

Robert Porteous de Lanxeth

Burgher, merchant and benefactor of Krosno On the 400th anniversary of the Scotsman's arrival in Poland

Around the year 1620, Robert Gilbert Porteous de Lanxeth, a young Scottish immigrant, settled in Krosno. The small but economically dynamic town on the Wisłok River, situated in the south of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, close to the Hungarian border, was to become his adopted hometown and the centre of a successful business which would make him the richest member of a Scottish community in the Commonwealth numbering many thousands.



He developed an impressive merchant enterprise importing Hungarian wine to Poland and northern Europe, making Krosno a serious competitor in the growing trade. King Sigismund III made Robert Porteous a royal factor and servitor, subject only to the crown and exempt from city laws. Married to Anna Hesner, daughter of a prominent burgher family of Krosno, Robert Gilbert Porteous gained an important social position in the local community.

Contemporary sources translate his middle name into Wojciech, the original Slavonic name of St. Adalbert, one of the patron saints of Poland, which may have been a sign of his quick and full assimilation.

The social and financial position of this Scottish patrician of Krosno allowed him to make numerous donations and artistic benefactions to churches and other institutions. His contemporaries named Porteous the second important founder of the Holy Trinity church, the principal parish church of the town, after the medieval King Casimir the Great. The scale and quality of the works funded by Porteous could not be rivalled by any other private benefactor in 17th-century Poland.

Robert Wojciech Porteous constitutes the most generous benefactor in the history of the town. A large portion of his impressive fortune was developed through hard work, extensive business contacts and innovative mercantile practices, and was donated by Porteous to hospitals, monasteries and parish schools in Krosno and its surroundings. What is more, the important economic and cultural position that Krosno held in 17th century Poland can largely be ascribed to the activity of the renowned Scottish immigrant.

In his testament, written in 1658 in Latin and Polish, Porteous generously disposes of his property donating it to numerous institutions and individuals. His last will is the final testimony to his charitable disposition as it spells out the gratitude that the foreigner-turned-patrician felt to his adopted motherland.



This exhibition was made possible by the financial support of the Mayor of Krosno and the Rector of Krosno State College and the organisational support of the Centre for History of the University of the Highlands and Islands, Highland Archive Centre and Portius Association.

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Robert Porteous de Lanxeth – Scottish burgher, merchant and benefactor of Krosno

Timeline of Robert Wojciech Portius' life

1600 or 1601

Robert Gilbert Porteous is born into an impoverished noble family in Lanxeth, today Langside near Dalkeith in Midlothian.

ca. 1618

Robert Gilbert Porteous arrives in Krosno, an important economic centre in the south of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, since 1606 home to a growing Scottish immigrant community including Kilian Benerman, Tomasz Dixman, Piotr Jeman (Hieman), Jan Laurensten, Bartłomiej Gines (Innes), Teodor Dygman, Jan Lau, and David Magell.

1620

Robert Gilbert Porteous remains in the service of Jan Laurensten (Laurensztyn), a wealthy Krosno merchant of Scottish origin.

1623

After the death of his Scottish employer Robert Gilbert Porteous (known as Robert Wojciech Portius vel Porcjusz from now on) signs a business contract with another Scottish merchant, Bartłomiej Gines (Ines), and becomes co-owner of a merchant factory.

1624

Securing the favour of the authorities of Krosno, Portius becomes the lease-holder of the town manors of Suchodół and Szczepańcowa.

1627

Portius marries Anna Hesner, 11 years his senior, and widow of Bartłomiej Mamrowicz, a Krosno saddler. The marriage raises his social and financial position and encourages his assimilation within the community of Krosno. Two daughters – Wiktorja and Agnieszka – and one son – Stanisław – are born of the union.



Portius buys a large house on the north side of the main square of the town (today Rynek 27) from his stepson, Paweł Mamrowicz, doctor of medicine.

