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# ZAKOPANE STYLE – NATIONAL STYLE

Around the turn of the century a number of different architectural styles, each with its own advocates, vied for the accolade of acknowledgement as the ‘national style’ (*styl narodowy*). In fact, during the final two decades of the Polish partitions much ‘objective’ thought was given by architectural historians and architects to the constituent forms of native architectural traditions. Szymon Szyller, the architect of Warsaw’s Poniatowski Bridge of 1905, published a grammar of Polish architectural forms under the title of *Tradycja budownictwa ludowego w architekturze polskiej* (Native Building Traditions in Polish Architecture, 1917), the result of years of architectural ‘archeology’. Szyller, in his own architectural practice, favoured a Renaissance style derived from sixteenth- and seventeenth-

century buildings found in central Poland (usually designed by Italian architects). He was responsible for the restoration of the cathedral at Płock in 1902–03 which contained both romanesque and Renaissance elements.<sup>1</sup> Others, such as Józef Pius Dziekoński, favoured a pointed variant of the Gothic known as Vistula-Baltic Gothic (*Gotyk Nadwiślański*). He designed Warsaw’s St Florian’s church, built between 1888 and 1901, in this style. Although highly influenced by the ideas of the English and French Gothicists, and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc in particular,<sup>2</sup> Polish advocates of this style believed that they had identified national characteristics in the Gothic found in towns

along the Vistula river in the north of Poland. Despite their pretensions to architectural ‘archeology’, these advocates of historicism were largely motivated by aesthetic proclivities. The claims made for the vernacular architecture and design from the Podhale region, then under the rule of the Habsburgs, whilst certainly no less exaggerated than those for the Gothic, held greater significance for the history of design in Poland. For Podhale culture not only caught the imagination of a great number of architects and designers, but Polish society across all three partitions.

In the nineteenth century the town of Zakopane was the regional centre of the Podhale area, the northern foothills below the Tatra mountains. It was largely populated by an ethnically and linguistically distinct people, the *Górale* (Highlanders).<sup>3</sup> Podhale was one of

<sup>1</sup> An earlier restoration of the cathedral had been made in the sixteenth century by Italian craftsmen led by two architects, J. Cini and B. Zanobi de Gianotis. See W. Budka, ‘Działalność architektów i rzemieślników przy restauracji katedry płockiej w XVI w.’ in *Rzeczy Piękne*, no. 5, 1925.

<sup>2</sup> Viollet-le-Duc, in fact, was employed as an advisor during rebuilding of the castle at Gołuchów in 1872 and the Czartoryski Museum in Cracow in 1878. See A. Miłobędzki, *Zarys dziejów architektury w Polsce*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warsaw, 1978, p. 296.

<sup>3</sup> The *Górale* migrated from the East to Europe in the twelfth century. Even today they remain distinct ethnic group within Polish society in terms of language and social codes.



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Rówień Krupowa (Krupowa plain), ca. 1876-1878

On previous page: the way to Morskie Oko, 1902

ters and wood craftsmen in 1876.<sup>6</sup> It was also a major promoter of the region as a health resort, and Chałubiński, in particular, has been credited as the 'discoverer of Zakopane' (*odkrywca Zakopanego*) for encouraging the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia to come to the area to rest and recuperate in the pure mountain air. Under the influence of figures like Chałubiński, Zakopane became a major health resort attracting wealthy Poles from across all the partitions. Whilst the very richest built Alpine-style villas as summer retreats, the less affluent stayed in the town's many sanatoria.

The Podhale region symbolised a freedom unavailable in the rest of the partitions. Its isolation made it a place where Polish life was unhindered by the oppressions of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: be they the infamous web of petty bureaucracy that fettered the Monarchy together or the enervating politics of compromise in Vienna.<sup>7</sup>

Hej za mną w Tatry! w ziemię czarów,  
 Hey with me through the Tatras! into this magic  
 land  
 Na strome szczyty gór!  
 On to cliff tops!  
 Okiem rozbijem dal obszarów,  
 Our gaze will collapse distant territories,

<sup>6</sup> See H. Kenarowa, *Od Zakopiańskiej Szkoły Przemysłu Drzewnego do Szkoły Kenera*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, the mountainous region around Zakopane was virtually tax-free because the *Górale* refused to pay duties and Vienna's bureaucrats were unable to collect them.

