
JOANNA NASTALSKA-WIŚNICKA*

ALEKSANDRA WITKOWSKA OSU (1930–2024)

Aleksandra Witkowska was born in Poznań on 10 December 1930 and died on 20 February 2024 in Lublin. Until 1968 as a nun she went by the religious name of Maria Helena. For almost seven decades she was connected with the historical community of the Catholic University of Lublin.

She was one of the four daughters of Stanisław Witkowski and his wife Zofia, née Wawrzyniak. Her childhood was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. In January 1940, together with her family, she survived displacement. First she was sent to the Poznań-Główna transit camp, where she spent two months, and later deported to the General Government spent the Nazi occupation in Dębica. In 1944 she returned to her native Poznań, where, after finishing the Grammar School and General Education Lyceum of the Ursulines in Poznań, in 1950 she entered the novitiate of the Order of Ursulines of the Roman Union in Częstochowa. In 1956 she took her final vows, taking the religious name of Maria Helena of the Holy Trinity.

In 1955 she began studying History at the Catholic University of Lublin, but had to cut short her studies after two years in order to carry out her duties as a teacher in her old Lyceum. However, she did not give up on

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her scholarly development and took part in seminars led by Professor Brygida Kürbis and Professor Gerard Labuda, which allowed her to deepen her knowledge of Medieval History and Source Studies. After a year of work in Poznań she returned to Lublin where in 1960 she graduated as Master of Arts on the basis of her work on the *Vita sanctae Kyngae ducissae Cracoviensis*, written under the supervision of Dr Marzena Pollakówna (the thesis was published in *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, 10.2 (1961), 41–166). This topic was the beginning of her research on hagiography.

After completing her studies Sr Witkowska returned briefly to Poznań, but thanks to the efforts of the rector of KUL, Professor Marian Rechowicz and Professor Marzena Pollakówna she began work as a research assistant in the Department of Medieval History run by Professor Jerzy Kłoczowski in 1962. She completed her doctoral dissertation supervised by Professor Aleksander Gieysztor which she defended in Warsaw University in 1967. Her study, *Miracula małopolskie XIII i XIV w. Studium źródłoznawcze* ['Miracles in Lesser Poland in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries. A Study of Sources'], was published in *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, 19.2 (1971), 29–161.

In 1978 she proceeded to her higher doctorate (*Habilitacja*) in the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences on the basis of her study *Kulty pątnicze piętnastowiecznego Krakowa. Z badań nad religijnością ludową* ['Pilgrim Cults in Fifteenth-century Cracow. A Study of Popular Religion'] (Lublin 1984). In the following years her academic career developed dynamically; in 1984 she became an assistant professor and in 1987 she received the title of supernumerary professor before becoming a full professor five years later in 1992. For more than 20 years (1983–2004) she headed the Department of General Medieval History and between 1985 and 1988 she carried out the function of head of the History Section (now the Institute of History) at the Catholic University of Lublin. Between 1979 and 1982 she sat on the Senate Scientific Commission and during the 1980s she was a member of the Senate Library Commission.

In her research Witkowska concentrated on topics connected with sacral geography during the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period as well as on the socio-religious function of the cult of saints, and the models and patterns of behaviour and expressions of mass religion. A special place in her research was taken by cult centres – their origins,

development and their role in the religious life of communities, in addition to the forms and motivation of pilgrimage movements. She analyzed historical sources which until then had not been studied in detail, especially hagiographical ones such as the lives of saints, collections of miracles and inventories of votive offerings, showing the significance of these for research on the history of socio-religious culture. In her work she highlighted the richness of the contents of this type of evidence, combining methods of classical source criticism with an interdisciplinary approach involving elements of cultural anthropology, art history, historical geography and religious psychology. Her pioneering studies of hagiographic sources brought new analytical tools to Polish medieval studies, allowing us to understand better both the functioning of pilgrim traditions and also the dynamics of the Marian cult in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. She also took up topics connected with transformations of the cult of saints in the modern period, leading to special consideration of their historical, political and religious context. Together with Jerzy Kłoczowski, Urszula Borkowska OSU, Zygmunt Sułowski and Eugeniusz Wiśniowski she belonged to a group of scholars researching the history of Christianity in Poland.

She was co-principal investigator in a grant supervised by Professor Antoni Jackowski (Jagiellonian University): *Przestrzeń i sacrum. Geografia kultury religijnej w Polsce i jej przemiany w okresie od XVII do XX w. na przykładzie ośrodków kultu i migracji pielgrzymkowych* ['Space and the Sacred. The Geography of Religious Culture in Poland and Its Transformations from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century from Examples of Cult Centres and Pilgrimage Movements']. Next, she herself supervised several ministerial grants, namely: *Patrocinia polskich diecezji. Tradycje kultu patronów Kościoła polskiego jako element chrześcijańskiego dziedzictwa kulturowego* ['Patrocinia of Polish Dioceses. Traditions of the Cult of the Patrons of the Polish Church as an Element of Christian Cultural Heritage'] (1995–1997); *Adalbertiana. Międzynarodowa bibliografia św. Wojciecha* ['Adalbertiana. An International Bibliography of St Wojciech-Adalbert'] (1999–2001); *Źródłoznawstwo hagiograficzne. Typy i funkcje źródeł hagiograficznych w polskiej kulturze późnego średniowiecza i baroku* ['Hagiographical Source Criticism. The Types and Functions of Hagiographical Sources in Late-medieval and Baroque Polish Culture'] (2002–2005); *Staropolski Atlas Marianus. Antropologia miejsca świętego* ['An Old Polish Marian Atlas. An Anthropology of Sacred Places'] (2010–2012).

