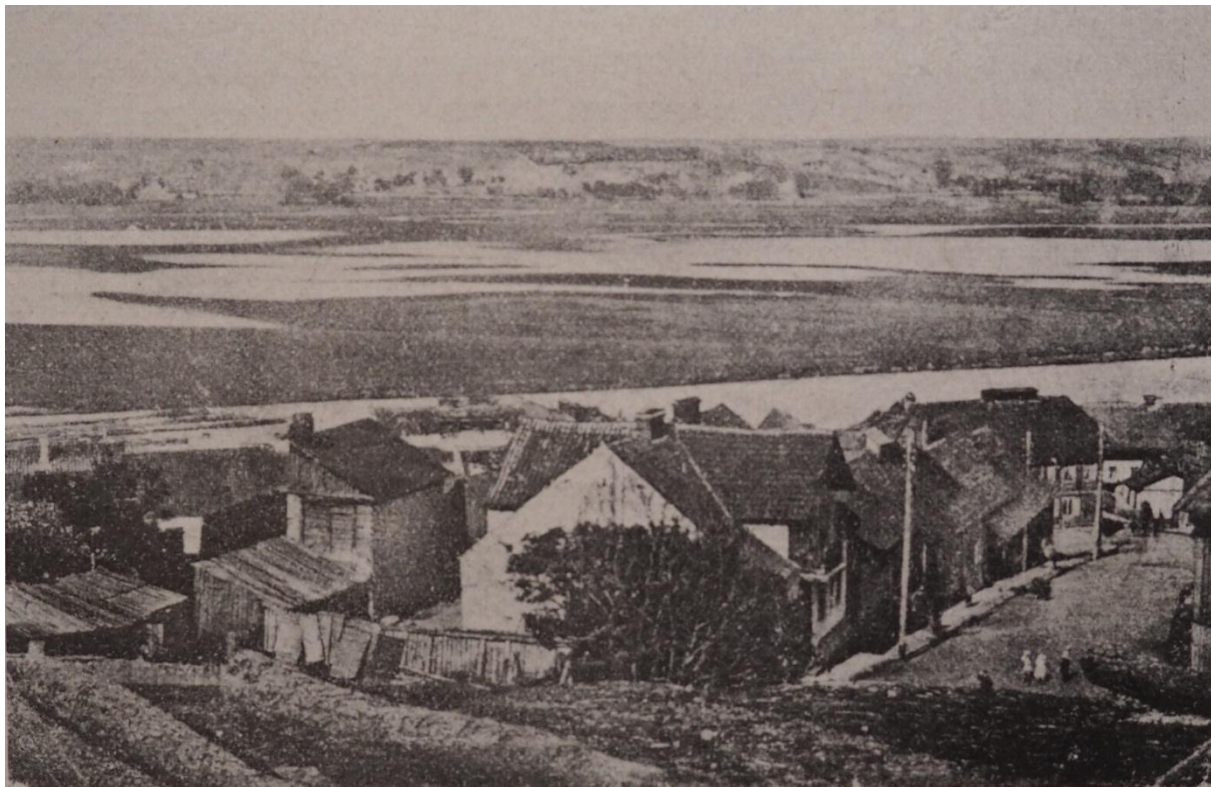


Photo from *The Memorial Book of Łomża Jewish Commune* with caption: Fishermen settlement – Rybaki, which was incorporated into the city and became a Jewish estate.