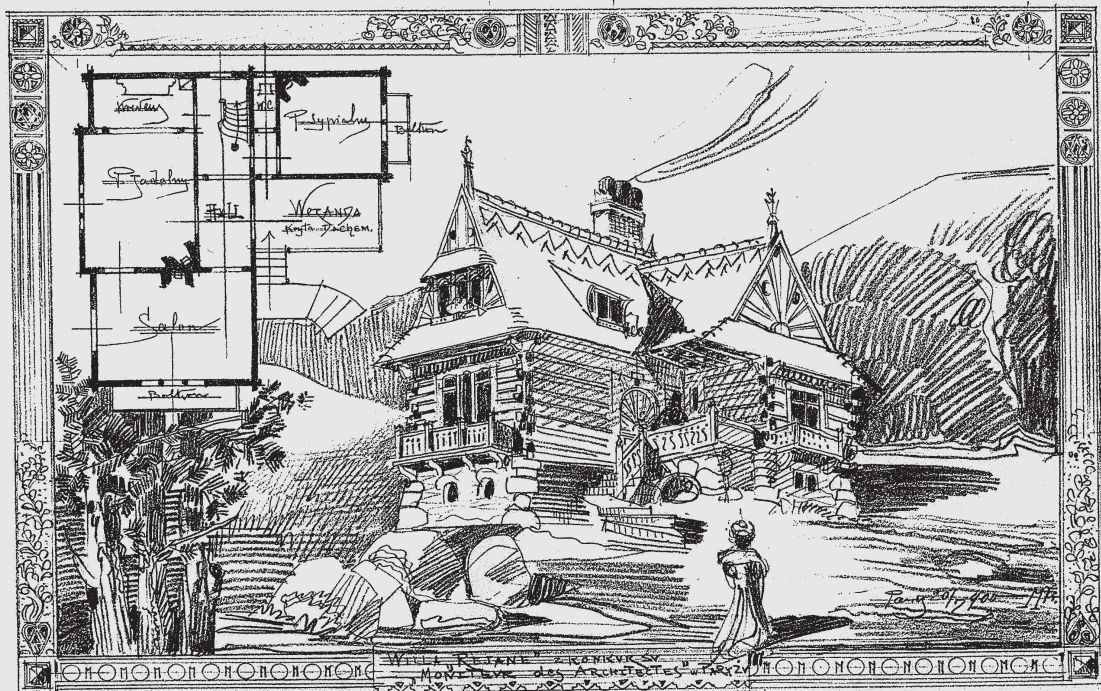
the poorest and most isolated areas, claimed as Polish by nationalists, in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Untouched by industry, its population survived as farmers and shepherds on the forested slopes and valleys of the Tatras. A key figure of the region was a doctor, botanist, national activist and mountaineer, Tytus Chałubiński, who had been a professor at the Warsaw Academy of Surgical Medicine until 1871. He came from Warsaw to stay in Zakopane for the first time in 1873 to combat a cholera epidemic.<sup>4</sup> This

<sup>4</sup> Although, according to the myths which have surrounded Chałubiński's life, he first saw the Tatras as a defeated liberal in 1849 fleeing from the Habsburg authorities: the mountains offered sanctuary.

experience led him to become one of the founders of the Tatra Society (*Towarzystwo Tatrzańskie*) in that year. As an institution established to promote and preserve *Górale* ways of life, the Tatra Society was a classic example of the nationalist / Positivist strategy of the institutionalisation and maintenance of Polish culture.<sup>5</sup> The Society sought to improve the social conditions of the local population and was a major force behind the establishment of a technical school in the town to harness the skills of local carpen-

<sup>5</sup> J. Bieniarzówna and J.M. Małecki, *Dzieje Krakowa*, III, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow, 1985, p. 297; L. Długolecka and M. Pinkwart, *Zakopane – przewodnik historyczny*, Wyd. PTTK 'Kraj', Warsaw 1989, p. 18.





