



Kraków's Nativity Scene

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In his book *Nie od razu Kraków zbudowano (Kraków Was Not Built At Once)*, Karol Estreicher Jr mentioned his childhood years, which included this emotional and enchanted description:

(...) It was a building whose height filled the door frame. The first thing to be noticed was its colour, and only then its shape. First the colours stroked you, and then the building's architecture caused amazement: red, green, violets, blue and yellow hues, black and Minium, browns, silver and gold comprised this riot of colours, alive and attractive like a fire.

In the front there were two towers, obviously like the towers of St. Mary's Church but richer in ornaments and with cupolas topped with spire crowns. In the middle there was a huge dome of gold as befitted every dome from Sigismund's times (...)

Those who once saw the *Kraków's Nativity Scene* understand the amazement of the little Lolek. Those who saw it through the eyes of a child bear this amazement in their hearts regardless of their age. The Kraków's Nativity Scene is one of the most beautiful Kraków traditions. It combines simplicity with refined finesse. It is entirely original and entirely of Kraków character. It is both the symbol of the City and its essence. It is a remarkable sign of Christmas and, finally, the mysterious *theatrum* where the fairy tale becomes true.

It all started nearly **800 years** ago in the grotto near a small village of Greccio in the Italian **Umbria**. It was there that **Francis of Assisi** set up a live picture of the Bethlehem stable where the Biblical figures were played by his brethren, friars minor, known today as *Franciscans*. Though it may be hard to believe, it was the first nativity scene in the history of Catholic church. When Francis died in 1225, his brethren continued this tradition. It turned out that this simple Evangelical message with unsophisticated form deeply touches the worshippers. From this moment on, wherever the *Franciscans* went, the *Nativity Scenes* were put up during Christmas. In Kraków this must have taken place soon after 1237, because it was then that *Friars Minor* reached the Wawel area for the first time. It is no accident that the oldest Polish nativity scene figures come from the Sisters of St. Clare's Convent in Grodzka Street in Kraków (Sisters of St. Clare form the female branch of Franciscans). These are wooden figures covered with colourful polychrome from the 14th century. It is also no accident that the most beautiful nativity scenes in the Kraków churches are traditionally built at the **Capuchin Fathers** (movable nativity scene favoured by children) and the **Bernardine Fathers** (Bernardine and Capuchin Fathers are orders of the Franciscan family). In the 17th century in Poland there appeared a popular custom of staging mysteries at Christmas time that involved peculiar performances known today as *jasełka* (English: nativity scenes; the Polish term is derived from the word *jasła* meaning 'crib'). In the 18th century the static nativity scenes and performances started to feature contemporary or historical figures associated with the history of the Republic of Poland.

At the turn of the **18th and 19th centuries** the third type of nativity scene emerged in the form of a small movable nativity scene resembling a puppet theatre. Its emergence is attributed to the Kraków bricklayers. Why them? It is simple. In winter they were unemployed so they came up with the idea that they will walk around with such theatre nativity scenes from one house to another, and thus earn their living. The idea turned out to be contagious. In the 19th century during Christmas time Kraków had several nativity scene troops with their own *jasełka* programme. They stood with their nativity scenes at the A-B line on the Main Market Square



and waited to be rented. When they received an order, they visited the set house where they were welcomed by children. It is exactly this moment that the young Karol Estreicher described. Competition is a good thing. There was a huge selection of scenes at the market, so they had to attract the clients in some way. How? The best solution was to build a nativity scene more beautiful than others. And what was the determinant of beauty for the Kraków bricklayers? The determinant of Kraków churches, bastions, towers, chapels, palaces and monuments! In this way miniatures of Kraków historical buildings on wooden frames were made of tinfoil, tissue paper, cellophane, metal plates, sequins, beads, crystals, etc. The Most beautiful nativity scenes were built in **Krowodrza** that till 1910 had been a Kraków suburb inhabited by many bricklayers' families. The most famous nativity scene troop was the **Michał and Leon Ezenekier's group**. At the end of the 19th century they built the nativity scene (presently kept in the **Ethnographic Museum in Kraków**) that became the unsurpassed canon of the *Kraków Nativity Scene*. What exactly is the *Kraków Nativity Scene*? It is a symmetrical building made of characteristic material, inspired by the motives of Kraków architecture and containing clear elements of Christmas tradition.

The tradition of performances in small nativity scenes died during the inter-war period. It was killed by cinema and radio, modern media that provided cheaper and more commonly accessible entertainment. The tradition of building these marvellous palaces was saved thanks to **Jerzy Dobrzycki** who organised the 1st competition for the most beautiful *Kraków's Nativity Scene* in 1937. The competition caught on. In the first year the prizes included a ring of sausage and a chocolate cake. Despite the war interlude the tradition was continued in 1946 and the patronage over it was assumed by the Historical Museum of Kraków. By 1999 there had been 57 competitions. During these years many great talents were discovered, often within families. The nativity scene dynasties were formed by the **Malikowie, Głuchowie and Pićkowie families**. The competition laurels were many a time won by **Stanisław Paczyński, Maciej Moszew and Tadeusz Wojciechowski**. Apart from prizes for experienced, professional nativity scene builders, prizes are also granted to children and young people, which is to foster the development of new groups of these remarkable artists.

In recent years a new danger loomed over the *Kraków Nativity Scene* in the form of a golden calf. Among the viewers who, as always, surround the pedestal of the Monument of Adam Mickiewicz every first Thursday of December when the nativity scenes are entered into competition there appear the representatives of hotels, travel agencies and rich companies who wander, look and tempt. If the nativity scene builder agrees on a quick transaction, the nativity scene is intercepted by the buyer and does not find its way to the Historical Museum for the post-competition exhibition. Here lies the problem. This exhibition is not only one the more frequented exhibitions in Poland, but also an excellent promotion of Kraków. It also acts as the lungs of this wonderful tradition that helps it to continue and develop.

text: Michał Niezabitowski