

# WHERE DID THE RADZIWIŁŁ EAGLE ALIGHT?

A short guide about the Biržai history



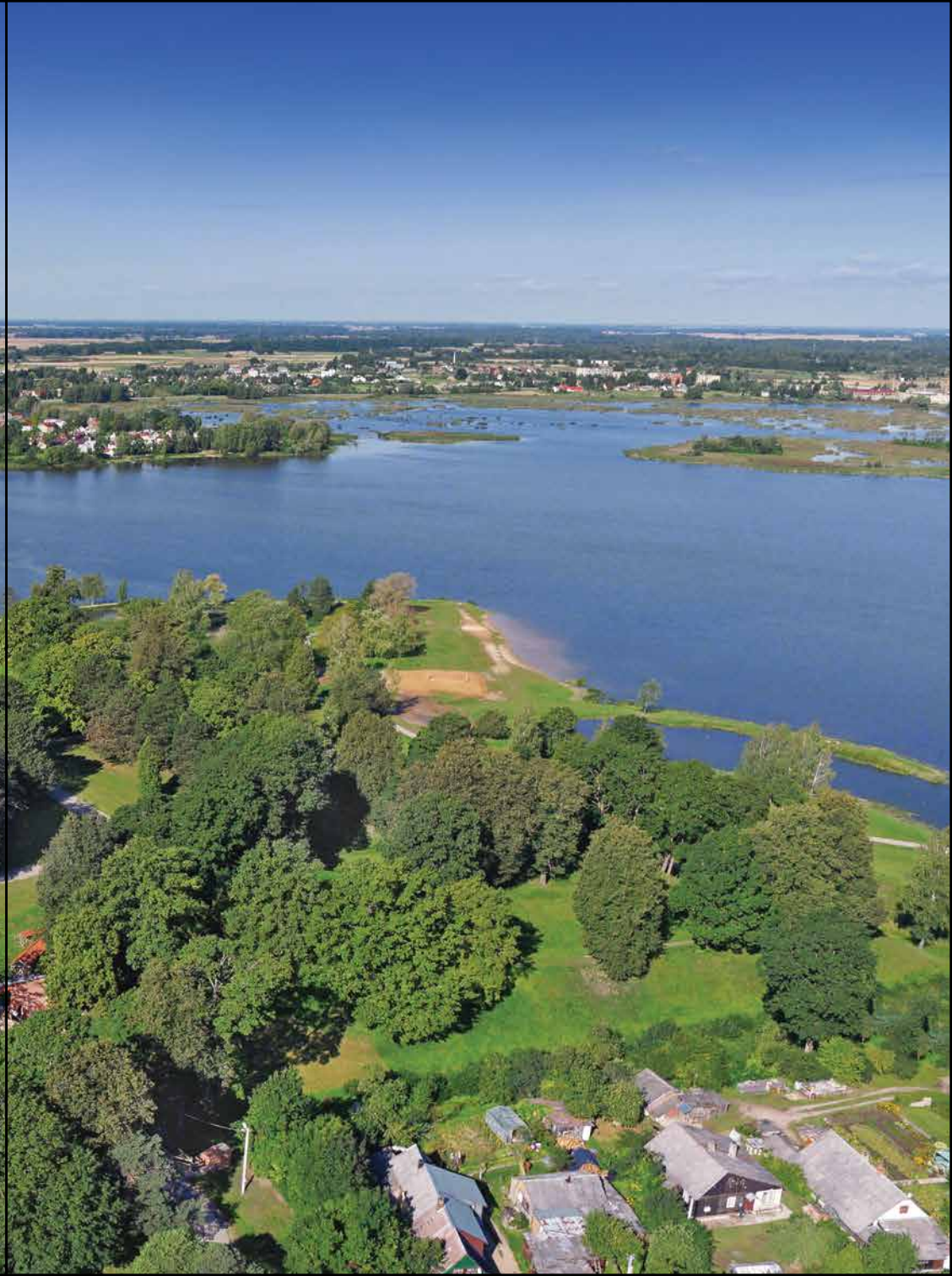
# Where did the Radziwiłł eagle alight?

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2020









## Welcome to Biržai – a town founded by Dukes Radziwiłł!

Biržai is a town in northern Lithuania, small but majestic with its exceptional natural beauty, unique natural phenomena and rich history. The founders of the town of Biržai would rightfully be considered the Radziwiłłs, or Radvilos, one of the most illustrious noble dynasties of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 16th – 17th centuries. From the beginning of the 19th century, the town was ruled by another powerful family of nobles – Counts Tyszkiewicz (Lith. Tiškevičiai).

The geographical location of Biržai district is also exceptional: it marks the northernmost point of Lithuania – 56°27, north latitude – anyone willing can find it.

While wandering around the environs of Biržai, you'd rather not say "May you be swallowed by the earth!" because it can actually happen. Our land is famous for karst depressions – sinkholes, of which there are thousands here. The largest of them is the Cow's Cave. As the legend goes, a couple of centuries ago a cow was swallowed up in this place, and all the owner found was its chain. Let alone the mysterious Kirkilai and Drąseikiai karst lakelets which sometimes get coloured red!

When in Biržai, you are welcome to go boating on one of the two lakes – Širvėna or Kilučiai. Lake Širvėna, located in the very Old Town of Biržai, is the largest and oldest artificial water pond in Lithuania, formed by damming the confluence of the two rivers that carved the city – the Apaščia and the Agluona. And in another lake, Kilučiai, the agar, a floating water nut, is believed to have grown, a rare delicacy reserved for the rich, desired to be tasted by every guest of Dukes Radziwiłł. Have you by any chance heard anything about the agar from Lake Kilučiai?

On one shore of the Širvėna stands the Biržai Fortress, built by Prince Krzysztof Mikołaj Radziwiłł, nicknamed "Piorun" (The Thunderbolt) (Lith.: Kristupas Mikalojus Radvila "Perkūnas") in the 16th century. It was meant to protect not only his Biržai domain but also the northern border of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), only to be destroyed by the Swedes and later in history rebuilt by as many as three Radziwiłł generations. However, at the beginning of the 19th century, during the Northern War, the fortress buildings were once again attacked and blown up by the Swedes. It was only after almost 300 years that the castle and arsenal of the fortress were salvaged from decaying. Today, a wooden bridge invites you to enter the fortress once again ...

The Biržai domain remained in the hands of the Radziwiłł dynasty for over 350 years. It

On the other side of the lake lies the romantic Astravas manor, a possession of Count Tyszkiewicz.



should be noted that the Duchy of Biržai is rightly called the largest and longest-lasting private estate in the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

On the other side of the lake lies the romantic Astravas manor, a possession of Counts Tyszkiewicz, immersed in the greenery of the park, overlooking the town and the fortress. You can reach the Tyszkiewicz manor, built in the 19th century, by going along the longest pedestrian bridge in Lithuania (525 m) via the Širvėna.





Jonas Mekas.  
New York, 1968.  
(The photographs  
are from Jonas  
and Adolfas  
Mekai Legacy  
Studies Centre).

Astravas manor one can feel the spirit of the Tyszkiewicz still floating around. Walking around the town, you will see many buildings dating back to the times of the first Republic of Lithuania, designed by the most famous architects of that time: Mykolas Songaila, Karolis Reisonas, Vytautas Lansbergis-Žemkalnis. The latter is famous for having designed the Biržai gymnasium (school), which produced many notable representatives in the fields of science, culture and arts, making Biržai famous. The future artist – the poet, the pioneer of avant-garde cinema in the USA – Jonas Mekas, was among them.

Biržai is the birthplace of quite a few notable individuals, among them two signatories of the Act of Independence of Lithuania – Jokūbas Šernas and Alfonsas Petrulis, and many ministers of the first Republic of Lithuania: the brothers Jonas and Martynas Yčai, Konstantinas Šakenis, Vytautas Petrulis, Ernestas Galvanauskas.

The withdrawal of the front during World War II left Biržai devastated by fire, with only a few brick buildings remaining. It is hardly surprising that during the Soviet era the face of the town was significantly changed – new public buildings and apartment buildings were erected. Despite the fact that due to its geographical location Biržai was at the epicenter of all the storms of all the wars that were being waged, the few surviving relics of the old epochs are very powerful.

Sport occupies a special place in the history of Biržai. Vladas Garastas – an honorary citizen of Biržai, one of the most titled basketball coaches in Lithuania, who led the legendary basketball team “Žalgiris” from Kaunas,

The busts of Martynas and Jonas Yčai.  
The sculptor Konstantinas Bogdanas.



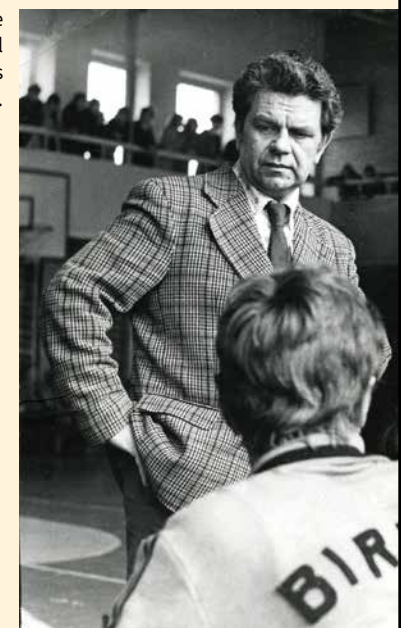
As far back as the time of Dukes Radziwiłł, Biržai was known as a multinational, multicultural and multi-confessional town. National and religious tolerance was used by Dukes Radziwiłł as the basis to successfully establish, develop and govern the Duchy of Biržai. Even a few centuries later, you can still find religious communities of eight different Christian denominations in the Biržai land.

The Biržai Castle is reminiscent of the times of the noble Radziwiłł family, whereas in the



studied at Biržai Gymnasium and started his career as a basketball coach in Biržai. Žydrūnas Savickas, the strongest man in the world, also born in Biržai, started lifting the first weights and picking up the first victories in his hometown. The winner of the Olympic silver (Beijing 2008) Austra Skujytė, competing in both the heptathlon and the decathlon, also grew up in Biržai. Arūnas Gelažninkas, known for successfully driving in the Dakar Rally, an unparalleled endurance event, overcame the first springboards at the Biržai motocross club “Agaras”. It would be great if you could find the time and grab the unique opportunity to play a game of outdoor tennis in Biržai – the first concrete tennis court in Lithuania was built in the Astravas manor owned by Count J. Tyszkiewicz around 1900. Unfortunately, this sport did not take root at that time, but in the interwar period, exemplary outdoor tennis courts were installed in the courtyard of the Biržai Castle. Let alone the victories of the Biržai gliders and the battles on the Tatami won by the fighters of an increasingly popular judo sports?..