1629

Securing the support of many Scots in Krosno – for example, Jan Kinengen, Bartłomiej Gines (Ines), Tomasz Dixman, and Jan Lau – Portius becomes a leading figure in the Scottish community. Portius starts an independent business and competes with Jan Greisteter, the richest merchant in town.

1630

Portius concludes a huge business transaction with the Vilnius merchant Wilhelm Serustow, selling him wine for the impressive sum of 2855 zł (Polish złoty). Portius continues to expand his business contacts in Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, the German Reich (Holy Roman Empire), Danzig and Scotland.

Portius makes an endowment to the Holy Trinity church in Krosno for numerous purchases: a large gilded silver monstrance (lost via 19th century military requisition), the retablo of the Corpus Christi altar made by an immigrant sculptor of Scottish origin, Teodor Dygman, the painting Adoration of the Holy Sacrament by Ecclesiastical and Lay Dignitaries with an image of Portius himself.



1632

Portius becomes the exclusive supplier of Hungarian wines to the court of Sigismund III.

At the General Assembly meeting of the Parliament of the Commonwealth on 20th April Portius receives the privileges of “royal servitor” by which he becomes an immediate subject of the crown and is exempt from any other jurisdiction.

1633

At the coronation assembly in Kraków on 11th February King Władysław IV makes Portius a royal factor and renews his servitor privileges. His house in Krosno becomes exempt from any obligations, especially the obligation of quartering soldiers.



1634

Portius buys the tin baptismal font for the Krosno Parish Church. Its cover bears the inscription ROBERT PORTIVS SCOTVS CIVIS CROSNENSIS DONAVIT 1634.



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ROBERTVS PORTIVS SCOTIVS CIVIS CROSNENSIS DONAVIT 1634

1637

Portius begins sponsoring a complete reconstruction of the chapel of St. Anne in the parish church which lasts till 1641. To commemorate his endowment Portius has his coat of arms sculpted in the archivolt keystone of the entrance portal of the chapel.

The construction of a new bell tower for the parish church begins via another of Portius' endowments. The task will take over 20 years as testified by an entry in the benefactor's testament from 1658 in which Portius assigns 6000 zł for the final works on the tower.

The Urban, 153 cm in diameter and 490 cm in circumference – one of the largest bells in Poland, bears the inscription: ROBERTUS PORTIVS CIVIS CROSNENSIS SVMPPTU PROPRIO RESTAURAVIT.



1640

On 25th April all three children of Robert and Anna die, presumably from a fatal infection. Their death is commemorated by their parents' foundation of an epitaph painting on wood donated to the chapel of St. Peter and Paul in the parish church.

1638

On 31 March Portius donates to the Holy Trinity church two Roman Missals bound in velvet and decorated with silver appliqué (now in the Polish National Museum in Kraków).



1639

Through Portius' endowment, the bell founders Stephen Meutel and George Olivier cast three large bells named Urban, Jan and Marian for the new bell tower of the parish church.

