If it weren’t for the Krakow Fortress, the city would look completely different today

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The Krakow Fortress, which took over half a century to build, was intended to defend the route to Vienna. Today, its forts are among the city’s most remarkable historical monuments and are increasingly being given a new lease of life. Marcin Paradyż, director of the Municipal Buildings Management Board in Krakow, talks about the history, mysteries and future of this unique heritage.

How did the history of Krakow Fortress begin?

The year 1850 is regarded as the beginning of the Krakow Fortress, when Emperor Franz Joseph I issued a decree establishing a fortress in Krakow. Of course, it wasn’t a random choice. For centuries, Krakow had occupied a strategic position – it was situated at a convenient crossing point over the Vistula, between the wetlands of the Niepołomice Forest and the Krakow-Częstochowa Uplands. This meant that, from the earliest times, it had been of great military and transport importance.

In the mid-19th century, its location took on particular significance for the Austrian monarchy, and later for the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The town lay almost on the border of the empire – the border with the Russian Empire ran just a dozen or so kilometres from the town centre. For this reason, Vienna decided to establish one of the most important defensive strongholds in this part of Europe in Krakow.

Why did the Austrians decide to surround Krakow with a massive system of fortifications?

The Krakow Fortress was built by the Austrian Empire, and later by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to protect access to the heart of the monarchy – Vienna. Krakow was of immense strategic importance, as its capture would have opened up a route through Moravia straight to the imperial capital.

The city was situated very close to the border with the Russian Empire, which is why it was one of the points most vulnerable to a possible attack from the east. From the Russian perspective, Krakow was a natural target for an offensive, whilst for Austria-Hungary it was a key element of its defence system. That is precisely why the monarchy spared no expense in fortifying it, creating one of the largest and most modern defence systems in this part of Europe.

Photo: Municipal Buildings Management Board materials

What went on behind the fort walls on a day-to-day basis?

We know quite a lot about this, as numerous sets of regulations and archival documents have survived. Contrary to popular belief, the forts were not inhabited by soldiers on a day-to-day basis. The conditions inside were difficult – it was damp, dark and chilly, so the place was unsuitable for long-term occupation.

The soldiers were stationed mainly in barracks located throughout Krakow. The forts were manned during military exercises and in the event of mobilisation. On a day-to-day basis, the only people present there were caretakers, security guards and small teams responsible for the proper upkeep and security of the facilities.

It is worth remembering, however, that the Krakow Fortress is much more than just the forts themselves. It comprised barracks, military hospitals, warehouses, weapons and food production facilities, as well as an extensive road and rail network. The fortress became a major catalyst for the city's development. One could even say that Krakow's current urban layout is largely the result of the fortress's function. If it weren't for this, the town would look completely different today.

What remains today of the former Krakow Fortress?

A surprisingly large number of forts have survived. Unlike Przemyśl Fortress, which was severely damaged during the fighting and its surrender in the First World War, Krakow Fortress was not the scene of any major combat operations. Although there were clashes in the area, these were limited in scope, and the forts themselves were never put to the test in actual combat. As a result, most of the buildings have survived in relatively good condition.

During the interwar period, the best-preserved forts were those that remained in the hands of the army. The greatest losses, however, occurred after the Second World War, when the systematic dismantling of some of the fortifications began. A symbolic example was the demolition of the western bastions of Fort Kościuszko. Marshal Michał Rola-Żymierski took part in the brick-breaking ceremony in person. It was a gesture intended to symbolise a break with the legacy of the partitioning powers. The official explanation was that the material from the demolition would be used to build a hostel for rural youths.

During the same period, Fort Krakus, which surrounded Krak's Mound, and Fort Krzemionki – on the site of which the Krakow branch of Telewizja Polska (Polish Television) is now based – also disappeared, amongst others. Over time, however, the demolition process was halted, mainly thanks to the efforts of Krakow's scientists and conservationists. Professor Janusz Bogdanowski played a particularly important role; as early as in the 1960s and 1970s, he highlighted the historical, architectural and natural value of the Krakow Fortress's structures, as well as their potential for the city's residents.

Another wave of destruction occurred in the 1990s and the early 21st century. The lack of permanent caretakers at many of the sites, the difficult economic situation and high metal prices meant that some of the forts fell victim to looting and vandalism.

Despite these losses, the overall result remains impressive. More than 40 forts of the Krakow Fortress have survived to this day. Not all of them are within the city limits – some are currently situated in neighbouring municipalities, including the municipality of Zielonki. As a result, Krakow can still boast one of the best-preserved fortification systems in Europe.

Photo: Paweł Szczur

If you had to pick one special place on the map of the Krakow Fortress, what would it be?

That’s a very difficult question, because there are so many places like that. However, the structures that are particularly close to my heart are those where, as the Municipal Buildings Management Board, we were able to carry out renovation work and return them to the residents.

