

Snapshots: Doors



Matka Marcelina at Szymanów's door



sr. Maria Ancilla of the Most Holy Sacrament

Szymanów, over the last two weekends has been a worthy venue for both Studniówka and Gymnasium Ball¹. These are events which always remain long in the memory of those taking part. It is difficult to imagine a better setting – a palace set in a park, an elegant ballroom, an impressive entrance hall with chessboard tiles and an antique fireplace, long sweeping corridors, and refreshments taken in a nineteenth century wood-panelled refectory. The celebrations always begin in the chapel, with a Mass, attended by the girls, their partners, parents and Sisters. Thus it was this year, and thus has it always been. Each year it is different, because the participants are different, and yet the same, because of the setting and the unique atmosphere it creates. It is the beginning, in many ways, of a new phase - a door into the future, as they look at what lies ahead for them – not just work and exams, but what will follow.

The future, in a very real way, has its roots in the past. When they step forward, through that door, they will take with them what they have already gained, and part of that will be the time they have spent at Szymanów. Standing in the chapel, looking at their faces – eager, perhaps a little apprehensive, as they dance the *Polonez* directly after Mass, it is not difficult to imagine, for a moment, those who have gone before.

There has been a school run by the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception at Szymanów for 110 years. Generations of girls, with their hopes, dreams, concerns, have walked through the same entrance hall, along the same corridors, have stood in the chapel on the evening of their Studniówka or Gymnasium Ball, and have walked out of Szymanów's door, into the world that awaits. They will leave, but Szymanów remains, and the same door through which they have left is always open for them to come back. Their lives will change, but Szymanów stays more or less the same.

What holds it all together? The cords are invisible ones, yet strong. Szymanów's tradition stands on a lot more than history and the length of time the school has been in existence. There have been both good, and more difficult, times during the school's existence – in many ways, the joys and struggles of Szymanów mirror the joys and struggles of Poland. There have been moments when a battle has taken place for the very existence of school and

¹ These two formal balls are held every year for the members of the final classes of High School and Gymnasium (Middle School) respectively. The Studniówka traditionally takes place 100 days prior to the Matriculation examinations, which mark the completion of compulsory education in Poland, and after which students usually commence higher education at college or university. One of the main highlights of both is the *Polonez*, a formal Polish dance, performed by the girls and their partners, under the gaze of Sisters, parents and other guests.

convent. This was so during the 1950s, when the civil authorities did what they could to undermine the Sisters' educational ministry. The Head teacher then was sr. Ancilla. Her leadership of the school has been compared to the steering of a boat through coral reefs and sandbanks in a storm. Sister Ancilla had three things about which she refused to compromise:

- Crosses were to remain on the walls, although pictures could be removed
- Normal lessons of Religious Knowledge would take place within school
- The school would not allow the presence of any government-sponsored youth organisations

To these, she adhered, no matter how high the waves became. The other arm of the battle, unseen, but potent, was, and still is, prayer. Szymanów stands on a foundation of the prayer of generations of Sisters and graduates. Do not imagine either, for one moment, that when a Sister passes from this world of ours, that she stops praying – not likely! Her prayer continues. In this way, the girls of Szymanów here and now, stand on the shoulders of others – Sisters and students. They are, in a very special way, our girls, and, when they pass through the physical doors of Szymanów, and the metaphorical door to the future, we keep them in our hearts. Our task is not to make their schooldays fun and make sure they pass their exams – although this too – our desire is to build into their lives, so that they, in turn, will build into the lives of others, and of Poland.

This is what Matka Marcelina said about Szymanów:

*God has revealed to me the treasure of His mercy for Szymanów.
That house, every soul within it, and all who work there, are
embraced by a special love. They have an enormous task for the
nation. He has shown us a fragment of this now, but, in time, we
shall see the enormity of His mercy for that place! I am so grateful
to God, that He has allowed me, at least once, to set foot in that
place of His mercy.*

Amen – so be it!