WILLA W GÓRACH  
KONKURS «MONITEUR DES ARCHITECTES» I. NAGRODA

ARCH. F. MĄCZYŃSKI

Franciszek Mączyński, a design of villa "Réjane" (1900); 1<sup>st</sup> award at the "Villa Moderne" competition organized by the "Moniteur des Architects"

Czołami sięgniem chmur.  
Our foreheads will touch the clouds.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, this mountainous region's untouched natural beauty appeared evidence of an intact and 'pure' Poland. Halina Kenarowa, a historian, employing the familiar language of Polish messianism, described the significance of the Tatra mountains in this way: 'They were the Polish altarpiece during the partitions.'<sup>9</sup>

It was not a great leap to extend this vision of an uncontaminated Polish nature to the local Górale people; their lives, dress, tradi-

tions and possessions.<sup>10</sup> In 1886 Stanisław Witkiewicz, an artist and art critic from Warsaw, visited the Tatra mountains for the first time. As both nationalist and a fervent opponent of historicism in the arts, he found Górale architectural and decorative traditions what he later argued to be the essence of Po-

<sup>10</sup> Interest with peasant cultures in Poland was not restricted to the Zakopane region alone. Many Poles were actively recording vernacular culture in the Russian partition through associations such as the Polish Society for the Investigation of the Country (*Polskie Towarzystwo Krajoznawcze*). See M. Wawrzeniecki, 'The Peasant Art of Russian Poland' in C. Holmes (ed.), *Peasant Art in Russia*, The Studio, London, 1912, pp. 35-42.

lish culture in form.<sup>11</sup> This material culture seemed not sullied by the partitions but free of all foreign traces, like a living fossil formed 'when the characteristics of national genius were consolidated and fixed'.<sup>12</sup> Witkiewicz was much taken with the vernacular Górale homes: long, low wooden cabins constructed from great logs and insulated with straw; topped with a wooden-slatted, half-gable roof with deep overhanging eaves. They were characteristically decorated with simple, geometric patterns or plant forms on the door-frame or across the main structural beams inside the house. At the same time Witkiewicz and his supporters were also greatly concerned with the spread of 'Alpine' chalets erected by wealthy Poles from outside the region. His friend, Stanisław Eljasz-Radzikowski, recalling the 1880s, wrote in 1901: 'Zakopane was already covered with the homes of the squirearchy and drab cosmopolitan homes in a Swiss-style. It seemed that the native Górale cabin would disappear because many of them built homes quickly, and in speculation, in the style of the gentry.'<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Although Witkiewicz rejected contemporary trends in painting emanating from Paris and Munich as the absurd pursuit of novelty, he was not a traditionalist. Like Ruskin (to whom he is often compared), he sought a moral and social art and design practice. He is renowned an often dictum: 'It is better to paint the head of a cabbage accurately than the head of Christ badly.' Accordingly he was a forceful advocate of realism in the arts and a strong critic of historicism. See W. Noakowska, *Stanisław Witkiewicz: teoretyk sztuki*, Ossolineum, Wrocław, 1970.

<sup>12</sup> J. Topass, *L'art et Les Artistes en Pologne du Romantisme à Nos Jours*, Librairie Félix Alcan, Paris, 1928, p. 145.

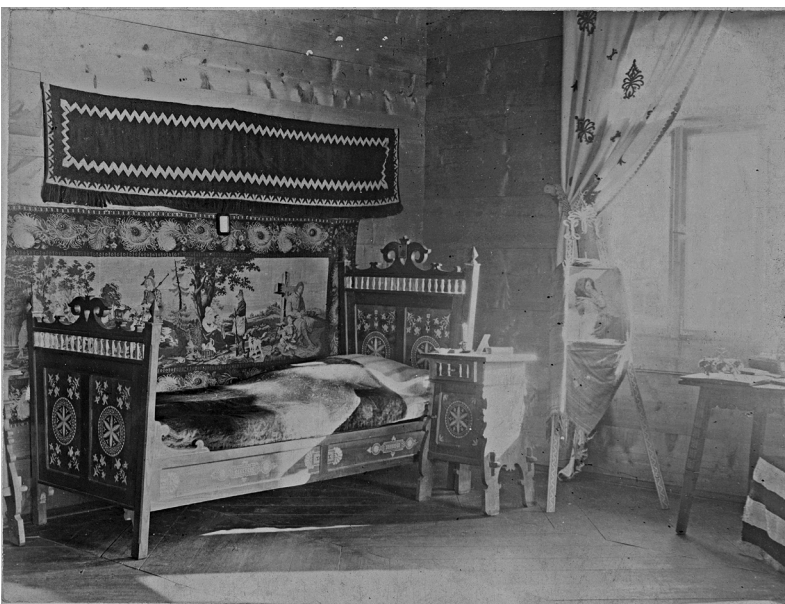
<sup>13</sup> S. Eljasz-Radzikowski, *Styl Zakopiański*, Cracow, 1901, p. 17.