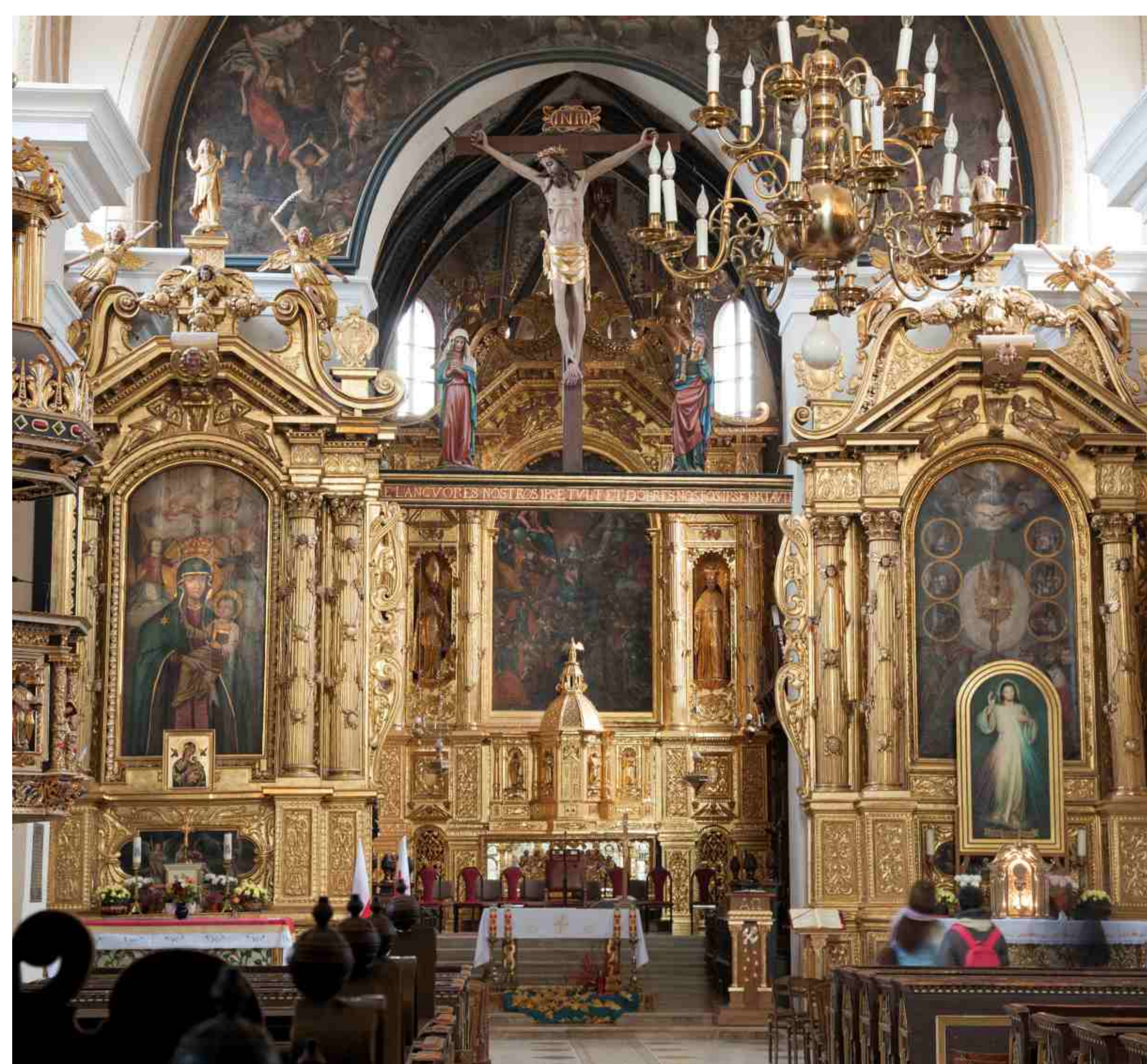


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ROBERTVS PORTIVS SCO TVS CIVIS CROSNENSIS DONAVIT 1634

1640-1646

Further renovation and purchases for the Holy Trinity parish church in Krosno are made possible through Portius' support: the reconstruction of the main nave of the church begins; the chapel of Peter and Paul is rebuilt to serve as the ancestral mausoleum of the Scottish founder; the advowson's pew is made at the order of Robert with his coat of arms cut in the canopy area, and a new pulpit is funded by Anna.

