

Snapshots: The Tale of a Certain Fireplace



The fire place in the upper hall. The door to the small classroom is on its right

On 4th November 1863 in Jazlowiec, fr. Jan Kaliniewicz, the local parish priest celebrated the first Holy Mass in the sisters' chapel, and placed the Most Holy Sacrament in the tabernacle. The word "tabernacle" means, "dwelling-place"; Jesus had come to live among His people. It was a great day for the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary – in a letter to fr. Kajsiewicz back in Rome, Mother Marcelina wrote: "We are now no longer alone here... the house is wealthy: it has Him!"¹ This day, which is also the liturgical memorial of St. Charles Borromeo, has been a special one for all the sisters in all the Congregation's houses ever since. A tradition exists, that, on this day, each class meets in the late afternoon or early evening with one older sister, who talks to them about her own experiences and memories of days gone by. These gatherings are known as *kominki*², perhaps because they originally took place in the evening with the girls gathered around the sister they had invited in front of an open fire. These days, open fireplaces are a limited commodity, and, sadly, so are older sisters, so that, sometimes, a younger sister is invited to talk about her own knowledge, rather than experience of the Congregation's history. However, the day still has a special atmosphere, and our students have a unique opportunity to discover something of the history of which they are a part. It is an inescapable part of studying at a school which has functioned for over 100 years, that as well as inheriting and benefitting from all that has gone before, those who learn at and graduate from the school at Szymanow automatically form part of its history, for history is a living and constant thing, not confined to grainy black and white photos and long-dead ancestors.

In the midst of all the excitement of *kominki*, and the preparations each class makes to receive its invited guest, as well as the general busyness of lessons, homework, needing to remember this and that, and the general blur of activity typical of most school days at Szymanow, there is one small *kominek* – a little fireplace – that, most of the time goes almost unnoticed. Its place on the wall next to a small classroom off the upper hall is one that girls walk past every day on their way to or from this lesson, or that meeting, without probably paying much attention to it. Yet there it is, and there it has been since the beginning of the school's existence. If the things around us could see and hear and speak, what would that fireplace have to say?

The year was 1951, and the head teacher was sr. Ancilla. The political situation in Poland was incredibly difficult, with the communist authorities waging a war against the Roman Catholic Church - especially against religious congregations, and those involved in education. There were frequent inspections aimed at finding a reason to close Catholic schools – indeed the school at Szymanow was one of the handful still functioning, and, for this reason attracted the attention of the authorities. In 1951 an

¹ M.Marcelina to fr. Kajsiewicz, 2/4.XI.1863

² *Kominki* In Polish means „fireplaces”

inspection took place, involving a commission of seven. They watched lessons, opened desks and went roughly through the contents, looking all the time for a pretext that would allow them to close Szymanow down. The very worst aspect of this particular visitation, however, was the demand for a meeting with the student's committee. A meeting held in the small classroom off the first floor hall, next to the fireplace, and which sr. Ancilla was forbidden to attend. During the three hours that followed, sr. Ancilla knew nothing of what was being said inside the room – all she could do was pray:

"I stood by the fireplace, went to the chapel, came back to the fireplace, praying all the time, that God would save us – from whatever was being said inside that room."

Three girls inside facing an interrogation aimed at closing their school; their head teacher outside treading a path between the fireplace and the chapel. All knew the truth...

"... lessons of religious instruction, the teaching of history, Polish, and other humanities... students attended chapel ... they had separate singing lesson devoted to religious songs... we went through the academies, when, in reality, they were simply imitations of the real thing."³

Matthew 10:19 says : "But when you are handed over, do not worry about how to speak or what to say; what you are to say will be given to you when the time comes."⁴ The girls inside the room answered every question, but the commission could find no reason to shut Szymanow – not one.

A small, insignificant fireplace, nothing special, nothing amazing – most people passing it every day don't even notice it, or give it a second thought. Yet what a story that humble unimportant fireplace could tell, as the witness of an enormous episode of God's grace and mercy, and the battle fought by sr. Ancilla in prayer, without which the history of Szymanow would literally be a thing of the past, instead of the vibrant ever-changing kaleidoscope it is now.



³ "Academies" were teaching sessions designed to acquaint students with the communist ideology, usually conducted by teachers

⁴ New Jerusalem Bible