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Hermitage of St. Brother Albert at Kalatówki

The hermitage of St. Brother Albert at Kalatówki, also referred to as the Saint's sanctuary, can be accessed by taking a bus from Zakopane to Kuźnice. Then one must walk up a short, but steep and stony road. After about twenty minutes' walk, an inexperienced traveller will see the always quiet complex. The complex is dominated by a tower with a wooden cross. Not long ago, this extremely modest little church was hidden among trees as in a small refuge, and insulated from the noise of tourists. In 1968, "God came on the wings of the wind" and eradicated vast areas of the forest, revealing naked rocks, and among them – the Albertan complex saved from the hurricane.

On entering the area of the hermitage, the tired pilgrim will first see a little well with spring water, and then a small monastery and a chapel, which with its simplicity and rigidity suits well the natural harsh environment. Roughly hewed beams, walls deprived of any decoration, a modest altar with the dominating figure of Christ described by the writer Stefan Żeromski as follows: "There is something extremely simple and unrealistic about it, and at the same time it is full of the faith, it is an outcry about Christ's Passion. The head falling on one side is a clear testimony, a vivid example of what it means to overcome the sanctity on earth."

This ancient crucifix is the only, yet very valuable decoration of the chapel.

To the left of the path, there is the small, stylish "Brother Albert's Hut" where the Hermit spent many hours during breaks in his continuous travels to acquire food for the poor. In the 1970s, the Memorial Room was prepared here in memory of Brother Albert.

The complex is visited by many tourist-pilgrims, who keep silent here and leave the place in contemplation.

How did Adam Chmielowski – Brother Albert – find himself in this wonderful yet dangerous place, which may be covered in snow on a day in August, and suffer blizzards on a July night?

The beauty of the Tatra Mountains, the Podhale Region, and especially Zakopane was mentioned to Chmielowski by Stanisław Witkiewicz. Zakopane from the late

19th century was much different from the present capital of the Tatra Foothills. There were few stone houses, wooden huts did not have chimneys; there were also wooden hotels, an old church presided over by Fr. Stolarczyk; people of the land included the nowadays legendary Sabała, Klimek Bachleda and the pioneers: Tytus Chałubiński, Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski, the Dembowskis and others. Kuźnice featured the walls of old industrial facilities, heaps of rubble and slag that opalesced with all the colours of the rainbow. These were the signs of the past golden years of the settlement and of the rolling mills there. From Kuźnice to the Kalatówki Meadow led only a forest path rarely visited by tourists.

After the fall of the uprising of 1863, Zakopane became a spiritual capital of the divided country. It was here, at the end of the 19th century, where a proper atmosphere was established for unrestricted exchange of thought, artistic creation and socio-political activity of avant-garde individuals and groups from all the partitions. It was here, at the foot of the Tatras that Polish idealism, previously hampered by the fall of the uprising and the Positivist organicism, spectacularly exploded.

The unique aura of Zakopane was made by people who came to live in the shadow of Giewont Peak. It was the era of such people as Grzegorzewski, Abramowski, Lutosławski, Limanowski, Chałubiński, Janiszewski, Żeromski, Witkiewicz, the Dembowski family, Daszyński, Piłsudski and even, as they say, Lenin. It was the Zakopane of manifestations, summer university, Olympus of Modernism and the great Melpomene. Yet it was also the Zakopane of the begging Brother Albert-Adam Chmielowski, and his hermitage at Kalatówki.

The entire life of Adam Chmielowski was inscribed into the turmoil of national insurrections in which his family lost fortune, and he himself lost a leg. His lifespan covered the years 1845-1916. At first he studied at the Technical University in Puławy and Ghent, later he pursued painting in Paris and Munich. Before he became Brother Albert, he proved to be a talented artist, searching the Platonic concept of eternal beauty in the surrounding nature. He abandoned art at the peak of his capacity, to associate himself with the homeless in the ugliness and poverty of the poor shelters in Galicia. Following his religious call, he managed to achieve the most difficult thing in the interpersonal relations. By imitating St. Francis of Assisi, he became poor out of his own choice in order to become an apostle of the beggars who were forced by necessity to pursue such a way of life.

What caused such an astonishing decision? How did this deep Christian sensitivity to human issues grow in the soul of the young artist, as was movingly presented by Karol Wojtyła in his play *Our God's Brother*. It is hard to give an unambiguous answer. The issue involves the spiritual richness of the man who based his social work only on the Gospel, and considered it to be his mission for life.

Adolf Nowaczyński in his book *The Most Beautiful Man of My Generation* wrote: "Chmielowski as a painter has been to London shortly. There was no way not to see in a street a strange march of civilian soldiers, the so-called East- End Mission, that is the popular "Salvation Army" organized in 1865 by a former Methodist Pastor (...).