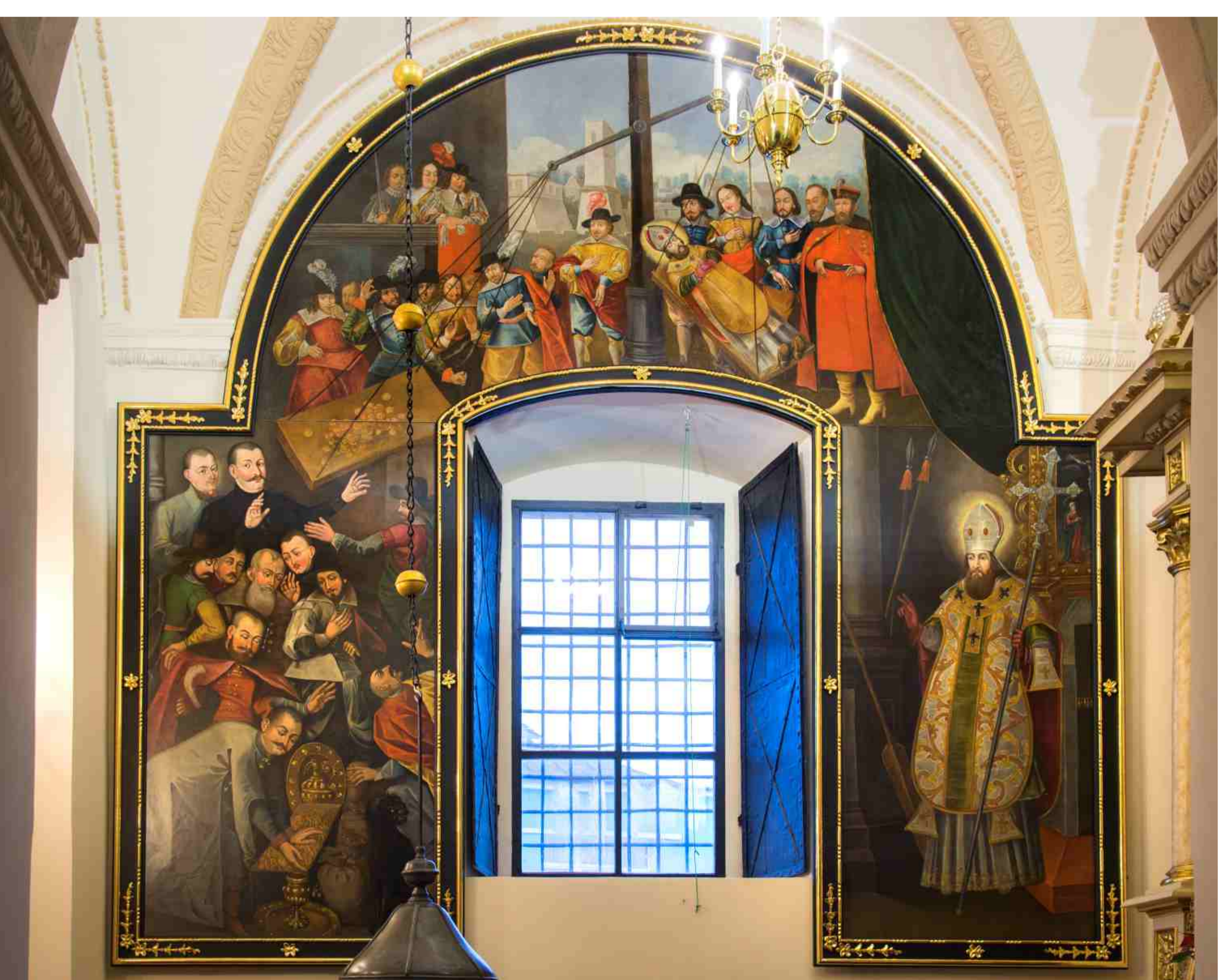


1648

On 4 December Anna Portius, née Hesner, dies at the age of 58. She is buried in the chapel of St. Peter and Paul, formerly reconstructed by Robert Portius as a family mausoleum. Robert commemorates Anna's death by ordering an epitaph portrait that is hung in the chapel.



Several large paintings are ordered for the main nave and the side chapels, among others, The Four Last Things, The Last Judgement, The Martyrdom of St. Stanislaus, The Purchase of St. Adalbert's body (with an image of Portius in it).