The  
basketball  
coach Vladas  
Garastas.





# In the clearing of the birch grove lies my Biržai town

(V. Dagys, the poet from Biržai)

*Eagle: This is the place I have been searching for... endless forests, with not a single human being in sight! No better place to build a nest...*



Forests were thriving here many years ago. The birch trees kept swaying from the winds and stretching in search of more sunlight. It is said that people made a clearing in the birch forest and settled in these places, giving their home a name. The origin of the name Biržai remains unclear. It can only be assumed that the name Biržai is derived from the word “biržė”, which means the area of forest to be felled or cut down, or from the word “beržų miškai“, the (birch forests) that were flourishing here. In the documents up to the 18th century, the name of the town was written

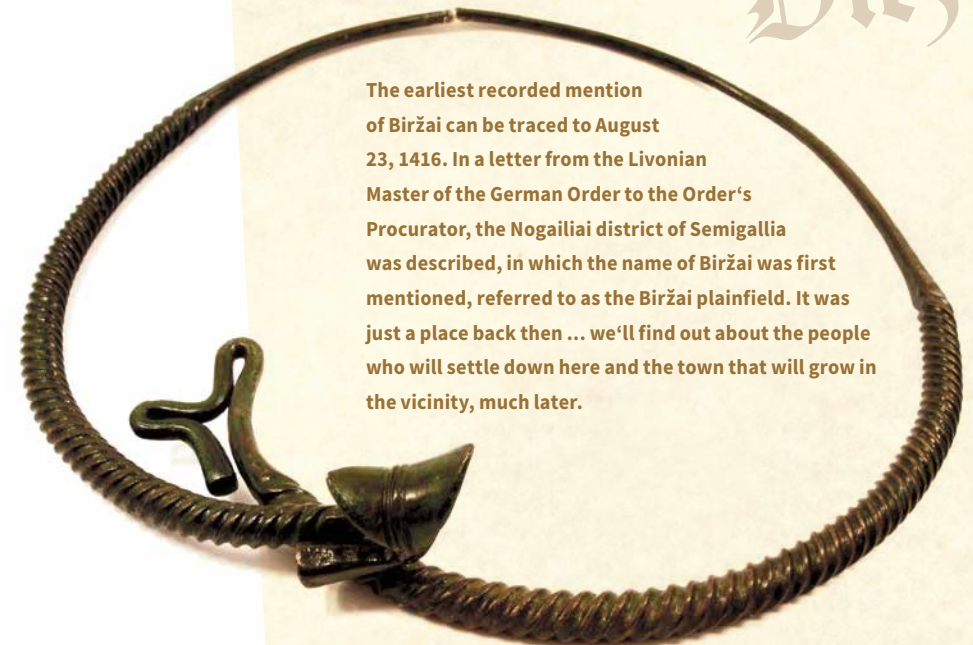


as “Birze”, in the times of tsarist Russia “Birži”, in 1915 it was re-named as “Biržai” and has been called Biržai ever since.

The Biržai land used to be inhabited by the two tribes of Balts – the Semigallians (to the North) and the Selians (to the South), which existed in the 6th-13th centuries. The residential area of the tribes included the present lands of northern Lithuania and southeastern Latvia. It was in the lands of Biržai that the boundaries of the Selian and Semigallian tribes crossed, and at different times they were pushed to one side or the other.

# Biržė

The earliest recorded mention of Biržai can be traced to August 23, 1416. In a letter from the Livonian Master of the German Order to the Order's Procurator, the Nogailiai district of Semigallia was described, in which the name of Biržai was first mentioned, referred to as the Biržai plainfield. It was just a place back then ... we'll find out about the people who will settle down here and the town that will grow in the vicinity, much later.



# The Radziwiłł dynasty as the Biržai rulers



Telling the history of Biržai is almost the same as telling the story of the Radziwiłł family. They ruled Biržai for so long that most of the town's history is akin to the history of the Biržai-Dubingiai branch of the Radziwiłł.

It was here that the Dukes founded the Duchy of Biržai, built a defensive castle, defined the rules and a conceptual layout to guide the future growth of the town, established a house of prayer, invited people of different nationalities and faiths to settle here and made the establishment of schools a priority. The documents also record how their predecessor Radziwiłł Ostik (Lith. Radvila Astikaitis) had put a lot of effort into inhabiting this region.

A letter of donation, written on April 14, 1455 by King of Lithuania-Poland Kazimieras Jogailaitis to Radziwiłł Ostik, Voivode of Trakai and Castelian of Vilnius, states that, at Radziwiłł Ostik's request, six individuals from Rokvėnai were to be resettled in the land of Biržai purchased by him near the German border. Mikołaj Radziwiłł the Old (Mikalojus Radvila Senasis), the son of Radziwiłł Ostik, adopted his father's first name as the last name, which was to be used in the future by the representatives of this branch, further expanded the lands of Biržai.



"Radviliana" – the cycle of the portraits of the Radziwiłłs family by Juozas Galkus.

The Biržai-Dubingiai branch of the Radziwiłł family line is believed to have been started by Jerzy Radziwiłł (Lith. Jurgis Radvila (~1480–1541), the Castelian of Vilnius and Grand Hetman of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Contemporaries highlighted his military accomplishments during the battles waged with the Muscovites, Prussians and Tatars. As a member of the influential Radziwiłł family, Jerzy worked hard both to consolidate the state and secure the predominance of his family among Lithuanian noble houses. He reared three offspring: a son Mikołaj Radziwiłł "The Red" (Lith. Mikalojus Radvila Rudasis) and two daughters – Anna Elżbieta (Ona) and Barbara Radziwiłł (Barbora). It was his children who started a new period in the history of the Biržai-Dubingiai Radziwiłł family. Mikołaj Radziwiłł "The Red" (~1515–1548) and the youngest daughter Barbara (~1522–1551), the wife of the King of Poland and the Grand Duke of Lithuania Sigismund II Augustus, occupy a special place in the history of the family. Barbara's marriage provided the Radziwiłłs a unique opportunity to establish their influence in the state.

Mikołaj Radziwiłł "the Red" became the first Duke of the Biržai-Dubingiai branch, but did not live in Biržai. At that time, Biržai was still far from the main Vilnius-Riga road, and the only wooden castle in the Duchy of Biržai was in Papilys.





*Eagle: Can I possibly find a better place for a bird of my caliber? Doesn't seem likely... Just wonder whose coat of arms am I being featured in?..*

Duke Mikołaj Radziwiłł "The Red" (Lith. Mikalojus Radvila Rudasis) stood out among the other well-off nobles for his long age, having lived to the age of 70! He lived quite healthily compared to other nobles: due to his high position he moved a lot, traveling around and en-

joying hunting in his free time. One could say that he pursued a healthy eating style, although it would be more accurate to say that he enjoyed eating in moderation, which apparently explains a lean figure throughout his lifetime ... He loved game (especially moose meat) and fish (especially salmon). His character was also quite praiseworthy: although the Duke had quite a short temper and was quick to anger, he was as quick to forgive, willing to reach a compromise and had a subtle sense of humor.

## Radziwiłłow

Thanks to Duke Krzysztof Mikołaj Radziwiłł "The Thunderbolt", (Lith. Kristupas Radvila Perkūnas) (1547–1603), Biržai became the center of the Duchy, with a bastion fortress built here to protect the northern border of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (as well as the Biržai Duchy). On March 9, 1589, the ruler of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth Sigismund III Vasa (Lith. Zigmantas Vaza) granted Biržai a privilege bestowing Magdeburg rights (self-government).

It's most unfortunate that in the 16th century, during the GDL wars with the Swedes, the town of Biržai burnt to the ground. The

Swedes also blew up the walls of the castle built by Krzysztof Mikołaj "The Thunderbolt". The grandson of Krzysztof Mikołaj "The Thunderbolt", Krzysztof Radziwiłł (Lith. Kristupas II Radvila) (1585–1640), led the GDL army in the wars with Sweden and fought with the Russians near Smolensk. He resided in Biržai, probably the longest of all the Radziwiłłs. In 1637, he initiated a massive redevelopment of the fortress. It was not only the restoration of the castle, but also its major reconstruction.



*Eagle: Why do they say that falling into the mud is OK, but staying in it isn't? A mere half an hour of a mud bath in Likėnai will suffice to regain your strength and bring back "a wide array of colours on your feather coat", as if you were a roller bird. Feels so good!*

Anna Kiszka. (Lith. Ona Kiškaitė), the wife of Krzysztof Radziwiłł II, was very fond of visiting Likėnai steam baths while visiting Biržai. They not only helped her improve her health – the water of the Smardonė spring is said to have helped the Duchess to maintain her beauty and youth. Even later, people did not forget the miraculous effects of spring water on health.

In Likėnai, located near Biržai, the water of the Smardonė

spring has been used for treatment purposes since the 16th century. At the beginning of the 19th century, the healing powers of the spring were researched by Theodor von Grotthus. The people of Biržai wanted a health resort to operate in Likėnai, thus this issue was constantly raised until in 1937. construction of resort buildings was launched, and a year later the sanatorium began its operations. At that time, it was written in the press that whenever individuals come to Likėnai on crutches, after having taken 10-15 mud baths, they leave fit as a fiddle. At the moment, you can take a walk in the park in Likėnai, test your endurance by swimming in the icy Smardonė stream and taste the magical water that has treated people for centuries.





Janusz Radziwiłł (Lith. Jonušas Radvila) (1612–1655), the son of Krzysztof Radziwiłł II, was born in the village of Papiliai and lived in Biržai Castle for some time as a child. He was one of the most prominent personalities of his era, an outstanding politician and a soldier, not lagging behind his predecessors, also holding the highest position in the state.

In 1655, Janusz Radziwiłł signed a treaty with Sweden with his supporters, nobles and boyars in Kėdainiai. This treaty terminated the union with Poland, concluding the union with Sweden. Lithuanian nobles were cherishing hopes that Sweden would better defend their interests and provide support in the war with Russia. By the way, according to the Treaty of Kėdainiai, a Swedish garrison made entry to the Biržai Fortress, which was the only peaceful entry in the history of Biržai. Due to this Treaty, Janusz Radziwiłł received controversial assessments, but the deal with the Swedes saved the country from the Russian invasion at that particular time.