Sr A. Witkowska's contribution to scholarship includes several monographs and more than 200 articles. Among the most important of her books one might mention: *Przestrzeń i sacrum. Geografia kultury religijnej w Polsce i jej przemiany w okresie od XVII do XX w. na przykładzie ośrodków kultu i migracji pielgrzymkowych* ['Space and the Sacred. The Geography of Religious Culture in Poland and Its Transformations from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century from Examples of Cult Centres and Pilgrimage Movements'] (jointly with A. Jackowski, Z. S. Jabłoński, I. Soljan and E. Bilska, Cracow 1996); *Święty Wojciech – życie i kult. Bibliografia do roku 1999* ['St Wojciech, His Life and Cult. A Bibliography up to the Year 1999'] (written together with J. Nastalska, Lublin 2002); *Titulus ecclesiae. Wezwania współczesnych kościołów katedralnych w Polsce* ['Titulus ecclesiae. The Dedications of Contemporary Polish Cathedrals'] (Warsaw 1999); *Polskie niebo. Ikonografia hagiograficzna u progu XVII wieku* ['Polish Heaven. Hagiographic Iconography at the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century'] (with Fr. R. Knapiński, Pelplin 2007); *Staropolskie piśmiennictwo hagiograficzne, I–II* ['Old Polish Hagiographical Writings'] (with J. Nastalska, Lublin 2007); *Ku ozdobie i obronie Rzeczypospolitej. Maryjne miejsca święte w drukach staropolskich* ['For the Adornment and Defence of the Commonwealth. Marian Holy Sites in Old Polish Publications'] (jointly with J. Nastalska-Wiśnicka, Lublin 2013). Her collection of previously published essays, *Sancti, miracula, peregrinationes* (Lublin 2009), represents a summary of her scholarly career. In addition, she was the author of the general introduction to, and a biography of St Kinga in *Hagiografia polska. Słownik bio-bibliograficzny, I–II* ['Polish Hagiography. A Bio-bibliographical Dictionary'], ed. R. Gustaw (Poznań 1971–1972), and in the 1990s she worked on an expanded version of this work called *Nasi święci. Polski słownik hagiograficzny* ['Our Saints. A Dictionary of Polish Hagiography'] (Poznań 1995; 1998). She took part in international research projects, including *Marienlexikon* and *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclésiastique*. She worked with the editors of *Encyklopedia Katolicka*, and was also a member of the editorial boards of several journals, including *Przegląd Historyczny*, *Kwartalnik Historyczny* and *Studia Claromontana*.

She played an active part in many medieval congresses, colloquia and symposia both in Poland and abroad. She obtained grants to carry out academic research for several months at a time at universities in France, Belgium, West Germany and Italy. She looked for source

material in archives and libraries in Austria, Great Britain, Czechoslovakia, France and the USSR.

An important part of her professional activities involved teaching. The lectures she delivered are remembered by her students as an example of the art of masterly teaching. Her M.A. and doctoral seminars stood out for the high demands she made on students. As a supervisor she looked for quality and not quantity, and she inspired those whom she selected both intellectually and in long-lasting ways. She remained in contact with many until the end of her life.

She devoted much attention to her mother Order of Ursulines of the Roman Union. She took part in work drafting and editing the text of its new constitutions and was involved in documenting the Lublin community, supervising its archive among other work. She worked on its inventory and subsequently drafted the *Katalog uczennic Szkoły Podstawowej oraz Gimnazjum i Liceum Sióstr Urszulanek w Lublinie 1917–1955* [‘Catalogue of Pupils of the Girls’ Primary School, and Grammar School and Lyceum of the Ursulines in Lublin, 1917–1955’]. Her last book, which came out posthumously, *Urszulańskie gawędy* [‘Ursuline Tales’] (Lublin 2024), is a personal testament to her devotion to the Order’s history, spirituality and traditions.

We should also bear in mind her engagement in social initiatives. Among other things, she worked with the Lublin Home for Single Mothers and saved the lives of children threatened with abortion (she played a key role in arranging five adoptions).

Sr Witkowska died on 20 February 2024 in Lublin and is buried in the Roman Catholic Cemetery on Lipowa Street, in the tomb of the Ursulines, where she lies next to Sr Urszula Borkowska, with whom she shared a common vocation and academic career for many years.

Translated by Stephen Rowell