1646

On Portius' orders the original main portal of the medieval church is uncovered and a cartouche is placed above it with Portius' coat of arms and the inscription RP DL CC: ROBERTUS PORTIVS DE LANXETH CIVIS CROSNENSIS

On 3 November the Bishop of Przemyśl, Paweł Piasecki, consecrates the newly renovated parish church of the Holy Trinity.



Robert Porteous de Lanxeth – Scottish burgher, merchant and benefactor of Krosno

1649

At the coronation assembly in Kraków on 8 February, King John II Casimir renews Portius' privileges and encourages him to continue his generous endowments for the royal town of Krosno



1651

The register of royal revenue for that year shows that the Krosno Scottish colony paid as much as 9000 zł in taxes, second only to the city of Gdańsk, where the Scottish citizens contributed 11000 zł. A large portion of the sum was paid by Robert Portius, with smaller amounts paid by other Scottish entrepreneurs active in Krosno at the time: Jerzy Peip, Jerzy Irwing, Albert Maxel and Jerzy Hay de Arral.

1655

In anticipation of the war against Sweden Portius secures his capital and valuables in Gdańsk and Eperjes (today Prešov, Slovakia).

1656

On 4-13 January King John II Casimir visits Krosno and is hosted by Portius in his home.

When in March of that year royal commissaries come to require church valuables for the purposes of the war, Portius pays 200 florins for them and returns them to the church treasury.

1657

On 5 May, when Krosno faces a serious danger of Swedish invasion, King John II Casimir nominates Robert Portius the military commander of the town.



On 7 August Robert Wojciech Portius signs his testament in the presence of the Carmelite priest Władysław Plenciński, the town scribe Sebastian Baranowski and the teacher of philosophy Wojciech Raniski. Apart from disposing of his movable and immovable property in Krosno and Hungary, Portius assigns the sum of 42000 zł for works on the town infrastructure (strengthening fortifications, paving roads) as well as for churches, monasteries, schools and hospitals in Krosno and the area.

The house at Rynek 27 becomes the property of Robert's brother Andrzej Portius and his stepson Paweł Mamrowicz.

One interesting entry in the testament is the miniature gold shrine bequeathed by Portius to his greatest patron John II Casimir and supplemented with the sum of 10000 zł for the King and 7500 zł for Marie Louise Gonzaga, the King's spouse.

Royal comptrollers confirm the construction of 300 m of new fortifications between the Kraków Gate and the parish church and the School Tower with funds relayed by commander Portius.



Portius spends 6128 zł of his own money on improving the fortifications of the town and a year later assigns another 2000 zł for that purpose in his testament.

For his service to the king and the town of Krosno Portius receives a Polish noble title.

1658

Robert Portius loans the town of Krosno the sum of 5400 zł and renews his lease on the town manors of Suchodół and Szczepańcowa.



1661

On 6 January Robert Wojciech Portius dies suddenly during a banquet in the house of the governor of Krosno, Zygmunt Fredro.

At the order of the Bishop of Przemyśl Stanisław Sarnecki, the funeral on 10 February was attended by over 100 priests. The body of the Scottish patrician was laid in the family crypt in the chapel of St. Peter and Paul.