Villa Koliba, designed by Stanisław Witkiewicz, ca. 1894

Below: a room of Zygmunt Gnatowski in Koliba, ca. 1894



Witkiewicz claimed the 'discovery' of the roots of a Polish national style in the wooden vernacular architecture of the region. Significantly, in this he differed from the supporters of historicist models which sought to restore particular architectural languages so as to revive the values of a particular historical epoch: the Renaissance and Gothic styles found advocates and intellectual justification as the fruits of 'golden ages' in Polish history. In contrast, the promotion of Zakopane Style (*Styl Zakopiański*) can be regarded as an example of what Adam Miłobędzki has identified in central Europe as 'the Romanic idealisation of the peasantry, and the unflin-

ching trust that in this peasant culture the authentic, unchanging traits of national tradition have been preserved'.<sup>14</sup> True to this prescription, Witkiewicz argued, contrary to ethnographic evidence, that the peasant material culture of the Podhale region held the last vestiges of a style that at some unspecified time in the past had been found all over Poland, and now only remained in the then near inaccessible foothills of the Tatras.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1890s Witkiewicz, then a resident of Zakopane, and his colleagues; architects, Julian Orchowicz, Stanisław Porczyński, Teodor Burze, and Eugeniusz Wesołowski, Stanisław Barabasz, and literary propagandists such as Stanisław Eljasz-Radzikowski, collectively and self-consciously set about recasting the raw materials that they had found in Zakopane into an intellectually complex decorative and architectural language. Witkiewicz wrote in a letter to his sister in 1898: 'We build more. One home is completed, two more are under way. *Zakopane is developing well, in its own style.*'<sup>16</sup> This first home, to which Witkiewicz referred, was the *Willa Koleba* which he designed in 1892 for Zygmunt Gnatowski from the Ukraine in which to house his family and entertain his circle of artistic friends (including the celebrated American / Polish actress Helena Modrzejewska). In plan, this relatively simple

<sup>14</sup> A. Miłobędzki, 'Architecture in Wood Technology, Symbolic Content, Art' in *Artibus et Historiae*, no. 19, 1989, p. 181.

<sup>15</sup> A.K. Olszewski, *Dzieje Sztuki Polskiej 1890–1980*, Interpress, Warsaw, 1988, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> S. Witkiewicz in W. Noakowska, *Stanisław Witkiewicz*, p. 152 (my emphasis).





Stanisław Witkiewicz and the contractors of the House under the Firs (Dom Pod Jedlami) with its model, December 1899

Below: House under the Firs, ca. 1900

ne Style homes, was commissioned by Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski, an economist and historian, and erected in nine months with the aid of some of the style's most accomplished craftsmen; Wojciech Rój, Jan Obrochta and Jędrus Gąsienica. This building, displaying an extraordinary virtuosity of craftsmanship in wood inside and out, revealed the style at its greatest distance from traditional roots. Built on a sloping site, the House under the Firs had a plan of concealed complexity with three floors, terracing and projecting gables that held entire rooms. The dominant, steeply-pitched roof was a complex of brick chimneys, deep eaves and dormer windows. These characteristics owed much to the spread of the Free English architectural style across Europe, via Germany

building followed the characteristic form of the *Górale* home; a long barn-like building with sharp gables at either end. Similarly, the hooded entrance porch was positioned mid-way along the north facing long wall. But the differences between this building and its stylistic sources betray architectural sophistication: the informally positioned dormer windows; the rusticated stonework foundations; and the high number of decorative motifs derived from the vernacular which cloak the building. The sun motif, typically found on the gable ends of *Górale* homes, for example, was applied to window frames, decorative panels and the small pitched roofs above the dormer windows in the *Willa Koleba*. Witkiewicz employed the skilled local sculptor, Wojciech Brzega, to produce these decorative elements.

The Zakopane Style reached its apotheosis in Witkiewicz's House under the Firs (*Dom pod Jedlami*) of 1897. This, the largest of Zakopa-



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Living room in the House under the Firs with furniture designed by Wojciech Brzega, 1902-1903

Dining room with a view at the living room in the House under the Firs

and its own vernacular revival, in the 1880s,<sup>17</sup> and an Arts and Crafts-inspired fascination with the commonplace and rustic.<sup>18</sup> But it was the deployment of local building and decorative techniques that was intended to express 'Polishness'. In decorative character the House under the Firs was unified and complete as the exterior decorative forms were repeated throughout the interior. The heart-shaped motifs found in the lattice fencing on the south facing walls of the building, for example, were repeated in the drawing room door-frames. No aspect of the home was left unconsidered, for Witkiewicz and his colleagues designed, and local craftsmen made every item of furniture, most of the fabric coverings and curtains, and the large free-standing ovens that heated the house in the Zakopane Style.

