

## The Stanisław Hills in Winter

(original title: Stanisławskie wzgórza zimą)

As soon as we leave Jelenia Góra, passing by Kopki on the right (a multi-peaked hill located south of the city, deserving of our attention and a walk), we notice an inconspicuous forested hill. Its name is Stanisławka, with an elevation of only 441 meters above sea level. Locals call it Księża Góra (which translates literally into Priest's Mountain) or Księżówka, since it became church property a while ago. The hill looks intriguing seen from the side of the fish ponds called Balaton, especially today (Jan 18, 2013). Fresh snow has covered the whole vicinity with a white blanket, and the water has begun to freeze over with a layer of ice dusted with snowflakes, in which dark patches of trickling water appear. Every so often we can encounter a fisherman sitting by an ice hole, freezing, hoping for any catch. Today, though, there is no one. The ice must still be too weak. The air here is clean, not polluted by the noise of the few cars passing by occasionally. The view that unfolds before us is so inviting that we set off into the forest without a second thought to climb uphill along a faint trail. We can already see large rocks on the slope. The untouchable whiteness of the snow has not yet been spoiled by footprints of humans or even animals that we know live here. We reach the summit rocks. Here we notice the first tracks of animals that have run through. Some tracks are tiny and densely packed, others larger and more spaced out. We can't seem to figure out what kind of animals could've left them. We can only wonder. Unfortunately, just when we think we have reached the summit, it turns out that it is just one of the mountain's many peaks. So we continue on. It is visible to the naked eye that it won't be so easy. A strenuous effort awaits us. It's an incredibly steep incline.



*Stanisławka towering over Balaton. Photo by Krzysztof Tęcza*

We finally reach the summit. It is strewn with jagged rock formations. The ascent was not easy. It can really make you sweat. Oh, and because of the fresh snow, it's not safe. It is quite pretty here, but due to the trees growing all around, there aren't any views at all—not even the slightest. We won't let that spoil the good mood our walk in the fresh air put us in, though. It will just make our rest period shorter and bring about the motivation to head down to the road sooner. Only now can we see how steep of a mountain Stanisławka is.

As we could have expected, the descent was no easier than the ascent. We're lucky there are a lot of paths to take to relatively safely "slide" down to the field surrounding the hill.



*Gaik seen from Witosza. Photo: Krzysztof Tęcza*

We find ourselves next to The Church of the Transfiguration (kościół Przemienienia Pańskiego), at the heart of Staniszków. Just here, right behind the cemetery, where, a few years ago, a new stone cross was erected, we can see a path leading into the forest, towards the wooded hill called Gaik (461 m above sea level). If it weren't for the dark tree trunks, the whole hill would be one huge white patch. Once we've looked around the church, we set off on the path, and we gradually make our way uphill. Looking over our shoulder, we see a plaque placed on the church tower. It bears the date 1784. Below it is a clock face. Since the clock does not work properly, it should not come as a surprise when it strikes the wrong hour. A sizable boulder on the square in front of the church sparks curiosity. It is a remnant of a monument to the victims of 1870, which once stood here. Just before the entrance to the cemetery grounds, a gravestone leans. The inscription carved into it commemorates Oswald Jakel. From this spot, we can see all three nearby hills: Witosza—slightly obscured by the silhouette of the church—Czop Hill, and finally—Gaik, which is where we're headed. At first, we were under the impression that we'd chosen an easy path, but the road ahead soon proved to be difficult, far more than our hike up Staniszkówka. Especially so when the rocky ground gets covered by fresh snow, like today. It becomes very slippery. Faint tracks prove that someone has already walked their dog here today. After a while, I encounter a lone dog on a solo winter stroll. It doesn't seem to take interest in me. It is not aggressive either. I recognize it as the pup that hangs around the store every morning, hoping someone will spare a bite. I myself have shared my breakfast with it a couple of times, meaning I treated him to a slice of ham pulled out of my sandwich. As we approach the buildings located near the edge of the forest, we can see the panorama of the mountains, stretching beyond the rooftops, with Chojnik Castle clearly visible. A little closer is a place where cows are almost always grazing—even now that the grass is covered by snow. They mostly nibble the hay from the bales scattered here, but we can also see them trying to pluck out greens from beneath the snow. Because there is no evident trail leading to the top on this side, we need to go a little farther, making a slight curve, and only then start climbing steeply uphill, following the trails left here by running deer. Then we'll be sure the route they have chosen is the right one. We'd better hold onto saplings and branches so we don't go tumbling down. We just need to keep