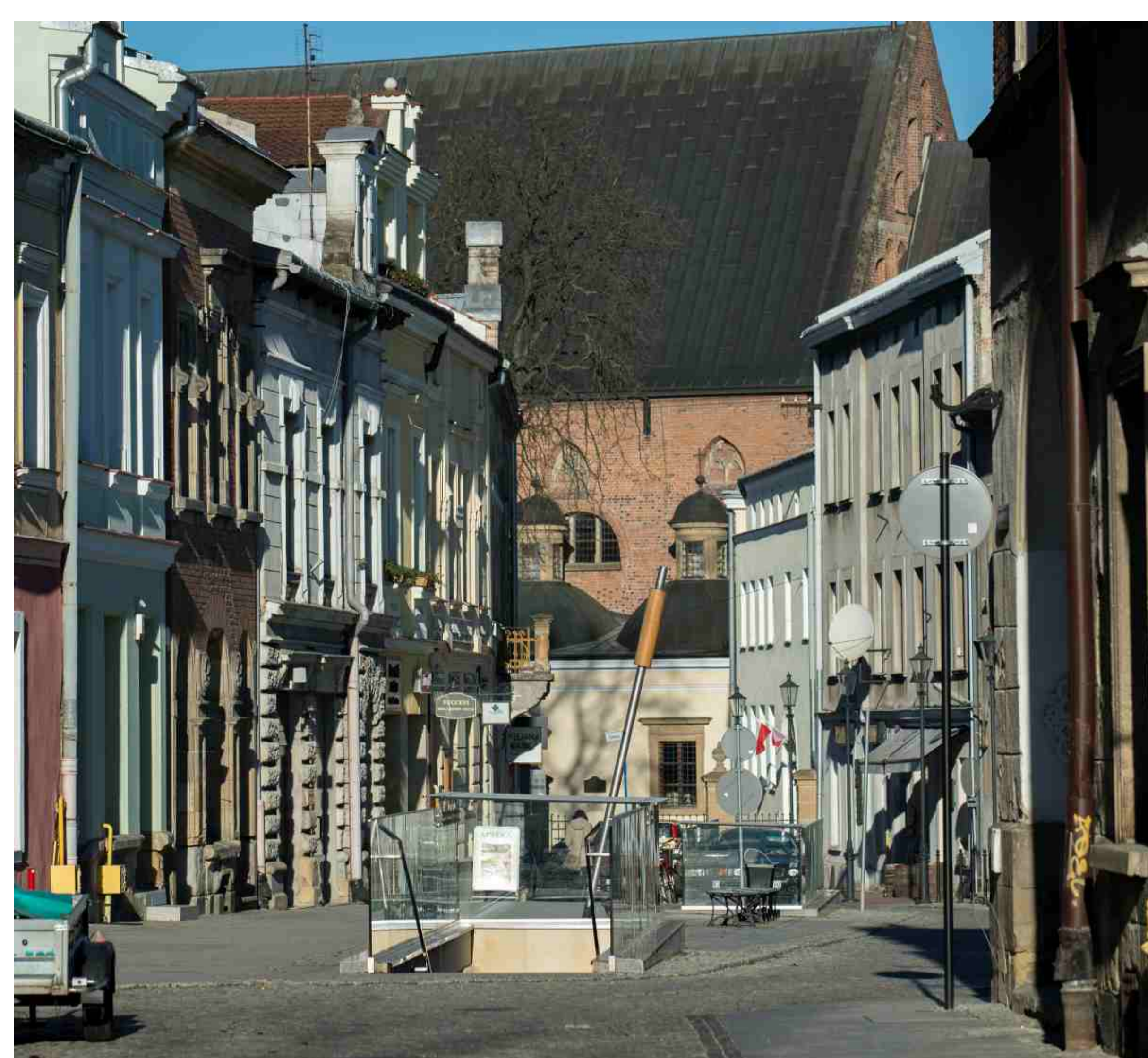
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The Scot's history lives on in modern Krosno

The memory of the Scottish immigrant is cultivated in Krosno until today. His house is still standing in the main square of the town and a plaque reminds visitors of its history. A statue of Portius can be found right outside the church which he so generously renovated.