Our tall, strong tourist with an artificial, tapping leg, must have known about and must have remembered this great action of the London God's Soldier. Anyway, on the arena of English history there were also other persons, so far very odd, such as left-wing church authorities: Bishop Irland, or Cardinal Gibbons. Also Cardinal Newman confessed then before the world in a simple and honest manner."

On the nearest continent, "in the unpleasant and irritating vicinity of the nearest East, the landowner and novelist, Tolstoy, rose up from his desk in his palace, and became grand with his tragic worries, remorse and thousands of questions, with the growing compassion for the ones deprived of land, and with the urging wish to get rid of all property, to give away all that he had. «What is all the *iskustvo* /art in the face of the endless human poverty?» he asked, and found himself running like a barbarian, barefoot and in the rough linen shirt."

Also, in the entire Catholic world, the renaissance in each area of life was sensed. Only in Poland, suffering after the failed uprising, and abused by Berg and Muraviev it seemed that all hope for any revival was lost.

Adam Chmielowski, a young, eighteen-year-old, very intelligent man, was acquainted with all these tendencies and thoughts. As a conscious Pole, Catholic, participant to the uprising and an orphan, he himself bore the cross of pain related to the loss of his homeland's dignity. What did this young aristocrat think and feel when he addressed a written application to the French and Polish Committee in Paris for a benefit due to his disability?

While considering the transformation process of the artist into the servant to the homeless and unemployed, one should answer many questions and solve many problems.

When Adam Chmielowski, already as Brother Albert, came to Kraków and started his bloodless revolution of love in the Kraków shelters, Zakopane enjoyed the revival of the reborn Poland. In this *piccolo mundi*, as Zakopane was described by the earlier quoted Nowaczyński, Brother Albert found the entire world of his youth. His good friend, Stanisław Witkiewicz, preached Promethean ideas, Helena Modrzejewska was announced the "Queen of the Tatras", professors and students from throughout Poland kept coming.

Begging Albert, with his entire individual past and present, was welcomed by this exclusive, yet very Polish society. Stanisław Witkiewicz, a great fan of St. Francis of Assisi and a preacher of Tolstoy, found in his friend Adam, nowadays St. Brother Albert, a vivid incarnation of those ideas. Stefan Żeromski also depicted him in his best novels.

"It was Witkiewicz, himself a complete abnegator, that inspired Brother Albert to build a hermitage hidden high among forests and rocks. It is said that the thought of constructing a hermitage was presented to Brother Albert by St. Rafał Kalinowski, related to Brother Albert by the uprising and a similar choice of life. It must not be forgotten, though, that hermitages were inscribed into the Franciscan spirituality,

continued by Brother Albert. He was certainly aware of *Eremo dei Carceri*. Let us not forget that it were the modernist poets and writers who rediscovered St. Francis, so much loved by Brother Albert. Stefan Żeromski in his novel *Converting Judas* presents a terrifying description of Albertan poverty: “poverty up, down, along and afar”. There is nothing to add.

Let us provide some details. Grzegorz Polak wrote: In 1897, two such /unusual/ men stood at the Kalatówki Clearing. Brother Albert took a joyful look at the forested slopes towards the bare peaks “and absorbed the silence and majesty of the mountains. His companion, after waiting a while said: «Take as much as you wish. I give it to you.» Then Brother Albert replied in a low voice: «Not a home, not a place, not a thing»...” Brother Albert’s companion was Count Władysław Zamoyski, a great social worker and patriot, owner of the land around Zakopane, which he later donated to the Polish nation. Then he offered a part of this land to the Grey Brother. In order not to disobey the Franciscan rule, they decided that they would use a lease for a symbolic amount of money. This was the beginning of the hermitage at Kalatówki.

The hermitage was erected in 1898, designed by Stanisław Witkiewicz, the originator of the Zakopane style, a friend of Brother Albert from his artistic times. The latter with his novices, worked on the construction of the road to *Morskie Oko* Lake in order to gather some money.

A nice little building was built on the slope in the middle of the path from Kuźnice to Kalatówki. The cells were so small that they could only accommodate a narrow wooden bed, a table attached to the wall, while under the bed all the personal belongings and a basin for washing was stored. The original heating system was designed by Brother Albert. Cells were placed above the dining room – the only room with a stove. Brother Albert ordered holes to be cut in the floors and provided with covers. After lifting the covers, hot air could warm the freezing Albertans. The furnishing of the hermitage was also modest and grey, like the Albertan habit. Such were also the dishes of grey clay, which often discouraged priests who came to celebrate the Holy Mass.

