

## **Women with croziers: the history of the portraits of the Armenian Benedictine Sisters**

**On May 22, 2017, the Benedictine Sisters of the Convent of St. Joseph in Wołów in Silesia donated seven portraits of Armenian prioresses from Lviv to the Foundation for the Culture and Heritage of Polish Armenians in Warsaw.**

They have been kept for years as a valuable inheritance from the convent of the Armenian Benedictine Sisters of Lviv, who after the Second World War left their original home at the Armenian-Catholic Cathedral and settled first in the former Benedictine abbey in Lubin in Wielkopolska – where the last prioress, s. Elekta Orłowska, died in 1954 – and in 1958 moved to Wołów. There, in 1961, the reunification with the Latin Benedictine Order and resignation from the Armenian rite took place. The gift of the memorabilia from Lviv by the Wołów sisters was motivated by the fact that the Foundation, established by Cardinal Józef Glemp, acting today under the auspices of Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz, collects and takes care of the historical heritage of the Armenian-Catholic Church in Poland: books and liturgical paraments, paintings, manuscripts, old prints and documents. Thus the prioresses' portraits returned to the Armenians. The history of creating images of Armenian Benedictine Sisters dates back to 1701, i.e. the election of the first of the prioresses portrayed, although of course this was also a consequence of even earlier events.

There are two reasons why the history of the Armenian convent in Lviv was special. The first is the uniqueness of the forms of female Armenian monasticism; the second is the traditional role of women in Armenian customs. The fate of Armenia, through centuries of being conquered by successive hordes of invaders hostile to Christianity, made it necessary to hide the nuns exposed to brutal attacks by the infidels in order to ensure their safety in privacy, in their family homes, i.e. to abandon the separate convents built in antiquity. This was at first the case among Polish Armenians too: in Kamieniec Podolski, Jazloviec and Lviv – although here the danger of pogroms and rapes was not as great as in the East. The idea of a community organised by women themselves was also not easy to reconcile with the principle of male domination in family life, which was the norm among Armenian immigrants to an incomparably higher degree than in old Polish society. Thus, the first Armenian nuns in Poland were completely subordinate to the authority of the elders of the municipality, who even usurped the right to give their consent to the accession of new candidates.

With social integration, and especially after the union of the Polish Armenian Church with the Catholic one, a mental change began. This was the reason why, from the end of the seventeenth century, a free community of Armenian nuns based on the new model was formed in Lviv, living in their own convent, guided by the rule of St. Benedict, independent of the Armenian elders, autonomous under the general authority of a bishop, and with a woman as superior. The first of them, as the 'elderly maiden', was Rypsyma Spendowska from the Szeferowicz family of Jazloviec, which was an ennobled Armenian family.

It did not happen easily. Resistance and prejudice were universal. It did not take place without 'great confusion', and the nuns' '...eyes day and night were almost never dry from tears,' their conventual chronicle reports. Finally, on 20 January 1701, two Armenian hierarchs appeared in the nunnery: Archbishop Wartan Hunanian and Bishop Deodat Nersesowicz, i.e. the Ordinary and Administrator of the Lviv diocese, 'And they sat at the election of the prioress, the elders were followed by the nuns, all of them one before the office of the clergyman, they voluntarily added their votes, until the last one; by voting accordingly, they appointed Miss

Marianna Nersesowiczówna,' states the chronicle quoted above. Several days later, on 6 February, the first prioress, an Armenian, but previously a Latin Benedictine Sister in the monastery of Jarosław, 'was consecrated by the pr(iest) bishop in the cathedral church with a great service, sermon and influx of guests'. The most spectacular moment of the ceremony was the handing over of the crozier – *baculus pastoralis*, i.e. the shepherd's staff, the symbols of bishops, abbots, archimandrites, and protonotaries apostolic. This was probably the first time in the history of all Armenians that a woman had received it.

From then on, the gilded crozier passed from hand to hand to the next eleven prioresses. They ruled the Lviv Convent, each from the election by all members of the congregation till death. Starting from Nersesowiczówna, the prioresses were portrayed with a crozier, and these magnificent portraits, painted with oil paints on canvas measuring 115 cm by 80 cm, were hung in the cathedral choir. It was only accessible to the sisters, who sang there and played instruments during the bishop's liturgy.

The first discoverer of the portraits for the world outside the convent was Felicjan Łobeski, a native of Nowy Wiśnicz, a graduate of the art schools of Kraków and Vienna, a former political prisoner in the Austrian Spielberg fortress, and a Lviv painter and writer. In the 1850s, he was already seriously ill with tuberculosis, but as soon as he could leave his bed, he wandered around the churches of Lviv and other cities and towns of eastern Galicia to describe the artefacts kept there, especially paintings and statues. This is how the *Opis obrazów znajdujących się w kościołach miasta Lwowa* [Description of images located in the churches of the city of Lviv] came about, published in the 'Weekly Supplement to Gazeta Lwowska'. This is an invaluable source for the history of the artistic decoration of the Armenian Cathedral in Lviv, to which Łobeski dedicated several issues of his publication.

