

The History and Fate of the Berlin Collection. Study of Old Prints from the Secured Collections of the University Library in Toruń

Historical library collections still conceal many undiscovered secrets. This project aims to fill a significant gap in research on the wartime and postwar fates of secured book collections, which have become a crucial foundation for the revival of Polish academic and educational institutions after World War II. One such institution is the University Library in Toruń, whose holdings have been assembled since 1945 primarily on the basis of commonly referred to as secured collections—materials salvaged and preserved by generations of librarians and now forming part of Europe’s valuable cultural heritage. The routes by which these collections reached Toruń are diverse and only partially known. Some were secured directly by local librarians in the regions of Pomerania and Warmia; others were brought from different repositories through exchanges or purchases. Among the least studied provenances in the University Library is the so-called Berlin Collection, consisting mainly of volumes from the former Prussian State Library in Berlin (commonly referred to as “Berlinka”), as well as from other Berlin-based institutions.

During World War II, these collections were evacuated to more than 17 locations across present-day Poland. Parts of the Berlin holdings preserved in other Polish libraries—particularly the Jagiellonian Library and the University of Łódź Library—have already been well documented from a bibliological perspective. During the war, Berlin-origin holdings were also relocated and deposited in parts of Pomerania, including Parsowo. From there, they were transferred to the Regional Repository of Secured Collections in Toruń. The share of the Berlin Collection now held at the University Library in Toruń (NCU Library) has so far remained outside the scope of scholarly interest and has not been described in academic literature. Existing knowledge remains incomplete and often inaccurate. Preliminary investigations have shown that the acquisition paths of individual volumes were not always straightforward—some items arrived through donations, purchases, or exchanges.

The research team’s academic objective is to determine what portion of the collection came through Parsowo and whether this was the only relocation site, as well as what part was transferred via other repositories. Equally important is assessing the cultural and historical value of the surviving items and conducting thorough provenance research. The project’s primary academic goal is to carry out detailed source and archival research in Poland and Germany to establish the origin, history, and postwar fate of the Berlin Collection of early printed books now in NCU Library’s holdings. Secondly, the project objective is to conduct detailed provenance studies to determine the scholarly value of the collection and to support future research into the intellectual environment of pre-war Prussia and Pomerania. At present, academic knowledge about the Berlin Collection in Toruń is limited to vague data on old musical prints, with estimates ranging from 29 to about 100 items. However, the selection conducted for this project identified 621 volumes of Berlin provenance located in the Early Printed Books and Music Collections Departments of NCU Library. These were published in European printing houses from 1511 to the end of the 18th century and represent a valuable research resource for historians and bibliologists alike. For decades, librarians have exercised caution in disclosing particularly valuable post-German collections. A common assumption that only less important Berlin materials ended up in Pomerania calls for critical re-evaluation. An interdisciplinary team of historians, bibliologists, musicologists, and archivists has been established to undertake this work.

The most valuable items will undergo in-depth binding and codicological analysis, with results published as case studies in both Polish and international academic journals. The project's concrete outcomes will include: a completed manuscript of a scholarly monograph presenting the history and fate of the Berlin Collection; analyses of historical provenances and bookbinding studies; a complete catalogue of all 621 items including a provenance index. The results will also be incorporated into bibliographic records in the NCU Library catalogue (Primo), as only a few volumes from the collection have been catalogued to date. Identified provenance marks will be made publicly available, including via the ProvenienzWiki database. Research data will be published in RepOD. Dissemination and popularization of the findings will be further supported by two digital exhibitions on NCU Library Digital Exhibition Platform and Google Arts & Culture, ensuring broad public access and engagement.