Next to the hermitage, the Chapel of the Cross was built – simple and austere. Brother Albert did not wish any decorations – “just a simple cross”. It was donated by Fr. Ambroży Federowicz, the superior of the Pauline Order from Skalka in Kraków. The cross, famous for its graces, was painted by Witkiewicz.

Since then, a small cart with two horses, driven by Brother Albert, regularly traveled from Kalatówki to Zakopane. Wojciech Brzega, a great highlander craftsman, recalled: “from Krupówki comes a sledge, one big horse, the other small. There are three old bearded men there. They stopped. I recognised Witkiewicz. And he says: «Wojtek, it is hard to find in Poland three such old guys together»”. These old men were Witkiewicz, Chelmoński and Brother Albert.

For recreation, brothers often went from the hermitage to the nearby peak of Krokiew. The view was beautiful, and someone had an idea to establish a new

monastery-hermitage there. «What about the one down there?» asked Brother Albert. «Let us give it to the sisters, let them also taste the goodness,» answered the brothers. The new *Na Górcze* monastery-hermitage for the brothers was constructed in 1902. The earlier one was inhabited by sisters. Bishop Anatol Nowak blessed the building for them, and also acquired the permit from Pope Pius X for keeping the Holy Sacrament in the Chapel of the Cross. In the previous year, Brother Albert built a small house for the chaplain below the first hermitage, and installed a modest cell for himself there. In front of the chapel, the spring waters were contained within a well with the image of Our Lady. On the well there is always a mug, so that everyone may drink some fresh water. Healing properties are ascribed to the water. “The house, called the Hermit’s Hut, is a special memorial room of Brother Albert”, wrote Andrzej Datko.

In May 1986, the hermitage of St. Brother Albert was visited by Archbishop Luigi Poggi, head of the team for permanent working relations between the Apostolic See and the Polish government. It was the year when he completed his mission. Asked about the impressions from the visit to the Albertan hermitages, he answered seriously: “for the first time in my life I see people living in a museum”. And indeed, the material vision of the hermitage interior has not changed, and has been preserved in its initial form for over a hundred years.

The Hermit’s Hut since the 1970s has been called Brother Albert’s Hut. Tourists were responsible for the change of the name, as only the latter features in the language of tour guides. Presently the Hut is only a museum, completely devoted to the memory of Brother Albert, canonized by Pope John Paul II on November 12, 1989. It houses relics: images, publications, and photos related to the Saint’s life. Next, there is the meticulously preserved cell where Brother Albert used to stay. At the Hut’s attic, in a little room, there are the exhibits from the first years of the hermitage and the photographic documentation of the entire complex. All the exhibits await a proper place to be presented to visitors.

On the initiative of social services, the entire complex has been entered into the heritage register of the Małopolskie Voivodeship. The Heritage Conservator of the Voivodeship of Małopolska justified the entry in the following way:

(...) The complex of the Convent of the Albertan Sisters at Kalatówki is one of the most significant examples of sacral architecture in the Zakopane style, designed by Stanisław Witkiewicz. The wooden architecture inspired with the art of the Tatra highlanders is compatible with the mountain landscape. Forests covering the land owned by the convent form a natural park. The patio garden with Tatra flora completes the composition of the green areas. The complex is one of the best Polish examples joining the cultural valour with the natural landscape.

The Hermitage of St. Brother Albert at Kalatówki has an important place in Polish history and culture. The convent has continuously been serving the implementation of the concept of St. Brother Albert who materialized the Franciscan teaching of loving other humans and serving the ones in need. At the same time, the

hermitage has been the place of pilgrimages of many believers and tourists, including the most outstanding representatives of the Church, as well as representatives of Polish culture and science. It is a place where the deep religious reflection is accompanied with aesthetic stimuli caused by the vicinity of nature and harmonising art, represented by the modest, yet outstanding architecture of the chapel, convent and the Hut of St. Brother Albert (...).

Practically, however, despite the great input of work and significant financial investments on the part of the Albertan Sisters, the facilities are gradually destroyed. Continuous exploitation, age and weather conditions have largely weakened the earliest parts of the complex. Already there are examples of significant destruction of the facility. In 1993, during the repair of the roof, the laundry collapsed, which featured the spring providing water to the hermitage. This was the spring Witkiewicz asked about: «is the water already flowing to the monastery?»

The complex is worth the conservator's care, as well as preservation for future generations, not only for its architectural value, but even more perhaps for its cultural and educational value. All the year round, the quiet hermitage turns into a small Częstochowa, where prayers mix with religious songs brought by pilgrims from all the regions of Poland and abroad, especially from the east.

The hermitage nowadays features a double dimension: the one designed by St. Brother Albert, referring to the members of his congregations, and another one, not envisaged by anyone: a social dimension. The area between the convent and St. Brother Albert's Hut is continuously occupied by thousands of people. The great number of volumes with entries of visitors is the best testimony to that.

