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SZWERMICKI, SZWERNICKI OR MAYBE SZWIRMICKI? A CONTRIBUTION TO THE BIOGRAPHY OF AN EXILE PRIEST, PARISH PRIEST IN IRKUTSK IN THE 19th CENTURY

ABSTRACT: The article is dedicated to the historically original figure of Krzysztof Szwermicki (1814-1894), a Marian priest, an exile to Siberia in the middle of the 19th century, then for many years, a parish priest in Irkutsk, who died there. On the basis of new materials - the parish books of the parish of Dauksze (today in Lithuania) – stored in the Lithuanian Historical Archive in Vilnius, the author establishes many facts, and corrects the errors in the biography of Father Szwermicki, one of the most interesting, exceptionally positive figures of the Catholic Church in Russia. The most important findings include the following: he was born on September 6, 1814 into a peasant family, to Adam and Catherine, in the village of Warnupiany, in the parish of Dauksze near Mariampol; on September 8 he was baptized with the name Krzysztof; he had the family name of Szwirmicki, which he later changed to Szwermicki, although he was also known and described as Szwernicki. He died in Irkutsk on October 31 (according to the Julian calendar), 1894, and was buried on November 3 in the Jerusalem cemetery (the grave does not exist). In historical literature he was more often spelled: Szwernicki. The author of the text argues that he should be spelled: Krzysztof Szwermicki, or more fully: Krzysztof Szwermicki (Szwernicki).

KEYWORDS: Szwermicki family, Father Szwermicki/Szwernicki, 19th century, Warnupiany, Russia, Siberia, Irkutsk, parish books – Dauksze parish, biographical notes.

The Marian priest Krzysztof Szwermicki, or more often noted in historical literature as Szwernicki, is a particularly important figure in the history of the Catholic Church in Eastern Siberia in the second half of the 19th century. It is worth knowing that the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which exists to this day, is a permanent trace of his long stay (first as an exile, then as a parish priest) in Irkutsk (where he also died). The church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was built in the early 1980s (mainly with Polish donations) and is now owned by the city and functions

as a concert hall (and is shared with the parish only on holidays to celebrate one Holy Mass).

Although since the 19th century the parish priest of Irkutsk has been mentioned in various texts and publications, mainly by Polish exiles (letters, memoirs, press articles, etc.), and in the 20th century also in historical studies, dictionaries and biographies (now numerous on the Internet), his name was written in various ways: Szwerwicki, sometimes Szwermycki, but probably most often Szwernecki; his secular name, from baptism was Józef, and his monastic name was Krzysztof (Krzysztof Maria). Inaccuracies and errors (reproduced later in publications) also entered into the date and place of birth of Szwerwicki/Szwernecki/Szwirnicki/Szwirnicki, the name given at his baptism, his mother's surname and first name, the date of his death, etc. Some of the incorrect entries (date of birth, name Józef) were also quoted after others by the undersigned, convinced that the most important biographical data had already been definitively established. Tracing all these records, and especially the 20th century studies and biographies, we become convinced that they are still being reproduced after the seemingly fundamental and comprehensive study by Józef Stanisław Pietrzak (recognised by us as somewhat unreliable) – *O. Krzysztof Marya Szwerwicki*, Kraków 1928. Basic facts, among other things, referring to Szwerwicki's biography are incorrect: that Szwerwicki was born on 8 September 1812 in Iglów, that he was the son of Kazimierz and Stanisława Szwerwicki, that he was baptised with the name Józef, and that he died on 8 December 1894.¹ Today we are able to verify some of these and other errors, and to clarify some of the biographical data, possessing, among other things, scans of USC documents, from the books of the Dauksze parish from the 18th and 19th centuries, from the State Historical Archives of Lithuania (LVIA) in Vilnius.² Dauksze (today Lithuanian Daukšiai) was situated in the vicinity of Marijampolė (in the years of the Duchy of Warsaw

¹ The contemporary Lithuanian encyclopaedia referring to Pietrzak as its main source notes down that Krzysztof Szwirnicki was born on 2 July 1812, and died on 28 November 1894; see: J. V a i s n o w a, *Švirnickas Kriestupas*, in: *Letuvių enciklopedija*, South Boston, Mass., 1964, vol. 30. pp. 249-250.

