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Sisters of Saint Elizabeth in Lithuania: The First Twenty Years (1924-1944)

Abstract: The Sisters of Saint Elizabeth arrived in Lithuania in 1924. It was not easy for the sisters coming from Karaliaučius to settle in Lithuania. They received help from Jesuit monks with ties to Germany, as well as from individual Lithuanian intellectuals and patrons. The sisters worked sincerely, and during the Nazi occupation, they risked their lives to save Jews. The Soviet occupation, the Nazi regime, and the later return of the Red Army with its inhumane atheistic ideology destroyed the established order. Some of the Elizabethan Sisters retreated to the West, while others remained underground, never abandoning their vocation. During the occupations, the sisters were persecuted, their activities restricted, and, as a new wave of Soviet occupation approached, their work went underground.

Keywords: Saint Elizabeth, monastery, Lithuania, Elizabethan Sisters.

In Lithuania, monasteries significantly influenced Catholic society with their charitable church policy. The Sisters of Saint Elizabeth were unafraid to undertake the most challenging tasks, such as nursing the seriously ill and caring for orphans. However, invaluable contributions during this period are difficult to fully capture. Hence, this study aims to gather surviving sources, analyze them, and reconstruct as accurately as possible the first two decades of the Elizabethan Sisters' activities in Lithuania (1924-1944), a time marked by the country's period of independence and subsequent Soviet and Nazi occupations. This work seeks to explore how the Elizabethan Sisters fulfilled their mission during these years, surviving and persevering through challenging times. The subject of monasteries is not a very common one in the modern multicultural space of the 21st century. In general, the subject can sometimes seem as archaic as the institution of monasticism itself. However, the question can be asked –

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is it really so? Could it be that these are just medieval hotbeds of science and culture? What did they give to Lithuania, which accepted Christianity? Have their ideas become stale and their way of life still appealing today? In the nineteenth century, epidemics raged in Silesia, claiming many lives. Four women decided to help the sick, and their gathering became St. The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Elisabeth was the starting point. The Congregation itself was founded on 27th September, 1842 in Neisse (Silesia). The first Elizabethans arrived in Lithuania in 1924. They made a significant contribution to education, culture and the alleviation of human misery in Lithuania. Sisters of St. Elizabeth did not have time to achieve all their goals as the occupation disrupted the life and public order of the country.

In Independent Lithuania

When discussing religious freedom, it is essential to emphasize not only the very unpleasant relations between the Republican government (under Christian Democrats, nationalists, and especially during the rule of the leftists) and the Holy See, but also the guaranteed freedom of religion. Freedom of belief, including the activities of monastic orders, was already guaranteed by the Provisional Constitution of the State of Lithuania in 1922[1]. The same is affirmed in the 1928 Constitution[2]. Moreover, the 1927 Concordat between the Republic of Lithuania and the Holy See reinforced the guarantee of freedom of belief. Thus, Lithuania provided favourable conditions for the establishment of monastic communities.

The Sisters of Saint Elizabeth, commonly known as the Grey Sisters (Graue Schwestern)[3], arrived in Lithuania during this period. They expanded their mission to other Baltic republics: in 1935 and 1936 they were already in Latvia and Estonia. They arrived from Germany, Kaliningrad. There was a provincial centre and "naujokynas"[4].

Dr. Regina Laukaitytė writes: "In 1924, the Sisters of Saint Elizabeth, known as "the Grey Sisters", came to Lithuania. They came from Karaliaučius (Kaliningrad) where the provincial centre of the congregation with the novitiate was located. These monasteries, established in 1842 (approved by the Holy See in 1887[5]), provided care for the sick in homes and hospitals, operated shelters, and taught handicrafts in schools"[6].

It was not easy for the sisters who came from Karaliaučius to settle down and establish themselves in Lithuanian society. Assistance came from Jesuit priests connected with Germany and from Lithuanian intellectuals who recog-

1 Laikinoji Lietuvos valstybės konstitucija, 1922 metai, & 83.
2 Lietuvos valstybės konstitucija, 1928 metai, & 84-88.
3 *Elenchus omnium ecclesiarum et universi Cleri provinciae ecclesiasticae Lituanae pro anno Domini 1936*, p. 240.
4 R. Laukaitytė, *Lietuvos vienuolijos. XX a. istorijos bruožai*, Vilnius 1997, p. 82.
5 Confirmed by Pope Leo XIII.
6 R. Laukaitytė, *Lietuvos vienuolijos*, op. cit., p. 82.

nized the importance of Catholic Action[7] in revitalizing a society weary from the Tsarist occupation and World War I. However, the sisters were faced with resistance (…). People who were sceptical about the arrival of the new congregation probably motivated their beliefs by the German origin of the sisters, at that time the issue of the Klaipėda Region was quite sensitive, and the German society of that region was hostile to Lithuania. So, according to Dr. Laukaitytė, in the beginning the Elizabethan sisters stayed with the Benedictines, assisted the Jesuits, and worked as private individuals. However, in 1929, they officially started working in hospitals, initially in Kaunas. In the same year, they settled in Švekšna[8] where their courageous actions during World War II included aiding persecuted Jews. Information about Antanina Žemgulytė[9] (sister Antanina Bonita), another Elizabethan woman who saved Jews, can be found in the Hugo Šojaus Museum located in Šilute.