This circle of architects and craftsmen dedicated much energy to a range of fields within the applied arts. Wojciech Brzega, for example, designed highly mannered Zakopane Style tables and chairs in which the studded and exposed joints were utilised as subtle, rhythmic decorative devices. In their original context most *Górale* decorative motifs, such as the gable-end sun figure, appear to have resulted from constructional forms. The style's practitioners frequently

<sup>17</sup> T. Benton, S. Muthesius, and B. Wilkins, *Europe 1900–1914*, The Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1975, pp. 9-14.

<sup>18</sup> Witkiewicz is known to have corresponded with John Ruskin and sent photographs of either vernacular Podhale designs or his own Zakopane Style projects. Unfortunately, there is no record of Ruskin's response.



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employed such motifs in ways that were unknown to the vernacular. In a 1901 set of table and chairs, Stanisław Barabasz took the sun motif and a geometric floral design circumscribed by a hexagon (a popular motif found across Europe since the Middle Ages), and combined them to create an attractive chair-back. In the late 1890s Witkiewicz produced a range of designs for porcelain jugs and bowls derived from a local ladle notable for its highly carved handle, which was used to drink goats milk. The latter were produced by a Sevres ceramic manufacturer under the name of *Le Style Polonaise*.<sup>19</sup>

The Zakopane Style closely paralleled other neo-vernacularist practices of the day. In Hungary, for example, Károly Kós and his circle of architect-designers exercised their nationalist vision by, initially, collecting folk artefacts, and then in the early years of the twentieth century, designing buildings that look surprisingly similar to those built by these Polish patriots.<sup>20</sup> Despite Witkiewicz's claim to have tapped a national vein, it would appear that he and his followers were part of a pan-European current of interest in the revival of vernacular tradition. As Adam Miłobędzki has argued, in those nations threatened or marginalised by imperialism, the vernacular became 'symbolic of national unity' (such as Poland), or, for others, of 'social progress' (such as Hungary).<sup>21</sup> Further-

more, the Zakopane Style, despite its claims to have tapped a vernacular source and to have rejected historicism, was, in fact, a hybrid style. In both peasant architecture and furniture one can find traits of undisguised historical ornament such as late Renaissance carved scrolls: this was not a form of revived historicism, but an authentic tradition of applied art.<sup>22</sup> But the Zakopane Style was less a 'natural' continuation of local traditions by *Górale* craftsmen than a refinement of those elements of the vernacular which met with Witkiewicz and his colleagues' approval.

The Zakopane Style was also self-conscious nationalist affair steered by intellectuals and artists. The political aspect of the Style is made clear in the controversy surrounding the local *fachschule* in Zakopane in the late 1880s.<sup>23</sup> Between 1886 and 1896 the School of Wood Industry was under the directorship of Franciszek Neuzil, a Czech architect of picturesque Tyrolean homes (an 'alien' form of mountain building types regarded as bland by the supporters of the Zakopane Style). His teaching methods and enthusiasm for the German Renaissance style in the applied arts drew fire from the supporters of the Zakopane Style who argued that the School threatened to destroy local skills and deprive young *Górale* craftsmen of their own native

traditions. Witkiewicz and his colleagues orchestrated a successful campaign against the School's educational programme (Neuzil was replaced by Edgar Kovats in 1896) which succeeded in 1901 when the directorship of the School passed to Stanisław Barabasz, a Polish architect and member of Witkiewicz's camp. This was not simply a campaign against Neuzil but against the authority of Vienna and the culture of the Dual Monarchy.

Although Zakopane and the Podhale region as a whole had drawn artists and writers from the 1850s, the activities of Witkiewicz and his friends in the 1890s gave the culture of the region a great boost.<sup>24</sup> In fact, by the early 1900s an informal artists' colony had formed. Many painters, writers, musicians and actors moved to the region and, consequently, *Górale* mythology and patterns of life began to play a major role in Polish high culture. Jan Kasprówicz, a poet, originally from the Prussian partition, came to Zakopane for the first time in 1891. His writing was strongly influenced by the mountainous landscape and, enamoured with the peasant culture that he found there, he became one of the leading figures agitating for the Tatra Museum's own building in the town from 1902. Despite Zakopane's distance from the cultural centres of Cracow and Lwów, its attraction to the Polish intelligentsia lay in a peasant-inspired ideology rooted in the twin constructs of the liberty of the

<sup>19</sup> S. Eljasz-Radzikowski, *Styl Zakopiański*, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> A. Székely, *Károly Kós*, Budapest, 1979.

