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Descriptions for the Multisensory UNESCO project

***Saints Philip and James Church in Sękowa***

Sękowa received its village rights under Magdeburg Law (1363), which was connected with the endowment of the local parish. The present wooden church was erected in the first quarter of the 16th century (around 1520), and then expanded in the 17th and 18th centuries (including the tower and *soboty*). The beam under the matroneum bears the date ‘1819’, referring to a renovation which included the strengthening of walls with braces. In addition, around 1888, the chancel was rebuilt and the interior of the temple was covered with a new polychrome. Unfortunately, only small fragments have survived to this day because the church was destroyed in 1915. The church was rebuilt in 1918 under the direction of Tadeusz Szydłowski; *soboty* were reconstructed in the 1950s, and the last complete renovation was carried out in 1984-1992.

The church, which has no aisle, is a log building with a chancel enclosed on three sides, which is narrower than the nave. The whole building is covered by a ridge roof (king post truss with carpenter’s marks), therefore, we can find *zaskrzynienia* in the nave. It is a construction that looks like suspended chests; the extended beams of the upper part of the chancel's side walls act as a support for the timber roof truss, shared by both the wider nave and the narrower chancel. The system combining the chest-like beam structure and the timber roof truss (in Polish: *system więźbowo-zaskrzyniowy*) was used only in Lesser Poland (the term is here understood as a historical region that mostly coincides with the area of former Western Galicia, much larger than the present voivodeship), and was a major achievement of the local medieval carpentry workshops.

The tower of the Sękowa church is topped with a dome with an octagonal lantern and a spherical cupola, open on the ground floor. The roofs of the open arcades go down to the level of the eaves overhanging the walls and are lowered only where the windows are, which creates a unique and picturesque view. The late-Gothic portals of the church (the tri-sectional western one and the southern one) have lintels enclosed with ogee arches. The portal between the chancel and the sacristy has been reconstructed. The wooden church lost its status of parish church in 1885 when Sękowa obtained a new brick neo-Gothic church.

**Destruction of the church during the First World War**

At first sight, the church in Sękowa may seem disappointing as, compared to other wooden temples on the UNESCO list, this interior looks poor and empty. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, the temple in Sękowa was considered the most beautiful church in Lesser Poland. Unfortunately, the building (and especially its interior) did not survive the First World War. In the first half of 1915, Gorlice was the sight of trench battles; the decisive one started with an attack of German and Austro-Hungarian troops on May 2. The Battle of Gorlice resulted in the Russian front being broken on May 2-5, 1915. Since 2010, the battle of Gorlice has been reconstructed in Sękowa every year, attracting reconstruction groups from Poland and abroad. Unfortunately, the wooden church in Sękowa was one of the victims of the battles; the Austrian infantry shooting ditches were located about 250 m from the monument and the soldiers basically dismantled the church, using the boards for planking and as firewood.

The interior elements lost in 1915 included late-Renaissance altars, a pulpit and a matroneum with an organ case from the early 17th century. The altars housed 16th-century paintings showing: Saint Joachim and the Holy Family, Saint Anne and the Virgin Mary and Child (Hodegetria). It also included a fragment of a late-Gothic triptych from the 16th century with depictions of Saints Nicholas, Stanislaus, Lawrence, and Bartholomew. The bell with the date ‘1540’ has been irretrievably lost as well. A preserved photograph of the interior of the church from before the First World War shows that the painting hanging today in the main altar was originally located in one of the side altars.

The rich iconography of the church allowed it to be reconstructed. The temple in Sękowa is the first rebuilt wooden church in Poland. In 1994, the exemplary conservation work in the temple was awarded an international prize and the medal of honour by Europa Nostra. In 2003, the church was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

**Interior**

The originally rich interior of the temple was destroyed almost completely during the First World War; the late-Gothic stone baptism font from 1522 is the best preserved element. The present side altars were built in contemporary times (the last quarter of the 20th century), while the 17th-century main altar was reconstructed in the 1940s. The crucifix on the rood beam dates from the beginning of the 16th century.

The main altarpiece dates back to the beginning of the 17th century; its structure represents forms typical of Renaissance and Mannerist furniture. We can say that they are transitional forms between Gothic triptychs and Baroque altarpieces in the form of architectural structures. We are, therefore, dealing with an altarpiece that preserves the composition of late-medieval structures (it has a middle part, sides that depict wings, a finial and a predella). At the same time, however, it is not a winged altarpiece anymore, but it is decorated with architectural elements (e.g. columns). Although the altar was made after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), it is supported by a traditional predella (with the depiction of the Dormition of the Virgin), but it does not include the tabernacle required by the Council.

The painting placed in the central part comes from the 16th century and depicts St. Nicholas along with Saints Benedict and Anthony. On the sides, we can see figures of Saints Andrew and Peter (17th century), and the finial holds a sculpture of Christ the Saviour of the World (Salvator Mundi: Christ Blessing, holding an orb). Later on, the interior obtained the images of the church's patron saints (Saints James and Philip) painted in medallions, and depictions of Polish saints (Saint Casimir and St. Stanislaus Kostka) in half-medallions on the sides of the altar.