The sisters settled down in Švėkšna. We can see their arrival and brief history through the activities of one of them, Bonita Žemgulytė: "In 1928 in July Bonita was sent to Kaunas to live with the Elizabethan sisters. Here she worked at St. Luke's hospital, later she was assigned to take care of the sick in private homes, took care of the poor. In 1932 she worked at Dr. Gylis hospital and in 1935 September 1st she was assigned to Švėkšna. Here she was responsible for the parish shelter for the elderly and the student dormitory of Švėkšna high school. After the departure of pastor Julius Maciejauskas, Bonita was left without a job. Then Petronėlė Daukšaitė, a nun from Švekšna, offered Sister Bonita two plots of land with buildings on the outskirts of the town (7 acres in total) to build a monastery in exchange for keeping her in this shelter until her death. Sister Bonita decided to build a dispensary on one plot of land, but later the idea changed, it was decided to build a monastery and a hospital where the sisters of the monastery would work"[10]. After the establishment of the Lithuanian Ecclesiastical Province, the sisters lived in the territories of Kaunas Archdiocese, Telšiai and Vilkaviškis dioceses[11].

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7 A. Šablinskas, *Kūrybinis katalikų veikimas*, Kaunas 1939.

8 R. Laukaitytė, *Lietuvos vienuolijos*, op. cit., p. 83.

9 "Antanina Žemgulytė (1903-1993) was born in the village of Žalakiškė, in the county of Endriejavos, in the family of farmers Justin Žemgulis and Barbora Srėbaliūtė. Father managed a farm of over 35 ha. Of the ten children born, seven grew up: Joseph, Paulina, Barbora, Antanina, Justinas, Stanislava and Julia. St. Antanina entered the novitiate of the Elzbieta Congregation in Kraliaučius in 1925. April 10 The drawer ceremony took place in 1927. on May 9, the girl chose the name of Sister Maria Bonita, and took her first vows in 1928. in June". See: Hugo Šojaus Muziejus, https://ve.lt/gyvenimas/zydu-gelbetojos-vienuoles-is-sveksnos (access: Dec 2, 2024).

10 Ibidem.

11 April 4, 1926 Pope Pius XI announced in the apostolic constitution "Lituuanorum gente" that the ecclesiastical province of Lithuania was formed with new dioceses: the Archbishopric of Kaunas, the dioceses of Telšiai, Vilkaviškis, Panevėžys and Kaišiadorių. From an ecclesiastical point of view, Lithuania no longer depended on dioceses in other countries and even gained independence – it became directly subordinate to the Holy See.

Just before the Second World War, the Elizabethan sisters in Lithuania developed their activities even more. "Around 1937 in Kaunas Prel. Marcelė Mačiulitė, the sister of Jonas Mačiulis-Maironis, donated the plot of land where the sisters built a house to the congregation. During the years of Soviet rule, the house was nationalized and returned only 50 years later. After major repairs, the sisters lived there with their grandmothers under their care"[12]. Other sources clarify: "Marcelė Mačiulytė, the sister of Prelate Jonas Mačiulis-Maironis, donated her plot of land, about 0.5 acres with a wooden house, to the Vilkaviškis Curia for church purposes. Ms. Marcela's condition was that the Curia would build a church with St. Ann's altar. If this is not possible, the donated property must be used for Catholic educational and charitable purposes. The Curia leased the property given to her to St. Vincent Paulietis Society, which founded a children's shelter here – a kindergarten. In 1939 August 25 Vilkaviškis Curia gifted that plot to the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth. Then the sisters began to prepare for the construction of the monastery"[13].

