Cerasus Rosea Major

Florus, Sterile: non fructic simus, quin gis
cetari, anni 1534.
Casus aliquid peristit.

Cerasus Rosea Minor

Fruitus geminis.
In post-war Poland, the Libri Picturati were kept hidden in the Monastery of Grüssau, until they were discovered and transferred to the Jagiellonian Library in Kraków, just after the war. It took some decades before the library dared open these hidden treasures up to the scientific world. Today scientists have access to this precious historical collection, which has stimulated new research in the history of science. The story of the Libri Picturati A16-31 after World War II can only be described in a general way. The documents about this period are scarce and the various testimonies are not always easy to verify after nearly 60 years. The articles about the story of these Libri in post-war times published so far, not only show facts, but also frequent speculations. Sometimes even pure fantasies appear amongst correct data.

The history of the Berlin manuscripts was presented in short in Whitehead & Boeseman (1989), with a bibliography quoting other contributions by Whitehead on that matter, and in Whitehead et al. (1989). A detailed description is given by Lewis (1989), but here the documented facts have sometimes been ‘enriched’ with the author’s inventions. Among the texts in Polish two press articles may be quoted: an article by the former director of the Jagiellonian Library, J. Pirożyński (1993), and a well documented long text by W. Kalicki (1994).

Especially poorly documented are the years immediately after the defeat of the Nazi Reich, i.e. immediately after the Second World War. Silesia, when Grüssau which was renamed Krzeszów, was amongst the territories incorporated into Poland after the Potsdam Conference (July 12th to August 2nd, 1945).

Post-war Poland

The situation in the area was uncertain at that time, and important migrations of people took place all over Silesia. The territory was only partly under the control of the Red Army, the army of Russia. The majority of the German population had flown westwards before the Nazi’s final defeat or had left the area after the end of the hostilities, either willingly or constrained. Their place was taken over step by step by Polish people, mostly by refugees from eastern territories that had been incorporated into the Soviet Union.

On March 2nd, 1945, the Polish authorities issued a decree, followed by a law on May 6th, 1945, concerning the goods ‘discarded and abandoned’ after the hostilities. The term ‘abandoned goods’ was used at that time to refer to the former properties of German citizens as well as those of the German state. The law of May 6th, 1945, established a temporary state administration for these goods, and foresaw that after 5 years the ‘abandoned goods’ would become the property of the Polish State Treasury.

Already in June 1945 the director of the Jagiellonian Library in Kraków was informed that various books from the Berlin State Library had been stored in Krzeszów and in other places in Silesia during the war. No details had been given to him, but nevertheless he wrote to the Ministry of Education pointing out the necessity to transport these books to a safe place.

On December 1st, 1945, the Ministry of Education then installed a delegate for the safeguarding of discarded and abandoned collections. This function was given to Stanisław Sierotwinski, a historian of literature, at that time working as a librarian in the Jagiellonian Library in Kraków. He held his office until April 20th, 1947. Sierotwinski and his team travelled across Poland. Their task was to find all abandoned book collections of Polish or German landowners and institutions, and to protect them against theft or from destruction.

Krzeszów to Stradom

The Benedictine abbey in Krzeszów, where the Libri Picturati and other treasures from the Berlin State Library were preserved, was fortunately situated in a place that had not been damaged by the hostilities.

We do not know exactly how the Berlin collections were found in Krzeszów. Following an undocumented but probable version the Benedictine monks themselves – who still remained in the monastery – directed the attention of the Polish librarians to the crates hidden in the lofts of the church (or rather two churches standing next to each other) in Krzeszów. The monks may have had reasons to fear that if the manuscripts would be found by the Red Army, they might be taken into Russia. Or even worse: they knew that on various occasions German books, manuscripts, and other collections had been destroyed by Russian soldiers.

What happened with this collection after it was discovered in Krzeszów is part guesswork, part fact. We know for certain that in 1946, a military convoy brought the whole Krzeszów collection to Kraków. The manuscripts and books including the Libri Picturati we are studying here, were first stored in the missionary monastery of Stradom, and then later found their place in the Jagiellonian Library of the Kraków university, where they remain until today.

Jagiellonian Library

The collection came under the curatorship of the Jagiellonian Library in October 1947, and in November the crates were opened for the first time after they were removed from the library in Berlin. Various parts of the Berlin collection were housed in special departments in the library in Kraków. The fifty illustrated manuscripts of the Libri Picturati collection, including the series of Flemish sixteenth-century botanical drawings (nowadays known as the Libri Picturati A18-31) as well as the Libri A16-17 with the animal illustrations, were stored in the Department of the Prints, Drawings, and Cartography Collections.

During the first thirty years after World War II the place of conservation of the Berlin manuscripts, and even the fact of its presence in Poland, were top secret. Even only a few persons in the Jagiellonian Library itself were aware of it. The Berlin collections were considered to be the property of the State Treasury of Poland, and the university library was only used as the site of deposit. Stanisław Sierotwinski, as mentioned, was the first to be appointed curator of the safeguarded collections. Later prof. Karol Badecki and subsequently the directors of the Jagiellonian Library were appointed curator of the, in the meantime former, German goods.