One of the most recognisable structures in the Krakow Fortress is Kościuszko Fort. After the Second World War, its western bastions were demolished, and for many years the site remained inaccessible and neglected. In recent years, we have carried out a comprehensive regeneration of this site, resulting in the creation of an attractive park featuring preserved remnants of the old fortifications. This is the place to start your tour of the Krakow Fortress. It offers not only the chance to see historic fortifications, but also exceptional scenery and views. Right in the centre of the fort stands the Kościuszko Mound – which is older than the fort itself, as it was built in the 1820s. When the Austrians began building their fortifications, they regarded St Bronisława’s Hill as one of their most important strategic points. The fort was therefore built around the mound, whilst respecting its significance as a national monument.

The second place I have a particular fondness for is Fort St. Benedict. It is a highly distinctive structure with a hexadecagonal shape, towering over Lasota Hill. For many residents of Podgórze, it is one of the most recognisable symbols of this part of the city.

Fort Borek is also close to my heart – a unique artillery fort with a rare double-vaulted structure. Following conservation and refurbishment work, a branch of the Podgórze Cultural Centre now operates there. Residents are keen to take part in organised children’s activities, workshops, concerts and author talks. This is a perfect example of how historic buildings can successfully serve contemporary needs and become an important part of the local community’s life.

Does Krakow Fortress still harbour any secrets?

Of course, Krakow Fortress has its own legends and unexplained stories. One of the best-known stories is that of the mysterious disappearance of the crew of Fort Skała. To this day, it remains unclear how it came about that the soldiers stationed there simply vanished without a trace. Many theories and interpretations have sprung up around this story. For anyone interested in this topic, I recommend the book “A Walk Through Fortress Kraków: A Short Guide to Selected Sites” by Mateusz Drożdż, published by Krakow City Council, where you can find more information on this subject.

However, I consider the caverns – a system of underground tunnels hewn out of the rock – to be the most mysterious features of the Krakow Fortress. Those in Bodzów are particularly interesting. These are places that are little known even to many residents of Krakow. When you step inside, it’s hard not to feel a thrill. There is a unique atmosphere there, which fires the imagination and serves as a reminder of just how many secrets the fortress’s history still holds.

You are the director of the Municipal Buildings Management Board. Where does your fascination with forts come from?

The Municipal Buildings Management Board manages a wide variety of properties – ranging from

tenement houses in Rynek Główny (Main Square) and in Podgórze, through blocks of flats, health centres and retail units, to fortifications. We currently have nineteen forts in our collection.

My interest in the Krakow Fortress arose through my work. Whilst working on the renovation, development and regeneration of these buildings, I had the opportunity to learn more and more about their history. These are incredibly interesting places, which, over time, have come to fascinate me.

As the Municipal Buildings Management Board, we strive not only to maintain the forts in good condition, but also to make them more accessible to local residents. We want to showcase the results of our work and encourage people to discover these places as attractive spots for walks, learning about history and getting in touch with nature.

We regularly organise events to promote the heritage of the Krakow Fortress. Among other things, a family picnic was held at Fort Kościuszko this year. In early July, however, we are planning an initiative unlike anything we have done before. We want to link the nine forts located in the southern part of Krakow into a single sightseeing route in the form of a city game. Participants will be able to visit various sites, complete tasks, earn points and learn about the roles that the individual forts fulfil today. I hope this will appeal to both families with children and groups of friends who want to spend an active and enjoyable day out.

It is also worth noting that many of the forts are open to visitors all year round. I encourage everyone to explore Krakow Fortress. There are associations and foundations that organise historical walks and guided tours for groups and excursions. Information about such events is published, amongst other places, on the Municipal Buildings Management Board’s social media profiles.

What significance do the forts of the Krakow Fortress hold today, and what can be done to better protect this heritage for future generations?

Today, we are increasingly recognising the importance of the forts as recreational areas and green spaces for local residents. It is worth remembering that a fort is not just a building. It also comprises extensive earthworks, screening vegetation, mature trees and, as a rule, several hectares of land which, for decades, has been protected from development due to its military purpose.

As a result, the forts have become some of the largest green spaces in Krakow. These are ideal places for walking, relaxing and getting in touch with nature, but they are also spaces that can be given new social and cultural functions.

A good example is Fort Borek, which is now home to the Podgórze Cultural Centre. This shows that historic buildings can successfully serve the contemporary needs of local residents. This is precisely where I see the future of Krakow Fortress – in the sensible adaptation and regeneration of the forts so that, whilst retaining their historical character, they can continue to thrive and serve future generations.

Interviewed by: Jolanta Tęcza-Ćwierz

Tłum. Michał Fluder, kor. Matthew Dundon