Bogusław Radziwiłł (Lith. Boguslav Radvila) (1620–1669), was the last male descendant of the Biržai-Dubingiai branch. Janusz Radziwiłł's cousin, he became the guardian of Janusz's only daughter Anna Maria Radziwiłł (Lith. Marija Ona Radvilaitė), and later her spouse. Anna Maria gave birth to a daughter, Ludwika Karolina Radziwiłł (Lith. Ludvika Karolina Radvilaitė) (1667–1695), who was married to Philip, Duke of Palatinate-Neuburg, bringing her husband the estates of Biržai-Dubingiai Radziwiłł as her dowry. At the beginning of the 18th century, the Radziwiłłs of the Nesvizh branch succeeded in regaining the estates of the Duchy of Biržai. However, they continued to write the history of the Radziwiłłs of Nesvizh-Olyka. Even though the name of the Radziwiłł ceases to exist in the history of the daughter of Ludwika Karolina, the last Duchess of Biržai-Dubingiai, many noble families of Europe can boast the blue blood of the Radziwiłł of the Biržai-Dubingiai Dukes.



**Eagle:** *You can chop off my toenails of my right claw if this strange thing is not a nut... and they even claim that it has a heavenly taste...*

Would you love to taste an agar nut from Lake Kilučiai? Agar, or a floating water nut, is believed to have once been growing in the lake and producing rich harvest of fruit. It ultimately became one

of the legends of Biržai, as no one had either seen or tasted it for a long time.

The legend has left its mark on the history of Biržai. Even now, the company "Agaras" is operating here, in the past the residents and guests were most welcome to visit the restaurant "Agaro žiedas" (Agar in blossom), although nobody really knows what agar in full blossom looks like. Agar is even more mysterious than the blooming fern flower with all its



magic: someone allegedly saw it, someone allegedly ate it, yet another person is said to have talked to it, the fourth is believed to have chased it, the fifth to have shot at it, the sixth is rumoured to have been jailed for it ... The legend goes that whenever noble guests came to visit Dukes Radziwiłł or stopped to spend the night, the Dukes immediately gave orders to their servants to treat the guests to the best beer and several pounds of agar nut! And the servants would run to Lake Kilučiai at full gallop and

dive into its depths to find agar. Who knows now whether they were truly fishing nuts from the lake? After all, not a single guest could have seen or relished agar, so how on earth could they have known what the host was about to serve them ... So what is that agar?

Floating agar or water nut, *Trapa natans* (Latin), a species of plants of agar genus - this is how Carl Nilsson Linnæus first described it. The upper part of the plant has four thicker stems,

and the fruit is adorned with four tiny horns. Blooms in June-July. Grows in non-calcareous, warm and muddy lakes. Agar gives one a feeling of fullness. In the 19th century, it grew naturally in Kilučiai and Vepriai lakes and was artificially cultivated in Širvėna lake near Biržai. Today, agar is believed to be completely extinct in our country.



## The Duchy of Biržai

As a possession of the Radziwiłłs, Biržai was already mentioned in the 15th century. The Radziwiłł dynasty worked hard to expand the domain, which had been passed down from generation to generation, by acquiring more land. In 1547, Mikołaj Radziwiłł, nicknamed "The Red", (Lith. Mikalojus Radvila Rudasis) was awarded the title of Duke by Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire in Augsburg, which was confirmed by Sigismund Augustus in 1549, whereupon the Biržai estate became a duchy.

The territorial expansion of the Biržai estate began with Jerzy Radziwiłł (Lith. Jurgis Radvila), son of Radziwiłł the Old (Lith. Radvila Senasis), when he started buying land from the Upytė boyars. At the beginning of the 16th century, the land of Biržai already had about 503 boyar farmsteads (Lith. dūmas).

Mikołaj Radziwiłł "The Red" was the first to settle Tatars (in Niutanai, Lotkov and Aspariškiai) and Germans in Biržai lands. During the battles led by Krzysztof Radziwiłł "The Thunderbolt", a separate Tartar-Cossack flag of the Duchy of Biržai would be raised during the battles. In the 16th century, empty lands were donated by the Duke to boyars for their military service.

Upon the death of Krzysztof Radziwiłł "The Thunderbolt", the lands of the Radziwiłł family in Northern Lithuania – Biržai, Nemunėlis Radviliškis, Papilys, Astravas, Salamiestis, Ageniškis, Parovėja, Naradava and Saločiai – were inherited by his son Krzysztof Radziwiłł II (Lith. Kristupas Radvila II). This was the exact composition of the Duchy of Biržai, which remained unchanged until the second half of the 17th century. According to the Duke himself, Biržai "was a good and useful estate".



*Eagle: How vast are the lands of my Majesty the Duke, and how beautiful they are from a bird's eye view – the whole Duchy seems to be resting on the palm of your hand ... Just wonder how could anybody be that smart as to draw it on a piece of parchment without rising to the sky?..*

The Radziwiłł dukes not only expanded the estates, but also wanted to know and see how much and what belonged to them. Thus, in 1645, Janusz Radziwiłł commissioned the cartographer Juozas Narūna-vičius-Naronskis, who worked

in the dukes' manors, to draw a map of the Duchy of Biržai. The 740x590 mm map is turned at an angle of 120 degrees, so we see Samogitia in the north, and Curonia and Žiemgala in the south and east. On the map you can see exactly all

the townships of the Duchy, even their layout. J. Narūna-vičius-Naronskis was not only the geometer of the Radziwiłł manor, but also the auditor, so he had the opportunity to use the material of the manor inventory for the map. He reduced the drawings of the individual areas in size while keeping the proportions the same and showed them on the map. He did not have the opportunity to rise into the air and capture the image from above, so he used other means, measuring with a rope and triangulation. That notwithstanding, he succeeded in transferring the image on the parchment very precisely and in detail. Above all, one can marvel at the talent of the artist – what a beautiful font and how impressive map illustrations!

Krzysztof Radziwiłł II focused on creating the administrative structure of the Duchy of Biržai, which had already been formed.

In 1640, after the death of Krzysztof Radziwiłł II, the Duchy of Biržai was inherited by his son Janusz Radziwiłł (Lith. Jonušas Radvila). He allocated a lot of land to the Tatars in return for their military service to protect the Biržai Castle. The Tatars served in the cavalry under the flag of the Duchy of Biržai or in hussar regiments.

The Germans, boyars and townspeople of Curonia and Livonia moved not only to the town of Biržai itself. They also settled in

other places of the Duchy of Biržai.

The Duchy of Biržai was the only larger integrated complex of Biržai-Dubingiai Radvila estates, equal in size to the lands of the most famous Polish and Lithuanian nobles of that time.

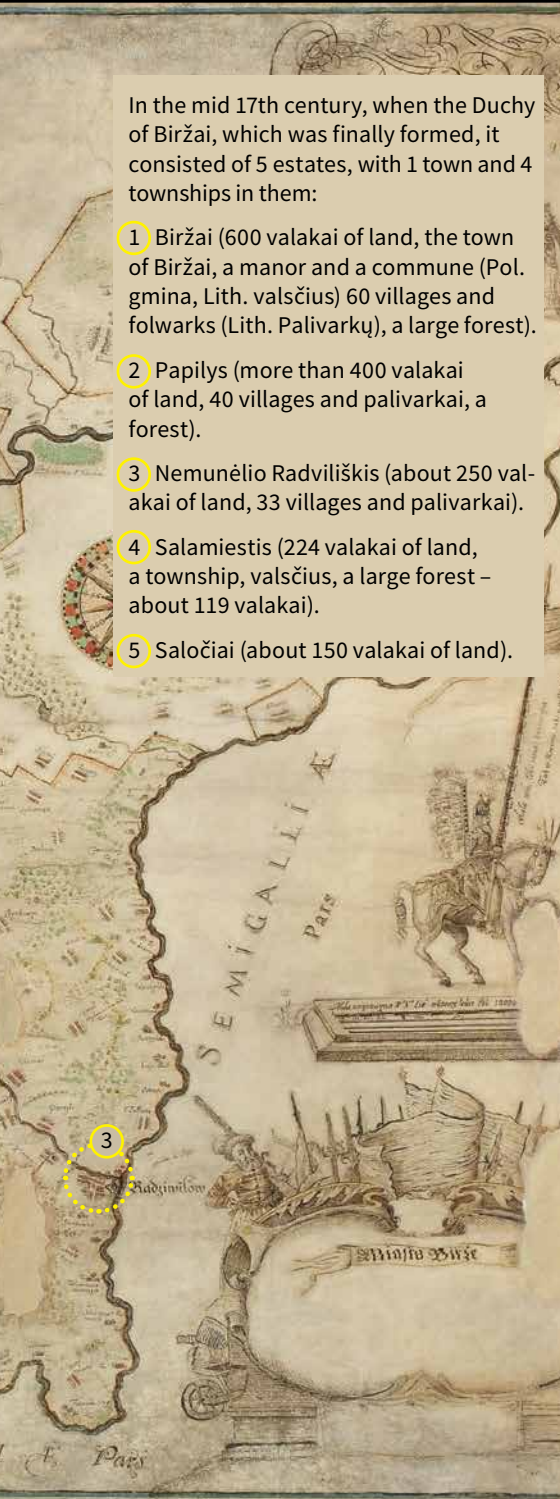
Brick and iron smelting furnaces were built in the Duchy for the construction of the fortress, a large glass manufactory operated in the Biržai forest, a gunpowder production workshop (mill) was installed to meet the needs of the castle defense. Furthermore, the Dukes of Biržai were entertained by the zoo operating in the vicinity. It also produced meat to the luxury table of the Dukes.





In the mid 17th century, when the Duchy of Biržai, which was finally formed, it consisted of 5 estates, with 1 town and 4 townships in them:

- 1 Biržai (600 valakai of land, the town of Biržai, a manor and a commune (Pol. gmina, Lith. valsčius) 60 villages and folwarks (Lith. Palivarkų), a large forest).
- 2 Papilys (more than 400 valakai of land, 40 villages and palivarkai, a forest).
- 3 Nemunėlio Radviliškis (about 250 valakai of land, 33 villages and palivarkai).
- 4 Salamiestis (224 valakai of land, a township, valsčius, a large forest – about 119 valakai).
- 5 Saločiai (about 150 valakai of land).



## Let us count what made up the Duchy of Biržai

### Biržai estate as the center of the Duchy

The Biržai estate was the strategic, religious and representative center of the Duchy of Biržai, uniting other estates around it. The inhabited territory of the Duchy of Biržai covered an area of approximately 36 thousand ha, excluding part of forest massifs, water bodies and empty land.