The predella shows a 17th-century carved representation of the Dormition of the Virgin in an archaic composition where the dying Mother of God is lying on a bed, surrounded by the Apostles. Information about the last moments of Mary's life was taken from apocrypha, or texts that were not admitted to the Biblical canon. According to apocryphal sources, Mary died and was buried, and it was not until the third day after the funeral that Christ came to take her body to heaven. Admittedly, the concept of the Assumption of the Virgin with her soul and body became popular even at the dawn of modern times, and this is how artists started to show Mary’s last moments, even though the dogma was not accepted until the mid-20th century. The church in Sękowa, however, shows a depiction according to the medieval tradition (known in Byzantine art as *Koimesis*). According to legend, the Apostles gathered around the bed of the dying Mary despite the fact that, at that time, they had already been scattered all over the world because, at her request, they were miraculously transported by angels to accompany the Mother of God in the last moments of her life.

*Fun fact – 19th-century iconography of the church*

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the wooden church in Sękowa was considered the most beautiful and the most picturesque wooden church in Lesser Poland. Its pre-war form was commemorated in the work of enthusiastic Young Poland artists, such as Stanisław Wyspiański, author of a drawing made in 1888 as part of "Teka Grona Konserwatorów Galicyi Zachodniej" (ink on paper, 26 x 26 cm, National Museum in Kraków).

*Fun fact – what are “soboty”?*

*Soboty* are roofed arcades which were most often added to Lesser Poland's Gothic wooden churches in the 17th and 18th centuries. They could be closed or open; their main task was to protect the foundations of the building from rainwater.

It is not entirely clear why such arcades in wooden churches are called *soboty* (“Saturdays”). The name might derive from the fact that they were mostly used on Holy Saturday: some sources say that, before Easter, some churches would use them as confessionals. Moreover, the arcades were a perfect space for blessing the Easter Basket on Holy Saturday.

*Fun fact – what are “lisice”?*

*Lisice* are vertical, two-sided, and bolted tie beams covering the inside and outside walls. They were generally used every 3-4 metres, which would strengthen the structure of the wall. *Lisice* were added to the walls of log buildings, i.e. structures built with horizontal logs interlocked at the corners by notching. Such buildings were erected without the use of nails.

*Fun fact: Sękowa and its past glory*

The village was founded in the 14th century in the so-called ‘Sękowy Forest’, which belonged to the town of Biecz. After the 16th century, the village belonged to the crown lands of the Biecz Castellany. It is known that, at the end of that century, Sękowa had a functioning school. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the village was an important regional centre of weaving, and had a paper mill as well. At the end of the 19th century, Sękowa exploited oil from 60 wells, extracting an approximate amount of 350 tons per year.

*Fun fact – late-Gothic crucifix*

The rood beam holds a late-Gothic crucifix dating back to the beginning of the 16th century. The rood beam was a structural reinforcement of the chancel arch separating the nave and the chancel. The ancient tradition of putting the Holy Cross altar in the middle of the church gave birth to the custom of putting a crucifix on the beam, or the whole Crucifixion group (crucifix and figures of the Mother of God and St. John the Evangelist). The figure of Christ in the crucifix from Sękowa shows the influence of the work of Veit Stoss; the Saviour's body is tense, his legs straightened and shoulders tilted at a slight angle, similarly to Stoss’ depictions in St Mary's Church in Kraków or in the parish church in Iwanowice. Other characteristic features include the head on the right shoulder and a thick, almost turban-like crown of thorns. Such elements can be found in many Lesser Poland crucifixes dating back to the beginning of the 16th century (for example, a crucifix from the rood beam of St Mary's Church in Kraków, crucifixes from churches in Przeworsk and Zborówek or a crucifix from the Benedictine church in Staniątki). These depictions show Christ with his mouth and eyes open and, despite the visible wound in his side, it is difficult to clearly identify the Saviour as dead.

*Fun fact – ‘feretron’*

The Polish name *feretron* derives from Ancient Greek *phéretron* (‘a bier’), in Latin it is called *feretrum*. In ancient times, these objects were already used in religious worship to carry statues of deities, holding the *feretrons* with wooden rods. In the Middle Ages, *feretrons* and banners became popular worship tools among religious brotherhoods and guilds of craftsmen. The portable paintings were used in processions during religious ceremonies or pilgrimages. *Feretrons* of brotherhoods of the Rosary were particularly popular, showing the image of the Mother and Child handing the brotherhood members or monks a rosary. Mary giving the Rosary to St. Dominic, accompanied by Saint Catherine of Siena or Saint Rose of Lima, was a popular motif as well, especially in Baroque painting and graphics. According to legend, Saint Dominic received a rosary from the Mother of God and then became a proponent of rosary prayers himself. This is the depiction that is shown on the 18th-century *feretron* preserved in the church in Sękowa.