Undoubtedly, the most outstanding person who came on a pilgrimage to the hermitage is Pope John Paul II. On November 29, 1978, as a cardinal, he visited the hermitage and in the memorial book wrote shortly: let us pray for the beatification of Brother Albert. He could not think then that in several years' time, he himself as Pope John Paul II would celebrate his canonization, and later, in 1997, the beatification of Sister Bernardyna Jabłońska, who also featured in the spiritual life at Kalatówki.

Shortly before his martyr's death, the hermitage was also visited by Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, who in the entry in the memorial book begged for freedom for then suffering Poland.

Perhaps it was the right place to pray for freedom. Adam Chmielowski acted on the stage of history as the one who fought for the freedom of Poland. His entire life was full of struggle for the liberty of art he represented, and then – the struggle for the freedom of the neglected and humiliated man, and it was for such a man that he 'gave his soul'. St. Francis of Assisi prayed: "I desire one privilege for myself from the Lord – that is never to receive a privilege from man". The same prayer and the same words could have been spoken by St. Brother Albert. Like St. Francis, Brother Albert was not a spiritual anarchist. This young religious movement was inscribed into the framework of church organization, as he knew that people preaching the revival of the Gospel

must be subject to the Church authority. A means for creating this organised freedom has been poverty treated as liberation. St. Brother Albert's Hut and cell are the best example of this concept, which is still attractive and motivating to others.

There are few places where dozens of squirrels dance over the heads of passers by, where martens calmly walk in the house, where a fox eats with dogs from one dish, and lives with babies near the Hut. This place features a true bird reserve, as unrestricted they breed their young in nests built everywhere. It is also here where the bear sneaks to eat jam and drink blueberry juice. It is here that from the far city a cat worrying about the fate of her kittens brings them trustfully and certain that they will suffer no harm. It is also here that in the evening one may call a deer which will come and show his horny head.

Throughout the years, the spirit of the man "as good as bread", Brother Albert, is still vivid and clear. Already in his lifetime, first in Kraków, and then in other towns where he founded his shelters, in Zakopane and in many other places, especially in Galicia, but also throughout Poland, people became convinced not only of the special character of his work, but also of the sanctity of his person. This continuing conviction has resulted in publications, literary and academic works devoted to him, to popularisation of this outstanding person and work, as well as attempts to understand and draw conclusions also for our times. St. Brother Albert still fascinates and encourages reflection. In the search for the most appropriate definition Adolf Nowaczyński, earlier rather reserved towards the Church, yet changed because of Brother Albert, wrote a book entitled *The Most Beautiful Man of My Generation*; and Karol Wojtyła portrayed Brother Albert in a play and called him *Our God's Brother*.

Cardinal Karol Wojtyła wrote: "The depth, the richness of his spiritual life, speaks with the profundity of the choice he made, and at the same time with the maturity of the resignation undertaken due to the choice. By choosing the absolute poverty and service to people most handicapped by the society, he faced the problem which still dominates the life of mankind and the Church. Into all this, Brother Albert brought all his patriotic involvement, the love of the homeland to which he had sacrificed his health in his young years, remaining a single-legged disabled. He also brought his great charm of an artist, a man of outstanding talent, who searched for increasingly more mature dimensions of beauty, goodness and truth."

Speaking at the funeral of Brother Albert, Bishop Anatol Nowak, Bishop of Kraków said that "we should rather pray to Brother Albert than for him." Pope John Paul II, beatified Brother Albert in Kraków on June 22, 1983, while on November 12, 1989 celebrated his canonisation in Rome, giving him to the world as the patron of the civilization of love and the revolution of mercy.

Polish society remembers all this, and no wonder that people come on pilgrimages to his Hut at Kalatówki, rightly believing that in this place he is "the truest".

This is why people come on pilgrimages here, they pray here even if they are not aware of it, and the terrifying image of Christ from the crucifix at Kalatówki speaks to them just as loudly and clearly as once it spoke to Brother Albert. Pope John Paul II, who in the begging Brother Albert sees his spiritual master, as the Archbishop of Kraków said once about Brother Albert: "This is how the soul of Adam Chmielowski who when transformed into Brother Albert was brought down to his knees. He was driven down before the unspeakable majesty of God who is all the sanctity and all the love. Yet the same God in humanity, in human history, acts in mysterious ways, and thus bringing one down to his knees in front of Him, also makes him kneel before one's brothers. The same happened to Brother Albert, who was brought down to his knees before the majesty of God, and who kneeled before the majesty of man, and exactly, before the majesty of the poorest, the most handicapped and neglected man, before the majesty of the lowest beggar."

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