in mind that after a fresh snowfall, snow from the branches will quickly coat us, and soon, we'll look like snowmen. Oddly enough, these little challenges help pass the time—we're at the summit rocks before we know it. Only when we glance behind do we realize how steep it really was—and we're no longer sure if those tracks belonged to deer or chamois. It's a good moment to take a rest because the climb up the rocks rising before us is far from safe. But there is no other way to the summit than scrambling up these rocks, and I think it would be safest to do it on all fours. Once again, the trees get in the way of the view. I can see I'm the first person to have made it here today. But that is usually the case, as few people decide to climb all the way to the top. As it soon turned out, going up is one thing—coming down is something else altogether, a whole different ball game! We're talking wintertime, of course. You could actually break your legs. I got lucky this time, and soon—after a couple of involuntary slides on my backside—I emerged from the forest and ended up near the church. So I came full circle.



***Gęśle. Photo by Krzysztof Tęcza***

Another noteworthy elevation is situated on the outskirts of the village. Gęśle (467 m above sea level) is a trapezoid-shaped forested hill, flanked on both sides by fences marking private lots. This area is a popular destination for mushroom pickers in the summer. Many different species of mushrooms grow here. I know of a spot around here where you can find puffballs—very tasty yet equally rare. In the winter, virtually no one ventures here. It might be due to the fact that the steep, snow-covered slopes are extremely difficult to conquer. On top of that, there is no particular purpose in a walk uphill if there are no views. The trees block everything. The only interesting view opens up from the field adjacent to the forest. Because this field is my property, and I have no fear about anyone having grievances about me trampling their grass, I like coming here. From this point, I can see the Kaspiekiewicz family house. Not long ago, Karolina, the daughter of my neighbor Jurek, wrote about some of the same hills I am describing here. Those were summer descriptions, though. Therefore, I hope my winter editions will complement the information shared by Karolina.





***Baba Yaga's Hut. Photo by Krzysztof Tęcza***

Before we embark on the journey to the most famous hill in Staniszków, let's make our way to Czop Hill. There, we will see a boulder called Grenadierski Kamień. It balances on a small surface so precariously that, seen from the side, it looks as if it might topple at any moment onto the buildings below. It must have looked that way to the French soldiers who were stationed here, because they tried to push it off. They were unsuccessful, of course. Ever since then, the name Grenadier's Stone has been attached to it, though it is also commonly called Czop, like the whole hill. Locals refer to it as the French Stone. Getting to the rock-hewn steps requires passing between a few houses. It was right there that a beautiful tulip tree grew until not long ago. We always visited it during our group trips to admire its blossoms at just the right time. For quite a while, however, it's been nowhere to be found. It turned out that the tree had split, and it became a safety hazard, which is why a permit was issued for its removal. It's a pity, as there are only a few such specimens in the area. Safety comes first, after all, and despite the various circulating rumors, the matter should be considered settled. The winter season is perfect for spotting curiosities hidden by leaves in the summer. Continuing along the forest's edge, we come across an unusual little house, partly made of brick, which fills the gaps in a sheltering rock ledge formed by natural boulders. It has windows and a door opening into a room with a hearth carved into the rock. It used to serve as a shelter for sheep grazing on the clearing during the day. Few people know this, but the place is most often referred to as the Baba Yaga's hut (a character from Slavic mythology, similar to a witch, who lives in the woods).

At the end of today's tour, the greater experience awaits us. I am now standing in front of the building of the old fire station. From this very spot, stone steps lead to the top of Witosza—there are several hundred of them. Good thing they installed metal railings here. They're incredibly helpful in the winter. The first glance up the mountain can be frightening or discouraging to some. The sheer number of steps can make your head spin. Considering the steepness, though, one should be glad someone thought of building the steps to ease the way up. I always wanted to know just how many there are, so I decided to count them. All in all, it came out to just over 490 (four hundred ninety). Quite a lot, right?