In the fifth issue of the 'Weekly Supplement' of 5 February 1853, we read: 'In the choir of the cathedral church and the Armenian nuns of the Rule of St. Benedict, there are also several portraits of the prioresses of that same monastery, beginning with the first Superior, that is, from 1683 to the present day. It is interesting to see in these pieces, as it were, a history of painting, because over the years the portraits follow one another and the manner of painting visibly changes. And so, from the more substantial features and use of paint seen in a work from the seventeenth century the eye turns to the ever fainter surface finishing and shapes of the later works. According to the single initial letters on these portraits and the conventual ledger, the nuns shown here are as follows: Rypsima Spendowska (...), Ksawera Marianna Nersesowicz (...), Helena Fortunata Spendowska, of Lubicz (...), Magdalena Benedykta Mańczukowska (...), Marianna Alojza Augustynowicz (...), Magdalena Rypsima Matiaszewiczowa (...), Barbara Weronika Piramowicz (...), Kolumba Nedyj (...), Ludwika Krzysztofowycz (...), Kajetana Rozalia Sarkisiewicz'.

The list does not include Ksawera Teodorowiczówna, whose portrait – which exists today – must then have already been hanging in the cathedral choir. Among those preserved, however, there is no image of Rypsima Spendowska, who is mentioned by Łobeski. Could he have misinterpreted the letters and assigned the identity of Rypsima Spendowska to Teodorowiczówna? In any case, it was only after 1853 that someone entered the names of the prioresses at the bottom of each of the portraits, interpreting the initials mentioned by Łobeski in the manner seen today in the beautifully calligraphed inscriptions. Since then another portrait has also arrived: that of Prioress Joanna Alojza Janowiczówna, the last Armenian to hold the position. No portrait was made of Elekta Orłowska, who succeeded her.

The Armenian Exhibition in Lviv, which lasted from June 1932 to October 1932, showed nine portraits from the gallery of Benedictine Sisters. Mieczysław Gębarowicz, the eminent expert in Old Polish Lviv art, who was born in Jarosław, at the foot of the convent from which the first prioress ventured out, and who was a student of Jan Bołoz Antoniewicz, an Armenian, and one of his successors at the Jan Kazimierz University, wrote of the images of the prioresses in the exhibition catalogue when he was assistant professor in the Department of Art History: ‘these paintings, usually by an unknown but not second-rate brush, are generally not devoid of artistic value, and thanks to the conceptualisation they sometimes have great power of expression’. (‘Messenger of St. Gregory’, 1932, No. 64-66).

They fortunately survived the war. But then came the change to Poland’s eastern border. In 1946, Prioress Orłowska ordered the canvases to be taken out of their frames and rolled up. Together with all the Benedictine Sisters’ possessions, they came to Poland, which had been moved to the west. The new seat of the Benedictine convent in Wołów was too cramped to hang all of the images of the noble prioresses on its walls. So only four were displayed, while the others – still rolled up and flattened like pancakes due to being laid flat – awaited better times. They were seen by Prof. Małgorzata Borkowska, a Benedictine scholar from Żarnowiec, because she wrote of their existence in her work *Słownik polskich ksień benedyktyńskich* [Dictionary of the Polish Benedictine Sisters] (Niepokalanów 1996), but it is unlikely that anyone other than historians paid much attention to this information. It did not reach the Polish Armenians, who had been diligently searching for the remains of their Church since the end of the war, and like them, had been expatriated from their former homeland.

On 30 May 2013, precisely, Roma Obrocka, on behalf of the Foundation for the Culture and Heritage of Polish Armenians, visited Wołów for the first time. The first result of the visit was to photograph the four hanging portraits: Marianna Ksawery Nersesowiczówna, prioress from 1701-1710, Ludwika Krzysztofowiczówna (1839-1843), Rozalia Kajetana Popowiczówna-Sarkisiewiczówna (1843-1893) and Joanna Alojza Janowiczówna (1895-1927). Three of these photographic reproductions were published – with the addition of biographical notes – in calendars published by the Foundation for the Culture and Heritage of Polish Armenians (2014, 2016 and 2017).

In May 2017, the Wołów prioress, Sister Maria Danuta Trybała, telephoned Obrocka and told her that the sisters wanted to donate the rolled-up portraits to the Foundation. On the 23rd of the same month, they were picked up from the convent by Roma Obrocka and Elżbieta Łysakowska, and the next day a team from the Jagiellonian University Museum took them to Kraków, where they await urgent and necessary renovation. After being unrolled by Jolanta Pollesch, the head of the museum’s restorers, it turned out that all the other prioresses had survived their journey – a journey that had lasted more than seventy years. We list them again, along with the dates of their rule: Helena Fortunata Spendowska (1710-1751), Magdalena Benedykta Mańczukowska (1751-1757), Maria Alojza Augustynowiczówna (1757-1772), Marianna Rypsima Matiaszewiczówna (1772-1791), Ksawera Teodorowiczówna (1791-1796), Barbara Weronika Piramowiczówna (1796-1826) and Ludgarda Kolumba Nedyjówna (1827-1835).

The gift given by the Wołów sisters is of great value to the Polish Armenians. Its artistic qualities can be assessed after restoration and a scientific study, but already today there is no doubt that the traces of spiritual heritage it contains have not been lost. More than that, it testifies to a vital past. Let us hope it will continue to inspire in the future.

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