

HISTORY OF THE PILGRIMAGE CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION ON VIRGIN MARY IN NERATOV



The front of the Neratov church in 1972. By then there still was a rococo staircase from the year 1776 which is currently placed in a park of mansion Skalka near Dobruška.

*How I love Thy Temple,
Lord Almighty!
How I want to be there!
I long to be in the Lord's Temple.
With my whole being
I ring for joy to the living God.
Even the sparrows have built a nest,
and the swallows have
their own home,
they keep their young
near Thy altars, Lord Almighty,
my king and my God!*

Psalm 84: 1-4

- **The Hamlet of Neratov, a First Wooden Church and Its Enlargement**

First written mention concerning hamlet of Neratov, in later records called Bärnwald, dates to 1550. The hamlet was founded at the frontier of Rokytnice estate which was a property of lords of Ryzmburk. First settlers in the hamlet were glassmakers of German origin. They built a small wooden church which was situated perhaps in the place of today's cemetery chapel. Existence of that church was confirmed by record in ancient land register of Rokytnice dated in 1590 which unfortunately has not been preserved.

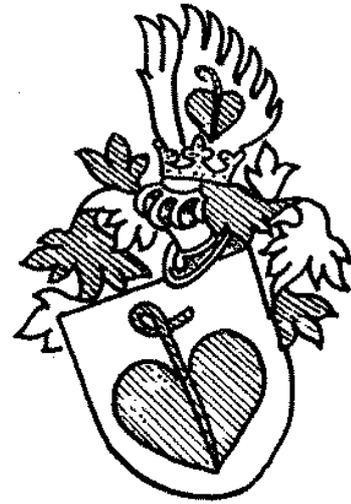
In early 17th century the church was enlarged and turned to a protestant chapel in connection with change of denomination of the owner of Rokytnice estate. Kryštof Mauschwitz of Armenruh donated to the church beautiful renaissance font, made of stone and decorated with four emblems of his parents and grandparents. The high quality design of those emblems is very similar to those of chart of heraldic bearings of the same nobleman which is nowadays placed in mansion church of Holy Trinity in Rokytnice. This font has been later moved to a newly constructed church and preserved, while the information about the other donation made by Kryštof Mauschwitz remain unclear. The subject of above mentioned donation was a big bell (6 cents - 336 kg weight) with inscriptions, relief of Calvaria and emblem of donor dated in 1603. This date shows not only the year in which the bell was made and first reconstruction of the church ended, but it also indicates that the chapel must have had a tower or belfry, where the bell could have been hung.

Kryštof Mauschwitz was killed by rebelling peasants on 27 September 1616 in Rokytnice. It seems that this murder was caused by religious contentions. As the land owners changed (Zieglers of Klipphausen and since 1627 Nostitzs), the recatholization gradually began. In that process of violent unification of people under one denomination took part even the Franciscans and the Jesuits from Klodzsko, with well ment intentions but often using inadequate and very cruel methods. This process however continued very slowly thanks to a nearness of Silesia where the freedom of Augsburg confession was granted (by Prague peace in 1635 and Altranstädt treaty in 1707). In 1636 Ota of Nostitz brought about the renewal of parish in Rokytnice and affiliated Catholic Church in Neratov was incorporated into a new parochial district.

- **A Birth of a Place of Pilgrimage**

The legend of the place of pilgrimage was founded in the 1760's. According to report written 80 years later, Christof Florian Blasius Drick, the vicar of Rokytnice, inspired by his dream, ordered the statue of Holy Virgin Mary to be carved and had it brought with a great pomp to Neratov on 16 August 1661. Many recoveries were attributed to a help of the statue as well as to a

healing power of a spring, and groups of pilgrims began to visit Neratov where small spa were founded.



*The blazon of
Mauschwitz von Armenruh
(a green water-lily leaf on a silver
field).*

