

THE LEGEND OF THE WAWEL DRAGON





he site where Kraków was built appears to have been chosen by one of the Slavonic tribes at some point between 600 and 800 A.D. The choice was no accident, because for centuries people had been searching for good sites for their permanent settlement – places that were comfortable to live in and easy to defend. They found the ideal site on a broad plateau with the River Vistula flowing through it. There in its flood plain rose a high, limestone hill, which was later named Wawel Hill. A defensive castle was soon built on this hill, and at its foot a small town arose. Its king bore the name Krak, and it is from him that the modern name of Kraków is derived.

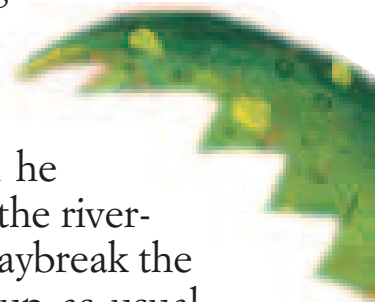
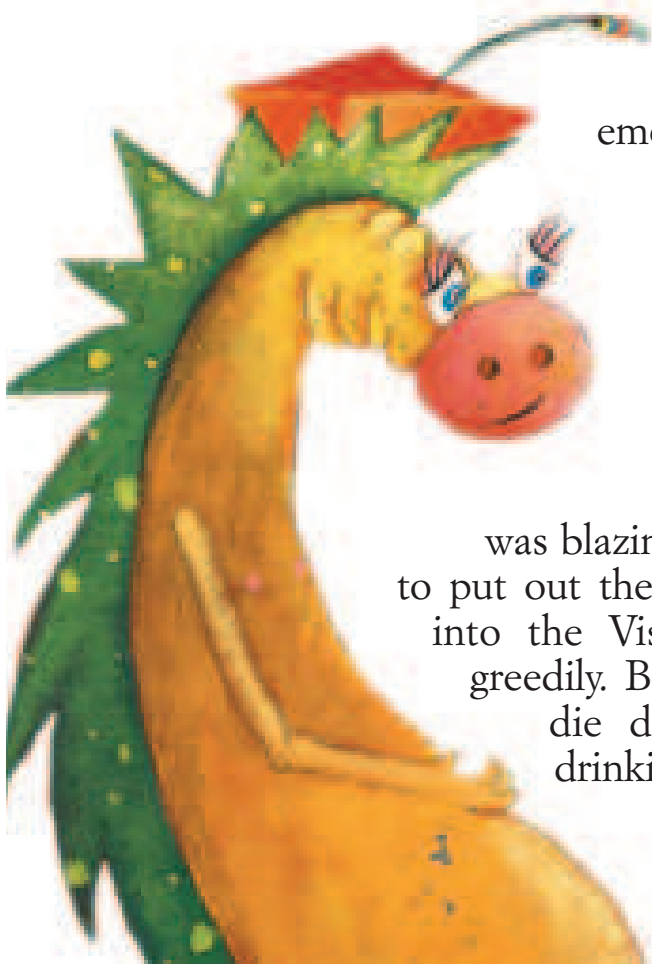
Nowadays Wawel Hill does not seem very high to us, but centuries ago Krak's castle would have towered over the district. The cliffs it was built on were very high, full of rifts and deep, hidden caves. One of these caves was the lair of an enormous dragon. The dragon had either been slumbering or living on stored food until people started setting up convenient dwellings near its lair. Or else maybe it only arrived in the area when herds of livestock animals started grazing there. In any case, one day at dawn it appeared by the River Vistula, and from then on it devoured some cattle and sheep on a daily basis. According to rumour, it even carried off young women, and was particularly fond of virgins. The townspeople became afraid to leave their houses. Soon the whole town was in a constant state of terror, and some of the settlers started preparing to leave the place.

King Krak realised that unless he succeeded in defeating the dragon he would have to abandon the

newly founded town and lose the lands he had managed to settle. So he summoned his bravest knights and warriors, and offered them his daughter's hand in marriage, along with his entire kingdom as a reward for slaying the dragon.