Sisters of the Congregation of Saint Elizabeth in Kaunas in 1936[14]:

	Last Name, First Name	**Date of Birth**	**Date of Eternal Vows**
1.	Červinskaitė Julijona	1897 05 01	1930 07 31
2.	Sembijonal Teresia	1906 07 14	1931 06 29
3.	Mačiulytė Sabina	1901 05 09	1933 07 02
4.	Stepulevičiūtė Digna	1907 02 02	1928 05 10
5.	Žemgulytė Bonita	1903 05 11	1928 05 10
6.	Augaitytė Veronika	1908 08 28	1931 05 17
7.	Tumosaitė Stanislava	1908 0425	1932 05 21
8.	Šimonelytė Baltramieja	1907 03 16	1932 05 21
9.	Raubaitė Antanina	1911 11 28	1935 05 29
10.	Petkevičiūtė Kazimiera	1909 08 07	No Data

According to the data of 1935, Benedictine, Catherine, Casimirian, St. Handmaids of the Heart of Jesus, St. Poor Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, Franciscan and Elizabethan Convents were active in Lithuania[15].

The Elizabethan sisters also lived in other monasteries or houses[16]:

[12] *Dievui ir Bažnyčiai*, ed. L. Rimkevičiūtė, Marijampolė 1997, p. 33.
[13] *Šv. Elzbietos seserų kongregacija. Istorija*, http://www.elzbietietes.lt/index.ph?id=18 (access: Dec 2, 2024).
[14] *Elenchus omnium ecclesiarum et universi Cleri provinciae ecclesiasticae Lituanae pro anno Domini 1935*, p. 240.
[15] Ibidem, p. 240.
[16] Ibidem, p. 241.

	Last Name, First Name	Date of Birth	Date of Eternal Vows, where They Lived
1.	Glomm Massalina	1869 10 12	1893 10 08 Švėkšna
2.	Valaitytė Kristina	1904 06 07	1928 05 10 Švėkšna
3.	Grabauskaitė Luka	1905 10 07	1930 05 17 Švėkšna
4.	Augaitytė Petronėlė	1900 08 10	1927 05 10 Jurbarkas
5.	Jugielaitė Dorotėja	1909 07 ?	1931 05 17 Jurbarkas
6.	Kilaitė Barbora	1908 01 16	1931 05 21 Jurbarkas
7.	Lingenau Velburga	1898 01 06	1922 04 26 Worked in the Apostolic Nunciature in Kaunas as an economist

A group of Lithuanians entered the Elizabethan monastery, worked in the nunciature in Kaunas, St. Lukas hospital, Jurbarkas orphanage, Švekšna elderly shelter. About St. Luke's Hospital, it was written: "It is carefully served by the Elizabethan Sisters"[17]. The monastery in Švėkšna operated from 1929 to 1944.

The Years of Occupation

As World War II approached and began, the population experienced both voluntary and forced displacement from their homes. On January 10, 1941, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany "(...) signed an agreement regarding the relocation of German citizens and persons of German nationality from the Lithuanian SSR to Germany, as well as the relocation of Lithuanian citizens and persons of Lithuanian, Russian, and Belarusian nationality from Germany (Klaipėda region and Suvalki areas) to the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic"[18].

In October 1939, Germany began urging people of German nationality to "return home to the Reich". This marked the beginning of the repatriation of persons of German descent from the Baltic States (and later from other regions). Whether this process also affected the Elizabethan Sisters, who had come from Karaliaučius (Kaliningrad), is difficult to determine due to the lack

[17] Support a charitable institution (L. Krikščiūnas, *Meilės Drojas valdyba*) / *Mūsų rytojus* (non-partisan farmers' newspaper, November 20, 1931, No. 46(232), https://www.epaveldas.lt/static/lnb-bucket/C1B0003760930/C1B0003760930-1931-Lapkr.20/doc/0001-880DA2DBA7C9999CD937AFD573 656A16.pdf (access: Dec 2, 2024).

[18] N. Kairiūkštytė, *Lietuvių bei kitataučių apgyvendinimas Lietuvos SSR, vykdant 1941.01.10 SSSR ir Vokietijos susitarimą. Molotovo Ribentropo pakto pasekmės*, Vilnius 1998, p. 47.

of surviving historical sources. All that is known is that the number of sisters decreased by six between 1935 and 1939[19].

Whether this reduction was due to repatriation or withdrawal to the West with the German army as Soviet forces approached remains unclear. However, it is confirmed that some sisters left with the 1944 wave of refugees, as revealed in a piece of information from the Hugo Šojus Museum in Šilutė: "On October 10, 1944, as the Bolsheviks approached Švėkšna, Bonita and her sisters withdrew to Germany".

The nuns withdrew from Kaliningrad using horse-drawn transport and later continued their journey by train. Accompanying them to Germany were Sister Bonita's sibling Julija and a fostered Jewish girl called Onutė. Onutė later settled in the United States, where she married. For some time, she kept in touch with her rescuer through letters, even sending a photograph to Julija Žemgulytė-Mickienė[20]. Sister Žemgulytė lived in Germany, reached an advanced age, and celebrated her golden jubilee of monastic life with dignity. This was reported by the Lithuanian émigré press[21].

