

## POLAND

### Dangers to the Sacred Wooden Architecture in Poland

In its annual report for the year 2000, the Polish National Committee of ICOMOS pointed to the principle dangers regarding five types of heritage monuments in Poland. They are:

- fire hazards to heritage monuments built of wood
- dangers created as a consequence of modernisation as well as the transformation of the ownership of industrial heritage sites
- dangers to military cultural heritage sites
- deterioration of heritage sites due to the lack of use or insufficient funding
- danger of theft and smuggling.

In its 2001/2002 report the Committee pointed to problems concerning dangers to industrial monuments; in this 2002/2003 report we present dangers to our sacred wooden architecture, which is an important, often unique, contribution to the European heritage. It consists of wooden churches, built between the 14th and 19th centuries, mainly Catholic, but there are also other churches, including Protestant, Orthodox, Catholic-orthodox, Dukebor, Jewish and Mariavites churches, the last characteristic only of Poland. There are also a few wooden Menonite churches of the Dutch settlers.

Wooden religious architecture consists not only of churches, but also chapels, belfries and morgues.

Presently there are 2785 items of religious wooden architecture in Poland (1729 churches – including temples of other religions, 730 belfries, 315 chapels and morgues). Most of them are in central and south-eastern Poland in Mazowsze, Małopolska, Podlasie (within Mazowieckie, Małopolskie, Podkarpackie, Śląskie, Lubelskie and Podlaskie Wojewodes).

The oldest and most precious churches built in the Middle Ages are the evidence of the mastery of their builders, quite often decorated with paintings as in Małopolska. About 70 churches were built in the 15th century such as in Dębno, Łopuszna and Nowy Targ. Six of them (from the 15th and 16th centuries) were nominated to the World Heritage List.

Their good maintenance is the concern of industry, institutions, organisations, parishes and also individuals who want to save these treasures of Polish culture for the following generations. These efforts, unfortunately, do not always bring the planned

results, because these monuments are at risk during times of both peace and war.

Fire hazards are of particularly high danger, especially to the most precious monuments, because fire destroys the monuments down to the foundations.

Between 1999 and 2000, 50 churches burnt down. The most frequent cause of fire is not damage to electric installations, but fire lit deliberately. This is why many churches no longer exist in Łączna (near Gliwice), Międzyrzec Górny, Łękawica near Żywiec, and lately in Długa Kościelna and in Wola Justowska in Cracow. Fires are often set to cover other delinquencies such as break-ins and theft, because in many churches real masterpieces can be found.

Thieves are frequently encouraged by inferior mechanical or electronic alarm systems. Many of the monuments are carefully watched by vigilant individuals, but still a large number of churches located a considerable distance from houses or farms are left without any custody.

The number of delinquencies including arson, theft and vandalism against sacred monuments (there are no separate statistics for wooden churches) during each period of 10 years stays the same and reaches about 1500 cases every year. The General Conservator of the Monuments in the Centre of Public Monuments in Warsaw has initiated a list of 91 wooden heritage monuments that are to be preserved and protected within a complex programme (guarding against threats such as the setting of fires, theft and vandalism).

Another very serious danger is nature itself. The flood of 1997–1998 caused much damage, especially in Silesia. Numbers of historical interiors were destroyed, as well as the main construction features of the buildings.

Finally, a very serious problem is created by substituting old churches with new ones. After a new church is built, the old one is usually abandoned and it deteriorates gradually. This can be prevented by revitalisation.

Preventing all these dangers requires first of all finances, then monitoring of the objects, followed by dissemination of knowledge concerning their value.

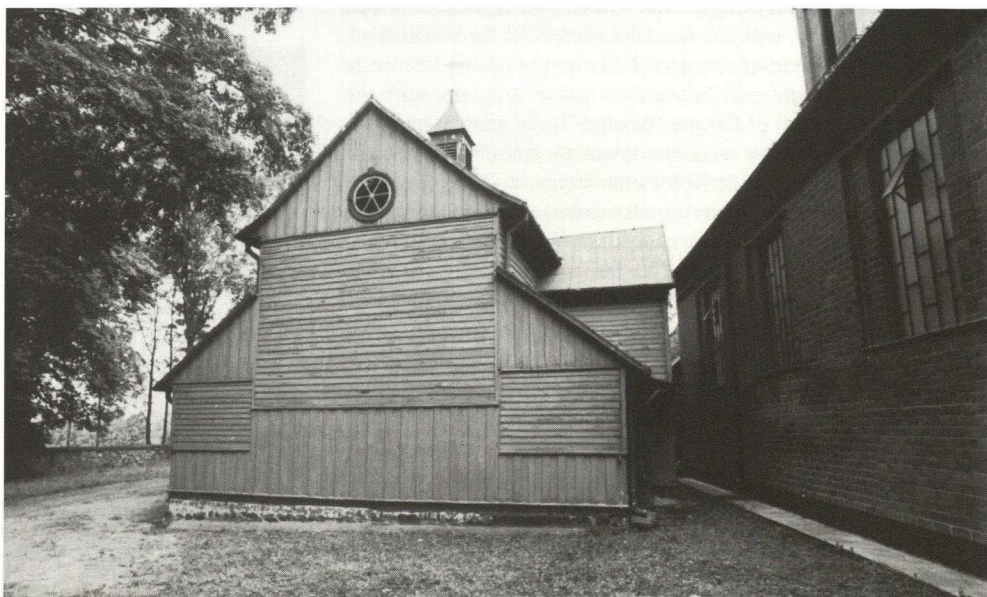
ICOMOS Poland

Długa Kościelna, the wooden church built at the beginning of the 17th century (before fire). Burnt in 2001, the fire was probably set deliberately.





Pszczonów, 19th-century wooden chapel, burnt in 2001



Wiśniew, new brick church built very closely to the 19th-century church creates a sense of the abandon and deterioration of the older structure



Długa Kościelna after the fire