<sup>21</sup> Miłobędzki, 'Architecture in Wood...' in *Artibus et Historiae*, no. 19, 1989, p. 200.

<sup>22</sup> R. Reinfuss, 'Elementy renesansowe w polskim meblarstwie ludowym' in *Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, no. 6, 1953, p. 327.

<sup>23</sup> The *Fachschulen* were the technical schools established for the training of craftsmen across Austria and her Crown lands. See A.S. Leventus, 'The Craft Schools in Austria' in *The Studio*, XXXV, 1905, pp. 201-19.

<sup>24</sup> S. Eljasz-Radzikowski, for example, wrote a popular guide-book to the area. *Pogląd na Tatry*, 1900, reprinted by K.A.W., Cracow, 1989.





A tenement house at 30 Chmielna street in Warsaw, designed by Jarosław Wojciechowski, 1906

were able to participate in what became a popular fashion for all things *Górale*. At the Town Theatre (*Teatr Miejski*) in Cracow in 1905, for example, audiences enjoyed a play called *Królowa Tatr* ('The Queen of the Tatras') or could visit an exhibition mounted by the Polish Applied Art Society (*Towarzystwo Polska Sztuka Stosowana*) which collected and displayed both original domestic utensils made by *Górale* craftsmen or furniture designed by renowned Zakopane Style artists. At the Society's annual exhibition in 1902 they showed a model of Witkiewicz's House Under the Firs. Amongst patriotic fashionable Warsaw it became highly modish to wear clothes inspired by Podhale peasant dress; white blouses with lacework, short, stiff waistcoats decorated with fine embroidery in richly coloured geometric patterns, and full woollen skirts. The greatest social cachet was not found, however, in wearing the most authentic costume, but one that had been designed by Stanisław Witkiewicz himself.<sup>25</sup> It is highly significant that the popular fashion for the Zakopane Style penetrated as far as Warsaw, which was then, at least on a political map of Europe, another city in another empire. Similarly, a few bizarre buildings were erected in Warsaw in the Zakopane Style such as Jarosław Wojciechowski's 1906 apartment house (30 Chmielna St). The facade of this four-storey building in a main shopping street mimicked, in decorative masonry, the primitive jointing of typical Zakopane wood

region and the inspirational nobility of its indigenous culture. Many of these 'immigrants' also became patrons of Zakopane Style architects and designers: a mutual reciprocation and confirmation. Life in Zakopane was not just 'the escape from the town' of the artists' colonies like that on the Mathildenhöhe outside Darmstadt from 1899, it was also an attempt to escape from Austrian rule.

Even those unable to leave the cities of Galicia to enjoy the life of a cultured highlander

construction techniques, and its stone balconies clumsily copied the subtle wood lattice work of Podhale craftsmanship.

But to question the logic of a rural, wooden building form derived from particular constructional techniques or carved decoration when built in stone cities; or to issue challenges to the Zakopane Style in terms of its Polish uniqueness, i.e. that its advocates were mistaken in finding national qualities in what was an international phenomenon – the vernacular mountain culture which scored central Europe on the slopes of the Carpathian mountains; or even to ridicule the attempt to establish a national style on the decorative traditions of a twelfth-century immigrant population, would be to misunderstand the national impulse in Polish design in this late period of the partitions. Of all the properties of this style, the most important was its symbolic value. It may be that Jarosław Wojciechowski's 1906 apartment house verged on architectonic absurdity, but as a patriotic gesture in an age of cultural activism it was as eloquent as the Raclawice Panorama<sup>26</sup> or Bolesław Prus's novel *Lalka* (The Doll, 1890).<sup>27</sup> To those Varsovians aware of the nationalist culture in the Tatras, the gesture embodied in Wojciechowski's employment of a building style originating in the distant mountains of another empire must surely have been clear.

<sup>26</sup> See B. Steinborn (ed.), *W kregu Panoramy Raclawickiej*, Ossolineum, Wrocław, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> See C. Milosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983, pp. 296-9.

<sup>25</sup> H. Kenarowa, in conversation in October 1987, and also A. Sieradzka, *Peleryna, tren i konfederatka. O modzie i sztuce polskiego modernizmu*, Ossolineum, Wrocław, 1991, pp. 70-7.