

From Ruszczyc to the Iron Curtain: Studies in the History of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Stefan Batory University in Vilnius (1919–1939)

Rec.: Małgorzata Geron (ed.), *Wydział Sztuk Pięknych na Uniwersytecie Stefana Batorego w Wilnie (1919–1939/45): Dydaktyka, twórczość i tradycja artystyczna*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2022.

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Vilnius art in the interwar period was largely developed at the Stefan Batory University. Established on the initiative of Ferdynand Ruszczyc, the Faculty gathered many outstanding scholars. As a result of World War II, many lecturers left Vilnius, and the Faculty changed its character. The book edited by Małgorzata Geron titled *Wydział Sztuk Pięknych na Uniwersytecie Stefana Batorego w Wilnie (1919–1939/45). Dydaktyka, twórczość i tradycja artystyczna* (*The Faculty of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University in Wilno (1919–1939/45). Education, creativity and artistic tradition*) presents main topics from the history of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius and elsewhere in the later period. The presented book shows the most important events and crucial moments from the history of Faculty of Fine Arts in years 1919–1945.

The Faculty of Fine Arts (Wydział Sztuk Pięknych, WSP) was one of the six faculties of the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius (Uniwersytet Stefana Batorego, USB). The WSP was a unique phenomenon among all Polish universities of the interwar period. What's more, it was the only institution of higher art education in Poland that existed within the framework of a university. The creation and development of WSP was the initiative of one man, Ferdynand Ruszczyc, who was of great merit for Polish culture, a lover of the Vilnius region, a painter, graphic artist and scenographer. The desire to maintain historical conti-

nunity, to continue the best university traditions, found its approval among the highest state authorities. Ruszczyć had allies in the persons of the Chief of State, Józef Piłsudski, and Ludwik Kolankowski, a docent of the Jagiellonian University (and later the first rector of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń), acting on his behalf in Vilnius.¹

The opening of the WSP took place on October 12th, 1919, one day after the ceremonial opening of the USB. The event, intended to symbolize the revival of the old traditions of art in Vilnius, took place in the room of the former Bernardine refectory in the presence of Piłsudski, ministers, archbishops and other dignitaries.² For twenty years of its existence, the WSP educated students in two sections: painting, sculpture and applied arts, and architecture. Organizational and personnel problems of the young faculty were overcome thanks to Ruszczyć's stubbornness and sincere love for art. Famous artists worked at the WSP: Ludomir Sleńdziński (after Ruszczyć's death, dean of the WSP in the years 1932–1939), Marian Morelowski, Bronisław Jamontt, Henryk Kuna, Tymon Niesiołowski, Jerzy Hoppen, Stanisław Horno-Popławski, Bolesław Bażukiewicz, Juliusz Kłos, Stefan Narębski and many others.

The functioning of the WSP contributed to raising the standard of cultural life in Vilnius. The Faculty was a place where art and science were combined, and the lecturers brought up a group of not only well-known artists – continuators of their thought and technique, but also people associated with the world of art: architects, monument restorers, bookbinders, etc. Vladas Drėma, an outstanding Lithuanian art historian and critic, conservator, graphic designer, recalled his time of studying at the WSP³ in this way: “The atmosphere was friendly. We could make jokes at each other, make fun of each other, but it didn't hurt anyone. There was no mutual resentment. We did not refuse to help each other when needed. There was no hostile behavior at the Faculty of Fine Arts, either towards me, a Lithuanian, or towards colleagues of other nationalities. Nationalisms developed later and in completely different circles”.⁴

The WSP activity was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II. The faculty, like the entire university, was closed on December 15, 1939.⁵ A policy of Lithuanianization of Vilnius followed.⁶ The Lithuanian authorities did not follow the suggestion of Prof. Michał Römer in order to preserve the section of fine arts in the structure of the newly established Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts (Vilniaus Dailės Akademija).⁷ The group of professors and students were dispersed. The departure of Vilnius professors to Toruń in May 1946, including B. Jamontt, J. Hoppen and S. Narębski, resulted in the fact that one

¹ K. Dormus, „Odrodzenie Wydziału Sztuk Pięknych Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie (1919–1939)”, in: *Rocznik Komisji Nauk Pedagogicznych*, 2011, t. LXIV, s. 11.

