Magiczny Kraków

Ecological value

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What remains of the Kraków Fortress leaves us not only with historic buildings, but also plenty of greenery. Prof. Janusz Bogdanowski from the Kraków University of Technology was the first to recognise the potential of the fortress greenery, noticing that the beauty of the architecture of military buildings harmoniously blends in with the surrounding natural environment. He also contributed an idea to the public discussion about the potential future of forts, according to which they could create something that he called 'Great Plants' – islands of green surrounding Planty Park and Kraków connected with one another and with the city by a system of old fortress paths.

Over 220 ha of old trees around the forts, 10 ha on "inter-field masks" and around 50 ha alongside fortress paths have survived till our day. In addition, an area of 800 ha around the forts is lush with green due to a ban on construction for the duration of the active life of the fortress. Trees planted around barracks, the depot and hospital complexes, as well as decorative gardens arranged for the military are also a green souvenir of old times.

Thanks to the fact that the forts became the property of the Polish Army in 1918 and gradually began to be taken over by civil public institutions after 1945, they could exist mainly untouched, to a large extent, as areas not built up by private persons or by developers.

Greenery was a very significant issue for military purposes. It served as camouflage and to make it difficult for spies or enemy forces to pick out fortifications, artillery batteries and paths for the transport of war supplies and the evacuation of the wounded. Greenery was needed in large quantities because its task was to cover or blur the fortifications against the landscape so that they could blend into the background. This was not easy, because it was known that, in the case of fights for the Kraków Fortress, the enemy observers would have binoculars and observation points in hot-air balloon baskets at their disposal. Therefore, over 25,000 tree seedlings were planted in strategic places. Most of them were black locust – trees from America that helped to mask the infrastructure of imperial troops even before the partitions of the Commonwealth. Then, at the beginning of the 20th century, the stands of black locust began to be supplemented with fast-growing willows and poplars, also thanks to technical development – even before the outbreak of World War I, the militaries had airplanes and dirigibles at their disposal.

In the present-day city, numerous enclaves of lush vegetation have remained after the Kraków Fortress became obsolescent, even in non-obvious places from a military perspective, e.g., along 3 Maja Avenue. The nearby Błonia Park was preserved by the Austrians so that it could continue to fulfil military purposes – for example, it was necessary for drills and exercises by the garrison soldiers. Greenery is also still present close to the ruins, such as the lawn complexes abounding in various species of flowers that together form an entire ecosystem for insects and the small fauna near Fort 53 'Bodzów'.

In the heyday of the Fortress, greenery was maintained as something of functional value for the military. Years later, however, when many facilities stood abandoned, the trees grew in size and

number, expanding within range of forts, into moats and onto glacis, which would have been impossible earlier. This is often a problem both for plants and people – when it is difficult for trees to take root on concrete ceilings or on steeply sloping grounds, they fall over when the wind is strong, thus posing a threat to people.