

## POLISH CASTLES

Over the centuries, numerous castles were erected in Poland. In the north of the country, there are castles that were built in the 13th and 14th centuries by the Teutonic Knights. Southern Poland has its Eagles' Nest Trail – which was once one of several chains of defensive strongholds erected in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by King Casimir the Great, who “found Poland built of wood and left her built of stone”. The troops garrisoned in these castles guarded the borders of the Polish state or the security of trade routes. The term “eagles' nests”, applied in 19<sup>th</sup> century, is usually associated with lofty inaccessible mountain crags. In fact the Cracow-Częstochowa Upland is a low, Jurassic range. Nevertheless the dense forest cover made it suitable as a natural line of defence. None of these castles have survived in their original form. They passed through the hand of various owners and most of them were ruined during the Swedish invasions of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

We would like to make you familiar with two of the “eagles' nests”. From several castles we decided to choose the most interesting ones: the *castle at Ogrodzieniec* which is regarded as the most beautiful castle ruin in Poland, and the *castle at Pieskowa Skala* – the only one to have retained its full charm although it has also undergone change over the ages.

### The Castle of Ogrodzieniec

The ruins of medieval castle at Ogrodzieniec have been a traditional spot visited by tourists both from Poland and abroad for years. Between Czestochowa and Cracow there are several castles and ruins, but Ogrodzieniec belongs to the most picturesque ones. The castle is located among huge white limestone rocks of fantastic shapes on the highest elevation (504 m ) of the Cracow-Czestochowa Upland. Looking at the rocks you can notice two-humped camels, a lion with disordered hair, a funny frog, Sphinx and two gossiping women. It makes the impression as if the inside of the castle there would exist another fabulous world. We will try to make closer to you the history of the castle and some other curious details.

The first fortifications in this place were founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century but in 1241 they were destroyed by Tartar invasion. The next owners built a new castle from stone. The construction exploited the natural defensive features of the area: on three sides it was shield by rocks joined to a stone wall and earthworks. It is assumed that the castle was erected thanks to initiative of king Casimir the Great. The period of the splendour occurred in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the castle belonged to the Boner family – the bankers from Cracow and the advisors of king Sigismund the Old. Seweryn Boner employed an Italian architect who turned the Gothic castle into a Renaissance residence. The chambers of the castle used to be decorated with arrases, paintings, and ebony and mahogany furniture. There were also stained –glass windows. The fortress consisted with a big upper castle with three towers and a vast outer bailey. The complex was surrounded by a wall whose shape was adapted to the limestone rock. The castle's defensive system –bastions of the upper castle and the outer earthworks, made use of firearms possible.

In 1655 the castle was badly damaged by Swedish invasion. Four years later estates at Ogrodzieniec were bought by Stanisław Warszycki who spent much of his fortune rebuilding it. The count Warszycki (called the “Slavic Dracula”) was known for his loyalty to his king and country, and gained fame as a good military commander and especially as a keen investor dedicated to developing his lands, but there are also many legends about his cruelty. His enemies also accused him of being cruel to his peasants; in Ogrodzieniec he presumably constructed a 'cave of tortures'. Another story tells of how he became furious that his wife received a male guest, and suspecting them of an affair, blew up part of the castle. Many of his former possessions have legends centered around him being a ghost. He haunts especially the Ogrodzieniec castle as a ghostly black dog dragging a chain.

After another Swedish invasion at the beginning of the 18 century the castle fell into decline. Since the last of the owners family abandoned it in 1810, the castle was left and become a picturesque ruin but great deal of its fortifications, towers, and other structures still can be seen. From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the castle walls were pulled down by the local people to get some stone for building new objects. In the years 1959-1974 the castle was secured as permanent ruin and opened to the public.

The ruins are opened for sightseeing from April to October, from 9am till dusk, but in winter season you can still take stroll around it and take great photos.

Passing what little remains of the stable and coach-houses, and crossing over a stone bridge you come to an impressive gate house. The castle architecture is grouped round a courtyard. Two main complexes, the northern and the southern ones, are joined with the western wing where private chambers and a library were located. The southern wing with two cylindrical towers and surviving wall fragments from the 14<sup>th</sup> century constituted a knight and administrative part. In the opposite, northern wing (opposite the entrance) there were kitchens and upstairs there were representative and residential chambers. In the basement there was a well, which is now covered with a metal grille. The legend says that on its bottom there are hidden treasures. It was a dowry of Stanisław Warszycki's daughter. It is said that during moon's nights he comes back as a black dog and guards the treasure which a lot of people have tried to find but nobody has so far. Next to the well there is an entrance to a cafe located in the basement. The eastern side of the courtyard was topped with a tower, whose lower storeys have survived till today. From the tower storey one can admire a wide panorama of the area and a beautiful views of the surroundings. Walking around the castle you can notice how slippery the floor is in some places that was because it was polished by the numerous inhabitants of this building during centuries.

Nowadays the Ogródzieniec castle offers a lot of attractions for tourists. You can see there not only ruins but also festivals and performances such as:

- knights' tournaments,
- Jurassic Rock Festival,
- "Barbarian invasion"
- "Swedish people in the castle"
- International Students' Folk Festival,
- "Holidays with ghosts" – during an original feast in the castle tourists can see ghosts with their own eyes
- "The castle brought to life" – you can see daily life going on in the medieval castle; in the kitchen the cook is baking pancakes which she later gives to the visitors; in one room the maids are dancing, in the courtyard knights are fighting duels.
- "Medieval Knights' Feasts" – held at the Castle Inn or in the courtyard. During the feasts one can witness daily life in the castle, meet real knights or come across the White Lady or other ghosts in the evening.

One of the most interesting places visited by tourists is a torture chamber. Coming in the chamber you stand face to face with the hangman in the black mask and with the axe in his hands. The torture tools make the tourist visiting this chamber have gooseflesh. You can imagine how a man condemned to death felt when he was confessing his guilt.

Inside the walls of the castle there is also the Castle Museum, where you can see the objects of daily use, which belonged to the nobilities living there during the centuries. You can also see there the miniature model of the castle, and watch the film, showing life and customs of people, who lived there. Under the castle the Exhibition of Middle Ages is presented.