In the 17th c., 8 workshops were functioning in Biržai: those of merchants; tailors; shoemakers; locksmiths and blacksmiths; a joint workshop of brewers, bakers, homebrew makers and animal slaughterers; carpenters' workshop; a joint workshop of bricklayers, carpenters, wheelwrights; weavers and spinners.

The fortress had an arsenal (Germ.czekhaus, Lat. armamentarium); its staff consisted of local government officials (Lith.urėdninkai) and craftsmen. The former were responsible for the functioning of the arsenal and its inventory (officers, cannon shooters, gunpowder supervisor), the latter operated and repaired armaments and other ammunition (gunsmiths, gunpowder makers, smiths, blacksmiths (armourers), wheelwrights, carpenters, drummers).



# Biržai held on an equal footing with Vilnius, the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

The rights of Magdeburg, or the free town, awarded to Biržai in 1589, were due primarily to Krzysztof Radziwiłł “The Thunderbolt”, who completed the construction of the castle. This privilege gave the citizens the right to govern their own town. At the same time, the most important symbols of the city were approved: the coat of arms, the flag and the seal. The coat of arms is a black Radziwiłł eagle surrounded by a laurel wreath against the background of a white flag: “... for this town of Biržai and the Townsmen of that town for the present and future times, for all the eternity to come, we have bestowed the Coat of Arms with a black eagle against a white flag, granting that town of Biržai all the rights and freedoms as the most important cities of our Crown (Kingdom) and Vilnius, the city of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania have...”

The highest official of the town government, the *vaitas*, was appointed by the ruler of the country or the owner of the town, in the case of Biržai – the Radziwiłł family. Apart from the *vaitas*, the most important self-governing institutions were: the city council, called a magistrate, consisting of burgomasters (master of the town, Lith. *burmistras*) and councilors (Lith. *tarėjas*), and the court of lay judges (Lith. *suolininkų teismas*.) Actually, we have to be grateful to these judges for having convinced the ruler to grant the privilege of turning from the original road Vilnius – Riga, one of the most important routes in those days, and making a detour through Biržai, which meant that everyone traveling through Biržai had to contribute to the town budget.

A privilege was also granted to Biržai to hold the days of the town market and annual fairs: “... we decide on forever having a weekly regular market in that town of Biržai would be held on Sunday and the second on Thursday. And the annual fairs are to

be held twice: the first during the Feast of Rome according to the new calendar, that is, it should start during the Feast of John the Baptist, and should last for 14 days, and the second during the feast (February 2) ...”. The residents of Biržai were allowed to trade in markets and fairs without paying any duties and taxes.

The town of Biržai was inseparable from the castle, so the townspeople had certain obligations to the castle, the most important of which was military service. It was obligatory for the townspeople to defend the town hall, to have a cannon shooter in the town and supply him with gunpowder and projectiles, to participate in the fortification of the city, first of all by building and strengthening a rampart around the city, to defend the castle during war and fire, less often to guard the castle in peace times. The townspeople guarded the castle in the absence of the garrison in it. When the city was attacked by an enemy and there was no garrison to protect the castle, the townspeople were obliged to gather in the castle and defend the honor of the Radziwiłł. The town dwellers were also obliged to guard the town at night, to protect it from unexpected fires and unforeseen events as well as to participate in the construction and restoration of the castle. The obligation to fulfill military service was supervised by the magistrate. This duty had to be fulfilled not only by all the townspeople, but also by every man who resided in the town. During the rule of Janusz, Bogusław and Ludwika Karolina Radziwiłł, the townspeople had to provide themselves with handguns (muskets), bullets and gunpowder.



The oven tile with the initials of Krzysztof Radziwiłł “The Thunderbolt”.







# Secret archive of the town of Biržai

The old archives of Biržai, reminiscent of the Radziwiłł era, the granting of self-government to the town of Biržai, even the times past its heyday, after the town lost its self-government rights following the third division of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, were vigilantly guarded and passed down from generation to generation. During the times of the First Republic of Lithuania, Professor Jonas Yčas, a historian writing the history of Biržai, only by some miracle managed to take a glimpse at several documents of that archive and make sure that it had survived intact and was still in good hands. Jonas Yčas wrote: “I, the ordinary professor of Lithuanian history, Jonas Yčas (...) was in my mother-in-law M. Neumanienė’s apartment, located at the corner of Aptiekos square and Reformatai street: with the mediation of P. Klybas, the mayor of Biržai, I met there Henrikas Stefanavičius, a representative of Biržai townspeople, who said he had been a long-term custodian of that archive and belonged to a commission of eleven other elected members of the townspeople.” The professor returned the documents to the

custodians again and it was only in the last decades of the 20th century that they were handed over to museums for safekeeping. Currently, most of the archive is kept in the Lithuanian National Museum, the other part of the archives is stored in the stock of the Biržai Region Museum “Sėla“ (stamps and some documents are on display).



The first coat of arms of Biržai. 1589



The coat of arms of Biržai. 1792



The current coat of arms of Biržai.

*Eagle: After all, it's in this coat of arms that I look my best and feel my best. Although... something is amiss here, something seems to be truly missing...*



Together with the title of the dukes, the Radziwiłłs received the coat of arms of the family – a black eagle with a shield on its chest, and on the shield, the coat of arms of their predecessors Ostiks was portrayed: three rotating hunting horns. The Radziwiłł eagle also landed on the first coat of arms of Biržai – right on the fluttering white flag within a yellow shield enclosed by a laurel wreath, a symbol of fame, honor and victory. The coat of arms of Biržai was the only having a wreath in the whole Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

However, in 1792, the last ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania must have confused something – when bestowing the privilege of self-government on the town of Biržai, he confirmed the same coat of arms that had previously been approved by him for Kėdainiai, another town of the Radziwiłłs. The saddest thing about it is that the eagle, the main symbol of the Radziwiłł Duchy and the town of Biržai, was reduced to

merely one wing and one claw holding a horseshoe – the symbol of the noble Kiszka family (Lith. Kiška) (the wife of Krzysztof Radziwiłł II, the mother of Janusz Radziwiłł, was Anna Kiszka, Lith. Ona Kiškaitė).

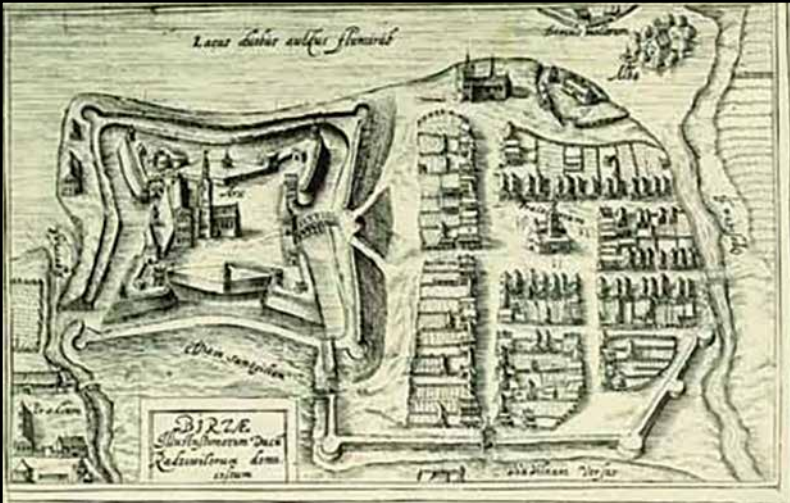
For some obscure reason, probably because it was the coat of arms approved by the last ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, this was the coat of arms that the Biržai people chose as the symbol of their town when Lithuania regained independence in 1918 after years of tsarist Russian occupation.

The Radziwiłł eagle was returned to the Biržai coat of arms of during the years of Soviet occupation, only the shield of the coat of arms this time was painted a bright red color of the USSR flag.

The coat of arms returned to Biržai in its genuine form only in 1996, when the Lithuanian Heraldry Commission approved the stylized version of the coat of arms created by the Biržai artist Egils Skuja. The current coat of arms of the town features the main details of the first authentic coat of arms of Biržai: a white flag on a yellow shield, a black eagle against the background of the flag, with the shield surrounded by a green wreath of laurel leaves. But something is still missing ...

The eagle is not as majestic, as if it were not the Radziwiłł eagle anymore ... It is quite disappointing that one important attribute is no longer visible on the eagle's chest – the symbol of the three hunting horns, which had also been the symbol of the Radziwiłł predecessors, the Ostiks (Lith. Astikai)...





Tomasz Makowski. The copper engraving from the 17th century.

**A fosa – a protective, defensive moat surrounding the territory of a castle or other defensive fortification.**

**A bastion is a defensive structure in the form of a pointed protrusion in the corner of the fortress wall.**

## Biržai castle

Biržai Castle is the residence of the Radziwiłł Dukes, the center of the Duchy of Biržai, built in the end of the 16th century for defensive purposes, repeatedly attacked and plundered by enemies, therefore it had to be rebuilt several times. Originally, it was built as a fortification of the Italian type (1575–1589), but in 1625, having suffered from the enemy attack, it was rebuilt for the second time (1637–1704) following the model of the Dutch fortifications. By that time, the construction of defensive castles had significantly advanced.

Currently, the Biržai Castle complex (13.36 ha) consists of a restored palace, a restored arsenal, three gunpowder magazines, the ruins of a gate building, a bridge and double defensive earthen ramparts with fosa. The Biržai Region Museum “Sėla” and the Biržai District Municipality Jurgis Bielinis Public Library (in one of the palace avant-corps (It. risalita)) are located in the buildings (in the palace and the arsenal) of the complex. Today, the buildings of the complex house the Biržai Region Museum “Sėla” and the Biržai District Municipality Jurgis Bielinis Public Library (in one of the palace avant-corps).

### The first castle

Duke Krzysztof Mikołaj Radziwiłł “The Thunderbolt” built a modern, the largest and strongest Italian-type bastion castle in Lithuania at that time for the protection of the Biržai lands and the northern border of Lithuania. Construction work began in 1575 with the installation of a dam at the confluence of the Apaščia and Agluona rivers. The base of the fortress consisted of four large bastions, which were surrounded by and connected with earthen ramparts and a moat. Each of the four bastions had a defensive tower. Six brick casemate buildings (fortified gun emplacement or armored structures) were designed to shoot at the attacking enemy. The main entrance was guarded by a gate building, on which a wooden bridge rested.

The pivotal building is the three-storey representative palace of Krzysztof Mikołaj Radziwiłł. In front of the palace stands the Evangelical Reformed Church, the arsenal and food warehouses, barracks and other buildings. The fortress and the city formed a single defensive complex.



