

Andrzej Bobkowski's Krakow

There is no doubt that Krakow was one of the most important places in Andrzej Bobkowski's life. Joanna Podolska brilliantly and in great detail described the Krakow "paths" of the author of *Szkice piórkami* ("Sketches in Ink") in the volume *Bobkowski wielokrotnie* ("Bobkowski Time and Again", Warsaw, 2014), and it is to her conclusions that I will make several references here. According to her, Krakow was (alongside Paris) the most important city in Bobkowski's biography.

Krakow was where the writer spent much of his childhood and youth, where – not without difficulty – he took his school-leaving exams, where he met his future wife Barbara, née Birtus, and where he published his first text in the Cracovian daily *Tempo Dnia*. It was in this city that his parents lived, from 1928 until their deaths (they are buried in the Rakowice Cemetery), along with many family members. Bobkowski stayed in regular touch with his relatives, especially his mother. He also continued to write for Krakow publications – Jerzy Turowicz's *Tygodnik Powszechny* and Kazimierz Wyka's *Twórczość* – for as long as he could.

Bobkowski arrived in Krakow in September 1926. His parents, Henryk and Stanisława, lived in Warsaw at the time

(his father, a Polish Army general, served in Modlin), and Andrzej spent almost two years living with his grandmother Maria and aunt Wanda Bobkowska. Their flat was on the first floor of the annexe of a townhouse at 60 Grodzka Street, in a property complex that belonged to the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession next to St Martin's Church. This was important, as the writer's family was partly Protestant. From Grodzka, Bobkowski set off to Na Groblach Square and the Nowodworski High School, where he continued the education he had begun in Toruń. In a townhouse at no. 12 on this square lived another aunt, Helena Czerwińska, and there he would often visit his younger cousins, Jerzy and Andrzej Czerwiński. There was one more important address on Na Groblach Square: no. 7 was home to the Preisendanz private girls' vocational school, attended by Barbara Birtus. She is said to have met her future husband Andrzej in spring 1932 on the islet on the Vistula River. Thereafter, Bobkowski was a frequent guest at the Birtuses' home in a townhouse at 25 Kochanowskiego Street.

Bobkowski was not the most diligent student, not to put too fine a point on it. He preferred to sunbathe by the Vistula, go off on bike trips, visit the local cinemas and theatres (revues at Bagatela), or duck into tea rooms and even pubs. Years later, he would recall the Feniks restaurant, where a friend of his revised for his school-leaving exams. During high school he also spent time with the Krakow wing of the Polish Socialist Party, where he met none other than Józef Cyrankiewicz and Wanda Wasilewska.

Summoned to the rescue, the future writer's parents arrived in Krakow in summer 1928. They and their son lived in Dębni, in a large flat on the first floor of a townhouse at 14 Konfederacka Street, right next to the then wooden Stanislaus Kostka church. Later Bobkowski would boast a little of his connections with the somewhat plebeian Dębni. In his war-time diary he reminisced fondly about the "classic rumpuses imported directly from Dębni and Podzamcze," and in one letter he wrote, "And the rest is up to the grace of God, as they say *round my way* in Dębni" (my emphasis).

His parents' care did little to help, and in 1932 Bobkowski failed his written Polish (sic!) final and was therefore not permitted to take the oral exams. He was punished by working in the locomotive workshops in Płaszów over the holidays. He then took his school-leaving exam re-takes – this time successfully – in February 1933. In September that year he submitted his papers for Warsaw School of Economics. This pretty much brought the Cracovian chapter of his biography to an end. Not quite, though, because at Christmas 1938 he would marry Barbara Birtus at St Stephen's Church on Sienkiewicza Street.

As I mentioned, though, Krakow recurred in his diaries and essays, usually with sentiment or lenient humour. In *Sketches in Ink* he recalled Taffet's antiquarian bookshop on Szpitalna Street, the Jewish shops on Wiśl, and family homes on Grodzka and Sławkowska, and upon seeing a small green tram compared it to "the Krakow no. 1". He also saw similarities to the city of his youth in Guatemala. "A good-natured little town, and so familiar

that at times I feel like we're living in Krakow," as he reported to Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. After the Second World War, when he met Andrzej Chciuk and Jacek Stwora in Paris, "he only talked a lot about Krakow." Stwora spoke of how Bobkowski suffered from a kind of Krakow-sickness, and loved the city's atmosphere, even if he mocked the Krakauers and their provincialism.

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