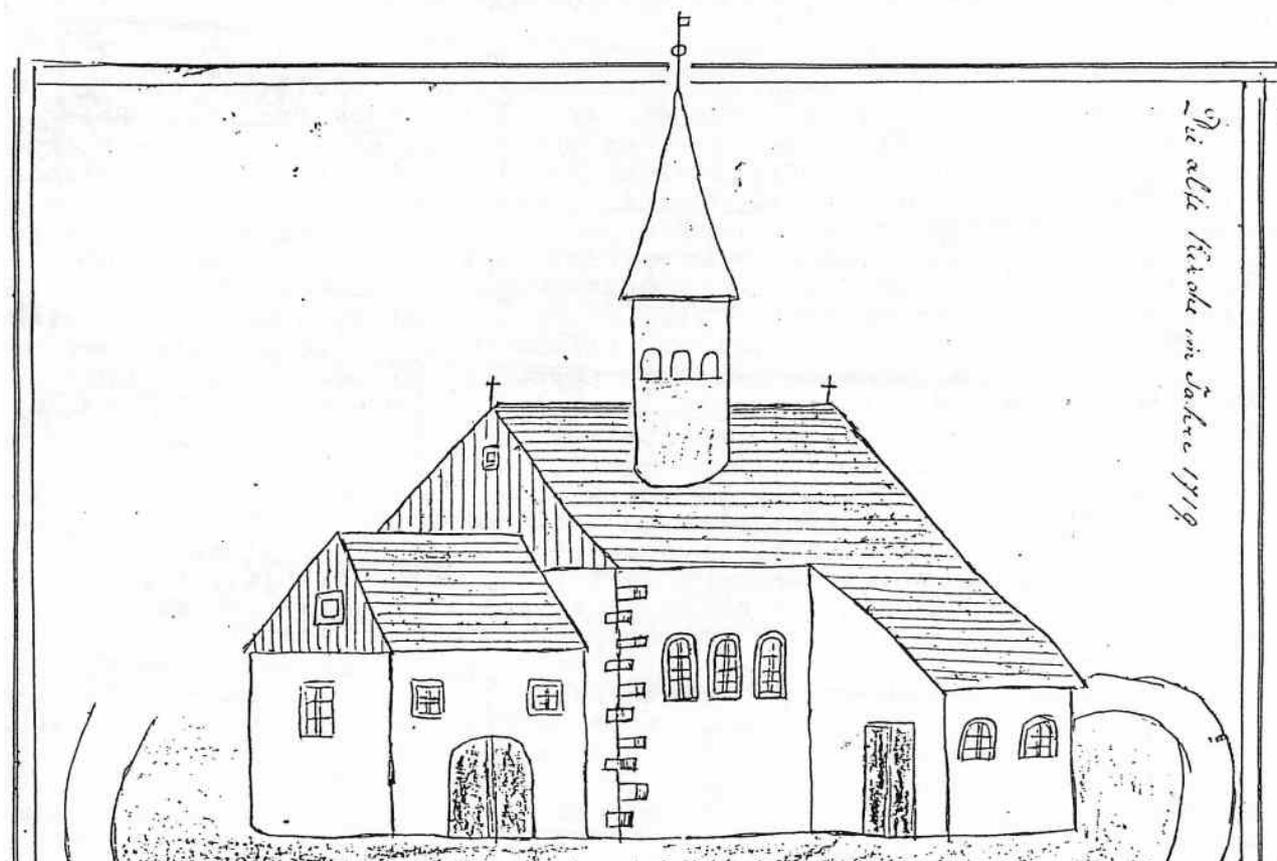
The stone font from 1603, a donation from Kryštof Mauschwitz von Armenruh to the Neratov church. The font itself was later supplemented with a rustic stand (shown on this picture from the year 1950) and wooden cover, neither of which has been preserved.

Urgent need "to behold God through this world", to experience encounter with Him; that festival so distinct from ordinary life; a real miracle which apparently and with clarity intervenes into an everyday material reality; that mystical and spiritual, naturalistic and substantial baroque sanctity, so ambivalent for people today; immeasurable yet perfectly joint together, participated on birth of this place of pilgrimage.

- **New Stone Church on Cemetery**

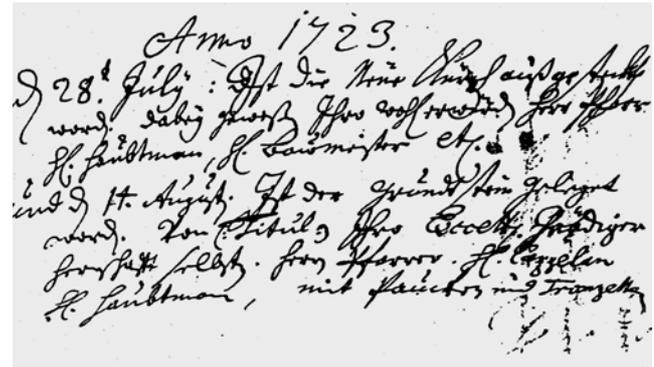
No wonder that some years later a wide reconstruction and extension of pilgrim church had to be undertaken. In 1667 - 1668 new stone church was build in the place of original small wooden one and its construction was financed by neighbouring villages in Klodzsko district. From that church only the presbyteries has been preserved, which is today a cemetery chapel. The nave of

that church used to reach to rococo cross built in the place of main entrance. The main altar was decorated with painting of the Ascension and with the holy statue of Virgin Mary placed below it.



Naive but unique picture of an old stone church comes from a chronicle written by Eduard Alliger Heimatkunde der Bezirkshauptmannschaft Senftenberg (SOkA Rychnov nad Kněžnou, file Neratov). It seems that author made his drawing dated to 1719 after some older picture which is not known to us but he mentions it in his chronicle.