I set off uphill. It seems no one has ventured here yet today. There are no footprints in the fresh snow. Soon enough, I spot the first of several benches placed along the way. We can pause here to sit down and rest. Before long, we reach the cave known as Skalna Komora (the Rock Chamber). Safety railings

have been installed on the rocks above it, allowing us to climb onto them and try to catch a glimpse of the view through the branches of the trees growing here. We're glad we can hold onto the railings, because looking straight down from here is a recipe for dizziness. Down the steps, we make our way into the cave. It's quiet and cozy here. We can sit down on a bench and rest, taking in the sight of the huge icicles hanging above us. While there's snow everywhere outside, here everything is covered in dry leaves. It makes it feel as if it were warm here. Sitting here quietly, we can hear nothing but the distant barking of dogs coming from the houses that lie below.



***Witosza. Photo by Krzysztof Tęcza***

Making our way forward, we reach an information board—the first of several that were installed here when the nature trail called “Wzgórza Łomnickie” (the hills of Łomnica) was laid out here. From the rocks just ahead, we can see the neighboring Gęśle Hill, which we visited a little earlier. Looking up, we observe the base of what used to be the Bismarck monument. Soon we will have the opportunity to enter a place called Ucho Igielne (Eye of the Needle), and a bit further on we'll walk through the Rocky Alley (Skalna Uliczka). There are also rocks arranged in such a way that we can sit on them like stone benches. We have to be very careful, though, because the mix of fallen leaves and wind-blown snow is extremely treacherous. We find ourselves at a spot from which two routes lead to the summit of Witosza. We can either go left or right. Most people usually choose the path marked as the yellow tourist trail—and that's the one we'll be following as well in just a moment. However, I suggest taking the lesser-known path to discover some overlooked views and curiosities, and then returning to our current location.

On the nearby rocks, we can see several inscriptions carved here many years ago. The most legible one reads: Scholz 1794. We come across a rock window, crowned with long, hanging icicles. At first, they may not seem particularly impressive—it's only when we stand beneath them that we realize their true size. We step down from the stairs and duck under the railing to enter a narrow tunnel. It forms something like a second level of the cave—just over 20 meters long, up to 4 meters high, and at most 2 meters wide. Except that there's a section where your arms catch on the walls. At the end of this passage, you need to watch your step—focused on the icicles above, you might not notice that the ground suddenly drops beneath you.

After climbing a few dozen more steps, we reach a spot where the path I mentioned earlier branches off to the right. From here, we can already see the pedestal of the monument that was destroyed after the war, granite pieces of it scattered all over the slope. They still bear letters that used to make up an inscription. A wooden table and benches in front of the monument offer a welcome rest for passing tourists. There's also a garbage can, but sadly it's not emptied often. Once we've settled down comfortably at one of the benches, we can finally get a good look at the view, and we are struck with awe. An incredible mountain landscape stretches before us. The closest hill—just across the valley where the buildings of Staniszków are nestled—is Gaik. To make sure you don't miss anything, I suggest taking out your map and comparing what you see with the features marked on it. That's the best approach.

To avoid retracing our steps down, I recommend we go behind the monument and take the clear path down to the spot from which we'll be able to see the remains of the monument. Extraordinary caution is advised, though. Going down this trail is dangerous enough in the summer, let alone in the winter. Especially now that everything is covered with a thick layer of fresh snow, concealing dry leaves that had fallen off the trees. To make matters worse, the rocks are slippery too. So as not to speak empty words, I'll tell you I even tucked my notebook and pen into my pocket. I begin cautiously stepping forward, carefully placing my feet. It's all in vain—after two steps I slip and slide down. Luckily, I get caught on a small tree growing in the middle of the trail, and it saves me from falling further down. The next 200 meters look the same, though. I give up trying to reach the stones from the monument. I'm just thinking about how to safely reach the leveled ground. It would probably be best to sit on my butt and slide down. I do exactly that. When I reach a somewhat safe place, I look like a snowman. My whole body aches. Now I know that snow, leaves, and rocks make up an unmanageable combination. I'm glad I got off with only a few bruises. I decide I've had enough for today, and I head home along the yellow trail. As usual, I stray from it and take a convenient shortcut through my neighbor's field to reach the familiar forest and then my house. Upon entering, I sit by the fireplace. I savor my warm tea with honey and lemon to the sound of crackling logs. I'm finally home!

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