

The Faces of Szymanów

When the weather changes from frost, wind, and grey skies, to sun, small fluffy clouds scudding across a blue sky, and a light refreshing and extremely pleasant breeze, then humours improve, smiles appear, and people make the effort to get outside. It is the same with places – somehow they appear friendlier when the winter ends and the spring shows its face. Szymanow is no exception. The park seems to open its arms and welcome those who want to wander along its paths and penetrate its hidden corners, whereas, in the winter, it tolerates all who venture out into its depths, but often the wind stabs so sharply, and the frost bites so hard, that a brisk stroll is about all most people want to attempt before they escape gratefully back inside.

If the park at Szymanow has many faces, the building itself – once a palace, now a convent and school, has only one – the face of friendship. People coming to Szymanow are not held at a distance, but welcomed; guests, be they old friends or new acquaintances, are met with a smile, and made to feel at home. Szymanow is, probably more than anything else, a home – for the sisters, for the girls attending the school, both boarders or day girls, and for those who “drop in”, whether they stay a couple of hours or a couple of weeks.



Summer pilgrims at Szymanow



Szymanow girls “at home”

This special Szymanow “face” was exactly the same during the dark days of World War II. Not only were there the horrors of death and destruction, but there was very little to eat in most Polish households, and no heating either. Szymanow was no exception to this. Yet, still, it was a home to the girls attending the school, as the Sisters strove to create a normal home in the midst of the chaos reigning outside the convent walls:

It is difficult to resist reflecting on the depth of wisdom of the sisters, who were able to treat wounded souls through the rhythm of a normal existence, the little jobs of everyday life...It was so hard to create an island of normality, and to separate the children from their life in the convent, and an awareness of the dominating threat of daily life outside.¹

This came at a price for the Sisters, who went without to ensure a life as normal as possible for the girls:

¹ *Poszłam Siac do Polski I Wszeszło, 150 Lat Pracy Zgromadzenia Siostr Niepokalanek* (Vol. II) – Hanna Kosyra-Cieslak, Romana Szyczak, *Siostry Niepokalanki* (Szymanow 2005)

The Sisters did what they could to ensure that we did not freeze during winter; in the boarding accommodation and at school the stoves were always warm, but there was not enough fuel to heat the Sisters' part of the building...We always had sweet coffee or tea, and bread spread thickly with butter...For dinner there was often potato soup, which, in my opinion, is the tastiest soup in the world...Most importantly, we were never hungry. We knew that, for the Sisters, the situation was much worse...²

Despite everything, Szymanow was home for these girls, for the Sisters, for whoever else turned up – a safe place in the midst of rejection, fear, and loneliness:

That the Sisters took care of us, while not looking after their own needs, meant that we felt very close to them, and we treated Szymanow like our family home³

Love goes without to ensure that others have what they need – this is why Jesus died on the Cross, and it was the foundation of the life of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception during the war, not only at Szymanow. Sister Gertruda of the Immaculate Conception (Maria Skorzewska), one of the early sisters in the Congregation. once summed up, this aspect of the spirituality of the Congregation in the words *Love knows only one action: Sacrifice*. This is still our heart.

² *IBID* – words of Teresa Lasocka

³ *IBID*