² The Historical Archives of Lithuania in Vilnius (LVIA), collection 1236, inventory 2, case 16 (lit.: f. 1236, ap. 2, b. 16). The quoted materials we received courtesy of Kęstutis Vaičiūnas from Vilnius.

it was the Łomża department; in the Kingdom of Poland, Augustów county, Sejny diocese).

The verification of various biographical facts of the family and the protagonist of this text will, however, not be easy, since also the above parish documents also contain many errors, inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the recording of surnames, forenames (especially when some used two names alternately or when the same name was used by different Szwermicki), age, family names of women married to some Szwermicki, etc.

The first and oldest records of the surname and the family in question, and this concerns the years 1790 and 1795, are Szwirnicki or Szwirmicki³, the landowner family⁴, illiterate, living in a village called Warnupie or Warnupiany; later – the first decades of the 19th century – we will record Swirniciki, or Warnupiany, the authorship of which should be attributed to Father Michał Narkiewicz, the parish priest of Daukšėnai, but yet another parish priest, Jan Jastrzębski, would consistently note Szwirmicki! in many acts of this family. Such form would be used by Father Krzysztof, to whom we will return later. Now, several most important documents will be brought to our attention.

Parents of the future priest and exile got married in the church in Dauksze in February 1811. On the 10th of that month, the parish priest of Dauksze, Michał Narkiewicz, publicly made (“loudly and clearly”) the second announcement (the first was on the 3 February) of the young couple in front of the municipal building, and then nailed this document on the office door. According to this record, “they vowed to be married”, Jerzy Adam Swirnicki (sic!) aged 23, son of Jerzy Swirnicki⁵ and Ewa née Beniulska, landowners settled in the village of Warnupiany, and Katarzyna Wojciechowska, aged 24, daughter of Józef Wojciechowski and Katarzyna (née Braczkowska?) Wojciechowska, landowners from the village of Dauksze. The wedding in the church in Dauksze took place on the 13th of the same month, at 11 o'clock before noon. In the marriage certificate the groom

³ *Ibidem*, c. 1236, inv. 32, case. 1, k. 64, 107.

⁴ In literature, the noble background of the Szwirmicki family, later impoverished, is often referred to; the quoted church acts do not contain such information.

⁵ The document stated: Jerzy Szarmicki, Jerzy Szwirnicki, aged 80, died on 15 January 1813 in Warnupiany; the acts was drawn up by Fr. Jan Jastrzębski; LVIA, coll. 1236, inv. 2, case 15, k. 6.

was recorded under one name, Adam (baptised on 24 December 1788) and the bride, Katarzyna (baptised on 20 September 1787). Those present at the drawing up of the act were: Jerzy Swirnicki, Adam's father, and Józef and Katarzyna Wojciechowski, the bride's parents, and witnesses: Bartłomiej (recorded as Bałtromiej) Smelster, aged 26, landowner of the village of Warnupiany, first cousin of the groom, Jan Marciskiewicz [!], aged 24, burgher of Ludwinów, Maciej Wojciechowski, aged 24, landowner of the village of Dauksze, and Tomasz Matukiewicz, aged 24, landowner of the village of Kułaki. As all of them were illiterate, the act was signed by the registrar, Fr. Michał Narkiewicz.⁶

The surname Swirnicki, recorded here in the context of other metric records of the Dauksze parish from the late 18th century, as well as from the 19th century, appears to have been distorted in this case. We stress again that the correct form was Szwirnicki, later Szwirmicki. The surname Szwirmicki was recorded in many birth, marriage and death records of the members of this family (findings were made up to 1865), permanently residing in the village of Warnupie. Apart from the above-mentioned act of announcement, a record of two names of Swirmicki – Jerzy Adam would also not appear there, he would be recorded with the second name only – Adam; also in his death act of 30 January 1831 we would read: “Adam Szwirmicki died, aged 45”.⁷

The family of Adam and Katarzyna Szwirmicki had six children (more on this later; various forms of the surname were also recorded), of whom Krzysztof was the first son. In September 1814, a now new parish priest of Dauksze recorded in the birth book: “Birth certificate of Krzysztof Szwirmicki [sic!]. In the year one thousand eight hundred and fourteen, on the eighth day of September, before us, the registrar of the municipality of Daukszech [!], Adam Szwirmicki, aged 35⁸, farmer living in the village of Warnupie, appeared and presented to us a man child born in his home on the sixth day of the month of September of the current year at eight o'clock in the morning,

⁶ *Ibidem*, coll. 1236, inv. 2, case 6, k. 126-127.