² F. Ruszczyć, „Wydział Sztuk Pięknych U.S.B.”, in: *Księga pamiątkowa ku uczczeniu CCCL rocznicy założenia i X wskrzeszenia Uniwersytetu Wileńskiego*, t. 2, *Dziesięciolecie 1919–1929*, Wilno, s. 511.

³ Vladas Drėma studiował na Wydziale Sztuk Pięknych Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w latach 1931–1936.

⁴ J. Kotłowski, *Vladas Drėma (1910–1995): twórczość artystyczna i działalność naukowa*, Toruń, 1999, s. 7.

⁵ P. Łossowski, *Likwidacja Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego przez władze litewskie w grudniu 1939 r. Dokumenty i materiały*, Warszawa, 1991, s. 50.

⁶ A. Żułyś, *Polska w polityce zagranicznej Litwy w latach 1938–1939*, Gdańsk, 2015, s. 407.

⁷ S. Kalemka, *Dwieście lat Sztuk Pięknych na Uniwersytetach w Wilnie i Toruniu 1797–1997: szkice*, Toruń, 1998, s. 36.

of the continuators of Vilnius traditions of the Academy of Fine Arts became the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.⁸ Ruszczyc's student, Marian Bohusz-Szysko, remained in exile and founded the School of Easel Painting and Applied Graphics in Cecchignola near Rome, operating from 1950 as part of the Academic Community of the Stefan Batory University in London (Społeczność Akademicka Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Londynie).⁹

As an expert on the Polish–Lithuanian relations, Prof. Algis Povilas Kasperavičius noted that there is little interest in the activities of Stefan Batory University in Lithuania,¹⁰ although it is briefly discussed in synthetic works examining the development of the Vilnius Alma Mater.¹¹ Recent publications include microstudies devoted to medicine at Vilnius University,¹² literary Vilnius in the years 1905–1939,¹³ or the Polish–Lithuanian cooperation devoted to literature entitled *Under the sign of the Eagle and the Chase*.¹⁴ This fact is a good example that the time is coming to speak together and refer to the past.

A different situation occurs in Poland. The history of the Stefan Batory University enjoys constant popularity, and the result is subsequent works devoted to the activities of the Polish university in the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic. A good example are the recently published books devoted to the history of: the Faculty of Humanities,¹⁵ the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences,¹⁶ the Agricultural Study and the Faculty of Agriculture,¹⁷ as well as Vilnius art in the years 1900–1945.¹⁸ Also worth mentioning are works devoted to Vilnius medical traditions,¹⁹ as well as a selection of writings by the leading Polish sovietologist, Wiktor Sukiennicki.²⁰

⁸ J. Krasnodębski, *Z Wilna nad Wilię do Wilna nad Wisłą. Ekspatriacja i osiedlenie się mieszkańców Wileńszczyzny w Toruniu (1944–1948)*, Toruń, 2019, s. 85.

⁹ The Academic Community of the Stefan Batory University – an emigrant association operating in the years 1947–1987 in London, associating former employees and students of the Stefan Batory University. Its main goal was to continue scientific work and Vilnius traditions in the conditions of emigration. The Association published a periodical – the magazine *Alma Mater Vilnensis*, of which 6 issues were published in the years 1946–1973.

¹⁰ Algis Povilas Kasperavičius, „Lenkų istoriko *opus magnum* apie Vilniaus universitetą tarpukariu”, in: *Lietuvos istorijos studijos*, 2022, vol. 49, s. 128.

¹¹ J. Boruta, A. Braziūnienė, A. Bumblauskas, M. Jučas, B. Juodka, D. Kaunas, I. Krivienė, V. Pšibilskis, E. Ulčinaitė, *Alma Mater Vilnensis: Vilniaus universiteto istorijos bruožai*, Vilnius, 2012; J. Boruta, A. Braziūnienė, A. Bumblauskas, V. Dolinskas, L. Jovaiša, D. Kaunas, I. Krivienė, A. Pacevičius, R. Petrauskas, V. Pšibilskis, E. Ulčinaitė, A. Žukauskas, *Alma Mater Vilnensis: Vilniaus universiteto turtai istorijos skersvėjuose (XVI–XXI amžiai)*, Vilnius, 2016.