The chronicles do not record how many of them took on the fight against the dragon, but in any case none of them was successful in vanquishing it. The townspeople lived in greater and greater fear as they helplessly watched the dragon devour more and more animals and carry off the last few virgins. One day a young cobbler's apprentice who was learning to make shoes for the burghers of Kraków came to see King Krak. By all accounts his name was Skuba. He told the king he was very keen to marry the princess, so he would slay the dragon, but to do it he needed a large amount of sulphur, plenty of sheep skins and some mutton fat. King Krak gave orders for Skuba to be provided with everything he asked for. Then the cobbler shut himself up in his cottage, where he spent the whole night busily sewing together the skins, filling them with sulphur and smearing the fleece with fat. Just before dawn he summoned the royal guard to help him carry the enormous ram he

had made to the river-bank. At daybreak the dragon woke up as usual, emerged from its cave and happily swallowed the meal prepared for it. But to its surprise, instead of feeling well fed it felt as if a bonfire were burning in its belly, where the flames were growing fiercer by the second – the sulphur was blazing in its bowels. In an effort to put out the flames, the dragon leaped into the Vistula and began to drink greedily. But as the flames refused to die down, it went on and on drinking the river water, while its



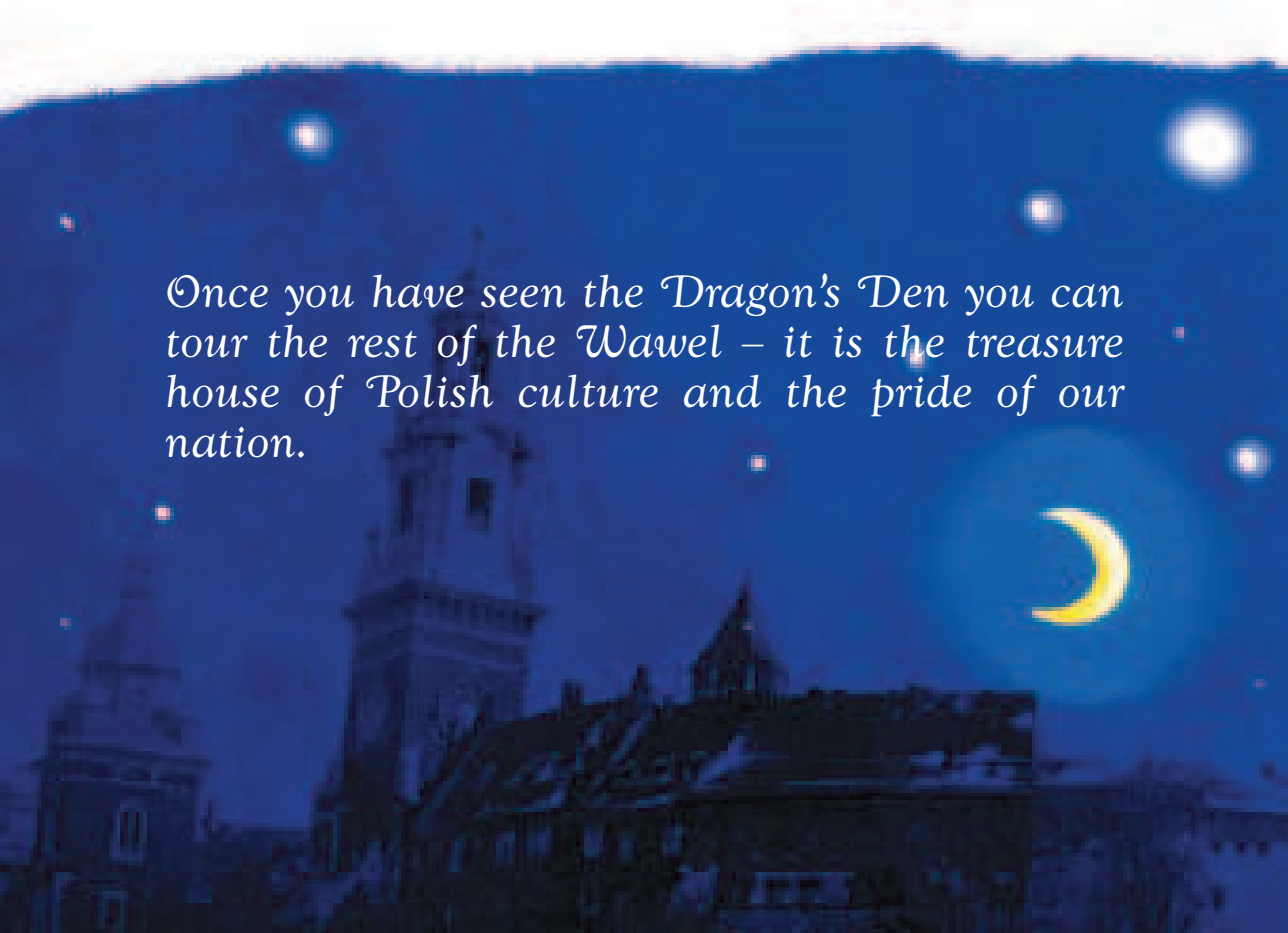
belly swelled and swelled until it was much too full and burst.

