

Architectural, Residential and Cultural Complex of the Radziwiłł Family at Nesvizh (2005)

The estate was owned by the Radziwiłł magnate family from 1533, when it was awarded to Mikołaj Radziwiłł and his brother Jan after the extinction of the Kiszka family. Since the Radziwiłł's were one of the most important and wealthy clans of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, it was there that the Lithuanian Archive was moved in 1551. In 1586 the estate was turned into an ordynacja.

In 1582 Mikołaj Krzysztof Radziwiłł, the Marshal of Lithuania, voivode of Trakai and Vilnius and castellan of Šiauliai, started the construction of an imposing square three-storey chateau. Although the works were based on a pre-existing structure of a mediæval castle, the former fortifications were entirely turned into a renaissance-baroque manor. Construction was completed by 1604, and they added several galleries half a century later. The chateau's corners were fortified with four octagonal towers.

In 1706, during the Great Northern War, Charles XII's army sacked the castle and destroyed its fortifications. Several decades later, the Radziwiłłs invited some German and Italian architects who had the chateau substantially renovated and enlarged. Antoni Zaleski decorated its yellow facades with baroque stucco work. The 16th-century castle gates were also reconstructed, and its two-storey tower was crowned with a helm. It was then that the three separate buildings surrounding the central courtyard were joined into a single structure.

The most important structure in Nesvizh is the Corpus Christi Church (1587 to 1603), connected with the castle by a dam over a ditch and containing coffins of 72 members of the Radziwiłł family, each interred in a simple coffin made of birch and marked with Trąby Coat of Arms. Designed by the Italian architect Gian Maria Bernardoni (1541 to 1605), the church is considered the first Jesuit temple patterned after Il Gesù in Rome, the first domed basilica with Baroque facade in the world and the first baroque piece of art in Eastern Europe.

Apart from elaborate princely sepulchres, its interior features some late baroque frescoes from 1760s and the Holy Cross altar, executed by the Venetian sculptors in 1583.

In 1770 the castle was seized by Russian forces and the Radziwiłł family was expelled. Soon afterwards the Lithuanian Archive was transferred to Saint Petersburg (where it remains), while the majority of works of art gathered in the palace were distributed between various Russian nobles. Abandoned both by the original owners and by the Russian army, the palace gradually fell into disarray. However, it was restored to the Radziwiłłs and between 1881 and 1886 the castle's interiors were renovated by Prince Antoni Radziwiłł and his French wife, Marie de Castellane. They also designed a landscape park in English style. With an area of more than one square kilometre, the park is one of the biggest such facilities in Europe.

In 1939, the Radziwiłł family was expelled from the castle by the invading Red Army. In Soviet times, the chateau was used a sanatorium, whereas the park gradually fell in neglect.

In 1994, the castle complex was designated the national historical and cultural reserve. Twelve years later, the castle complex was inscribed on the World Heritage List. The ongoing reconstruction has drawn sharp criticism for its "unjustified reconstruction" of several long-demolished structures, notably a bell-tower. In 2002, the upper storey of the residence was destroyed by fire.

-- Wikipedia [<http://www.wikipedia.org>]