¹² A. Žalnora, *Stepono Batoro universiteto Medicinos fakulteto veikla sprendžiant Vilniaus krašto visuomenės sveikatos problemas*, Vilnius, 2021.

¹³ I. Fedorowicz, T. Dalecka, *Wilno literackie w latach 1905–1939 (Literatūrinis Vilnius 1905–1939 metais)*, Vilnius, 2021.

¹⁴ I. Fedorowicz, M. Dawlewicz, K. Geben (red.), *Pod znakiem Orła i Pogoni. Polsko-litewskie związki naukowe i kulturowe w dziejach Uniwersytetu Wileńskiego. Zbiór studiów*, Vilnius, 2021.

¹⁵ Z. Opacki, *Wydział humanistyczne Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie 1919–1939*, Gdańsk, 2021.

¹⁶ A. Supruniuk, J. Szudy (red.), *Dzieje wydziału matematyczno-przyrodniczego Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie (1919–1939)*, t. 1–2, Toruń, 2021.

¹⁷ J. Szudy, *Dzieje Studium Rolniczego i Wydziału Rolniczego Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie (1923–1939)*, Toruń, 2022.

¹⁸ J. Poklewski, *Studia z historii sztuki i kultury wileńskiej lat 1900–1945. Wybór tekstów*, Toruń, 2019; J. Kotłowski, *Grafika wileńska okresu międzywojennego wykładowców i absolwentów Wydziału Sztuk Pięknych Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie ze zbiorów Biblioteki Uniwersyteckiej w Toruniu*, Toruń, 2020.

¹⁹ W. Makarewicz, *Wileńskie korzenie Gdańskiego Uniwersytetu Medycznego*, Gdańsk, 2022.

²⁰ W. Sukiennicki, *Pisma sowietologiczne*, wyboru dokonał i wstępem opatrzył Marek Kornat, Kraków, 2020.

Another project in line with the above trend²¹ is the work devoted to the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius, edited by Małgorzata Geron – assistant professor at the Department of History of Modern and Non-European Art of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. Geron is the author of, among others, the monograph devoted to Tymon Niesiołowski,²² a painter and graphic artist associated with Vilnius, the catalogue of the artist's works, as well as numerous articles devoted to the art of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Research interests as well as previous achievements are part of the subject matter taken up in the presented book, Faculty of Fine Arts at the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius (1919–1939/45) (*Wydział Sztuk Pięknych na Uniwersytecie Stefana Batorego w Wilnie (1919–1939/45). Dydaktyka, twórczość i tradycja artystyczna*).

The work consists of a short introduction in memory of Prof. Józef Poklewski and five chapters devoted to the following issues: the centenary of the resumption of the WSP activity, painting and sculpture, graphics, artistic photography and the fate of the Vilnius school of fine arts during World War II. The work was written in Polish and translated to English by Krzysztof Z. Cieszkowski. As indicated in the introduction, the publication was created in connection with the 100th anniversary of the resurrection of the Faculty of Fine Arts, therefore a broad coverage of the issues raised should be expected.

The first article is “The Centenary of the Resumption of the Vilnius Stefan Batory University and its Faculty of Fine Arts 1919–1939–1945” (“Stulecie wznowienia działalności wileńskiego Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego i jego Wydziału Sztuk Pięknych 1919–1939–1945”) by Józef Poklewski (1937–2019). The well-known researcher presented the beginning of the WSP activity against a broad historical background, remembering about the traditions of Vilnius art. A key role in the creation of the Faculty was played by Ruszczyć – the *spiritus movens* of this great project. The inauguration, the design of the symbols and insignia of the Faculty authorities, the professors' robes, the curriculum, the selection of employees and, finally, educating the youth were all the work of Ruszczyć.²³ The painter also did not miss the interesting thread of the conflict between the Academy of Fine Arts and the Vilnius Society of Visual Artists – the dispute over the primacy and nature of Vilnius art. The end of the text is a description of the fate of WSP employees in the period until the end of World War II. The information collected on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the resumption of the Faculty's activity is a significant contribution to the history of Polish science and culture in the interwar years and the period of World War II. As rightly emphasized by Poklewski, they also shed light on important, yet almost unknown, historical and national conditions.²⁴

²¹ In 2020, PhD thesis was defended at the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce entitled *Academic Staff of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius (1919–1939)* by Agnieszka Kania.