***Eagle: I feel so desolate every time I fly over the glorious Biržai that I have to rest here, on the corner of the castle palace... It breaks my heart to see the walls of the mighty castle palace falling, but on this corner I feel safe. My resting place has been the same for so many years, it's indestructible.***

You might have heard the legend of the Biržai Castle, which is spread by word of mouth, from generation to generation and will be told as long as the castle stands in Biržai. It is said that when Radziwiłł ordered the

construction of a castle in Biržai, people dug deep and wide canals, built high and steep embankments, and built masonry with thick walls. Whenever construction was about to be completed, the same corner of the palace would collapse for no obvious reason. The corner was restored several times, but it would collapse again, as if a spell had been cast over it. Superstitious people were filled with dread just looking at it. Some said it was heavenly punishment for the fight between the Catholics and Evangelicals. How come brothers cannot find peace and unity when the enemies sharpen their swords around? The old people would sigh reprovably: in the old, when our parents were nurturing the old faith, the castles never collapsed on their own...

Totally exhausted, the castle builders decided to seek advice from a hermit who, in the old customs of his parents, still worshiped the Lithuanian

pagan God Thunder (Lith. Perkūnas). This is what the old man told the builders:

– You have defiled the old faith of your ancestors, you keep fighting over the new God, you are angry with each other. Can't you see? Lithuania is fading away, the castle under construction is even disintegrating on its own ... But since you want my advice, listen... Wait for the full moon, then stop the first couple of newlyweds returning from the church and bring them to the collapsing corner of the castle palace. Only the good will of genuinely happy individuals can save a crumbling castle like this...

This is exactly what happened ... they stopped a happy couple of newlyweds who had no time to rejoice in their happiness. The newlyweds were brought to the castle and told that only their benevolent sacrifice could save the crumbling palace. Upon hearing this, the young groom agreed to be immured within the corner of the castle palace for the sake of his homeland, and his young wife chose to share her husband's fate ... Wars and storms raged, the castle fell into ruin several times, and yet the corner of the palace – a symbol of love and loyalty to the homeland – stood intact, withstanding all hardships.



## The second castle

In the 17th century, The Grand Duke of Lithuania and King of Poland Sigismund III Vasa and later on his descendants would not renounce their claims to the Swedish throne. They dragged the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth into the war with Sweden, which lasted many decades (1600–1635 and 1655–1660). In 1625, the Biržai castle suffered extensive damage from the Swedish army.

In 1637, on the initiative of Duke Krzysztof Radziwiłł II, major reconstruction of the castle began. Following the death of Krzysztof Radziwiłł II, his son Janusz Radziwiłł continued the work. It was not only the restoration of the castle, but also its reconstruction, by changing the type of fortification – instead of the Italian, the Dutch model of fortification was used. The reconstruction design of the castle was prepared by an engineer,

military architect Gregor Pirk, to be continued by Teofil Crell-Spinowski. During the reconstruction of the castle, new double ramparts were formed, the gate building was only partially rebuilt in the yard, and a temporary arsenal was reconstructed from the old stables, whereas other buildings were built anew.

Janusz Radziwiłł invited the famous military architect A. Freitag to Biržai for the construction of the castle. The second castle was much larger, its design included four bastions, defensive curtain walls connecting those bastions and a ravelin, a triangular fortification or detached outwork, located in front of the innerworks of a fortress covering the bridge. The ramparts generally consisted of large earthworks, covered with turf, with a ditch in front of it. The buildings for defense purposes included an arsenal, stables, 4 barracks and barracks (there were 4 two-storey barracks, accommodating 500



The model of Biržai castle.  
The author is Valdas Rakutis.



soldiers), where the castle crew lived. In the center of the courtyard was a troop formation (or alarm) square, from which paths led to all the bastions, gates, and main buildings. The facade of the gate building was decorated with the coats of arms of the towns belonging to the Radziwills carved in the sandstone. The representative palace was a late Renaissance-Early Baroque building with two 3-storey “avant-corps” (lt. rizalita) and a 2-storey arcade.

In the autumn of 1655, after the union with Sweden initiated by Janusz Radziwiłł, a Swedish crew was brought to the Biržai fortress. In 1659, the castle was taken over by Duke Bogusław Radziwiłł, the cousin of Janusz Radziwiłł. Although living in Karaliaučiai, he took good care of the reconstruction of the Biržai Fortress, which due to the wars remained unfinished. In his will, Bogusław

Radziwiłł bequeathed all his property to his daughter Ludwika Karolina Radziwiłł (Liudvika Karolina Radvilaitė). In 1671, Ludwika Karolina renewed the construction of the fortress, the works lasted until 1682.

In 1701, during the Northern War (1700–1721), Peter I, Tsar of Russia. and Augustus II, Ruler of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, concluded a treaty against Sweden in Biržai Castle. In August of the same year, the Swedes occupied Biržai and it was only in 1703 that the castle and the town of Biržai were regained by Grzegorz Antoni Ogiński and the Russian soldiers.

In 1704, the army led by the Swedish general A. L. Levenhaupt, having outwitted the castle crew after a month-long siege, recaptured the fortress. When forced to retreat, the Swedes blew up the buildings of the fortress.

## Arsenal (Germ. czekhaus, zeughaus) – the Heart of the Castle

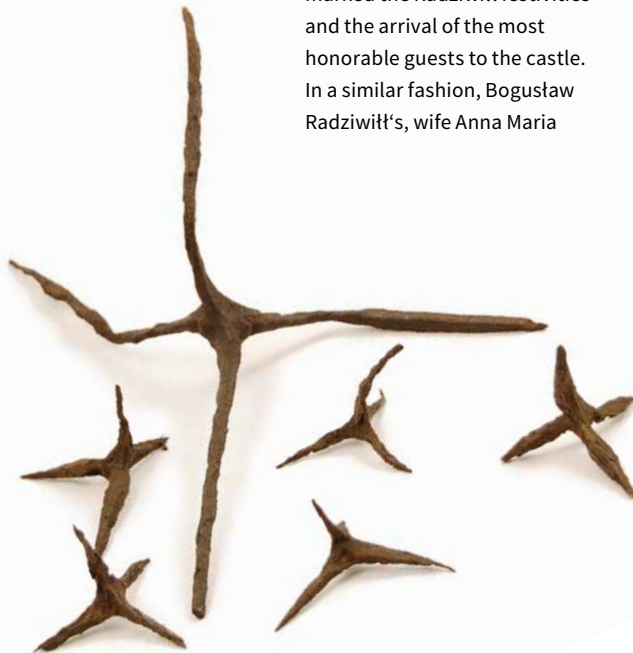


***Eagle:** As Casimirus Siemienowicz (Lith. Kazimieras Semenovičius), a great expert in the art of warfare, said in the middle of the 17th century, “Let better rockets serve temptress Venus than blood-thirsty Mars... Salve to his Majesty the Duke!”...*

The arsenal holds an exceptional place in the fortress. Furthermore, the fact that this particular fortress arsenal belonged to the Radziwiłłs, Dukes of Biržai, makes it even more exceptional – it was by no means inferior in prestige and value to

the royal arsenals. Thus, every esteemed guest was escorted by the Dukes not only to the palace and the church, but by all means to the arsenal as well. Judging by the abundance of cannons, the Biržai arsenal was even equal to that of the Kraków city. The cannons and weapons kept in the arsenal were of good quality, most of them were made in the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark. It is no secret that the Radziwiłłs were interested in military innovations and were the first in the GDL to use muskets.

It should be noted that the arsenal inventory was not used merely for warfare. The thunder of the castle cannons also marked the Radziwiłł festivities and the arrival of the most honorable guests to the castle. In a similar fashion, Bogusław Radziwiłł's, wife Anna Maria



(Ona Marija) was greeted upon entering Biržai. So was Peter the Great, Tsar of Russia, who arrived at Biržai Castle to sign a treaty with the ruler of our country August II, and was greeted amidst the thunder of cannons. Cannons were also fired in rendering a salute at funerals of the most distinguished officers for their merits. It is regrettable that the impressive cannons, decorated with the coats of arms of the Radziwiłł Dukes, left the Biržai Castle as war trophies. One of them is proudly

displayed today at the Swedish Army Museum in Stockholm, the other is exhibited at the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw, and how many more of them are still resting at the bottom of the Baltic Sea?..





# There is only one God, but there can be multiple ways to know Him

Even as far back as the 16th century, Biržai was a multinational and multicultural city where Karaites, Jews, Germans, Latvians and Tatars mingled together. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that in the town of Biržai and in the whole Duchy, each ethnic group prayed in its own house of worship. The spirit of religious diversity and tolerance for each other was prevailing in the town. From a religious perspective, Biržai is still one of the most colorful towns in Lithuania. Although there are no more Jewish, Karaite or Tatar religious communities in the town and district of Biržai, even today there are as many as eight Christian religious denominations in the district, and as many as five houses of worship for different denomina-

tions in Biržai. Religious tolerance is the legacy of the Radziwiłłs, Dukes of Biržai. Although they instilled the Evangelical Reformed faith in their lands (by building churches and establishing schools next to them), they also realized that the more diverse the society, the greater its potential contribution to the economic growth of the Duchy and the town. The Radziwiłłs also understood the importance of providing the opportunity for the representatives of each ethnic group to realize their best potential. Religious tolerance was inseparable from ethnic tolerance.



## Catholic Church

Currently, the largest religious community in Biržai is that of Catholics. The first church was built at the start of the 16th century. However, the activities of the Catholic parish depended on Dukes Radziwiłł who, after converting to the Protestant faith, liquidated the parish (late 16th century) and demolished the church. For more than a hundred years, the dominant religion in Biržai was Calvinism. Duchess Ludwika Karolina Radziwiłł, who for the second time married the catholic husband, the Duke of Neuburg, and consequently started embracing Catholicism in the Duchy of Biržai, in 1692 committing funds for the construction of Catholic Church. True, the church was wooden, without a sacristy. A few decades later, two more Catholic churches were built in the Duchy – in Salamiestis and Nemunėlis Radviliškis. In the late 18th – mid 19th century, the wooden St. Jerome's Church in Biržai was replaced by St. Ann's church, also wooden. When the latter church started crumbling, concerns were raised about the construction of a new church. After the foundation of Count Jan Tyszkiewicz, a new brick church was erected in Biržai, designed by architect Tomas Tiškeckis. In 1879, it was consecrated with the title of St. John the Baptist. Although the dominant religion in the Duchy of Biržai during the reign of Dukes Radziwiłł was that of the Evangelical Reformers, Counter-Reformation also exerted its authority, and today



Catholics have their houses of worship in all centers of the former Duchy of Biržai (Biržai, Nemunėlis Radviliškis, Papilys, Salamiestis, Saločiai).