"Liber consignationis" from the beginning of 18th century records approximately 300 - 400 miracles, recoveries or help on intercession of Virgin Mary per year. In the same time 50 - 80 scapular medals would be sold and 3000 - 4000 people, often including the landowner, his family and nobility from neighbouring area would attend the main pilgrimage on 15 August. It seems that already at the beginning of 18th century the new church did not meet the requirements of still increasing number of pilgrims and construction of much larger temple was considered. Unfortunately there is no specific information about this construction. The only preserved document is an entry in accounting records dated in 1706, concerning payment of suggested budget for construction of new church. But the architectonic proposal, its author and possible realization will probably never be clarified. Very expensive renovation of furnishings in old church was carried out in 1720, but commencement of construction of a new one had to be postponed due to lack of finances and perhaps also death of sponsor Kryštof Václav of Nostitz in 1712.



A short report on beginning of construction 28 July and placement of a foundation stone on 14 August 1723. (SOA Zámorsk, file Vs Rokytnice, box 12).

The blazon used by Nostitzs of Rokytnice.

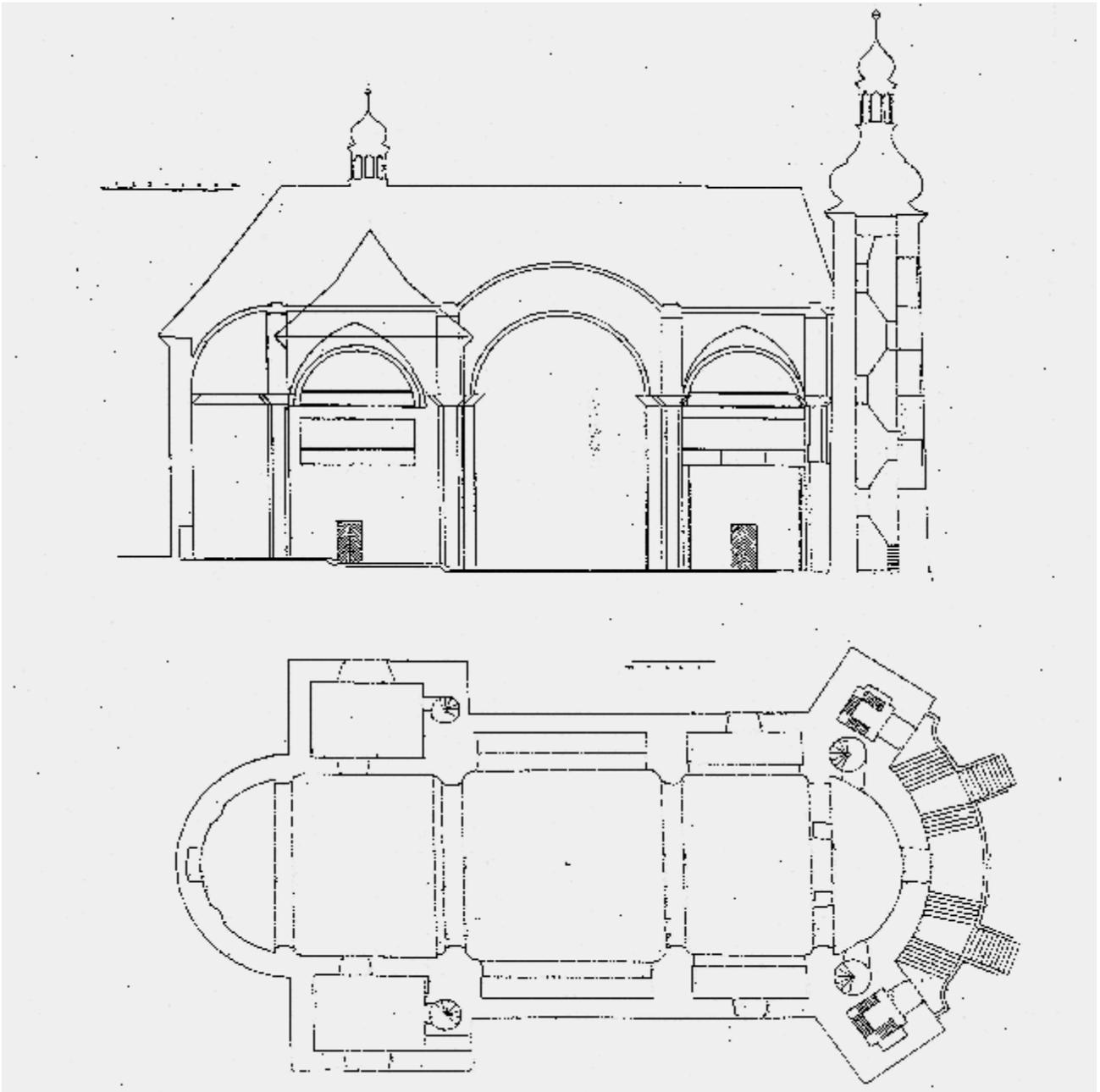
- **The Construction of the Baroque Church, its Architects and Constructors**