²² M. Geron, *Tymon Niesiołowski (1882–1965): życie i twórczość*, Warszawa, 2004.

²³ J. Bułhak, *Dwadzieścia sześć lat z Ruszczyćem*, Wilno, 1939, s. 151.

²⁴ J. Poklewski, „Stulecie wznowienia działalności wileńskiego Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego i jego Wydziału Sztuk Pięknych 1919–1939–1945. Rozważania jubileuszowe”, in: M. Geron (red.), *Wydział Sztuk Pięknych na Uniwersytecie Stefana Batorego w Wilnie (1919–1939/45). Dydaktyka, twórczość i tradycja artystyczna*, Toruń, 2022, s. 72.

“Painting and sculpture” (“Malarstwo i rzeźba”) by Małgorzata Geron is the second article of the publication. The author points out that during twenty years of activity, twenty diplomas for the degree of a certified painter and over ninety teaching certificates were issued at the Higher School of Fine Arts. The creativity of people associated with the Higher School of Fine Arts was characterized by a variety of artistic attitudes. The dominant tendency was classicism represented by Sledziński and Kwiatkowski. The counterweight was the work of Tymon Niesiołowski (avant-garde and colorism). The post-impressionist trend was represented by Aleksander Szturman, while Bronisław Jamontt combined the inspirations of old landscape painting with a modern form of work. Formism, popular in the interwar period, was represented by Zbigniew Pronaszko, a sculptor who became famous for the controversial model of the monument to Adam Mickiewicz, unveiled in 1924.

“Graphics” (“Grafika”) by Katarzyna Kulpińska is the third article of the publication. As Kulpińska pointed out at the beginning, despite the initial difficulties, Ruszczyce managed to appoint teachers in the field of architecture, painting and sculpture, it was the graphics teachers who changed. For this reason, in the initial period of the WSP functioning, graphics was its *weakest link*.²⁵ The WSP was a place where, as the author rightly emphasizes, not only Poles developed their artistic talents. Lithuanians (Vladas Drema), Jews (Szejna Efron-Składnik, Hadassa Gurewicz-Grodska, Róża Suckewer-Uszajewa, Fani Lew-Frydman, Rachela Mariampolska-Elchanani) and Belarussians (Kozma Czuryło, Michał Sierwuk, Walenty Romanowicz) also studied at the WSP. A breakthrough and an increase in the importance of graphics at the WSP took place in 1931, when Jerzy Hoppen took over the management of the Department of Graphics and Decoration. A large group of graphic artists came under his scientific supervision, including Gracjan Achrem-Achremowicz, Roman Jakimowicz, Józef Horyd, Michał Roubba. Hoppen had a significant influence on the character, form and subject matter chosen by the young graphic artists. However, regardless of the later chosen path, he provided his students, both in Vilnius and Toruń,²⁶ with a solid mastery of techniques and skills for further development.

The beginnings of Polish photography are inextricably linked with Jan Bułhak. He was an outstanding photographer and, above all, a longtime friend of Ferdynand Ruszczyce. His role and influence on the Department of Artistic Photography under his supervision were presented by Maciej Szymanowicz in the article titled “Artistic Photography” (“Fotografia artystyczna”). Bułhak, who had no formal academic education and was a very experienced practitioner, took the position of the head of the Department. His artistic manifesto indicating the approach to photography and setting the direction of science was included in the article Artistic Photography and the Native Landscape,

²⁵ K. Kulpińska, „Grafika”, in: M. Geron (red.), *op. cit.*, s. 131.