King Krak was overjoyed to hear that the dragon had been slain, and Skuba the cobbler was hailed as a hero by the townspeople who were happy to have regained their peaceful life. The princess was thrilled too, because she considered it a good thing to have a wise and canny husband.

To this day in Kraków people who are admired for dealing with tricky situations in a shrewd way are sometimes described in the local slang as “skubany” – deriving their resourcefulness from Skuba the cobbler.

To this day there is still something left of the dragon – a vast, empty cave, known as “Smocza Jama”, or The Dragon's Den. You can go inside it during your visit to the Wawel. As they walk along the Vistula embankment, the children of Kraków stop to admire the dragon's statue which belches fire every now and then, terrifying the youngest ones.

Nowadays the Wawel dragon is Kraków's most famous, best loved mascot. Almost all the tourists take one home with them.



Once you have seen the Dragon's Den you can tour the rest of the Wawel – it is the treasure house of Polish culture and the pride of our nation.

THE LEGEND OF THE TRUMPET-CALL FROM ST MARY'S TOWER





his story concerns the taller tower described in the previous legend, and is famous in many countries, even including Kazakhstan.

The tower is 81 metres in height, and soon after its completion it was named the Watchtower. In those days it was the tallest building in Kraków. Times were not peaceful, and European cities were constantly being

attacked by hordes of nomadic Mongol barbarians, or sometimes simply by rapacious neighbouring states, so the Kraków city councillors decided that a sentry should stand on guard in the tower all round the clock, to warn the citizens of approaching danger. For many years a succession of sentries did warn them on several occasions, thanks to which they were able to prepare a timely and effective defence. Serving as the sentry on the Watchtower was an honour attained only by an exceptionally responsible select few men, who were known to all the citizens.

At that time Kraków was not just a beautiful city, but also a rich one, so it could not avoid being raided by the Tatars. The individual Tatar hordes that had been attacking small towns and villages to carry off all sorts of booty, especially captives to sell into slavery, were more and more often joining together to conquer new terrain. The times were dangerous because the heirs to Genghis Khan had extended their realm, occupying Ruthenia and Hungary, and were now starting to extend it into the Polish lands and even further west. This was when the Battle of Legnica was fought, one of several battles that determined the future of all Europe, at which the Polish Duke Henryk the Pious halted the Tatar advance, but suffered great losses in the process. He paid the highest price, killed on the field of battle along with most of his knights, but the Mongol expansion was stopped, and soon ceased to be a direct threat to Europe.

One day in 1240, at early dawn when the city was still asleep, the Tatar cavalry appeared not far from the fortified walls. The only person to notice the danger was the sentry on the St Mary's Church Watchtower. Immediately he began to sound the alarm call, rousing the troops and the citizens from their beds. And he played his trumpet without stopping in all directions, to warn as many people as possible.

