

## Bird Kings

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The oldest views of Kraków, starting from the one of **1493** included in Hartman Schedel's *Opisanie Świata (Description of the World)*, depict a city surrounded with walls and a wreath of high defensive towers. The city fortifications are fairly impressive to us, and they had to evoke respect in the potential aggressor and the feeling of safety among the inhabitants. However, one cannot forget that walls alone, even the strongest ones, were of little import if they were not guarded by trained defenders. This was the cause of a vital problem. Neither the duke nor the king was obliged to defend the city, should the need arise. During the war the royal army had to fight in the field, while the city defended itself. This system was in line with the interests of both the burghers and the whole country. But how were the burghers, that is shoemakers, tailors, merchants, blacksmiths, tanners, etc., to stand in need on the walls if they normally worked with needles, hammers or elbows and not with swords or partisans? The answer to this question is not particularly hard to come up with. The burghers had to be trained in the military trade. To this end the medieval cities established *Sharpshooters' Societies*. These organisations training the burghers in the military trade were named after the fact that the basic skill acquired by burghers was to be accurate shooting with a bow, a crossbow and a rifle. They did so by shooting to a wooden bird hung on a high mast. The cock substituted a shooting target. Why the cock? Because this bird is a symbol of watchfulness. It gets up early in the morning and announces the taking over of control of the hens in the farmyard with a loud crow. The burghers were to be such watchful guards of the city walls.

The beginnings of the Kraków's *Sharpshooters' Society* cannot be easily determined. It must have been established within a short time distance from the Kraków's location (1257), probably in relation to the privilege of Leszek Czarny upon which Kraków was surrounded with walls (1286). Certain references to the existence of the Society come only from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. *The Behem's Code* (1505) provides an illustration depicting burghers shooting at a bird. In 1565 the city council founded a silver cock for the Sharpshooters' Society, a remarkable jewel of the Kraków's artistic craftsmanship, that is kept today in the Historical Museum of Kraków. The shooting range of the Society was initially located near the Mikołajska Gate in the area situated between the low and high walls. It was called *celestat* from the German word *zielstatt* which can be translated as a place where they aimed. *The Sharpshooters' Society*, also known as *The Shooting School* or *The Knight's School*, survived till the fall of the First Republic of Poland (**1795**). It was revived only in **1831** at the times of the so-called *Republic of Kraków* (1815-1846). From this moment on it performed social, philanthropic and patriotic functions, as it reminded of the grandeur of the Polish state and Kraków. In 1837 *The Shooting Society* (as this was the official name then) moved to its new headquarters in Lubicz Street where a neo-Gothic palace was built. This palace, traditionally known as *Celestat*, houses the headquarters of the Society till the present day, and the garden, though much smaller, is called *The Shooters's Garden*. The representative rooms of the renovated *Celestat* accommodate the branch of the Historical Museum of Kraków dealing with *The History of the Sharpshooters' Society of Kraków*.

The history of the *Sharpshooters' Society* of Kraków is associated with the beautiful Kraków tradition of shooting for the title of the *sharpshooter's king* and his ceremonious enthronement. Everything takes place according to the long-set scenario. First, in the spring months the sharpshooters nominate candidates to this highest post at their meetings. Not everyone can



become the king. It has to be a long-term member with impeccable reputation and ... wealthy enough to give a feast for the noble society's members after his potential ingress. When the list of candidates is closed, the final contest may begin. The position of the king is decided by a sharp eye. The candidates gather at the shooting range (since 1966 it has been the shooting range of General S. Sosabowski's 6<sup>th</sup> Landing and Assault Brigade) and shoot to the wooden cock. The one who brings down the last piece of the bird with a well-aimed shot becomes the king. Those who win the second and third places become the Marshalls of the Society. But that's not over. In June, usually in the second half of the month but there is no fixed date, the ceremonious enthronement of the Bird's King takes place. First the sharpshooters march out of the *Celestat* towards the market square. The procession is attended by members of sharpshooters' societies from other cities, invited guests, and representatives of city and regional authorities. The sharpshooters of Kraków distinguish themselves by the outfits modelled on the old nobility attire comprised of colourful *kontusz* thrown on *żupan* tied with long, broad belts, hat with heron's feather, high shoes and, frequently, a sabre at the belt. The retiring king of the sharpshooters' society struts with the silver cock suspended on a chain placed around his neck, followed by the Marshalls with decorative staffs. The procession moves to the rhythm of a march played by the accompanying orchestra. The proper ceremony takes place on the stage at the Town Hall Tower. The old establishment (king and his marshals) confer their competences to the new one. The ascending king declares his nickname (e.g. the Bold, the Watchful, etc) and suspends the silver cock on his neck. Then he places a bunch of flowers at the stone commemorating Tadeusz Kościuszko's oath sworn on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1794 and at the Monument of Adam Mickiewicz. Finally, in the *Celestat* the sharpshooters and guests have a traditional meal of honey and gingerbread. The last element of the ceremony is the feast given by the new king. It takes place in one of the renowned restaurants in Kraków at the date set by the new king.

It used to be said in Kraków that it was the city of the true king sitting on the Wawel throne and of the bird's king. Today the kings of Wawel sleep their eternal dream in the basement of the Kraków Cathedral. Their honour is proudly guarded by the bird's kings. Kraków is still a royal city not only by name but also by office.

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