

THE CHESS SET

More than 650 years after his death, King Casimir the Great once again stood at the head of a great army. An army unparalleled, to which non-other in the world can compare. An army which emerged from the walls of the medieval castle in Ogrodzieniec like a host of shadows led by Aragorn from Tolkien's Haunted Mountain. An army whose battlefield was a chessboard. *Unreal, totally unreal* — this was Włodzimierz Seweryn's first thought when he was offered to carve chess figures out of stones taken from the renovated gate tower of the Ogrodzieniec stronghold. The experienced artist was well aware of how difficult such a task would be. *Jurassic limestone is extremely unstable and not suitable for carving. It simply falls apart during processing* — explains Seweryn. Despite this, he took on the task. Almost a year later, what seemed impossible became reality. *That's what art is all about: to do what is difficult without taking the easy way out* — he explains that decision. For the boulders of limestone, making chess pieces out of them was the only chance they had for a second life. Hundreds of years ago, they were used by the fortress builders to erect the walls of the 14th-century gate tower — one of the oldest parts of the castle — but time and changing seasons left it in poor shape. Over the years, micro-cracks formed, meaning that the stones could no longer be relied on. Covered with patina and traces of authentic medieval building mortar, the limestones would inevitably end up on the trash heap.

The very first days of the project confirmed all my worst fears about carving in limestone. In one place the stone was as soft as chalk, so that one could almost carve in it with a fingernail; and in other parts it became so hard that even diamond cutters couldn't handle them. What's more, inside the stone there were cavities, fossils, and overgrowth. As a result, the pieces were often falling apart, sometimes just a step away from being finished. This turned the initial excitement into weariness and doubt. *Out of the five that were attempted, only one figurine was successfully completed, with the others falling apart. Carving is like chess, in that you always have to look ahead. Every move must be carefully thought out. Here, however, nothing could be predicted. Everything depended on the stone. Sometimes this really disturbed me* — remembers Włodzimierz Seweryn. The specific nature of the "raw material" wasn't the only problem — there was also a lack of suitable tools. Seweryn's workshop had tools to carve in wood, not stone. According to the motto, the best tools for a sculptor are the ones he made himself, the artist bought several metal chisels at a hardware store, which he sharpened and forged into chisels suitable for working with limestone boulders. The kit was completed by a pair of diamond cutters and a hand grinder. These tools were finally able to successfully grip the stone, as where others had slipped or burned. And so in toil and dust more figures were made. *I often looked as if I had come out of a mill after I'd left work* — says the sculptor. Despite all the uncertainties, he eventually managed to achieve 95 percent of what he set out to do. *Only 5 percent was left for the stone* — said Seweryn.

The army of limestone warriors stands on a chessboard made partially from oak wood and partially from fragments of stone taken from the castle. The board stands on four legs of stone. *There is no other chessboard set like this in the world. They are unique, because there is an extraordinary story behind them. When I was carving these chess pieces, I felt that these stones had a soul. There will never be another chess set like this* — the sculptor summed up many months of his work. Both he and other people involved in this project hope that this story will continue; that the chess pieces will find a buyer and that the money raised from their sale will contribute to the castle budget and further conservation of the Ogrodzieniec Castle. Renovating the outward walls would help upkeep other old walls so that the medieval castle continues to

delight tourists, filmmakers and history enthusiasts for centuries to come.

The figures formed by Włodzimierz Seweryn's hand and chisel allude to the history of the Ogrodzieniec Castle. In the chess set, the king piece resembles Casimir the Great, the ruler who built the fortress. An attentive observer will notice in the queen's piece's robes a similarity to the attire of Casimir's wife, the Hessian princess Adelaide, as she is depicted in one historical church painting. The rooks situated in the corners of the chessboard are made in the likeness of the castle's gate tower. Next to them stand the knights — steeds with fluttered manes. The adjoining bishop pieces are represented by knights in armor. The pawns in the front line wield swords and shields. What is significant, is that none of the figures are „fully” finished; each piece has some undressed stone left on it with the original patina from the castle, which the artist refers to as „the stamp of the ages”.