

HISTORY OF OGRODZIENIEC CASTLE

Europe was experiencing the waning of the Middle Ages. The French and English knights were perishing in the Hundred Years' War; the Turks had just begun their conquest of the Balkans, and cities decimated by the plague were being traversed by woeful processions of flagellants. The Renaissance had not given birth to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and Istanbul still held the name of Constantinople, as the capital of the Byzantine Empire. The printing press and America had yet to be discovered. It was then, in the second half of the 14th century, that construction of a defensive fortress began on one of Ogradzieniec's rocky hills. It was to be part of a network of fortresses meant to guard the south-western border of the Polish Kingdom and its capital, Krakow, against Bohemian rulers from the Luxembourg dynasty.

The location of the fortress is not coincidental. In the rays of the rising sun, the chalky castle ruins are clearly visible from a distance of several kilometers, regardless of the direction one chooses to approach Ogradzieniec from. The castle, built on limestone ridges, is situated on the highest point of the Jura Krakowsko-Czestochowska (515 meters above sea level). The location made it easy to monitor local roads and trails, which were often traversed by columns of soldiers, caravans of merchants and individual wanderers.

The stronghold was constructed on the initiative of King Casimir the Great — a builder, reformer, and excellent administrator, about whom it is now said that he found Poland made of wood, and left it made of stone. A close associate of the monarch was Przedbor of Brzezine, the governor of Cracow, who later became the Marshal of the Polish Crown. He became the first leaseholder of the castle in Ogradzieniec. The next one was Wlodek Sulimczyk, a lieutenant from Cracow. According to the famous Polish chronicler Jan Dlugosz, the new king of Poland, Wladyslaw Jagiello, leased the castle to him in 1386.

The Sulimczyk family lived in the castle until 1470. Over the next half century the stronghold changed its possessor many times, passing successively into the hands of the Salomonowicz family (a family of rich Cracow townspeople), the Rzeszowskis, the Pileckis, the Wlodeks again, until finally, in 1523, it became the property of the Boner family.

This was a significant date in the history of the castle. A native of the Alsace region, Jan Boner was the owner of a gigantic fortune, which he earned by working in trade and finance. He was a city councilor for 30 years, holding at one point the office of mayor. Most importantly, however, he was the trusted banker of three successive Polish kings. Boner lent them (as well as to many other wealthy Polish people at the time) money for public and private expenses. He helped finance two of King Sigismund the Old's weddings, including the one with the Italian princess Bona Sforza. Monarchs appreciated the services of the resourceful financier and made Boner, the Grand Master of the Castle in Cracow, a supplier of silver to the royal mint, leaseholder of salt mines in Wieliczka and silver mines in Olkusz, as well as giving him several fiscal privileges and ownership of dozens of villages. He was given nobility status and the position of a starost.

Not long before his death, in 1523, Jan Boner took possession of the castle in Ogradzieniec. The stronghold, along with most of the estates of the deceased banker, was taken over by his nephew — Seweryn Boner. It was him, who around 1530 began the spectacular reconstruction of the medieval fortress

into a Renaissance defensive residence. It soon began to be called "a small Wawel". It consisted of four wings (one was the so-called high castle, and the other the middle castle) with an enclosed courtyard, surrounded by Renaissance galleries. The high cylindrical towers were topped with characteristic „helmets”, similar to those seen on the towers of the Royal Castle on Wawel Hill. It's quite probable that the architects and sculptors working on the fortress were Italians, who had been staying in Poland at that time. Furthermore, the castle's interiors were generously decorated with silk tapestries and mahogany and ebony furniture — another costly element of the renovation.

After the death of Seweryn Boner in 1549, the reconstruction of the castle continued under his son Stanislaw and then by Jan Firlej, the husband of Zofia Bonerówna, the daughter of Seweryn. The project ultimately finished in 1576. The result was a castle complex with living quarters, utility rooms (including a brewery and distillery), storehouses, a 100 meter deep well, soldiers' bedrooms, a treasury, powder magazine and armory, but also a chapel, a library, a ballroom and representative chambers. The residence was protected by massive walls, reinforced with towers, moats, and drawbridges.

While the 16th century was a period of richness and splendor for the Ogródzieniec castle, the 17th was the beginning of its decline. It started when the Swedish army invaded Poland in 1655. The stronghold, occupied by the soldiers of King Charles X Gustav, was plundered and partly destroyed. The task of reconstructing the castle was successfully undertaken by the new owner of the castle — the castellan of Cracow Stanislaw Warszycki — but the newly renovated building did not outlive its architect. In 1702 the Swedish army occupied the castle again, this time as part of the Great Northern War (at this point the castle belonged to the Męcinski family, who acquired it through the marriage of Barbara Warszycka and Kazimierz Męcinski). The stronghold once again was plundered and set on fire. After these events, Ogródzieniec never regained its former glory. The owners could not afford the expensive renovation of a castle that's size exceeds thirty-two thousand cubic meters. The condition of the building slowly deteriorated, resulting in its last inhabitants leaving in 1810.

Although it was abandoned, the castle was formally still private property. The building was falling into decay over the following years, due to exposure to harsh weather and being treated as a source for building material by the local inhabitants. In the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, the owner of the castle changed several times, which did not facilitate a potential reconstruction. The intangible value of the abandoned castle, however, was appreciated by enthusiasts, who made its image a symbol of the Polish Tourist Society, founded in 1906. Even this did not protect it from being destructed even further during the First and Second World War.

After 1945, the fortress finally received proper attention, when archaeological research of the castle was carried out. It uncovered hidden architectural relics and partially reconstructed the spatial layout of the castle. This became the basis for undertaking restoration and conservation works, which resulted in the former fortress being partially opened to the public as a permanent ruin in 1973. Today, the castle is the biggest attraction on the Eagle's Nest Trail, which follows the trail of medieval strongholds of the Polish Jura in Lesser Poland. Numerous open-air events are held on its grounds, attracting large crowds of tourists. The castle is frequented by filmmakers looking for locations for their productions: in 2001 Andrzej Wajda filmed

„*The Revenge*“ here, while in the spring of 2019 Ogródzieniec hosted a Netflix crew that was making a TV series adaptation of "*The Witcher*" (it was here that the scenes for the Battle of Sodden were shot). Even before the fall of the Iron Curtain, the famous heavy metal band Iron Maiden recorded a film insert here, which was later used in the film *Live After Death*.