⁷ *Ibidem*, inv. 2, case 40, k. 64.

⁸ Undoubtedly, there must be a mistake in the spelling of the age of Adam Szwirmicki; there should be 25, since he was born in 1788; in many different acts his age is still recorded incorrectly: age 35 was written three times in 1814, 1818 and in 1823, whereas in 1827-38, when it should have been 40.

declaring that it was begotten of him and Maryanna⁹, née Wojciechowska, his wife, and was named Krzysztof; after the explanation and presentation of the child in the presence of Bartłomiej Smelstar and Jerzy Szwirmicki, farmers residing in the village of Warnupie, and then this birth certificate, after having been read to those who are present and do not know how to write, signed by us.

X. Jan Jastrzębski parish priest of Dauksze, Registrar”.¹⁰

This entry explains a few things: that the mainfigure of this text and future well-known priest and exile was born on 6 September, and two days later, on 8 September, was baptised as Krzysztof and entered in the church records. Thus he was not given the name Józef, as it is most often written and that he was not born on 8 September. With reference to the surname, it is clear that both the father and the new born were Szwirmicki. In 1827, Adam Szwirmicki already submitted his vague, but legible signature (next to the signature of Fr. Jan Jastrzębski) under the birth certificate of his next child, son Szymon Rafał.¹¹

Since when Krzysztof started to write his surname Szwermicki (not Szwirmicki) has not been determined. Still though we possess documented traces of the notation in the form of Szwermicki, both in Russian and Polish, from the period when he was in Siberia (first as a political exile, then as a parish priest of Irkutsk): this is year 1861 and the so-called “statiejnyj spisok” (a document including official personal data of the exile) about the priest and his own letter written in Polish on 8 July 1879 to the writer Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, with the request to collect social funds for the erection of the church in Irkutsk, after the old one had been burnt down in the fire in the city, and an official letter of the priest to the Irkutsk authorities of 1868 on the improvement of the living conditions of the Polish participants of the January Uprising, whom he visited during his pastoral journey in the

⁹ In other metric records she is always recorded as Katarzyna Szwirmicka, daughter of Józef and Katarzyna née Rażuk (!?! – E.N.) Wojciechowscy, born in the village of Dauksze (perhaps she bore two names Katarzyna Marianna? – E.N.); after the death of her husband Adam Szwirmicki on 30 January 1831 (at the age of 45), she re-married (recorded: at the age of 35 – and it should have been 45, E.N.) a bachelor Jan Rutelonis, aged 29, in Dauksze in November 1832, LVIA, coll. 1236, inv. 2, case 39, k. 100.

¹⁰ LVIA, coll. 1236, inv. 2, case 16, year 1814, act No.100, k. 45.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, case 62, k. 69.

Irkutsk province.¹² In the two autographs known to us he submitted legible signatures: Szwermicki and Швермицкий¹³ (Szwermickij).

Also the date of Szwermicki's death in Irkutsk needs to be verified, as there are different versions in the literature, both as to the day, and the month: October or November, or even December 1894 are indicated. The fact is that in January of that year, he was severely beaten at the vicarage by unknown assailants – in a bandit attack – and he was barely saved. He never fully recovered and died on 31 October, according to the Julian calendar (which was used in Russia and Siberia at the time)¹⁴, and following a new Gregorian calendar on 12 November 1894. On the third day after his death, 3/15 November, he was buried in the central cemetery in Irkutsk, called Jerusalem, where the dead were buried (in separate quarters) of all Christian denominations, as well as Jews and Buryats. So let us then put the basic data in order: the family original name was Szwirnicki or Szwirmicki, the father of the Marian priest was Adam Szwirmicki (or more precisely Jerzy Adam), his mother Katarzyna, née Wojciechowska (or probably Marianna Katarzyna); their son was born on 6 September 1814 at 8 a.m., and on 8 September was baptised with the name Krzysztof (not Józef, as has long been mistakenly reported in the literature¹⁵) and recorded in the church