The foundation stone of a new baroque church, in whose ruins you stand right now, was laid by the count Johann Karl Nostitz - Rhienek, the owner of Rokytnice estate, on 14 August 1723, the evening preceding the festival of the Ascension of Virgin Mary. Among notables present at this event, were custodian of the estate, vicar and curate of Rokytnice and also Carl Antoni Reina, the constructor of the church. This man had come originally from Italy, settled in Rokytnice area, got married there and kept close relations with the landowner. He constructed the church of St. John of Nepomuk in Vrchní Orlice and participated on reconstruction of Rokytnice Mansion. Towards the end of his life he became an executive constructor of prelaty at monastery Hradisko near Olomouc. In 1730 he suffered fatal injury on the building site in Neratov and was replaced by Jakub Ondřej Carove, constructor of fortress in Klodzsko region. The latter brought the work to the end and the temple was consecrated on 24 August 1733, though minor construction work went on until 1749.

The architect of Neratov's church, however, remains unknown. The building itself (with some features such as convex front with two towers built in aslant position, cruciform plan, even today apparent concave pilasters in interior, etc) are assigned to a radical group of Czech Baroque. On the other hand, certain tinge of provinciality and perhaps even rustic character, though very slight, can not be over looked. Some experts attribute this building to some of disciples of Italian architect Giovanni Battista Alliprandi. His Participation can be proved for the case of reconstruction of Holy Trinity church in Opočno (1712) and construction of Piarist church of The Discovery of Holy Cross in Litomyšl (1714 - 1726) whose plan, character of front and other features are very similar to those of Neratov's temple. For sake of completeness it is necessary to mention the church of St. Mary Magdalene in Deštné (built in 1720 - 1726) whose architect also remains unknown.

It is yet possible to express an assumption that the architecture of temple in Neratov is a work of anonymous imitator of monastery church in Litomyšl (most probably it would be the first constructor Carl Antoni Reina). Nevertheless it is very likely that some plans and drawings existed at the latest in 1706. Because they are unknown, it is impossible to determine to what extent they became a basis for actual construction and how much they were supplemented or restructured.

The church itself has 48 m in length, 19 m in breadth and its height used to be 18 - 20m. The front and the main entrance open to the south, presbytery points to the north. Old chronicles mention that thanks to this orientation the sunrays would fall to tabernacle just on Christmas Day at noon. Part of the main entrance portal takes an alliance blazon of the builder count Johann Karl Nostitz - Rhieneck and his wife countess Anna Charlotte Fuchs von Bimbach und Dornheim made by a stone mason from Žamberk in autumn 1734. Above the blazon used to be a statue of Virgin Mary that is lost.



Ground plan and longitudinal section of the church in Neratov, worked up after Josefa Kalous's plans from year 1945 (SOkA Ústí nad Orlicí, file County office Žamberk).



Neratov and its church viewed from the Polish side of the border – 1930's.



The front of the church viewed from southeast – 1930's.



The interior of the church with original furnishing before the fire in 1945.

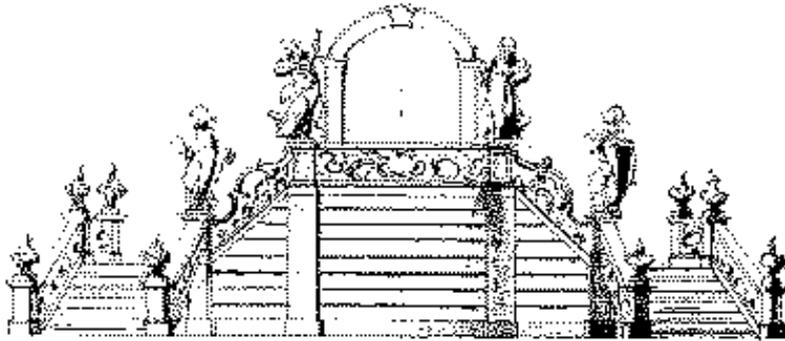
- **Original Furnishing of the Church**

The interior of the church was painted in 1732 by Ignác Teiber from Rokytnice. Besides some minor ornaments, decorating various components of architecture, there were three large frescos: the Holy Trinity above the main altar, an illusory staircase above the main entrance, and the largest one, placed in the central part, was an impressive painting of dome, complemented with angels, flower festoons and garlands, scenes from the life of Virgin Mary and the blazon of Nostitzs.