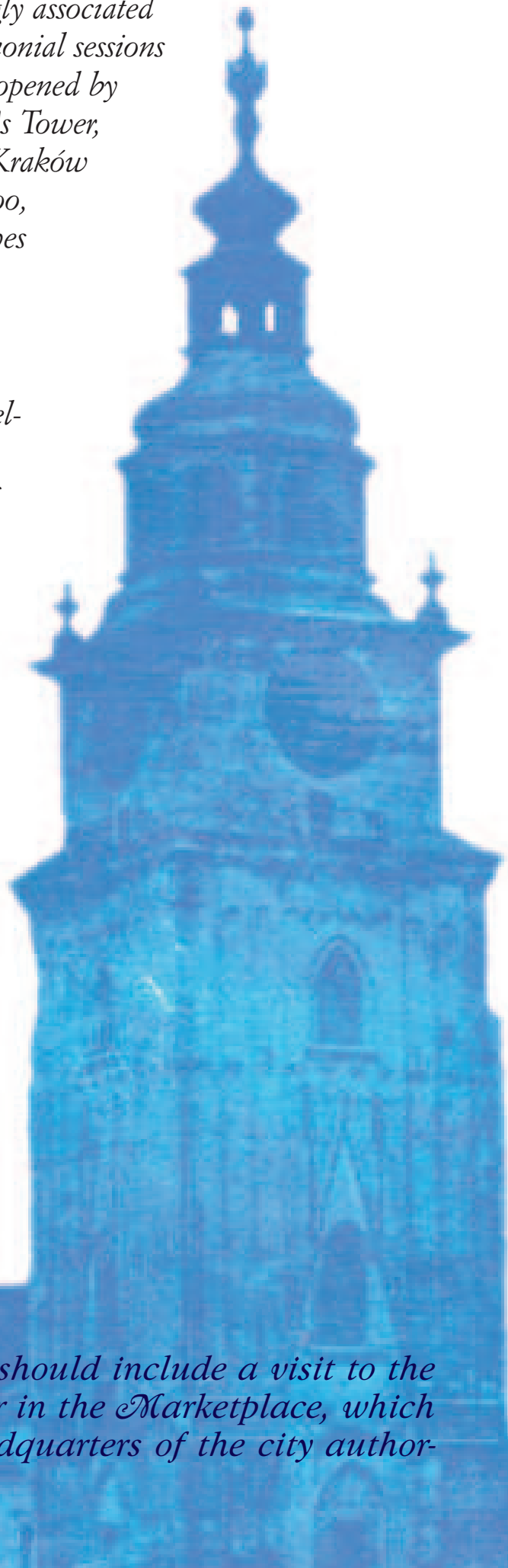
When the Tatars stormed the city, their first target was the sentry who had thwarted their attempt to catch the defenders off guard. A Tatar arrow pierced his throat and cut him off in mid-note of the alarm call he was playing. But it was too late for them to capture and pillage Kraków. The soldiers and citizens had appeared on the walls and turrets by now, and fought off the Tatar attack. The sentry who had saved the city at the cost of his own life was buried with great honours, and the memory of his sacrifice is still alive today, commemorated by the trumpet-call that resounds from St Mary's Tower. Played to all four quarters of the globe, it marks each hour, and is cut short on the same note as it was by the Tatar arrow almost 800 years ago. First the trumpeter plays in the direction of Wawel Hill, in honour of the king, then he turns towards the Town Hall Tower out of respect for the councillors, then towards the Florian Gate to greet arriving guests, and finally towards the Little Marketplace to play for the merchants and citizens.

Over the years the Kraków trumpet-call – known as the “hejnał” – has become a symbol of self-sacrifice for your country. Programme One on Polish Radio broadcasts it nationwide every day at twelve noon at the start of its main news programme, and many other Polish-language radio stations all round the world broadcast it too, to confirm their ties to their home country.

The “hejnał” is so strongly associated with Kraków that ceremonial sessions of the City Council are opened by the sentry from St Mary's Tower, who is invited to other Kraków ceremonies and events too, including football matches played by the local club, Cracovia, which was founded in 1906.

According to many travelers, the legend of the St Mary's trumpet-call is told on several continents. You can even hear it on the steppes of Kazakhstan and Mongolia, where the story of the bugler who thwarted the capture of Kraków is known as the Legend of the Golden Trumpet.