Photo from *The Memorial Book of Łomża Jewish Commune* with caption: A Jewish street in the settlement by the Narew River



Photo from *The Memorial Book of Łomża Jewish Commune* with caption: The Jewish settlement of Rybaki by the river

In *The Book*... in the context of the place that Rybaki was, we can find memories about people, for example about an “Oilwoman” Marcus:

„At the settlement of Rybaki she was called with respect an “Oilwoman” and everybody knew whom to turn to: to that woman, the owner of the small oil mill by the Narew River. She was quite thick, medium height, she had beautiful eyes, delicate and sedate face. She was born in Zambrów. Her husband was a calm and humble man who performed his craft all his life and she raised beautiful daughters and the only son, graduate of Yeshiva. The daughters grown up and she married them off scholarly and good husbands. One of them, Rejzel, went as far as Paris. Each day, besides her care of home, which she kept perfectly and with big solicitude, the „Oilwoman” dealt with help to the needy and bestowing in secret people, who prospered poorly every day. With big talent she discovered beautiful families, who suffered scarcity and were ashamed to ask for help. She sent them money and food. When the war refugees came here, she day and night took care of satisfying their needs, sending food, clothing, finding temporary and permanent dwellings and also work for family heads.

I remember when one day mentally ill daughter-in-law of above mentioned Chaja-Hinda Brzoza disappeared. She was young and beautiful and came from Ostrołęka. She lost her mind and her husband - a lawyer - with children moved to another city because of big shame. Ill woman was roaming the streets, circling around her deserted house and looking at it with full of pain gaze. When nobody could see it, the “Oilwoman” took her to her house, locked her in the attic and three or four times a day brought her food and satisfied all needs. Even her own daughters for some time did not know about human and noble deed of their mother...”⁵

Other figure connected to Rybaki, as a place of his birth, was, Jehuda Blumenfeld.

„Among respectable citizens of Jerusalem, famous people from the second half of the 19th century, there was rabbi Jehuda Blumenfeld, or, as he was called *Judel Łomżer*. He was born in 1822 in Łomża at the settlement of Rybaki. When he was nine, his father bereft him. Jehuda moved to Amsterdam and studied in a small Yeshiva at the expense of brothers Akiwa and Dow Leharin. At the age of sixteen Jehuda emigrated to Jerusalem. According to another tale he went there with grandfather, an old man, who moved to Land of Israel in order to die and be buried there. Jehuda entered Yeshiva in Jerusalem and fast became famous as a big erudite and scholar. He was a beautiful young man, strong as an oak and brave. He was known to the whole Jewish society of Jerusalem. Jews, on their way to the Western Wall or Rachel’s Grave, who were scared to pass through the Arab districts, asked *Judel Łomżer* to accompany them. And more than once he had to repel attackers with strength of his arm.”⁶

⁵ Ibidem, p. 669-670.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 569-570.

In memories about a well-known in Łomża doctor Karbowski⁷ Rybaki were also evoked in the *Pinchas*, but in the context of place, that he was connected to professionally and socially.

„(...) Jehuda Karbowski was his (that is his father's) darling and when he finished University of Warsaw and Petersburg in 1894, old Karbowski influenced his son to stay in Łomża. Father bought him all needed modern medical instruments and arranged beautiful medical office. For three years Karbowski treated poor patients for free and he was loved for that by everybody. He got his fame as an experienced doctor, especially as a surgeon. Thanks to his father's generosity, Jehuda could sacrifice himself to the medical knowledge and did not have to during his first years' work for money. When he joined the old Jewish hospital as an assistant of the older doctor Kacenenbogen, he put in a lot of effort to accelerate construction of the new hospital and thanks to his father's support he started also to buy modern instruments for that institution. He organized dancing parties and collections for the benefit of the hospital. He was also a doctor for several social help societies and he did not expect any reward for that. He was a favorite of the poor from the Rybaki district and he knew everybody there. One day he was summoned to the patient and walking down the stairs he sighed and said: "Their life is endangered!" Concerned people asked: "Who is?" He answered: "These steps..."⁸

Rybaki was also a place of tragic events. Here is a description of one of them:

„The second „historical” fire started on the 19th of June 1678. After many years Łomża again remembered fires. In 1865 “Gazeta Polska” informed about a big and dangerous fire, which started in Łomża in the Jewish district of Rybaki. About 200 families were left without a roof over their heads. A big sugar plant of Moshe Nowiński also burnt and over 200 workers lost their bread.”⁹

As we can see, that place lived with its own rhythm. Its atmosphere is recalled in following descriptions and tales:

