

## Merchant Day

2011-04-12

**On the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 1410 the Merchant Congregation was established in Kraków as the oldest commercial corporation in Poland. Its founders included the distinguished figures of the then Kraków like Jerzy Morsztyn and Piotr Kalderberg. The first one was a juror and a city councillor, owner of a huge fortune, and one of the ancestors of a family that meant a lot in our history.**

Piotr Kalderberg, also a Merchant and a Kraków councillor, was one of the executors of **Queen Jadwiga's** will. It is he that executed the purchase of the townhouse in the then Jewish Street (today's Św. Anny Street) where the restored *Kraków Academy* (today's *Collegium Maius*) became based. His person also combines the truth and the legend about the famous *Nawojka*, the first female student of the Kraków's *Alma Mater*. *Nawojka* herself was an authentic figure. We learn about this from a source record which indicates that she was captured by the guards when she was entering the house of Piotr Kalderberg. Why did she go there? What role was played in the whole affair by the noble merchant? And finally who was *Nawojka*? These mysteries are to be clarified by the legend. But enough of *Nawojka*; we are talking about merchants.

The merchant class played an extraordinary role in Kraków. It is true that the merchants constituted the elite of power and wealth in all cities of the then Europe, but in Central and Eastern Europe Kraków was the only city where they achieved the outright hegemonic position. For centuries it was difficult to find any names of craftsmen or freelancers among the merchant majority of the city council. They are like raisins in the cake. This was not accidental. The position of the Kraków merchants reflected the position of Kraków as the great commercial power in the then Europe. The great east-west and north-south trade routes passed through Kraków and were frequented by the merchant caravans carrying copper from Hungary, roots from the Orient, fabric from Bruges, and Wieliczka salt and Olkusz lead from the Kraków area.

Today we know relatively a lot about the trade activities of the merchants themselves, but much less about their everyday life, traditions and customs. This results from the fact that till the 18<sup>th</sup> century the merchants' organisation, the above-mentioned *Kraków Merchant Congregation* operated fairly sluggishly. Why? Most likely due to the fact that the merchant-dominated city council could effectively defend the interests of the local trade so they did not need their own organisation. Only when the Republic of Poland suffered from devastating wars, and Kraków lived through some sieges, occupations and contributions, the Congregation was revived in **1722** in order to protect the trade that had been brought to ruin. Paradoxically, at the time of much poorer condition of the local trade the Congregation was much more active. One of the vital elements of its activity was the integration of the local merchant environment with the important part played by the *Merchant Fraternity of God's Providence and the Immaculate Conception of Virgin Mary* at **St. Peter and St. Paul's Church** in Kraków. One should not confuse two words originating in Latin, that is **congregation** which meant the economic self-government organisation and **fraternity** which was a kind of religious brotherhood. In the actual fact these were independent though complementary organisations. *The Merchant Fraternity* existed even before the revival of the congregation in 1722. It was based in the chapel of St. Peter and St. Paul's Church which then belonged to the Jesuits. In this chapel the merchants gathered every Sunday singing the *officium* about *Saint Mary*. Traditionally, they already observed two holidays. The first one fell on the sixth Sunday after



the Whit Sunday when they worshipped *God's Providence*. Today this holiday is witnessed by the triangular Eye of Providence featured, next to a merchant ship, on the emblem of the *Kraków Merchant Congregation*. The second holiday was the *Day of Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary* which was celebrated by the practical merchant class on the first Sunday after this event. At that time Sunday was a holy day in practice and not in theory as it is today when all the shops work at full steam on all days of the week. The painting of the *Immaculately Conceived Virgin Mary* painting that used to decorate the *Oratory of the Merchant Fraternity at St. Peter and St. Paul's Church* is kept today in **St. Barbara's Church**. This painting by unknown artist is a valuable example of the 18<sup>th</sup> century painting. But it was not only a work of art but also an object of worship. For whom? The colloquial name of this painting, *Our Lady of Merchants*, is quite telling. Kraków merchants actually had a very pious attitude towards the *Immaculately Conceived Virgin*. No wonder that she became the patron of them and their organisation, that is the *Kraków Merchant Congregation*. Her silver figure in the characteristic wreath of twelve stars standing on the half-moon adorns the cane of the congregation's elder, while her images can be found at standards, occasional diplomas and medals. Starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century the holiday of the *Immaculately Conceived Virgin* was the main merchants' holiday. Even the oldest references state that on that day ... *the merchants used to assist at the conclusion of the light processions....* In time the holiday celebrations took on a much greater scale. They always started in the morning. It is hard to establish the beginning of the custom to invite guests for traditional merchant breakfast after the mass and the procession. It is also hard to say when the custom to hold this ceremonious breakfast at the Town Hall emerged. In 1774, after the dissolution of the Jesuits, Kraków's Bishop **Kajetan Sołtyk** gave the post-Jesuit Church of St. Barbara to the *Merchant Fraternity*. Why the Church of St. Barbara? To clarify this we must go back in time to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Already in 1404 the *Literary Brotherhood*, also known as the *Merchant Brotherhood*, is founded at this church. This is the oldest reference to a religious organisation performing the pastoral functions to the merchant milieu. In **1444** the statutes of this Brotherhood were confirmed by **Cardinal Zbigniew Oleśnicki**. So the relation between the Kraków merchants and the Church of St. Barbara can be documented even at that time. The origins of this relation may have been grounded in the fact that the initial Church of St. Barbara was founded in 1338 by **Mikołaj Wierzynek Senior**, distinguished Kraków merchant. In this light it is easier to understand why this church was given by Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk to merchants. From this moment on, that is from 1774, the Church of St. Barbara has uninterruptedly performed the pastoral functions to the Kraków merchants. The tradition of the merchant holiday also moved to this church. When the Jesuits returned in 1889, the tradition did not stop. The Jesuits obliged to hold a ceremonious mass for the merchants on the Day of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. In the inter-war period certain canon of celebrations became settled. First, there was the Holy Mass in the morning, and then the ceremonious procession with standards to the municipal building (the old Town Hall was already gone) where guests were entertained for breakfast at the merchant hall existing till the present day. During the war and the People's Republic of Poland the tradition died. In **1949** the *Kraków Merchant Congregation* was liquidated. The merchants, known then as private traders and greengrocers, could barely vegetate. But when the *Congregation* was reactivated in **1989**, the merchant holiday was revived and its celebrations were recreated. The holiday traditionally took place on the **first Sunday** after the Day of the *Immaculate Conception of Virgin Mary*, which usually falls on the first Sunday in December. In 1994 a new custom was introduced of knighting the salesmen for merchants with the original old ell. From 1995 the merchants' procession from the Church of St. Barbara has stopped at the



**Magiczny  
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*Town Hall Tower*, and there the chairman of the council of *the Kraków Merchant Congregation* reads out the merchant address. From 1996 this address has been announced by the trumpeters who play the *Heynal of St. Mary* from the *Town Hall Tower*. From 1999 the procession has been led by a squire on a horse bearing a large flag depicting the image of the proud ship in full sail. The ship symbolises the eternal longing of the Kraków merchants for the achievement of the frequently far-out and difficult goal. Persistence and assiduity formed the basis of Kraków's power.

*text: Michał Niezabitowski*