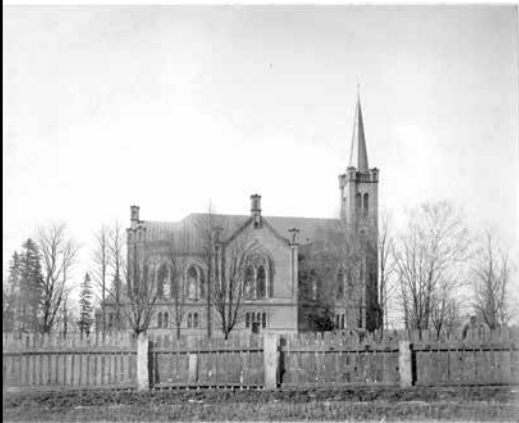
## Evangelical Reformed Church

In the 16th century, Dukes Radziwiłł brought Calvinism to the land of Biržai (currently the religious confession of the Evangelical Reformers), one of the branches of the Reformation. Dukes Radziwiłł, the disseminators of the Evangelical confession, were preoccupied not only with the construction of churches in the Duchy of Biržai, building churches in Biržai, Nemunėlis Radviliškis, Papilis and Salamiestis, but also with the establishment of parish schools. The parish of

Biržai, established by Mikołaj Radziwiłł “The Red”, was the largest in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and has remained the largest parish of Evangelical Reformers to this day. The Biržai-Dubingiai branch of the Radziwiłł Dukes remained faithful to the Evangelical Reformed faith until the end of its existence.

The only place in the former estates of the Duchy of Biržai where the Reformation did not take root was Saločiai, a territorially separate estate of the Duchy, in which there is no Evangelical Reformed Church today. And although the Counter-Reformation movement significantly changed the religious map of Lithuania, Evangelical Reformed communities and houses of worship have survived in Biržai, Nemunėlis Radviliškis, Papilis and Salamiestis to this day.

The Evangelical Reformed Church, which had repeatedly suffered damage in Biržai, was rebuilt several times. In the 19th century, Count Tyszkiewicz donated 2,000 rubles for the construction of a new church, commissioning a competent architect Heinrich Schell to design it. The church was consecrated in 1874.



## Evangelical Lutheran Church

Having emerged in the 16th century, the Reformation movement did not bypass the Duchy of Lithuania and the Duchy of Biržai. Martin Luther's idea that salvation does not depend on the sacraments or performance of rites, but on the sincerity of the human religious belief, found its followers. Among the greatest patrons of the Reformation

movement were the Biržai-Dubingiai branch of the Radziwiłł Dukes, and although they chose the Calvinist branch of the Reformation, other Reformation movements were also tolerated by them. Thus, the Evangelical Lutheran community in Biržai consisted of newcomers – Latvians and Germans. About mid 17th century, Evangelical Lutheran Parish in Biržai was one of the largest in Lithuania.

The last Lutheran church was built in the 19th century in the city center, near the market square (currently Dagilio St., the square near J. Janonis Square), during World War II, as the front was retreating through Biržai, the church was severely damaged by war and fire, and in Soviet times it was demolished. The Evangelical Lutheran community was granted shelter for prayer in the Biržai Evangelical Reformed Church, and after Lithuania regained its independence, the community established its house of worship on Kilučių Street.





## Orthodox and Old Believers in Biržai region

The Orthodox parish in Biržai was founded in 1864, and a year later St. Church of Nicholas was built. Count Tyszkiewicz allocated a plot of land and money for its construction. The Orthodox Parish in Biržai was among the smallest in Lithuania. Today, the city no longer has an Orthodox community, and the former church building is used by another religious group.

Another church was built in Lebešiškiai village, the dwellers of which, after the uprising of 1863, were deported to Siberia and in which the tsarist government settled Russian families instead. At present, only a few individuals belong to the Orthodox

community in Lebešiškiai, and rites are very rare in the church.

In the village of Kvedariškis, right on the border with Rokiškis district, a community of Old Believers has survived. Its predecessors settled here in the second half of the 17th century or early 18th century, when, during the church reform in Russia, confessors of the old faith were forced to renounce it and were persecuted. Eventually they fled to the outskirts of the country or deep into Europe. In the village of Kvedariškis, the community of the Old Believers has significantly declined in number. The house of worship still stands here, but the rites no longer take place in it and there is no local clergyman leading the church.

The Orthodox Church of St. Martyr Nicander in Lebešiškiai.



The Orthodox Church.

## Methodist Church

Methodists consider the Bible to be the most important source of faith. The first Lithuanian Methodist community in Biržai was founded by priest O. Kaufman in 1923. It did not have its own permanent house of worship. The activities which had ceased during World War II were resumed only in 1997. The Methodists settled in Stoties Street.

## Pentecostal Church

The Pentecostal fellowship in Biržai was established in the end of the 19th century. Pentecostalism is an evangelical faith recognizing adult baptism and emphasising direct personal experience of God through baptism with the Holy Spirit. It also proclaims salvation for all those who believe in the Gospel. Since its inception, the community had changed its name and the location of the house of worship several times, until in 1989 the Pentecostals were handed over by Biržai City Municipality a redundant Orthodox Church in 12 Kęstučio str. For many years, the church was led by its founder Petras Viederis.

## Seventh-day-Adventist community

The individuals professing this Christian faith, like the Jews, regard Saturday the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath day, rejecting several doctrines that other Christians uphold – the immortality of the soul and the eternal suffering of sinners in hell. A group of Seventh-day-Adventists gathered in Biržai in 1935, but it was scarce and even ceased to exist. Today, believers gather for prayer in either the Methodist Church or the priest's homestead.

## Oriental ethnoses: Jews and Tatars

The Jewish community in the Duchy of Biržai was established at the end of the 16th century, during the reign of Duke Krzysztof Mikołaj Radziwiłł “The Thunderbolt” (Kristupas Radvila Perkūnas). In the 17th century it grew in numbers. In the 17th c., Krzysztof II Radziwiłł took the initiative to settle the Jews of the town in one place and allowed them to build a synagogue. Prior to World War II, Biržai had the Great Brick Synagogue, two wooden Kloyzn, one for shoemakers, and the other for the Shammash (synagogue beadles) and a wooden Chabad Hasid Synagogue, which was later rebuilt into a large brick synagogue. On August 8, 1941, the town of Biržai lost its Jewish community, which was annihilated by the Nazis, and the surviving house of worship was deprived of the privilege to exercise its direct functions.

There is scanty information about the religious life of the Tatars in the Duchy of Biržai. It is believed that the mosque, or rather a private room for prayer, may have been built in the 16th–17th centuries in Panemunė folwark (Lith. palivarkas). In the past, a small Muslim burial place was situated near the house of prayer. The Tartars in the Duchy of Biržai lived communally in six settlements. There were no mosques in the neighboring estates. The religious tolerance of the Radziwills and a open-minded treatment of the Islamic ethnic minority by the Christian denominations did not prevent the latter from having a place to profess their faith. Today, only the names of place names (Aspariškiai, Totorkalnis) remind us of the former Tatar community.

Biržai Great Wooden Synagogue (beit midraš) and the Great Brick Synagogue in Karaimų Street. 1926.



*Eagle: For whatever reason, it does not feel good any longer to land on the other side of the lake, I like it much more to rest here, gives me pleasure...*

As time passed by, the fortress was gradually falling into decay and ruin. One dynasty which ruled Biržai was replaced by another: in 1811, Biržai, which had been under the ownership of the Radziwills, passed into the hands of Counts Tyszkiewicz. They are said to have paid 450,000 silver rubles for Biržai. The Tyszkiewicz family established its residence on the other side of Širvėna lake – in Astravas manor.



## Counts Tyszkiewicz acquire Biržai

In the 19th c., Counts Tyszkiewicz became the richest landowners in Lithuania. Their land holdings included Palanga, Kretinga, Užutrakis, Lentvaris, Raudondvaris near Kaunas and other lands. As a family sign, the Tyszkiewicz used the so-called Leliwa coat of arms (Lith. Leliva) – a yellow crescent and a six-pointed star over a yellow crescent moon on a blue shield.

The Tyszkiewicz acquired the Biržai land holdings at the beginning of the 19th century. Official documents state that the Biržai estates were bought by Colonel Michał Tyszkiewicz (Lith. Mykolas Tiškevičius) (1761–1839) from the Radziwills. He is considered to be the first official owner of the Biržai estate, although it is believed that Biržai land holding could have been bought for



One of the Astravas manor buildings.





the money of Jozef Ignace Tyszkiewicz (Lith. Juozapas Ignotas Tiškevičius) (1724–1815), one of the richest people in Lithuania at that time. Apparently, due to his respectable old age, the elderly Count no longer wanted to manage the property documents in his own name, passing over the ownership title to his son and his wife Joanna. Jozef Ignace Tyszkiewicz is considered to be the pioneer of the Biržai Tyszkiewicz branch.

During the Napoleon's invasion of Russia 1812, Michał Tyszkiewicz supported Napoleon. Using his own funds, he began formation of the 17th uhlán regiment consisting of Lithuanians. in Biržai, in the hope of reestablishing the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Upon his death, Biržai were inherited by his youngest son Jonas, who is considered to be the most colourful personality, having left the biggest mark in the history of Biržai.

Jan Tyszkiewicz Jonas (Lith. Tiškevičius) (1802–1862) was a well-educated nobleman, speaking Russian, French and German, well versed in geometry, mathematics and history. Being just 18, he was elected a candidate for the Masonic lodge. It was J. Tyszkiewicz who took all the trouble of securing the approval from the Tsar of Russia to legalise Biržai as an entail in 1862. An entail (Fr. majorat) meant an indivisible family estate, which was inherited as an integral unit by the most senior member of the family. J. Tyszkiewicz not only perfectly maintained and nurtured the Biržai estate, but also built the current Biržai Catholic Church and the Astravas manor house at his own expense.

Jan Tyszkiewicz was also famous for being a dandy. The Count had his attire made in St. Petersburg or London, or and purchased clothes in Vilnius, Riga and St. Petersburg. He



had a lot of Parisian gloves, hats, hats, sticks, loved to wear kerchiefs, ties, scarves. He even had tiny silver comb to comb his moustache.