⁷ In the *Book* there is written an information about that man: „A real Łomża doctor, who was born and raised in Łomża, was doctor Jehuda Karbowski, or as he was usually called – Julian. His father, Lejb Karbowski, born in Augustów, was a simple Jew, an uneducated man, who started as a waiter in a restaurant, read Hebrew with difficulties, not understanding the meaning of words. He was however a social activist, who with faith devoted himself to the construction of the new hospital, erecting a synagogue and specially decorating its Aron ha-Kodesh. Lejb Karbowski had a pure esthetic sense, dressed as a noble man, wearing a tailcoat and a cylinder on his head. He also took care of the Jewish social institutions, so they could be pure and elegant. He had eight sons and almost all of them finished gymnasiums and universities, and later became famous doctors in Warsaw, Nowy Dwór and other cities of Poland and Russia, and one of them, Jehuda – in Łomża. Old Karbowski however kept kosher rules and religion. During *Tishat HaYamim*, he cared that nobody would bring any meat to his house and that fact became a legend in the city. During holy days he was climbing up bimah along with all his sons, because he belonged to the kin of Kohen (priests) and delighted the whole house of prayer with their singing. When his son Julian married a daughter of Zajdenbojtł's from Warsaw, old Karbowski was coming during Shabbat evenings to check if his daughter-in-law lit candles.

He had no shortage of money, as he was a wealthy man and his hotel called „Hotel Polski” was famous for its beauty and elegance in the whole area. Mighty of this world stayed there. He used to say that: “ No rabbi ever stopped at my hotel. Catholic priests were coming, priests of the Orthodox faith were coming, but no rabbi ever crossed my threshold...” (heard from Abraham Mizrach). See *ibidem*, pp. 259-260.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 263.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 572.

„At the Rybaki district you could meet goats all the time. Goats and goatlings. On the street and in the yards. Goats on the grass and at the river bank. Goats on low roofs and on rotten fences. Jews lived at the expense of goats: each house had a goat giving milk for family and for sale, in order to sell goats' production in those city alleys, where they could not keep goats. Goats were fed with leftover of bread and dinner, potato and fruit peelings. There was enough of that. At each step and at any place, especially in the summer, one could see goats' excrement covering yards and streets in front of houses like cones in the forest. In the summer it was that children were going down to the cellars or went to a farm and slept with goats and goatlings. With the exception of two houses, where cows were kept: the house of a blacksmith Niski and the house of wife of *Kapinoza*. They diversified their home dishes with milk and also were selling it to people of upper class and picky gourments.”¹⁰

Background of recalled in the citations situations approximates real life of the city and its inhabitants, showing life of the cultural community, its daily routines, social conditions, human temperaments, independent from human will course of events...

„All days of the week there was peace and quiet at Rybaki. But on Friday, before the Sabbath an idyllic atmosphere was changing. Already at dawn all the inhabitants were jumping to their feet. At the other side of the Narew River, on the broad fields sounded voices of peasants and their women coming there on their carts full of all kinds of goods grown out of soil and intended for the “market day”. All roads were filled with strings of carts coming with cracking because of heavy products loaded on them. For the sound of carts rumbling on the streets of the settlement workers were waking up and getting up. Na odgłos furmanek turkoczących po ulicach osiedla wrywali się ze snu i wstawali robotnicy. They hurried up in jumps because Sabbath was approaching. Everybody wanted to make it with finishing of work, in order to get a weekly salary and make it to market to buy what was needed from peasants.

All the Rybaki inhabitants were busy and toiling: some hurried to buy products for Sabbath, others hurried for service at the houses of rich men. Women-workers usually did their shopping when they finished work in wealthy people's houses: they were buying leftovers of products and waste items for a song afternoon. Tumult and uproar, turmoil and shouts were everywhere you could turn. Also by the Narew River there was tumult and uproar; everything was immersed in the waters of the river: tabs and pans, tables and benches, bowls and pots, plates and rakes, bags and lids, and at the end children of the cheddar age. Everything was cleaned and sanctified in honor of Sabbath... The waters flowing calmly in the riverbed took with their current and washed all the dirt of the six days of work.