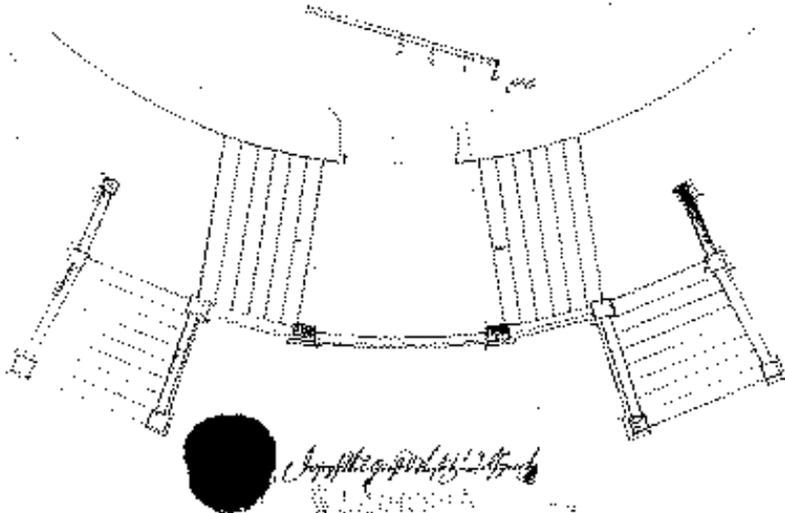
The main altar, completed in 1744, bore very large painting called "the Ascension of Virgin Mary" (by Antonín František Hampisch from Prague), iconological complemented by ceiling fresco. The holy statue of Virgin Mary from original church was placed in glazed case above the tabernacle and surrounded by angels. Wood-carving was made by master Surmann from Erfurt and polished by Josef Starck from Prague. Those artists made also a pulpit, unusually located on epistolary side of the church, which bore a sculpture of Holy Trinity situated in overhang. Neratov church had also two side altars – an altar of St. Archangel Michael, on epistolary side, decorated with a blazon of counts from Martinice and another one of the Ascension (brought there from original old church) with statues of St. Peter and Paul on evangelic side. It is necessary to mention also an organ, dated in 1734 and especially two bells made in 1754 by Johann Henn from Prague and added to the original bell from 1603.

- **A Rococo Staircase, Changes of Interior**

In 1776 a rococo staircase was built in front of the church, which added beauty to the face of building. Stone maronic work which costed 218 goldens and 30 crowns was carried out by Franz Hornich from village Rothsloss (today called Czarwony Strumeň in Poland). Statues of St. Joseph, St. Thomas, St. Barbara and St. Theresa, decorative vessels and rail were made by sculptor Václav Henrich from Litomyšl.

