

SALT OF THE EARTH

By Karen Prebensen

The dwarf stood a metre tall, was smartly dressed and wore a stern, no-nonsense expression, but the twinkle in his eye suggested he had a cheeky streak. Or maybe it was just the way the crystal caught the light. Although his entire body was made from salt, he didn't appear snow white like you'd expect - more stony grey. He took his role seriously, watching over the millions of tourists that came to view his home: Wieliczka Salt Mine, near Krakow, Poland, which he shared with hundreds of other salty artefacts. I nicknamed him Doc.

To reach Doc I had to descend 378 rickety wooden steps which spiralled down and around until I felt nauseous and dizzy. On step 276 I came to a halt as I remembered, clear as crystal, or should I say salt, an interesting snippet from the February 1916 edition of the *'Popular Science'* publication:

"At the famous salt mines of Wieliczka, there recently fell a huge mass of salt weighing some two hundred tons. The great block evidently became detached from the roof of the chamber and came crashing down, demolishing a portion of a passage and heavy timbered barriers".

With no way to go except down and a queue of growingly frustrated tourists stuck behind me, this was no time to become apprehensive. A nudge in the ribs from my husband did the trick (and nearly sent me hurtling to the bottom). I sprang off the last step, relieved to be on solid ground, albeit 64 metres below the earth's surface. Surprisingly I did not feel claustrophobic; the room was large and airy.

"You can leave your canary at home, the ventilation is good", joked our jovial tour guide Marc, a stout, moustached Pole with a thick accent. Despite subjecting us to one too many salt puns

for my liking (“some people say I look like one of the dwarves - that’s ok, I’m not in-*salt*-ed”), he provided an amusing narration to our excursion:

“Follow me, as I take you on a journey to the centre of the earth”.

It would take us nearly three hours to walk three kilometres, yet we would see only one percent of this amazing underground city, a labyrinth of passages, caverns, pits, traverses, lakes, chapels, purpose built rooms (such as a sanatorium used to treat those suffering from respiratory ailments) and sculptures carved by the miners.

As we walked along a wooden pathway past ancient mining equipment and old tools, Marc pointed out:

“This wood will never rot and will retain its quality forever”. Unless a huge slab of salt should fall and demolish it of course.

Marc explained that the mine, also known as ‘Magnum Sal’ (‘Great Salt’), is more than just a tourist attraction. It is a museum that reflects the historic stages of mining techniques from the Middle Ages to modern times and represents industrial development.

The miners recognised the perils of their career and placed their lives in the hands of their Patrons: Saint Kinga, Saint Anthony Padewski, Saint Clemens and Saint Barbara and built chapels where they attended mass each morning. ‘God Bless’ was the miners greeting which was said before descending and before exiting to the surface.

St. Kinga’s chapel is the mine’s trump card. As we entered, I stood in awe, frozen like one of the sculptures. Then all my senses came alive. Everything glistened in a glorious kaleidoscope of sparkles as the light reflected off the salt walls, floors and sculptures and the chandeliers above (also made entirely of salt) glistened like illuminated Christmas trees. For a moment my olfactory nerves tricked me into thinking I was by the seaside eating fish and chips, I could

taste the sodium chloride in the air. Although tempted to lick the walls, I instead ran my finger across it and down onto the floor. It was smooth and shiny. The voices of other visitors rebounded off the walls and echoed off the ceiling. The great acoustics combined with such visual beauty made it the perfect venue for classical music concerts, weddings and banquets.

I walked alongside Marc and grilled him about the history of the mine. It had been worked for a mind-boggling nine hundred years. Salt was once the world's biggest commodity, the equivalent of oil in today's economy. It was essential to conserve meat and dairy products and was later used in the production of gun powder. It was once recognised as legal tender in the Kingdom of Poland and was deemed as property of the ruler under the 'Salt Regale' law. At peak production times during the seventeenth and eighteen centuries there were believed to be two thousand miners employed.

"There is a rumour that some men were born in the mine and died before they had a chance to see the outside world", Marc said.

A decline in production occurred from the nineteenth century onwards due to wars, plagues and bad management decisions. This combined with falling salt prices of the twentieth century forced salt mining to cease at Wielickza in 1996.

But thanks to some Polish ingenuity the mine is still a money maker ("so it is now a gold mine, ha ha"). As well as guided tours it has also hosted some unusual events, such as a hot air balloon flight which took place in the 36 metre high Staszica Chamber (proving that it is possible to be above the ground whilst underground), surfing on the underground brine lake and bungee jumping from the top of a chamber. I wondered what the twelfth century miners would have thought of that.

We rounded a bend into a chamber where carvings of Saints once stood proud. Marc told me to take a closer look at the relics; I was saddened to see they had partly disintegrated. He

explained that many of the sculptures have semi dissolved because of exposure to moisture. They were attacked by water vapour present in the ventilation system (“or you could say they were being a-*salt*-ed,”) and the cumulative effect of the breath of millions of tourists each year was taking its toll. Or in the words of Bayard Taylor in *‘The Salt Mines of Wieliczka, 1850’*:

“Francis is running away like a dip candle, all of his head is gone except his chin and the limbs of Joseph are dropping off as if he had the Norwegian leprosy.”

Da Vinci’s ‘The Last Supper’ is exquisitely carved into a wall of rock salt, in such fine detail that even the items on the table are visible. The thought of this slowly fading away brought a tear to my eye. I then had the horrifying thought that maybe it hadn’t been a twinkle in Doc’s eye, but a single tear, for he knew his future was uncertain. Marc put my mind at ease: in 1978 the World Heritage organisation found the mine to have ‘outstanding universal value to mankind’ and placed it on its endangered sites list. An international team of scientists implemented a dehumidification system that created safe conditions for the sculptures and subsequently the mine was the first site ever to be formally removed from the list.

I’d been so absorbed in conversing with Marc that I hadn’t realised we’d meandered around the penultimate corridor and into the final chamber of the tour, which housed a souvenir shop and a restaurant offering tempting Polish cuisine, seasoned with salt of course.

“Before you go, make sure we haven’t raised your blood pressure or your cholesterol”, joked Marc one final time.

A cage elevator thrust us 135 metres back up to the surface. I felt grateful to have experienced this remarkable time capsule and display of craftsmanship, a tad guilty at breathing over the sculptures, thankful that the mine is no longer endangered and relieved to be back on terra firma. Yes, it was definitely a twinkle in Doc’s eye. I bid a silent farewell to him and vowed to one day return. Next time I’d introduce myself. God Bless.

END

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