Upon the tragic death of Jan Tyszkiewicz in the second half of the 19th century, the Astavas manor was inherited by his brother Józef's eldest son Michał Tyszkiewicz (Lith. Mykolas Tiškevičius) (1828–1897). Michał Tyszkiewicz was a tall (almost 2 m in height), imposing aristocrat who married Duchess Maria Radziwiłł (Marija Radvilaitė). M. Tyszkiewicz became famous in Europe as a collector of antiquities and an amateur Egyptologist. He took an interest in archeology early on: not yet 30, he was already an Honorary member of the St. Petersburg Society of Imperial Archeology. In 1861 he traveled to Egypt, where he carried out archaeological excavations. The Count added Egyptian antiquities to his collection of antiquities, which he bought or received as gifts. When M. Tyszkiewicz returned from

Egypt, he was approached by the Louvre Museum in Paris, interested in his collection. Count Tyszkiewicz donated a part of his valuable collection to the Louvre.

After starting an affair with a cabaret dancer Juliette Beaux in Paris, he divorced his wife Maria. As the years went by, he seemed to care less and less about his manor in Biržai. Receiving a large income from the Biržai entail, M. Tyszkiewicz lived his life freely and became increasingly involved in collecting antiques. He had acquired antique rarities.

Michał Tyszkiewicz died in 1897 in Rome. His collection of antiques was sold at an auction in Paris, and individual masterpieces were split between different locations, mostly European and American museums. Prior to his death, he bequeathed the entail to his son Joseph (1850–1905).

*Eagle: And what might our Honorable Count have written here? He seems to have slept at his desk in the library... wait, could it be in Polish? How can a simple eagle read it?*

The pioneer of Lithuanian museology, a scientist, archaeologist, collector, founder of the Museum of Antiquities, Count Eustachy Tyszkiewicz (Lith. Eustachijus Tiškevičius)

(1814–1873) lived for several years in Astravas manor, where he wrote the first monograph on the history of Biržai region “Biržai: An aperçu of the history of the city, its castle, and majorat” (“Biržai. A glimpse into the past of the town, the castle and the majorat”). The book was published in Polish in 1869 in St. Petersburg. It took many years for the book to be translated into Lithuanian. Finally, in 1998, the Lithuanian version, translated by Algimantas Baublys, the then director of the Biržai Region Museum “Sėla“, was



released. The book presents the history of Biržai, gives a detailed description of the library in Biržai Astravas manor, rich manuscripts, archeological and ethnographic collections.

Józef Tyszkiewicz (Lith. Juozas Tiškevičius) inherited the Biržai entail when he was only 22. The burden was much too heavy for his shoulders, so he relinquished the estate in favor of his younger brother Jan Leon Tyszkiewicz (Lith. Jonas Leonas). Thus, in 1880, Count Jan Leon Tyszkiewicz (1851–1901) became the fourth owner of the Biržai entail. His mother Maria Radziwiłł-Tyszkiewicz (Lith. Marija Radvilaitė-Tiškevičienė) did her best to find the right bride for her son. In 1878, Jan Tyszkiewicz and Klementyna Potocka were already seated in a horse-drawn coach, on their way to

Lviv Cathedral (now Ukraine) to be wed. After the marriage, the spouses lived in Paris in great luxury for several years. After Jan Leon took over the Biržai estate, the spouses moved their residence to Vilnius.

At that time, Biržai entail consisted of 43 small folwarks (Lith. palivarkas), their rent brought the largest income. However, due to the crisis J. L. Tyszkiewicz's income fell significantly, leaving him indebted to the state.

Looking for new ways to make money, in 1899 the Count started to build a large match factory on the bank of the Nemunėlis, in the village of Šleideriškis. It is said that after Russian engineers declared the buildings unfit to be used for production, Jan Leon Tyszkiewicz

became grief-stricken, fell ill and passed away in 1901. His wife Clementina remarried a Frenchman and settled in Paris. The Biržai entail was inherited by Alfred Tyszkiewicz (Lith. Alfredas Tiškevičius) (1882–1930), the only son of the Counts. He was the fifth and last owner of Biržai entail from the lineage of Counts Tiškevičiai.

Alfred Tyszkiewicz was born in Astravas manor, could speak some Lithuanian, but spoke only its dialect. At the beginning of the 20th century, he worked at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Embassy in London. In 1919, authorized by the Lithuanian government, he went to Rome to negotiate with the Pope on Lithuanian-Vatican relations. In 1920, A. Tyszkiewicz was appointed Lithuania's diplomatic representative in London. "He was one of our most talented diplomats," wrote Martynas Yčas, a member of the Lithuanian government.

In 1922, the Law on Land Reform was adopted, pursuant to which the manors of A. Tyszkiewicz were expropriated by the state. He was left with only the manor of Astravas and about 165 hectares of land. The impoverished Count sold his real estate and moved to Paris. He died in 1930 in France.

**The first telephones in the Biržai environs were introduced in 1898–1899. The first telephone line connected Count Jan Leon Tyszkiewicz's Astravas manor and the village of Mūrmuiža in Latvia.**



## Astravas manor

Astravas is part of the town of Biržai, located on the other side of Lake Širvėna, from which a beautiful view of Biržai opens in front of you. Count Jan Leon Tyszkiewicz chose Astravas as his permanent residence. In 1841–1842, he started to build a brick manor house there, which has survived to this day. It is one of the most beautiful residences of the Romantic period in Lithuania.

On the peninsula situated on the northern shore of Lake Širvėna, a landscaped park of a mixed design, overgrown with various trees and shrubs, was planned. A pond

system was installed in the park, with swans gliding majestically over the water. In the homestead of Astravas there was a stable with a manege, made of red bricks and broken stone. At the entrance to the palace there still stands a small guard's hut, otherwise known as a dog handler's hut, and an arch bridge over the canal is built next to it. The territory of the manor was surrounded by a fence, there were observation towers in the corners, and two gates, wide across the bridge, and smaller, leading to the farm- and buildings (Lith. kumetynas) and manor barns.





The representative palace in 1840 was designed by Tomas Tiškeckis, construction was supervised by Cezare Lorenzo Anichini. Materials for the construction of the palace were brought from St. Petersburg and Riga.

In addition to the park and the palace, Astravas boasts an original architectural engineering structure, a dam-bridge, built in 1860, considered one of the most beautiful technical, cultural and historical monuments in Lithuania.



***Eagle:** It should be scary for an ill-intentioned person to walk through these doors when they are guarded by such sentries...*

In the 19th century Russia, it was considered fashionable to decorate the facades of the palace with lion statues symbolizing power and might. J. Tyszkiewicz tried to follow suit by ordering cast iron statues of lions in

St. Petersburg. Documents have survived showing that for the transportation of lions by sledge from St. Petersburg to Biržai in 185, the Count paid the carrier 79 rubles. and 10 copecks and 3 rubles of bonuses. The authentic lions are currently guarding the gate to the Kaunas Vytautas the Great War Museum (donated by Count Jan Jerzy Tyszkiewicz (Lith. Jonas Jurgis Tiškevičius) in 1938), and the facade of the Astrava Palace is decorated with their decorative copies.



The interior of the Astravas Palace was famous for its works of fine and applied art. Regrettably, scanty information about them has survived. Art treasures (such as the painting of the Crucifixion of Jesus by Peter Paul Rubens) have spread from the Astravas manor around the world and are now housed in famous museums and private collections.





## Biržai in the 19th–beginning of the 20th cent.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the press was painting the following picture of the town: “Biržai is a relatively small town – summer here is the most dust-ridden season, and in autumn you are literally stuck in unwadable mud. And yet the town is adorned with impressive masonry buildings. In the 19th century, Catholic, Evangelical Reformed, Evangelical Lutheran brick churches, an Orthodox church and Astravas Palace were erected in the town of Biržai. The town is also embellished with many other handsome buildings, notably the industrialist T. Janson’s palace, the houses of pharmacist A. Marcinkevičius and merchant A. Paslaveckis and a brick hospital. Most of the houses, however, are wooden. The bridges across the Apaščia and Agluona are also wooden”. In 1907, the newspaper “Nedėldienio skaitymai” wrote that the main streets were paved with stone, and in one of the main streets – Dirvonas (now Vytautas) – “there were outdoor lighting fixtures built in rows in the middle”.

Behind the Agluona River, after crossing the bridge, the Tiškevičiai Avenue, as dusty as all Biržai, ran from the town to its outskirts. The street was built-in only at the beginning: on one side stands the Orthodox Church and on both sides are the buildings of Biržai Manor. In the place of the current buildings of “Aušra” School and “Saulė” Gymnasium, fields of crops were swaying, and in the direction of Parovėja, the town boundary marker was a mill standing behind the bridge over the Apaščia.

In the town, life was concentrated around the Market Square (Turgaus aikštė), the Church Square (Bažnyčios aikštė) and the Pharmacy Square (Aptiekos aikštė). All the squares were close to each other: Market Square, is currently J. Janonis Square, Church Square was next to St. John the Baptist Church, and Pharmacy Square is currently Bielinio Street, next to the so-called White Pharmacy).



**The White Pharmacy is the oldest building in Biržai, and only the surviving authentic walls of the Biržai Castle could compete with it. The Radziwill town hall stood in close proximity.**

The house of the pharmacist Apolinaras Marcinkevičius, built in 1913.



**Eagle:** *What kind of marketplace is this? And where do so many people come from? The place is so loud, you can hear people chattering here in Lithuanian, over there in Latvian...*

The biggest commotion in Biržai was during the fairs, when the people came to the town from the surrounding environs. And horse-driven carts aplenty! ... Most wore home-made clothes, factory made clothing was a rarity. However, in the Market Square one could find scarves, galoshes, hats, medicines, fabrics and other goods to one’s liking. More accurately, some were looking for a goose, the others

for a pig, and all the above-mentioned fancy goods could be found in A. Marcinkevičius house of (now 5 Vytauto str), where Ch.Ginzburg’s stores of Curonian drapery and fashion clothing and medicine stores welcomed you, and the stores operating in B. Paslaveckis’ house of (now 7 J. Janonis sq.) offered the residents of Biržai and the newcomers a wide range of haberdashery.





The house of Teodoras Jansonas, built in 1903.

In 1908, a four-grade school was established in the house of the industrialist Teodoras Jansonas (currently 23 Vytauto str.), which later evolved into a gymnasium. Both boys and girls studied there. The tuition fee was small, the instruction was in Russian. Foreign language learning was to be paid for separately. Povilas Jakubėnas, a Lithuanian Calvinist clergyman, general superintendent of the Lithuanian branch of the Reformed Church and an active public figure, started teaching in Lithuanian without receiving any remuneration.