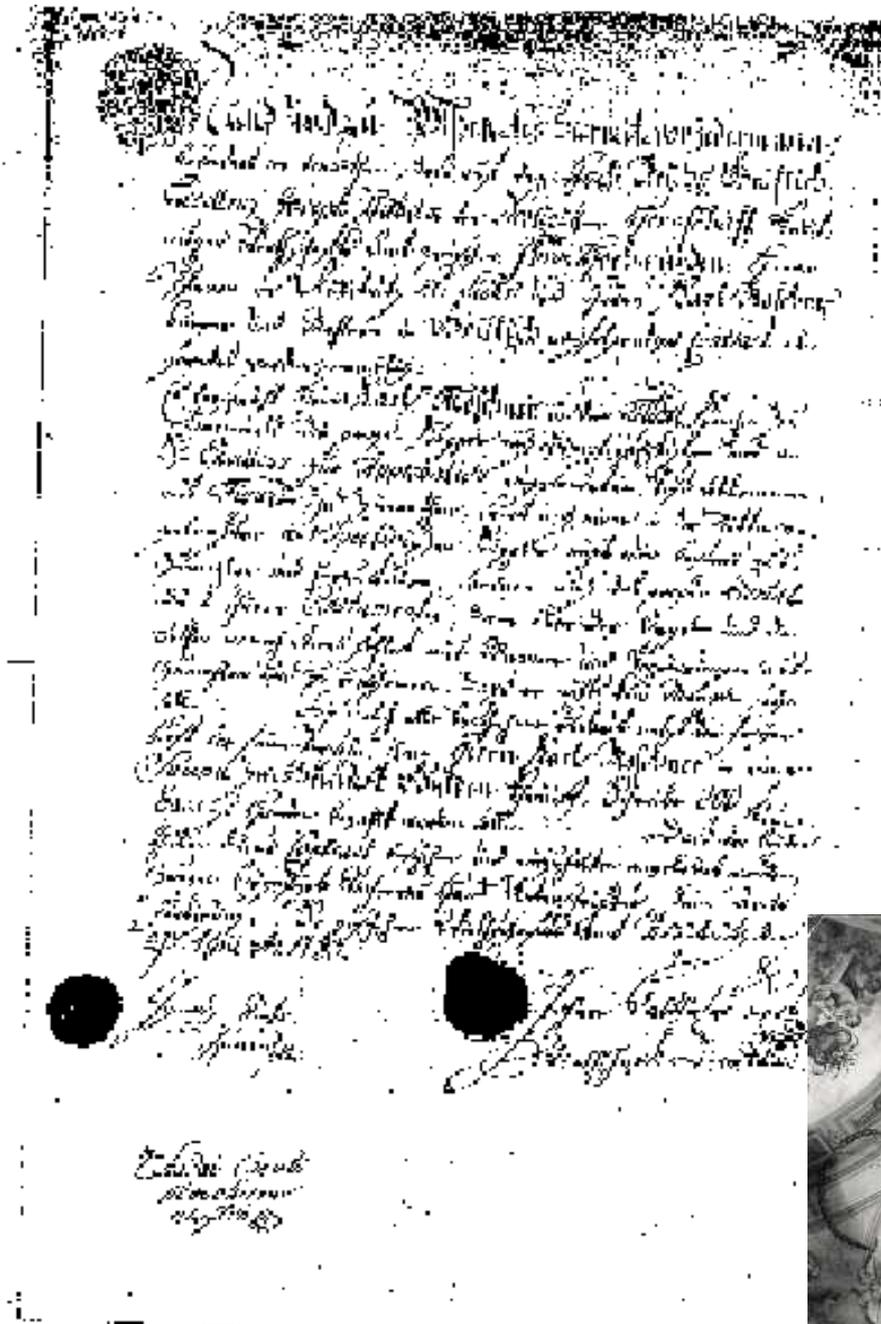


An original plan of the staircase with a seal and signature of the count Josef Vilém Nostitz – Rhieneck. A pen sketch from the year 1775, was added to a contract by the sculptor Václav Henrich and a mason Franz Hornich (SOA Zámorsk, library Vs Rokytnice, kart. 12).



Artistically most valuable statue of St. Theresa the Great – a condition after renovation in 1988 – 1989.

Interior of the church went through remarkable changes at the 1780's. In 1782, the original old altar of the Ascension of Virgin Mary was replaced by altar of St. John of Nepomuk with statues of St. Barbara and St. Margaret. The latter was purchased by sponsor of the church; as proves the blazon of Nostitz - Rhieneck family placed in overhang. The altar on epistolary side also underwent some changes. New painting of St. Joseph from Venice was placed upon it and the altar was dedicated to this saint. The original benediction was reminded by statue of Archangel Michael which was situated beside the altar picture, together with statue of St. George. A year later, Karl Moschner from Králíky renovated, complemented and partly repainted the frescos.