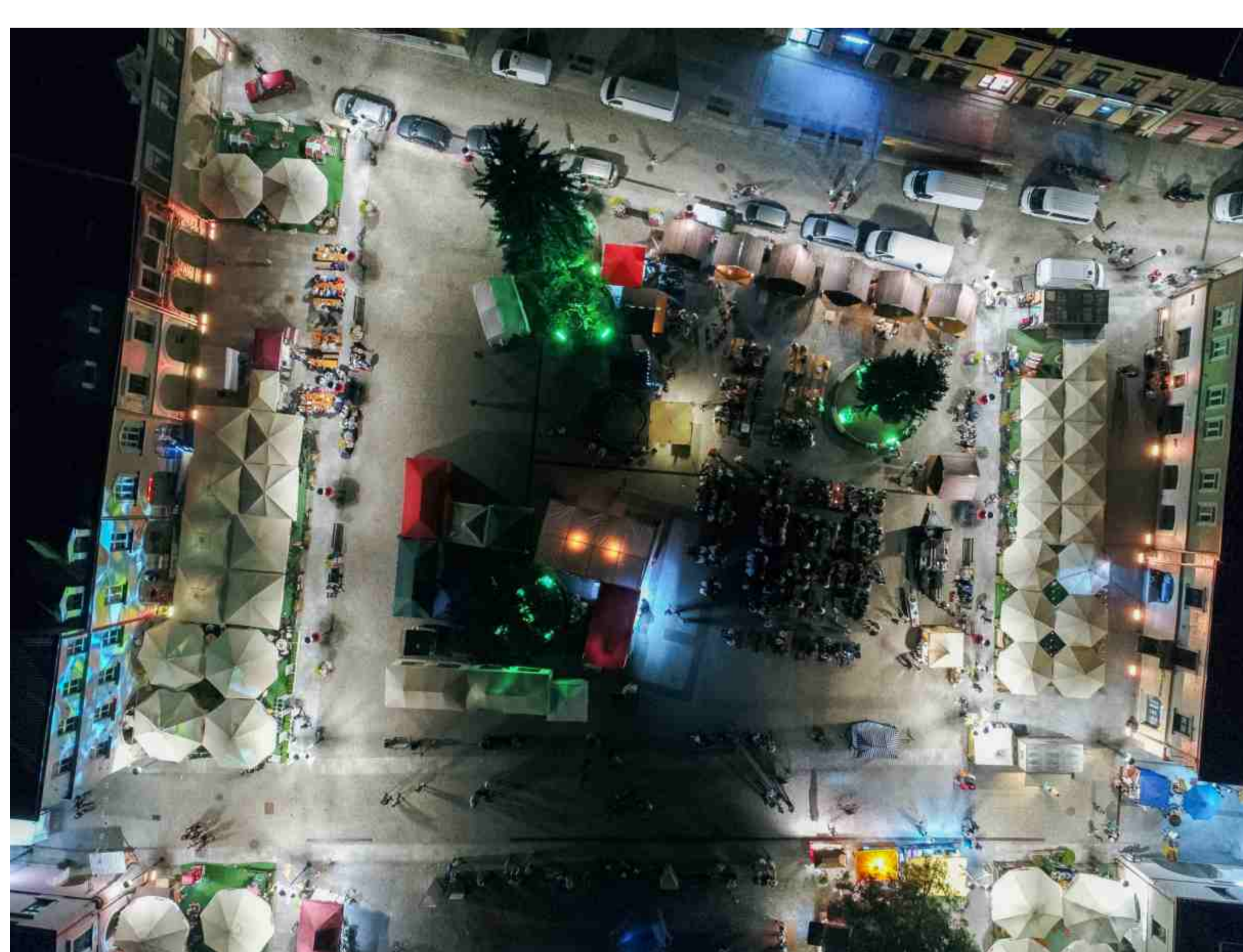


One of the streets in the historical centre bears his name as a hotel and a shopping gallery. Krosno is also home to the Portius Association, founded in 2002 to protect the historical memory of Portius and to promote the Polish-Hungarian economic links that the entrepreneurial Scot developed.



Every August the Portius Association organizes festivals of Hungarian wine which attract thousands of visitors. Robert Wojciech Portius has become part of the cultural and tourist branding of Krosno.

This exhibition is an invitation addressed to the Scots, who like the Poles respect and celebrate their history, to help us remember and promote Robert Porteus by making Scotland present in Krosno today. Maybe it is time to make up for what Portius' business plan did not include and ... jointly organize a Portius festival of Scotch whisky.



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