

# Memorial Church of the Holy Spirit

128 km  
100 B1  
B3

Pološka planota above Zatoľmin

*Year of plan and completion:*  
1916

*Designers:*

Remigius Geyling: architecture and decoration; Geza Jablonsky - builder and site supervisor; Anton Perathoner: the wooden part of the altar

*Investors:*

soldiers of the 3rd Mountain Brigade of the Austro-Hungarian army

*Building type:*

basilica church with a nave and two aisles

This memorial church is a Gesamtkunstwerk, a complete work of art, in the best tradition of the Viennese Secession. It stands in the exceptional natural environment of the Julian Alps, in a side valley above the source of the Tolminka. Its origin is closely linked to the events on the Isonzo Front in the first world war. It was hand-built by Austro-Hungarian soldiers fighting on this part of the front, and through voluntary contributions, in order to preserve the memory of their dead comrades. The plan of the whole was produced by the Austrian painter and set designer, Remigius Geyling (1878-1974), an interesting artistic personality. He studied painting at the School of Arts and Crafts in Vienna (where he was later, from 1926 onwards, a professor) and at the Munich Academy.<sup>1</sup> He fought on the Isonzo Front between 1915 and 1918, as a first lieutenant in the Austrian army. The plans for the construction of the building

were contributed by Second Lieutenant Geza Jablonsky, who also supervised the building works.

The church stands on a slope levelled into an artificial terrace to which a monumental staircase leads. A terrace with a pergola is located at a vantage point by the church, which stresses that this is a place of contemplation.

The church of the Holy Spirit is a pseudo-basilica with a nave and two aisles, a rectangular chancel with a pentangle termination, and an open entrance porch. The lower part of the church is built of irregular blocks of stone which the soldiers quarried in the immediate vicinity. The stair balustrade and the parapet around the terrace are made of the same material. The church thus appears to "grow" from the rock base. The upper, wooden part of the construction rests on a mighty plinth of rubble. The external and internal skeleton is made of larch beams. The exterior edges of the beams are carved in a zigzag, so that the whole is reminiscent of Scandinavian folk architecture. Above the entrance, an octagonal belfry with a pointed spire rises from the main building. A panel is set in its base, with a sundial and the double coat-of-arms of Austro-Hungary. On the side façades and on the chancel, panels are set between the windows bearing the arms of all twenty provinces of the monarchy.

The hall of the interior is divided into a nave, aisles and individual bays by eight wooden pillars. Two pillars support the lintel of the chancel-wall. The nave is somewhat higher than the aisles, but it does not have a clerestory. The windows are distributed in the upper part of the outer wall. Above the entrance is a "row window" which shows the influence of the Glasgow School. The light enters through stained-glass windows.<sup>2</sup> Together with the colour decorations on the pillars, the ceiling and the walls, it creates a feeling of harmony. The lower part of the space is darker, while shades of blue highlighted with gold dominate the upper part. White and gold increasingly predominate towards the chancel.





The altar is white and gold, the ceiling of the chancel is coffered in white.

The painted columns, panels on the walls and coffering on the ceiling play on geometric motifs related to the colours and motifs of Moorish glazed tiles. The basic decorative and symbolic image is a Greek cross, from which squares and rhombuses are derived. Since the decoration is drawn freehand, the effect is not monotonous or mechanical. The colours are of a single shade, but their visual combination and the light from the stained glass create ever varied, fluid tones. The fittings are an integral part of the whole, designed "by a single hand" from materials which were locally available, and executed with techniques, or skills, used in the army (forging, carpentry, turning). Worth noting are the wrought-iron arms of the lamps attached to the pillars, and the wooden altar candelabra. The finer, carved part of the work, i.e.

the relief of the Crucifixion with angels on the door of the tabernacle and the altar decoration, was done by the South Tyrolean, Anton Perathoner. The only part of the fittings which, in the words of Geyling himself, was produced elsewhere<sup>3</sup>, is the altar glass-chip mosaic of the Holy Spirit. The mosaic forms the central field of the altar in the form of a cross. To the left and right of the chancel-wall are set tall oil paintings on canvas, each showing an angel in adoration. They were painted by Remigius Geyling.

A special feature of the church is its eloquence. As well as the architecture, painting and craft creations, the numerous inscriptions on the façade and inside contribute to this. Even the lettering is a work of art. The inscriptions provide basic information on the Third Mountain Brigade and their commanders, on the designers of the church, the date when the foundation stone was laid (1st March 1916) and its completion (1st November of the same year). The inscription beneath the arms of the monarchy - *Indivisibiliter ac inseparabiliter* - draws attention to the fact that men from various nationalities and faiths, coming from all parts of Austro-Hungary, had fought there. The inscription at the top of the chancel-wall marks the intention of the builders that "... the names of our unforgotten heroes from Sleme, Mrzli vrh and Vodil vrh be set and preserved in the church..."<sup>4</sup> The





interior really does read like a book in which are inscribed the names of thousands of the fallen. The lower part of the wall of the aisles is covered with oak boards made from mortar shell cases. The soldiers spent more than three months branding on the names of their dead comrades. When the church was renovated at the beginning of the eighties, two thousand eight hundred were counted. Since space on the walls ran out during the fighting, additional tablets were attached on hinges, and open like the leaves of a book.

Given the use of state symbols, a superficial observer might characterise Javorca as a glorification of the monarchy. However, the truth is different. The state coat-of-arms is crowned with the significant word *Pax*, and the sundial above is a symbol of the transitoriness of people and the permanence of nature. Perhaps the most shocking of the inscriptions

commemorates the memory of the Italian renovation of the church in 1934,<sup>5</sup> and reads: *Ultra cineris hostium ira non superest* (May hatred not squeeze past the ashes of the dead).

*Literature:*

Eine Gedächtniskirche von Remigius Geyling, *Der Architekt: Wiener Monatshefte für Bauwesen und dekorative Kunst*, XXI, 1916-1918, pp. 84-88;  
Sergio Tavano, Memoria "Jugendstil" per caduti senza ricordo, *Da Iniziativa Isontina*, 93, 1989, 2, pp. 91-98.  
Damjan Prelovšek, The lost Monument to the Monarchie, *Piranesi*, 5-6, 1995, pp.112-118.



<sup>1</sup> *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler des XX. Jahrhunderts*, Leipzig, E.A. Seemann, 1963, fol. 2., p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Geyling's forebears, including his father, Rudolf, were glaziers in Vienna. So it is not surprising that Remigius had also mastered the technique and art of glazing. *Remigius Geyling*, Vienna, Wiener Bibliophilen-Gesellschaft, 1974 (Künstler und Literaten: Gezeichnet in Wien um 1900), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Der Architekt*, XXI, 1916-1918, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Ihr unvergesslichen Helden vom Sleme, Mrzli vrh und Vodil vrh deren Namen dieses Haus birgt und bewahrt!

<sup>5</sup> The inscription bears the initials A. XII E. F.