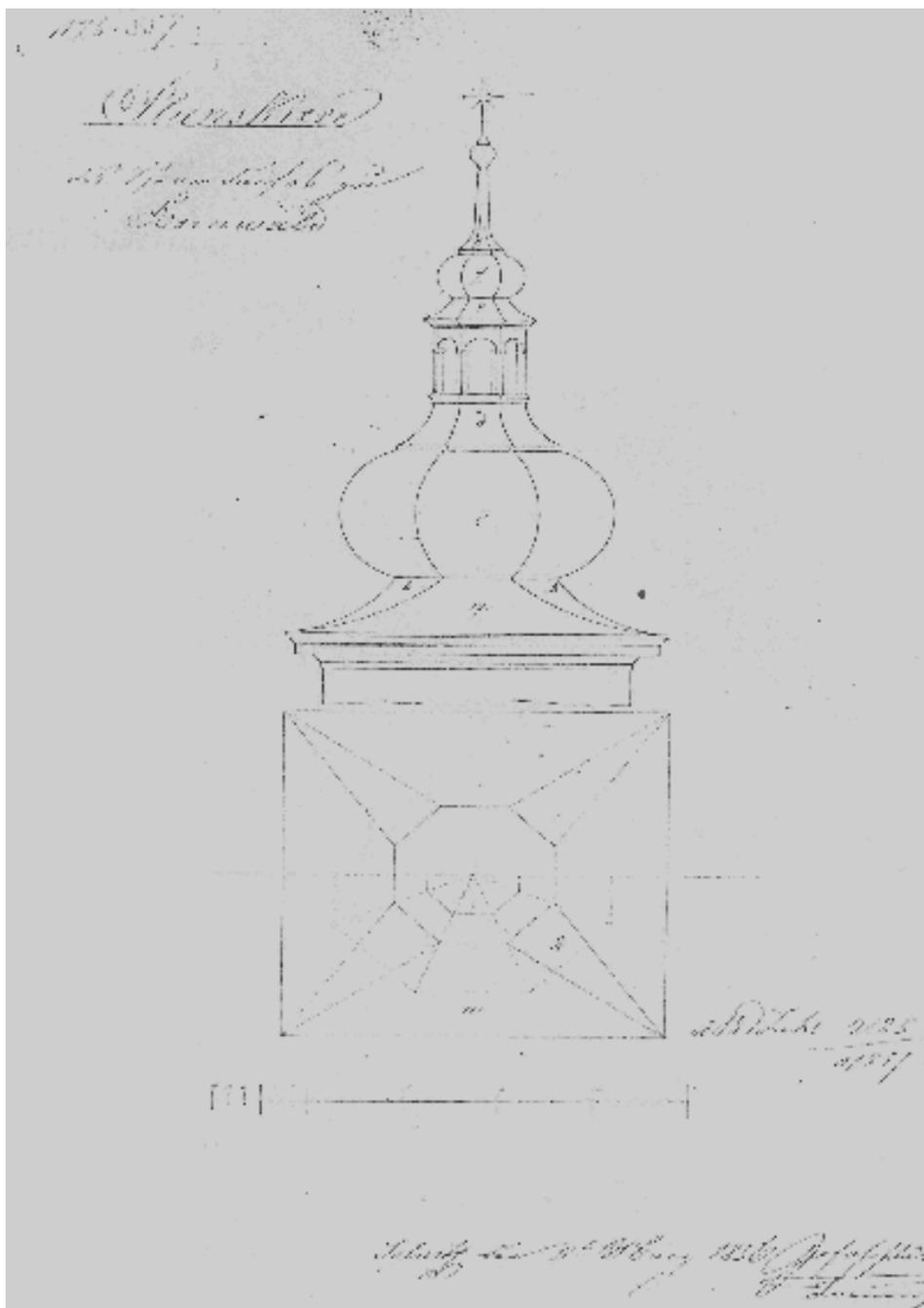


A contract between Jan Baltazar Kerb, the administrator of the estate, together with vicar of Rokytnice Ignác Stehr and painter Karlem Moschner for renewal of wall paintings in the church signed on 29 April 1783 (SOA Zámorsk, library Vs Rokytnice, kart. 12).



An illusory painting of dome on the largest vault field, 1951.

Many renovations followed in later years, such as the renovation of facade and towers in early 19th century, "the general renovation" in 1858 - 1859 and a reconstruction of main altar on the occasion of 200th anniversary of dedication of the church, in 1933.



An original plan of roofing of towers from the time of "general reconstruction". A pen sketch signed by Josef Pöter, dated on 11 March 1856 (SOA Zámorsk, Vs Rokytnice, book 5445).

- **A Fate of the Church after 1945**

On 10 May 1945 the church burned out. An anti-tank bomb, deliberately and unnecessarily fired by a group of red army soldiers, hit a small roof tower. The raging fire consumed roofs, wooden staircases in both towers and melted down the clock work as well as the bell, all within an hour. Interiors and all furnishings remained untouched by fire, since it was protected by strong brick vaults.

But it was the very same year, when many people tried to save the church. Neratov's vicar Haik together with German inhabitants of

Neratov (mostly women) removed some ruins. Soldiers from 1st company of I. battalion of 19th CS army infantry regiment wrote on 8 August 1945 a letter to Dr. Jan Šrámek, Deputy Prime Minister asking him to use his influence for advertisement of reconstruction of "beautiful artistic memorial". They also offered their help on the renovation of the church. Finances were finally obtained from Ministry of Education, some expenses were covered through voluntary collections. The assignment of the work and its payment had been taken on by district authorities and actual work could start on 18 October 1945. A company of Josef Kalous manufactured a wooden roof construction and covered it with boards.

Work had been completed on 24 -25 July 1946, but problems occurred with payment of 472 233,19 Kč, which largely surpassed planned budget. The District Council in Žamberk had to borrow money from the District Saving Bank in Žamberk, instalments was supposed to be paid monthly until 1989...

However, a second phase of renovation, which included the covering of roof by wooden tiles, never started. All the work was postponed until 1947 due to lack of finances, then it was not possible to include it into two year plan and even the State Institute for Preservation of Historical

Memorials did not succeed in collecting of finances. By that time (1950) first suggestions were made to pull the whole church down, for it was "totally dilapidated by the fault of German occupants".



An interior of the church in early 1950's.

In 1955 the initiative was fully handed over to the administration of the Catholic Church. Mr. Josef Císař, the ecclesiastical administrator of Rokytnice, managed by an incredible effort to obtain 10 000 Kč from Regional Council and continued with the covering of roof with wooden tiles by himself. In 1956 he managed to erect a kind of wooden staircase that led to the roof by southern wall, to cover one third of the roof by tiles, to construct wooden floors in both towers and to clean the

interior from ruins. But the regional secretary for religious affairs did not show any understanding for his endeavour and enthusiasm. All the money was taken away from him as well as the official state consent needed for executing his duties of clergyman.

Josef Císař made some necessary repairs between 1955 and 1956 including partial covering of the roof with wooden tiles. His work couldn't be unfortunately finished. This picture shows the situation on the beginning of 1956.