Is such a withdrawal justifiable? The years of the first Soviet occupation, particularly its final days, may offer an answer. "It is not surprising that, in the summer of 1941, people not only talked about war but even awaited it. However, it is unacceptable to anticipate war—one should fear it. Yet for most Lithuanian residents, war seemed less terrifying than the oppressive Soviet regime and its destructive system: hiding, interrogations, imprisonment, deportations"[22].

However, the first group to withdraw likely left Lithuania even before the war began, during the repatriation of German nationals. Dr. R. Laukaitytė writes: "At the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941, during the repatriation of citizens of other countries from Lithuania, Jesuits, Capuchins, Elizabethan Sisters, and Dominicans departed along with their compatriots. They managed to take some of their archives with them"[23]. Thus, the number of sisters in Lithuania decreased due to war and occupation. In 1939, there were 16 Elizabethan Sisters[24] in Lithuania, but just before World War II, only 11 remained:[25]

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19 *Elenchus omnium ecclesiarum et universi Cleri provinciae ecclesiasticae Lituanae pro anno Domini 1935*, p. 240-241.

20 *Jewish saviors – nuns from Švėkšna. Šilutė Hugo Šojaus Museum inf*., https://ve.lt/gyvenimas/zydu-gelbetojos-vienuoles-is-sveksnos (access: Dec 2, 2024).

21 *Vienuolystėsa jubiliejus Reinbeke, Vokietijoje, gyvenanti tsesuo Bonita Žemgulytė atšventė auksinį savo kaip vienuolės jubiliejų*, "Europos Lietuvis" No. 31(1421), Londonas, 1978 m. rugpiūčio 8, https://www.spauda2.org/britanijos_europos_lietuvis/archive/1978/1978-08-08-EUROPOS-LIETUVIS.pdf, (access: Dec 2, 2024).

22 K. Žemaitis, *Žingsniai be stabtelėjimų. Vilkaviškio vyskupijos istorijos bruožai*, Punskas 2016, p. 20.

23 R. Laukaitytė, *Lietuvos vienuolijos*, op. cit., p. 127.

24 L. Jagminas, *Vienuolijų veikla Lietuvoje nepriklausomybės ir pokario metais (1918-1940 m.). Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademija, Suvažiavimo darbai, XV*, Vilnius 1995, p. 105.

25 *Elenchus omnium ecclesiarum et universi Cleri provinciae ecclesiasticae Lituanae pro anno Domini 1940*, p. 287.

Kaunas	6
Švėkšna	1
Apaštalinė nunciatūra, Kaunas	1
Jurbarkas	3

The Soviet occupation, the Nazi regime, and the later return of the Red Army with its inhumane atheistic ideology destroyed the established order. During the German occupation of Lithuania, monasteries, like the Catholic Church as a whole, had a brief respite, but they did not return to the pre-war situation. Following this, a prolonged period of Soviet reoccupation ensued, marked by relentless persecution of the Church. There is insufficient information about how the Elizabethan Sisters fared in emigration[26]. By 1970, it was unknown how many remained in the West.

The Elizabethan Sisters also operated under underground conditions in Soviet-occupied Lithuania. During the years of independent Lithuania, they successfully continued their apostolic work, both those originating from Lithuania and those arriving from Poland (Lithuanian Elizabethan Sisters belong to the Wrocław Province).

Conclusions

The Sisters of Saint Elizabeth arrived in Lithuania in 1924 from Karaliaučius (Kaliningrad). They were welcomed at the invitation of Lithuanian intellectuals and public figures, although there was some initial suspicion due to their German origin. Over time, as more Lithuanian women joined the congregation, the sisters became well-regarded and beloved for their social work, caring for the elderly, children, and the most vulnerable members of society. This charitable charisma was inherited from the movement originating in Poland, which gave rise to the congregation. Although few documents about the Sisters of Saint Elizabeth in Lithuania have survived, it can be concluded that the nuns not only accomplished significant work but also inspired the continuation of charitable movements in the country. Lithuanian society needed some kind of signposts or something that would remind of Archangel Rapolas, known in the Holy Scriptures, who helped a person in great distress. Such signposts, with an angelic mission, were the monasteries operating in Lithuania. Interwar Lithuania was quite a progressive country, receptive to the innovative ideas of the time, and it was making progress, but it needed people who were at the forefront of society, and the monasteries were at the forefront of society.

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[26] *Elenchus sacerdotum lituanorum in variis statibus pro anno Domini 1970*, Putnamas, p. 55.

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