

## The archive and the library of Birgittines monastery in Grodno. The inventory from 1925 and present state

### Summary

The Birgittines convent (Order of The Most Holy Saviour of St. Birgitta) in Grodno – the 10th, and chronologically the last, outpost of this type in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – was founded and equipped in 1634 by Aleksandra née Sobieski and Krzysztof Wiesiołowski. A complex of buildings, located at the one of main streets of the city on a large plot, is preserved to the present day. The church and the adjoining double storey quadrilateral building of the monastery is surrounded by a high wall with decorative gates and octagonal towers at the corners. While the architecture of the unit lasted with minor changes, the excellent in terms of art baroque furnishings of the church, abundant monastery archive, and rich book collection have been almost completely destroyed, what has occurred relatively recently – in the second half of 20th century. In the long history of the monastery there was no shortage of various difficult moments, however, the direct threat of the continuation of the monastery's existence brought the prohibition against the accepting of novices, issued by the Russian occupational authorities. Although the monastery was not formally dissolved, the influx of the new candidates was prevented, what was equal with the total liquidation in future. Before in 1908 the last of Birgittines had died, several sisters from the Congregation of the Holy Family of Nazareth were installed in the monastery by the efforts of Vilnius Bishop Edward Ropp. In 1923 they formally took over the heritage of the Birgittines. Thanks to them we owe the detailed inventory of the heritage of predecessors, drawn up on 9th February 1925, titled: *Inwentarz i biblioteka pobrygidzka. Opisanie kościoła i klasztoru sióstr Najświętszej Rodziny z Nazaretu dawniej Panien Brygidek w Grodnie diecezji wileńskiej, wraz z jego inwentarzem, zabudowaniami gospodarskimi i przynależnościami* [*The post-Birgittine inventory and library. The description of the church and monastery of the Holy Family of Nazareth, formerly Order of The Most Holy Saviour of St. Birgitta, together with its inventory, farm buildings and belongings*] – preserved in two copies: one in the Warsaw Province of Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth Archive, and second in the Lithuanian National Historical Archive in Vilnius. Part of this document consists of 100 paged typescript titled *Katalog dokumentów spraw ogólnych klasztoru i ksiązek pobrygidzkich* [*The catalogue of general issues of the monastery and post-Birgittine books*], herein published.

The whole, untouched legacy of past inhabitants of the monastery was under the care of Nazarethan sisters until the suppression of their Grodno facility by the Soviet

authorities. On March 25th 1950, the nuns were forced to leave their seat, and the monastery together with the church became the property of the Department of Health, and was used for 40 years as a mental hospital. Before that occurred, most of the sisters in 1945 left Grodno, moving to the Provincial House in Warsaw, where they transported liturgical vessels, a small part of the equipment of the church, and dozens of valuable manuscripts and books. It was a very provident move, as even though 7 sisters remaining in Grodno were able to move a lot of the equipment to post-Bernardian church, they did not manage to save everything. The library collections, placed in a room in the church tower remained virtually unattended here and over the years almost the whole resource was looted, getting to the antiquarian market. From the former library of Grodno Birgittines only 130 objects (manuscripts, old prints, and books from the 19th century) have been preserved. A small part (one manuscript and 27 old prints) was bought by Grodno Museum of the History of Religion from the hands of the so-called collectors. In 1997, during the inventory works carried out under my supervision by the team of the University of Warsaw art history students, only 7 positions, forgotten in the attic of post-Bernardine church, were managed to find, and another 7 in 2013, preserved today in the collections of the seminar library in Grodno. To this list there have to be added two positions exhibited in the museum established in 2008, in the underground of the former Birgittine church and another three currently being privately owned.

Even worse was the fate of the archive. The Nazarethan sisters leaving Grodno in 1945 were able to transfer only few most valuable documents to the Provincial House in Warsaw, but the rest of the vast resource probably remained in the monastery. Almost everything was lost – only in the basements of the convent was found a box containing damp, already partly decayed documents (mainly concerning the economy in the monastic estates). They were divided between the Historical-Archeological Museum and National Historical Archive in Grodno.

