

## Road



The distance between Teresin-Niepokalanow and Szymanow is not great, but the road seems very long, especially on foot. It takes about an hour to walk the 5,5 kilometres, but the road, stretching out in a straight line, seems never-ending. Most of the sisters at Szymanów know this route very well, and many have walked home more than once using that long long road.

The road has a certain symbolic significance – it implies moving on, a journey. Most journeys have a destination, but what we find when we reach it may not always be exactly what we anticipated in setting out. This was the experience of a young, already well-known Polish priest, who set out for Szymanow early in February 1956, to lead a retreat at the school. The sisters were expecting their guest to arrive by train at 18.30, and a horse-drawn cart left at 17.30 to make the journey to the station at Teresin and bring him back to the convent. It returned at 23.00 ... empty!

February 1956 was one of the coldest winters on record in Poland. The meteorological station in Zakopane reported a temperature of -34 degrees centigrade at the beginning of the month<sup>1</sup>, and, although it was a little warmer in Szymanow, only -25 degrees, the train carrying the expected guest was hopelessly delayed. When he eventually arrived, finding no transport waiting, and the hour late – or, rather, early (it was about 2.00 by then) - his only choice was to walk. This he did, despite the temperature, and the feeling one has on that road, that the further you go, the longer it gets!

When he arrived, finding no gate open, he did the obvious thing and scaled the wall! Landing on the other side, he discovered that the convent was firmly closed for the night. Searching for any possibly of entry, he went round trying every door to see if he could find a way in. Nothing! His persistent attempts eventually reached the ears of sr. Idalia in her cell. The temperature outside was still -25 – the lock on the door of the chaplain’s house where he was to sleep was frozen!! What was to be done? Amazingly, after following sr. Amata on a tour of Szymanow’s attics, thanks to the frozen locks, and eventually reaching the bed that had been waiting for him for many hours, fr. Karol Wojtyla was none the worse for his “classic Wojtyla adventure.”<sup>2</sup>



sr. Amata



fr. Karol Wojtyla



**EXACTLY** where fr. Wojtyla went over the wall is not clear, but this seems the most likely spot!

<sup>1</sup> [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rekordy\\_klimatyczne\\_w\\_Polsce](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rekordy_klimatyczne_w_Polsce)

<sup>2</sup> *Pope John Paul II: The Biography*, Tad Szulc, (Pocket Books, 1996) p. 198 (Szulc uses this phrase to describe this exact incident at Szymanow)

We often set out, confident of the road ahead, knowing what to expect, sure of getting to where we want to go, and, then, unexpectedly, there is a delay, a diversion, the temperature drops. Sometimes, the place we reach does not look quite as we hoped it would, or, as our hero discovered, there is no obvious way in – jumping over the wall is a great idea, but it doesn't always completely solve the problem! Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła) once said: "Remember that you are never alone, Christ is with you on your journey every day of your lives!... Walk with him who is 'the Way, the Truth and the Life!'"<sup>3</sup>Our plans, as well as our ambitions and what we have imagined may change beyond recognition, but Jesus never does.

Oh, by the way, the retreat itself was a great success 😊

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<sup>3</sup> 12th World Youth Day, Longchamp, Saturday, 23rd August 1997 – Address during Baptismal Vigil (special greeting to English-speaking pilgrims)