A tour of Kraków should include a visit to the Town Hall Tower in the Marketplace, which used to be the headquarters of the city authorities.



THE LEGEND OF THE JEWISH WEDDING



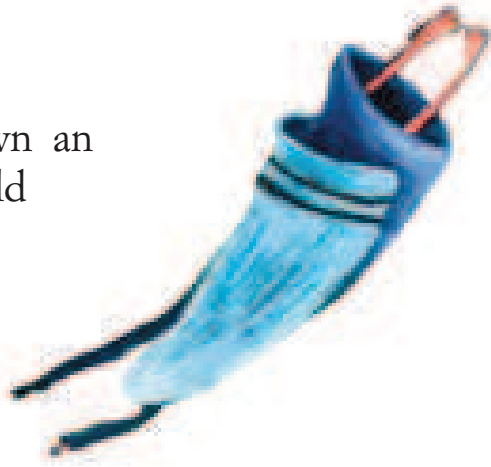


Kazimierz, which in olden days was a separate town, is now one of the best known districts of Kraków. It is named after Kazimierz III the Great, who founded it in 1335 not far from the dynamically developing city of Kraków.

Because of its proximity to Kraków, in the fifteenth century Kazimierz was gradually settled by large numbers of Jews who had been expelled from other European kingdoms and dukedoms, and who came here to do business. In time, more and more synagogues were built alongside the city's many churches and convents. The Jewish community developed rapidly, and soon in the area now centred on Szeroka, Józef and Jakub Streets an almost independent Jewish Town had come into being.

Nowadays Kazimierz is a must for any tourist, containing many cultural sites that testify to the co-existence of the Poles and the Jews. Tourists searching for signs of Jewish culture can visit the synagogues in Kazimierz, especially the Tempel, the Isaac and the Popper. The Remuh synagogue and the neighbouring cemetery also attract large crowds of tourists from all over the world, and it is with this particular place that the legend of the Jewish wedding is connected. For centuries this legend has acted as a warning to those of the Jewish faith.

One day in the Jewish Town an ostentatious wedding was held opposite the Remuh synagogue. The bride and groom were happy to be starting their life together, but their parents were even happier.



Through this marriage they were uniting two of the richest Jewish families, and had great hopes for a prosperous future. The wedding was magnificent and sumptuous. The hosts and guests were so completely absorbed in singing, eating and drinking that they stopped paying attention to the passage of time. They went on celebrating for far longer than they had planned, continuing their revels into the early hours of the Sabbath – a holy day for all Jews. They ignored the rabbi's appeals and warnings as he anxiously noted the turn the wedding was taking, and tried to prevent them from committing sacrilege. Time went by, it was already evening on the Sabbath and the sun had long since set, but still the revellers went on enjoying themselves. Suddenly a very strong wind began to blow, and the ground and neighbouring houses started shaking. The band fell silent, the dancing stopped, and the dining tables overturned. The bride and groom, their parents and all the other revellers looked around them in terror, seeking the help of the rabbi, but it was

already too late. The earthquake shook the entire Jewish Town, but only in one place did the earth cave in – right under the feet of the banqueters. They all fell beneath it, and the ground went on shaking and moving until it had covered them over, making a natural grave. None of the Jews who witnessed the tragedy had the courage to try and dig out the buried revellers. Several days



later they were still so terrified that they decided to build a low wall right round the grave – once the site of the wedding party – so that no one should ever commit any such act again.



For centuries nothing has changed in front of the synagogue. The entire walled area, located on what is now Szeroka Street, has remained vacant for hundreds of years, as a warning not to break the Law. And they say that since then no Jewish wedding has ever been celebrated in Kazimierz on a Friday. Those who visit the site today can see that opposite the entrance to the Remuh synagogue there is still a fenced, undeveloped flower-bed – a dreadful reminder for those of the Jewish faith.

On a visit to Kraków it is worth finding time to tour the synagogues in Kazimierz, including the Remuh, the Tempel, the Isaac, the Popper, the High and the Old synagogues, and also the churches, including the Church on the Rock and the Pauline monastery, St Catherine's and the Augustine monastery, and Corpus Christi and the monastery of the Lateran Canons

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