The herein published *Katalog dokumentów spraw ogólnych klasztoru i księzek pobrygidzkich* presents the idea about the size of the resource and allows for an approximate determination of its character. The archive of Birgittines, consisting from 24 thematic areas, counts of more than 698 fascicles with difficult to determine today number of the documents. Section I contained files concerning the establishment of the foundation and the beginnings of the convent's functioning, including the original of the foundation description from December 12th, 1642 with the stamps and signatures of Aleksandra Wiesiołowska and bishop Abraham Woyna. Section II was comprised of the materials concerning the inhabitants of the monastery and the equipment of the church. One of the most valuable documents was, started in 1636 and kept updated until 1908, the list of names of all 191 Birgittines who stayed in the monastery during its existence. The detailed rules regulating the religious life of the monastic community, including the way of lay maidens ordination, the ceremony of taking the veil, religious vows, and consecration according to the Holy Saviour rule, but also the household rules, the order of celebration of religious prayers and singing Masses, had to be extremely valuable. Both in the archive, as well as in the library were found numerous collections of prayers, hymns, and devotional texts considerations written

or prescribed by the residents of the monastery. The extensive information on the appearance and equipment of the church and the monastery had to be in a unit of several visitations from the years 1646–1895, as well as 14 separate inventories of silvers and most valuable vestments (mostly drawn up when the founder was still alive). The certificates of relics authenticity from 1664–1665, 1778, and 1838 concerned the spiritual goods of the monastery, including the act of offering St. Clements relics, given in 1781 by Karol Litawor Chreptowicz, and the consent to their introduction to the church.

The largest part of the archive (units III–X) were economic records relating to the goods granted for the monastery equipment, including the collection of 67 accounting books from 1689–1896, as well as plans of individual estates, villages and farms. Among the property acts were also found the documents issued way before the establishment of the monastery, including the extracts from the landowners and municipal books enclosed by the Wiesiołowski spouses together with the documentation of founding goods. Section XI consisted of Birgittines profuse correspondence with the clergy authorities and offices, nearly all dating from the nineteenth century.

Sections XII–XXIII contained of the monastic library books inventory, and unit XXIV included plans and a set of drawings.

The collection consisted of at least 785 identified titles, and because some of them were present in more than one copy, the whole counted about 1000 volumes (usually bound in brown and black skin). The undoubted curiosity constituted the uncut printing sheets, enough to draw up 204 copies of Breviary, printed for the Birgittines in Lublin in 1748 and dozens of the *Regula Świętego Salwatora podana św. Brygidzie* [*The Rule of the Holy Saviour given to St. Birgitta*] copies, printed in Kraków in 1673. When drawing the inventory of the post-Birgittine library, each one of the books was labelled with a signature written with purple indelible pencil, consisting of the ordinal number within the specific section and the letter describing this department – for instance 228/k or 12/n (and if there were few copies of a title, to the signature was added the copy number indicated by the figure in Latin). Only three books came from the 16th century (the oldest from 1585), the number of prints from 17th century (only 47) was also fairly modest, although one of them was a work extremely rare today, as there are only 3 copies of it preserved today in the world collections – *Vita seraphicae matris Birgittae de regno Sveciae cum Revelationibus Eiusdem selectoribus Formis Aeneis Expressa, Coloniae Agrippinae* [1676?], with the engraved title page and 50 engravings by S. Theysens. The core of the collection were issues from 18th century, often complemented with handwritten supplements (concerns especially breviaries, prayer books and collections of prayers and hymns); there was also a lot of books from the 19th century – (the last from 1883).

The catalogue has been prepared very carefully – most of the positions have the name of the author, the beginning (or brief record) of the title and year of publication, and also the number of copies. These data allowed to fully identify the majority of prints, what is indicated in hereby elaboration with a reference to *Bibliografia staropolska* and to *Bibliografia polska XIX w.* [*The Old-Polish Bibliography and Polish Bibliography of 19th century*] of the Estreichers. The preserved manuscripts and books were labelled

with more accurate description, indicating the place of their current storage, and in several cases were enclosed the illustrations: reproductions of title page, prints, and more interesting elements of the text.