



Comber Babski

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According to the PWN Popular Encyclopaedia of 1982, *Comber* (English: saddle) means “meat with bone from the lumbar part of back of slaughtered and hunted animals.” It may be a hare’s or rabbit’s comber, but whoever heard of a woman’s comber?!!! But it does exist, at least in Kraków. *Comber Babski* is an old Kraków tradition celebrated at the end of the carnival which, contrary to its name, had nothing to do with ritual cannibalism. The word *comber* originates in German and has two meanings. The second one denotes that the Polish verb *combrzyć* means as much as *to frolic*, and - to be honest - to frolic strongly.

Ostatki (Shrovetide) that traditionally started with the Fat Thursday’s belly-worship was particularly pompously celebrated in Kraków, mainly thanks to the women. On Tuesday preceding the Ash Wednesday they gathered at the Church of Our Lady of the Sand (corner of Karmelicka and Garbarska Streets) forming quite a division. This general levy was recruited mainly among female vendors trading in vegetables that ripened at the fertile lands of Czarna Wieś, Kawitory and Łobzów. These vendors were called in Kraków simply *baby* (a pejorative term denoting women, pronounced to rhyme with ‘flabby’). Thus, on this day the *baby* wore fancy clothes dressing up as great ladies. But instead of satin, tulle, silk and lace they used crude bags and straw, and the place of carefully styled ringlets was taken by shavings plaited into their hair. When they all reached the gathering site, they formed a battle line and started for Kraków towards the shoemaker’s gate. This solemn march might have little to do with drill principles but it was a sight to remember. At the front there was carried a huge straw puppet shaped like a man, called the *comber*. It was followed by the vendor who performed the function of marshal in the given year. In the first half of the 19th century this post was assigned five times in a row to a woman unknown by first and last name, but known by her nickname of *Wise Maryna*. The rest marched behind the *Marshall in a skirt*. It needs to be added that the whole company of women was already fairly tipsy even despite the fact that it was rather before noon. The parade reached the Kraków Main Market Square about noon taking hold of the City and its inhabitants. Kraków changed into the *Republic of Women*. They ran about the market and the neighbouring streets chasing men. Young boys, particularly those who did not manage to find a wife during Shrovetide, were chained to a large block of wood that they had to drag around the market for the amusement of the mob. A garland of dry haulm was hanged on their necks for decoration. Older staid and married men were surrounded, accosted (Polish term: *combrzeni*), forced to wild gambols and taken hostage. In order to buy themselves out they had to pay ransom in tinkling coins and give countless kisses. One year Jacek Przybylski, Professor of the Kraków’s Academy living in the 18th century and well-known for his stinginess (which the stingy call thrift), danced for several hours and finally fell down. But the women did not slacken and the respectable professor had to pay ransom. Generally it was great fun for everybody. Even in the 19th century the circle of dancers on the market became so large that people holding hands surrounded the whole building of the Cloth Hall. Today such a sight is hard to imagine. The event climaxed at the time when, at the sign from the (female) marshal, the women assaulted the comber’s doll and tore it to pieces in the twinkling of an eye. However, this did not stop the fun which sometimes lasted till the Ash Wednesday.

Comber Babski survived till the end of the **Republic of Kraków**. In 1846 the Austrian police prohibited further celebrations. No wonder that the authorities of the conservative Habsburg monarchy stopped this feminist event. However, it is strange that many traditions prohibited by the occupant were revived in more convenient times, and the *Comber Babski* did not.



**Magiczny
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Are we so afraid of a one-day reign of women in the city

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