¹² National Historical Archives in Belarus in Minsk, collection 1781, inventory 25, case 150, k. 937-938 (a formal list of 1861); Internet: Fr-Szwermicki-letter.pdf, padri mariani.org.pl; Gosudarstwiennyj archiw Irkutskoj oblasti w Irkucku (GAIO), fond 297, opis' 1, dzieło 43, karta 20-21. See also *Książdz Krzysztof Szwermicki i 10 tysięcy wiorst po Syberii w 1859 i 1860 roku*, by E. N i e b e l s k i, Lublin 2018, pp. 198-199.

¹³ See also facsimile of a document with the signature of Fr. Szwermicki in: E. N i e b e l s k i, *Wobec roku 1863. Książdz w powstaniu styczniowym i ich losy*, ed. 2, Lublin 2016, p. 406.

¹⁴ Gosudarstwiennyj Archiw Irkutskoj Oblasti, f. 297, o. 1, d. 120a, k. 13; Schematyzm mohylowski 1895, p. 282 (here that he died on 1 November); see also: N.S. R o m a n o w, *Lietopis goroda Irkutskaja za 1881-1901 gg.*, podgotowlenije N.W. Kulikauskiene, Irkutsk 1993, p. 146 (here that Fr. Krzysztof Szwermicki! died in Irkutsk on 31 October); *Książdz Krzysztof Szwermicki*, pp. 210-211; 31 October 1894 is also suggested by B. S z o s t a k o i c z in the biogram of Szwirnicki in the encyclopaedia of Siberia: *Istoriczeskaja enciklopedija Sibiri*, Nowosybirsk 2009, vol. 3, p. 525. At present, Wikipedia notes down the date of his death to 26 November – unclear on what basis (n.st.) 1894 r. https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krzysztof_Maria_Szwermicki [accessed on: 28.06.2022].

¹⁵ In a number of publications from the 20th century the name Szwermicki – Józef; most probably the basis of such a claim were the “findings” from the above-mentioned

books of Dauksze. There is every likelihood that in his adult life he first signed his name Szwirmicki, also as a Marian monk Krzysztof, which was noted in the document of his compulsory examination before being admitted to priestly ordination. This is a document drawn up in Sejny on 13 July 1837, in which it is recorded that three (*venerabilis*) candidates take the examination, required by ecclesiastical law, including: “Christophorus Szwirmicki”, having corrected the first “i” in the surname – to Szwymicki¹⁶. Whether this correction was made with the knowledge or the intervention of the priest candidate himself, we do not know.

He had no influence on the fact that he was recorded by various people, also in church documents and texts, more often as Szwernicki, nor did he seem to think it necessary or possible to correct it. Moreover, we do believe that he might also have accepted this form. After all, Szwermicki and Szwernicki also had earlier historical justification. Many of his acquaintances and friends wrote him down correctly as Szwermicki, including his fellow exiles Benedykt Dybowski and Józef Kalinowski: Szwermicki or Szwermicki, but others, however, spelt him as Szwernicki more often, including the Capuchin exile after 1863, Wacław Nowakowski, who knew the parish priest of Irkutsk personally, and who wrote down in his later publication: Szwernicki.¹⁷ The aforementioned Kalinowski, who in the period of his exile even lived at the presbytery in Irkutsk, wrote to his relatives in his letters from Siberia about Fr. Szwernicki, but later consistently about Szwermicki. The contemporary publisher of these letters retained the originality of both entries, but already in the comments and in

J.S. Pietrzak (*O. Krzysztof Marya Szwermicki*). See: among other things: J. Kalinowski, *Wspomnienia 1835-1877*, ed. R. Bender, Lublin 1965, p. 45 (in the footnote we will find Bender's information Józef Szwernicki; also many other erroneous bibliographical data); Cz. Gil OCD, *O. Rafał Kalinowski 1835-1907*, Kraków 1984, see: index of names, p. 360: „Szwernicki Józef Krzysztof”; W. Śliwowska, *Zesłańcy polscy w Imperium Rosyjskim w pierwszej połowie XIX wieku. Słownik Biograficzny*, Warszawa 1998, p. 603: „Szwermicki (v. Szwernicki) Józef”; also E. Niebelski writes about Józef: „Szwermicki (Szwernicki) Józef, w zakonie Krzysztof Maria”, „Polski Słownik Biograficzny”, vol. 49, pp. 381-484.