²⁶ Hoppen came to Toruń in 1946 and took over the Department of Graphic Arts at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Nicolaus Copernicus University. He headed it first with the title of associate professor, then from 1951 to 1961 associate professor. Hoppen, like Ruszczyce in Vilnius, designed insignia for the rector's and dean's authorities, clothes for the academic senate, seals, occasional prints and ex libris for the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

which appeared in the photographic monthly “Światłocień” in 1923.²⁷ Bułhak based his curriculum on the aesthetics of pictorialism, i.e. on the approximation of photography to painting and graphics. A significant feature of the photographers community at the WSP was its “natural” interpenetration with other artistic centers in Vilnius: the Vilnius Society of Photography Lovers (Wileńskie Towarzystwo Miłośników Fotografii) and the Vilnius Photoclub (Fotoklub Wileński). The beginning of photography as an art, due to relatively high costs, was quite an exclusive activity. The artists from Vilnius were therefore quite a tight-knit group, the “binder” of which was their mentor – Bułhak. Young photographers presented their achievements at numerous exhibitions, gaining recognition throughout the country. Among the most famous people associated with the Department of Artistic Photography (Zakład Fotografii Artystycznej), the author indicated Włodzimierz Krukowski, Stanisław Turski and Aleksander Zakrzewski.²⁸

The publication is closed with the article “The Fate of the Vilnius School of Fine Arts during World War II: Known and Forgotten Pages of History” (“Losy wileńskiej szkoły sztuk pięknych podczas II wojny światowej: znane i zapomniane karty historii”), written by Svetlana Czerwonnaja (1936–2020). The text presents the fate of Vilnius art in the turbulent period of World War II. The first dramatic event was the closure of the WSP and the entire USB by the Lithuanian authorities. On its basis, a new institution was created – the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts (Vilniaus Dailės Akademija, VDA). The period of occupations – two Soviet occupations separated by German one – influenced people’s attitudes and choices. As a result, many artists, were forced to leave Vilnius, others, carried by successive “waves” and slogans of the totalitarian authorities, served the system by co-creating the culture of the time, servilely used for the needs of the authorities. Viktoras Vizgirda, director of VDA, appreciating the workshop and work of Polish artists J. Szturman, J. Hoppen and T. Niesiołowski, tried to keep them working as long as possible (until April 1942). With the end of the war, the VDA resumed its activities, which it continues to this day. Former USB professors repatriated to Toruń after the war began their activities at the Nicolaus Copernicus University, maintaining the continuity of the Vilnius Alma Mater tradition. One should also remember about emigrants who cultivated traditions while abroad. In Italy, and later in London, M. Szyszko-Bohusz’s Study of Easel Painting (Studium Malarstwa Sztalugowego) was related to the USB. Lithuanians, on the initiative of Vytautas Kazimieras Jonynas, opened the College of Fine Arts and Crafts in Freiburg (Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Pięknych i Rzemiosła).

Ars longa, vita brevis. The work edited by Małgorzata Geron seems to resemble this obvious thought. The book presents the most important moments from the cultural life of Vilnius in 1919–1945. It describes not only the history of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the USB, but also the fate of Vilnius and Lithuanian art during the occupation, which was emphasized with the time period in the title, and developed in an interesting article by Czerwonnaja (its topic is not well-known in Poland). What is also worth emphasizing, the artists Jan Bułhak and Ferdynand Ruszczyc, although indispensable and crucial

²⁷ Światłocień 1923, z. 2-3.

²⁸ M. Szymanowicz, „Fotografia artystyczna” in: M. Geron (red.), *op. cit.*, s. 200.

for the history of the WSP of USB, do not dominate over the others in the narrative. The publication has been enriched with numerous photos and illustrations, giving the opportunity to commune with the described works of Vilnius art. The biggest advantage, however, is the publication of the articles also in English. Thanks to this, it is possible to reach a wider group of readers interested not only in the history of the USB. The articles are based on extensive literature. Surprisingly, there is the lack of any references to the Lithuanian Central State Archives and its Fond 175 – the most important source of research on the history of Vilnius Alma Mater.

The book edited by Małgorzata Geron brings a lot of new information about the activities of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the USB, concerning the VDA in the later period. This interesting approach to the fields of fine arts at Alma Mater Vilnensis may be a contribution to deepening research on selected issues in the field of painting, sculpture, photography and graphics. The work devoted to the history of the WSP confirms that the history of the Stefan Batory University enjoys unchanging popularity.