In the afternoon hours housewives, both poor and rich, took care of preparation of the hot meal, that is a *chulent*¹¹ in honor of Sabbath. Each pot was covered and beautifully tied with cloth. Rows of pots with *chulent* were waiting for their turn to be inserted inside a hot, big oven and when women executed that holy action, they immediately started preparing and cleaning houses in honor of the day of rest. Children were chased to the street, so they would not interrupt in house and there they could gambol for long hours, how much the heart desires. And here the joker Chaskali was showing up with slightly squint eyes, with kind of shofar, a toy out of lung, which he appropriated in kitchen. He was striding like a king in front of a team, and following

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 666.

¹¹ It is a traditional Jewish dish, a stew made of kosher meat and chickpeas, with onion, barley or millet groats and sometimes with other extras.

him a big army of barefoot children, whose ends of shirts were shining through holes in their pants and they had chunks of wholemeal bread in their hands. Chaskali and his army were marching and singing out laud and in the middle of their procession crazy Pietruszka¹² was squeezing and dancing a joy dance in front of them: a company was accepting him with joyful blare and they both, Chaskali and Pietruszka were marching rhythmically and the whole street was full of holyday blare – that is how children at Rybaki were greeting a Queen of Sabbath”¹³.

A subjective picture of place, which contributed to the space of life of Łomża Jewish population, its specific architecture and people, brings back the aura of the past. Its traces you can find up to now *at Rybaki*, as contemporary Łomża inhabitants are used to say colloquially. It is worth to take a walk there, which will be accompanied by verbal memories from the pages of Memorial Book..., photographic picture and your own perspective of overview of space and rather difficult history.

¹² In his biography we can read: “Seemingly behavior of Nachum Pietruszka was same as all other people. Calm and polite, he spoke out and answered questions without any signs of confusion of senses and attacks of madness. Also the clothing, which he was wearing, was neat and complete. However at closer acquaintance one could realize strange fire and dancing flashes in the pupils of his eyes and melancholy spilling over the face. Some psychological trauma, torment and heavy tiredness, some endless pain and pressure was overwhelming his soul and that is why he was revealing confusion and mixing of mind. Mercy and compassion, which he kept in his heart, rootless and defective for some unknown reason, he transferred to inanimate objects, which he perceived as alive. In his eyes they seemed to be sentenced to lifelong prison. He complained over their slavery.

Those signs of madness Nachum showed when he was no longer adolescent, but came to adulthood. For some time he was an apprentice of the owner of the sausage plant Johanan Kristal. Ribs of the butchered cattle, cleft meat and stuffing of sausages influenced week and sensitive Nachumke’s mind, who at every point started to see cruelty and murderous acts.

He had a delicate and very sensitive soul and besides that refined musical sense. When he heard a melody played on a piano, a violin or any other instrument, he stopped like petrified and listened to flowing sounds. When he heard any melody, he immediately imitated it on his mouth-organ. During the national holidays, when the military band played on the Sienkiewicz Plaza, Nachum stood next to a conductor and with his thin cane he imitated his movements, accompanying a band and nobody rebuked him for doing it. And when the band was returning to barracks, Nachum was striding in front of them, was whistling or singing march melodies, waving his cane, standing on one leg and the other lifting up.

Nachum’s mother took a lot of efforts and finally found him a pair – some poor older maid, also a little mentally ill. Nachum knew, that now he was carrying o load of family support and tried to feed his wife. From then he did not want to show his wonders for free. He asked for money and the curious dropped pennies to his hat. He was touring also the houses of wealthy people, he was dancing in front of them and asking for remuneration. He also tried to carry heavy loads, bags of landladies from market for reward.

Nachumke was killed by Nazis...” See *Memorial Book...*, pp. 612-613.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 667-668.