

Snapshots: Class of '51



The memorial stone

As you walk past the Sister's graveyard at Szymanów, you might, perhaps, glance downwards to look at the grass. If you do that, you will spot a small memorial stone standing by a small oak sapling. The stone was placed there to commemorate the planting of the tree on 15th June 2001. The words on the stone speak volumes:

GOD BE PRAISED

We have planted this tree to thank the Sisters

On the fiftieth anniversary of our Matriculation exam

The graduates of 1945-1951

Szymanów. 15. VI.2001

This was a special class. These girls had come to Szymanów after World War II. They were a mixture. Some were older than usual, others had fought with the partisans, and many had lost those closest to them. There were orphans and aristocrats joined to one another by loss. They had seen and experienced a great deal. They all came to Szymanów bearing scars and the pain which is unique to war. They all sought a permanence and structure, somewhere safe:

I came to Szymanów on 6th June 1945, sent by social services... for the whole journey, I was afraid the sisters wouldn't take me. I was thirteen and a half years old and had been homeless for almost a year...I didn't expect anything particularly special, but I wanted to learn...I had heard the school at Szymanów was a very good one. Of the sisters I knew nothing...I went through the gate ... and my heart froze... I held out my referral. My hand was covered in scabs and scars from prurigo¹. The Sister said, 'We need to go somewhere else' – and I thought – 'I knew it'. We walked around to the other side of the building... to a back entrance. A white corridor, a room, a bed...what a relief, what joy! They are going to accept me, I'm staying, I'm going to live in this beautiful house! I don't have to move on yet again. There is a place for me here! (Hanka Gajewska – student at Szymanów, 1945-1951)

These were also special times; difficult times. The authorities did not easily tolerate a Catholic school in the midst of Communist Poland, and the values enshrined at Szymanów did not sit easily with them. If they could only prove that the level of teaching and the way the girls were prepared for life was unacceptable; not good enough, the school could be closed. There were frequent inspections; attempts to catch the Sisters and their students out.

For the girls, though, Szymanów was more than a school. It was their place; it was stability; the childhood that had been denied them. The people around them, Sisters and fellow students, were like a family. After all they had been through, they were ready to fight for their home, and this meant that unity and love prevailed over manipulation and threat. The girls didn't just learn for themselves, but to save their school. The Sisters didn't just teach to pass on knowledge, but to pass on truth. The girls were expected to know Marxist theory and the biographies of leading Communists to conform to the educational requirements of the regime, and they did. They also learnt the truth about Poland, culture, history and literature. One school and one heart.

¹ A chronic inflammatory skin disease causing constant itching

One small stone embedded in the grass, yet it symbolizes the hopes and dreams of these girls, which they found here, at Szymanów. Love will always find a way.