¹⁶ The Diocesan Archives in Łomża, collection II, volume 120, „Akta święceń 1821-1847”.

¹⁷ See: E. z S. [W. Nowakowski], *Wspomnieni o duchowieństwie polskim znajdującym się na wygnaniu w Syberyi, w Tunce*, Poznań 1875, p. 26.

the index of names Szvernicki is recorded in the first place, being convinced that it was rather the author of the letters who was mistaken.¹⁸ How dominant and established is the literary form of Szvernicki can be proved by other facts: in 1968, Wacław Zawadzki, a well-known Warsaw literary and bibliophile, compiled and published the memoirs of two Augusts Iwański; the senior Iwański mentioned Fr. Szvernicki (!) several times, while Zawadzki noted in his index of names: Szvernicki, overlooking the other form.¹⁹ Therefore, the notation Szvernicki was so firmly established from the 19th century to the present day that it would be impossible to ignore this form completely.

Let us then recall some other sources proving the form of Szvernicki. In the first decade of the 20th century, Fr. Józafat Żyskar was the parish priest in Irkutsk for several years. He was interested in the history of the Polish clergymen exiled to Siberia after the 1863 uprising, especially those settled in Tunka in the vicinity of southern Baikal, and Father Szvernicki himself, who was their spiritual guardian at the time. In 1909, Żyskar also took a photograph of the grave of Fr. Szvernicki in the cemetery called Jerusalem (at present it does not exist, the area serves as the park),²⁰ and which is still kept in the archives in Irkutsk (GAIO). In a new biogram in Wikipedia, he was noted down as “Krzysztof Maria Szvernicki (Szvernicki), actually Józef Szvernicki”.²¹ Therefore, there are some arguments to call him: Fr. Krzysztof Szvernicki (since this is how he signed himself) or in full – Krzysztof Szvernicki (Szvernicki), not the other way round.

Below are, according to the church registry books, the siblings of Fr. Krzysztof Szvernicki (born Szwirnicki); children of Adam (Jerzy Adam) and Katarzyna Szwirnicka (!), born in Warnupiany²², preserving the original form of writing the surname and first name:

¹⁸ J. K a l i n o w s k i, *Listy*, ed. Cz. Gil OCD, vol. 1-2, Lublin 1978.

¹⁹ See: A. I w a ń s k i senior, *Pamiętniki 1832-1876*. A. I w a ń s k i junior, *Pamiętniki 1881-1939*, by W. Z a w a d z k i, Warszawa 1968.

²⁰ The place known to the author of this text.

²¹ Accessed on 31.07.2021. See also the notation Szvernicki in: A. M a j d o w s k i, *Kościół katolicki w Cesarstwie rosyjskim. Syberia. Daleki Wschód. Azja Środkowa*, Warszawa 2001; R. S t o p i k o w s k i, *Kościół katolicki w Cesarstwie Rosyjskim w świetle polskiej prasy katolickiej drugiej połowy XIX wieku*, Warszawa 2001.

²² The list compiled following the quoted acts of the parish in Dauksze, LVIA, coll. 1236, inv. 2: case 15, k. 6; case 23, k. 9; case 25, k. 45; case 40, k. 28; case 44, k. 2; case 60, k. 43-44; case 62, k. 69.

- Jagnieszka Swirnicka (sic!) – born on 13 April 1812
- Marianna Agata Szwirmicka – born on 13 January 1817
- Elżbieta (Elżbieta Katarzyna) Szwirmicka – born on 18 November 1818
- Adam Szwirmicki – born on 23 December 1823 – died on 11 February 1828
- Szymon Rafał Szwirmicki – born on 22 December 1827.

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