A view to the altar and main entrance after the fall of the vaults in 1957. Photo from 1961

On 31 December 1956 all the renovation work stopped because of absolute lack of finances, on Easter Sunday 1957 drenched vaults felt down and by the end of 1958 a decision was made to abandon the building. Many institutors, however, were not going to accept the status quo and even the civil authorities in Poland called attention to unsatisfactory condition of the building in 1958. In 1960 the Department of internal affairs of Regional Council made a request to demolish the church.



Furnishings and ilusory painting of sacristy in 1961.

But the end of 1960's brought some hope again. Thanks to an initiative of the administrator vicar Stanislav Zeman, responsible state authorities began to deal with situation of Neratov church, at least rough historical and artistic research could have been done and a request was made to put the building on the list of memorials protected by state. This request wasn't, however, successful due to a strong reluctance of former Department of Culture of District Council in Rychnov nad Kněžnou, which was afraid of taking responsibility for static and construction conditions of the building.



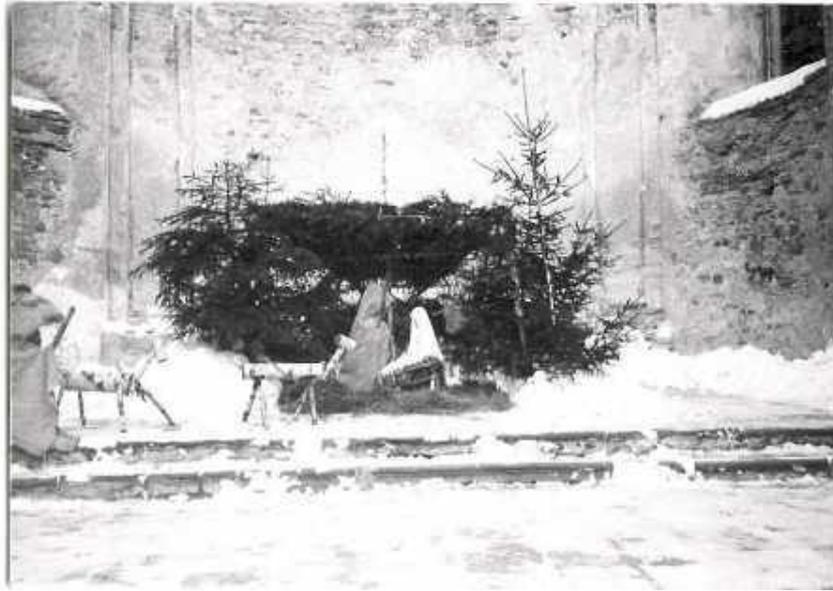
*A view to the altar and main entrance after the fall of the roof at the end of 1960's .
Photo shows the condition in 1972.*

The same institution demanded a demolition of the church again in 1973, this time justified politically. Although a demolition order had been already issued, the church was saved by the position of authorities responsible for landmark conservation, who rejected the request made to them to cease the protection of rococo staircase and insisted on its removal. The finances allocated for demolition were thus spent on transportation and settlement of the staircase in park surrounding the mansion Skalka u Dobrušky (1977, 1988 – 1989).

- **A Fate of the Church after 1989**

After year 1989 the Neratov church entered a new period of its history. The State Institute for Conservation of Historical Memorials initiated its final registration on the List of memorials protected by state and some effort was made to conserve remaining walls. New vicar of Rokytnice, Josef Suchár, has come to this region with an idea of renewal of the place of pilgrimage in village Neratov as well as of the church of the Ascension of the Virgin Mary. First pilgrimage took place on 15 august 1990, by than still at a field beside the church but as early as year later, it

could be held in newly cleaned church. A new tradition has come to an existence, tradition of open air masses held under the heavenly vault that bring together all the people. Among the celebrations that take place in Neratov are celebration of the Ascension of Virgin Mary on 15 August, celebration of other festivals of Virgin Mary, but also the night holy masses on the occasion of Christmas, Day New Year's Eve or Easter Saturday, when the entire temple is illuminated by torches. At the same time, demanding conservation work continues to protect the brick walls suffering by severe attacks of wind, rain, snow and cold.



A crib in Neratov church – Christmas 1992.

But the greatest deal of the work is still to do. It is the creation of a true place of pilgrimage, a place where people will flock to find serenity and peace as well as the kind of certitude which is difficult to describe but consumes entire human being to the tips of its toes. The temple of Neratov inspires such certitude. When we become able to open ourselves to it, as this church is opened to the sky, then perhaps something more will come...Reconciliation. And Love.



Last Neratov's angel...

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Translated by Karel Tesař

*Materials whose source is not mentioned belong to the author. Notes and list of references had to be omitted due to the small range of this volume. More details in Oppeltová's paper: *Historie poutního kostela Nanebevzetí Panny Marie v Neratově* in: *Orlické hory a Podorlicko*, sv. 9, 1999, s. 123 - 160.*