During the Lithuanian press ban (1864–1904), Lithuanian books were distributed by many enlightened people of the country, the most famous of whom was Jurgis Bielinis, called the father of book smugglers (Lith. knygnešys).

In 1912, a printing house was established in Biržai, which employed 10–15 people. With the advent of the printed word, it was no longer necessary for a man to walk with a drum and break the news to the townspeople aloud.

## Biržai during the period of the first Republic of Lithuania

In 1918, Biržai town-dwellers, who had been exposed to cultural deprivation for quite some time, founded the art society “Mūza“, the aim of which was to educate their members and those around them by organizing literary evenings and acting. Plans were made to start a choir, organize lectures and engage in many other cultural activities. Kostas Kregždė, a teacher at Astravas Primary School, became the first director of the “Mūza“ Theater.

A few years later, the well-known director Borisas Dauguvietis took over staging performances at the “Mūza“ and training would-be actors, until he was invited to work at the Kaunas State Theater.



Dalia and Beatrisa – the characters of P. Vaičiūnas' drama “Nuodėmingas angelas”. On the left is V. Kulbytė who played Dalia. 1930

The opening group of Biržai Art Society Theatre “Mūza”, 1921.





*Eagle: Is it really worth wearing such knick-knackery, me being a self-respecting eagle?..*

The “Mūza” Society flourished when Borisas Dauguvietis (1885–1949) arrived in Biržai – an extraordinary personality, a hearty and boisterous character, witty and ingenious, a person of high stature, wearing an earring in the left ear. He grew up in Biržai region, near the Nemunėlis river. Not all actors could put up with his hot temper, but the performances were a great success. In the years to come, B. Dauguvietis would gain fame for his immortal comedy “Žaldokynė”, in which the tradition of brewing, typical of the people of Biržai, is revived, and the reality of the Soviet regime is cautiously ridiculed. Žaldokas, the main character of the play, had his own prototype – Jurgis Žaldokas, who worked

as a forester and taught B. Dauguvietis how to brew a beer.

Brewing traditions in Biržai date back to the time of Dukes Radziwill. In 1704, the Swedes marching towards Biržai knew that when they knocked on the door of the locals, they had better know how to say in the local language: “Hello, do you have a beer?” – and would be given a hearty welcome. In the 19th century, the Radziwill brewery was taken over by Counts Tyszkiewicz, to be reacquired at a later time by the last manager of Astravas manor Petras Variakojis.

In 1922, a section of the narrow-gauge railway from Pasvalys to Biržai was built. This project was largely possible thanks to the efforts of Martynas Yčas, born and raised in the district of Biržai. He served as the

Minister of Trade and Industry, as well as the Minister of Transport. The train was called “kukuška” (cuckoo), which gave the Biržai dwellers a lot of joy, but at the same time it caused worry. The carriages were cold in winter and filled with smoke coming from the wood burning stove. The trip was slow and long, jokes were even made that any elderly woman preferred to ride a bicycle, loaded with cans full of milk, because she did not have time to enjoy the ride on the “kukuška”.

Today, Biržai railway station remembers not only the joyful chatter of the “kukuška” passengers but also the pain and emotional distress of the Biržai deportees, forcibly expelled from the Homeland and transported to a bleak and inhospitable terrain of Siberia



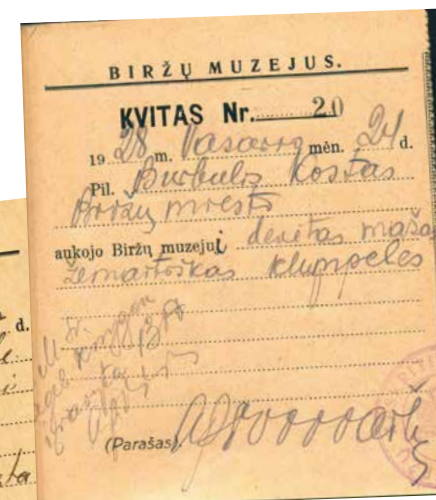
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At the same time, in 1922, the first private power station owned by AB “Agluona” started operating.

In 1924, after competing with Pasvalys, Biržai became the district center. The town

grew, new houses and public buildings were built. Reinforced concrete bridges were built across the Apaščia and Agluona rivers, and many city streets were paved.

On February 16, 1928, Biržai intellectuals and broad-minded individuals joyfully welcomed the Decade of Independence: with the support of the Biržai county governor Vladas Rozmanas, a museum was opened in Biržai.







There was no solemn space in Biržai to commemorate state and national holidays, so on September 13, 1931, the monument to those who died for the independence of Lithuania was unveiled and consecrated (author Robertas Antinis). The place chosen for the monument was quite reputable – the Church Square (currently Independence Square), with its facade overlooking Vytauto Street. In 1946, the monument was blown up and buried in the very place it had been standing on. In the years of national revival, in 1988, the ruins of the monument were excavated, but it was impossible to restore the monument from them, so the sculptor's son Robertas Antinis Jr. cast a copy of the monument. The Biržai dwellers gently call the monument Birutė, but not everyone has accepted it as a worthy replacement, so the ruins of the original sculpture are also exhibited nearby.



In 1928, the Riflemen's (Lith. šauliai) Theater opened in Biržai, with a number of performances staged, thus contributing to the cultural life of the Biržai residents, and the "Odeon" Cinema was opened.

In 1930, the flax-tow yarn spinning factory "Siūlas" started operating in Astravas, in the former stables of the manor. In the summer of 1939, the factory was employing 300 workers. Linen is still being processed, UAB "Siūlas" is one of the companies representing Biržai.

The castle site, called the Radziwiłł mound, was a popular place during the interwar period – firefighters organized festivities here, people played tennis, a summer theater was staging performances, dances were held, apple trees were blossoming and impressive rose trees were stretching toward the sun.

On June 28, 1931, a monument to Duke Janusz Radziwiłł was unveiled in front of the ruins of the Biržai Castle Palace. The monumental sculpture was made by the sculptor Juozas Zikaras. Many distinguished guests attended the unveiling of the monument, Minister of Education Konstantinas Šakenis, prof. Jonas Yčas, Martynas Yčas among them. Taking part in the ceremony were also 4 exemplary units of the First Hussar Regiment, named after Grand Hetman of Lithuania Janusz Radziwiłł, with the Regiment Commander Colonel Pranas Jackevičius.



*Eagle: And how does the press cover the glorious town of the Radziwitts today? .. Vow, it looks like changes are about to come to Biržai.*

Extract from the weekly “Biržai žinios”, February 26, 1928: “The town of Biržai is steadily pursuing its “modernization”. Sidewalks are diligently scraped

from ice and snow. Regrettably, snow and ice are removed in a peculiar way. Sidewalks are watered with salt solution, as it should be. Only that salt solution is usually not mixed by street cleaners themselves – herring brine is used instead. I have seen several heads of herring spilled on the street with together with brine. As a result, the streets turn wet and smelly. If the sidewalks are watered while the snow is melting, they should be swept and cleaned. For whatever reason, this is not done here.”



The improving economic situation meant that Biržai did not lag behind other cities, commissioning the most famous architects of that time to create artwork for them. Not only modern public buildings have emerged in the town, but its residents also started chasing fashion, building their own houses.

As you walk around today's Biržai, you will easily recognize the buildings of modern architecture of that time (you can find out more in the booklet “Interwar Biržai on the way to Modernity”; Lith. “Modernėjantys tarpukario Biržai”).

Biržai Gymnasium was one of the most modern and expensive Lithuanian gymnasium schools of that time. It was designed by Vytautas Landsbergis-Žem-



Biržai Gymnasium, built in 1931. Designed by Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis.

kalnis (1893–1993). Construction took place in 1930–1931. Among the students of Biržai Gymnasium were the following: Vladas Garastas, Jonas Mekas, Vytautas Brėdikis, Bernardas Brazdžionis, Alma Karosaitė, Antanas Kučas, Kazimieras Vasiliauskas, and many others who left their mark in literature, art, sports and religious life.

Walking around Biržai, you can see more modern buildings: Biržai Town Hall (10 Rotušės str.), the construction of which started in 1923, municipal administration building (38 Vytauto st.), built in 1931.

In the summer of 1944, as the World War II front was retreating, only the ruins of Biržai remained, more than half of the city was destroyed and burned.



New Biržai County Board House.





The restaurant. 1972.

## Biržai in Soviet times

In the aftermath of World War II, the town had to be rebuilt. Three collective farms – “Tarybinis artojas” (“The Soviet Ploughman”), “Raudonoji vėliava” (“The Red Flag”) and “Pabiržė” – circa 1954 were preparing for future construction by opening a new brickyard. Asphalt was poured and spread on the streets of Biržai, apartment buildings were being erected in the town center, new factories and institutions were being built.

In 1954, a public catering establishment was built on the corner of Vytauto – J. Janonio streets: there was a dining room on the ground floor and a restaurant on the first floor. This building Biržai is still being called a restaurant.

Today, there is a supermarket between the restaurant and the former house of industrialist T. Janson, but around the year 1964, the cinema “Širvėna” was built there. It was here that the main hall of the town was located. It

The cinema “Širvėna”.



was used not only for film viewing – dances, concerts and other events were held here.

During the Soviet era, in the currently central part of the town, multi-storey apartment buildings were built. In a fully equipped square, as the locals say, in front of the Church of St. John the Baptist, a water fountain was running just for one day, and a plaque of honor dedicated to the forerunners of socialist work was placed.

In 1976, the architect Vytautas Brėdikis and sculptor Konstantinas Bogdanas, both coming from Biržai, put the monument dedicated to the poet J. Janonis, who had attended the Biržai four-grade school established in the same T. Janson's house, on a high pedestal. Restoration of the Biržai Castle was launched. The first parts to be restored were the gunpowder house, the bridge, to be followed by the palace itself, where in 1988. Jurgis Bielinis Library was established, and in 1989, the relocated Biržai Region Museum “Sėla” opened its doors.



*Eagle: We have shown you what Biržai looked like in the past, and what they look like today, how the town grew and was beautified during the 30 years of the independent Republic of Lithuania, you can see with your own eyes. And who knows what it will be like in 50 years, who knows? Feel free to take a brush and draw a picture of today's Biržai, or maybe the Biržai in 50 years'time?..*



This book is based on the articles and monographs  
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BIRŽŲ KRAŠTO  
MUZIEJUS „SĖLA“



BIRŽŲ  
MIESTO  
SAVIVALDYBĖ



LIETUVOS  
KULTŪROS  
TARYBA

