OŚWIĘCIM
ponad 800 lat historii

ZABYTKI MIASTA
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The monuments and other attractions of the town can be admired strolling along the marked routes:

- **„From the State Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum to the Old Town”**
  - Route 1 – yellow
- **„Post-war Oświęcim”**
  - Route 2 – red
- **„The Monuments of the Old Town”**
  - Route 3 – blue

The information can be obtained at:

**Tourist Information Office**
ul. Leszczyńskiej 12, 32-600 Oświęcim 5

- ph. no: +48 33 843 00 91,
- fax. no: +48 33 843 24 81
- e-mail: mpit@um.oswiecim.pl
- www: http://www.mpit-oswiecim.neostrada.pl
There were settlements on the castle hill in Oświęcim as early as the 11th century. The name of the town, however, appeared for the first time towards the end of the 12th century, when there was a fortified settlement surrounded by a defensive earthen rampart there. The castle complex, its village and the parish church were destroyed by the Tartars in 1241 as they, led by Badair, were marching to attack Silesia. During the reconstruction work after the attack, a brick defensive tower was built on the castle hill, which remains standing to this day. At that time, Oświęcim was part of the Duchy of Cieszyn and around the year 1272, it was granted the founding charter – further confirmed on 3 September 1291 by Mieszko I, the duke of Cieszyn.

When the Duchy of Cieszyn was divided in the years 1312-1317, an independent Duchy of Oświęcim was created with its capital in Oświęcim. It was ruled by the Silesian line of the Piast dynasty. The first duke to reside here was Władysław, the son of Mieszko I of Cieszyn, who, together with his wife, Eufrozyna, founded the Dominican Church and Monastery. One of its parts – St. Jack’s Chapel – remains standing even today. In 1327, Władysław’s son, Duke John I Scholastic, became vassal to John of Luxembourg, the king of Bohemia, thus making his Duchy dependent on the Bohemian Crown for over 100 years.

Towards the end of the 13th century, Oświęcim became an important place on the salt route – it had the privilege of storing and trading in salt of the highest quality mined in Wieliczka. It even had its own unit of measurement, the so-called bałwan oświęcimski. Oświęcim also enjoyed judicial privilege, the right to store and trade in lead, the right to levy fees on two bridges over the Vistula River, plus the right to maintain customs chambers. Oświęcim was famous for its fishing trade; even providing fish for the royal court in Kraków.

In 1445, the Duchy of Oświęcim was divided between Duke Casimir’s three sons thus creating three Duchies: those of Oświęcim, Zator, and Toszek. In 1453, Jan IV, the Duke of Oświęcim, paid homage to Casimir IV, the king of Poland. The Polish gentry and townspeople of Oświęcim did the same a year later. In 1457, Duke John IV sold his duchy to the Polish King, becoming part of the Polish Crown being fully incorporated much later, in 1564, under the Incorporation Act issued by Sigismund II Augustus.

In 1503, a great fire destroyed a large part of the town and the castle. King Alexander exempted the town from taxes for a period of 15 years, ordered the town walls to be repaired and the castle including the fortifications with a system of turrets to be rebuilt. This work took until 1534. The oldest surviving part of the castle and the fragment of the defensive walls come from that period.

In the 16th century Oświęcim flourished. Within the city walls, there was a parish church with a cemetery, a market square, a town hall, and the Dominican Church. Outside the walls, in the area of today’s ul. Mikołajskie, there was a hospital-shelter for the poor with the wooden St Nicholas’ Church and a cemetery. The period of prosperity ended when the town was captured by Swedish troops in 1655. Although they were forced to retreat by the troops of Jan Grzegorz Torysiński, after another two months they re-captured the town – plundering and burning it in revenge for the defeat. Out of the 500 houses, only 20 were left and out of 200 artisans, only six survived. The salt store stopped functioning; the castle and St Nicholas’ Church lay in ruins. In 1676, there were only 114 inhabitants in Oświęcim. Thirty years later, plague killed over 300 people and a fire destroyed the buildings around the main market square. For over 200 years, Oświęcim was unable to recover after the Swedish invasion and the disasters following it.

In 1772, the First Partition of Poland placed the Duchy of Oświęcim under Austrian rule, as a part of Galicia. Ten years later under the imperial decree concerning the dissolution of religious orders, the Dominican monastery in Oświęcim was closed. In addition, the parish cemetery at the Church of the Assumption was liquidated and a new one established – outside of the city walls.

The mid-19th century was a break-through period for the town, as it became an important railway junction on the route from Kraków to Vienna. Right up until the outbreak of World War I...
War II, many industrial plants were established here. These included a tar-board production plant, a tannery, Jakub Haberfeld’s factory of vodkas and liqueurs, a fertiliser production plant, the Ostryga and Atlantic factories of tinned fish, a factory of farming machines (Fabryka Maszyn Rolniczych “Potęga-Oświęcim”) and a machine and car factory (Zjednoczone Fabryki Maszyn i Samochodów “Praga-Oświęcim”). The car factory produced three types of “Praga-Oświęcim” cars: Piccolo, Alfa, and Grand. At the beginning, the chassis were imported from Prague. The total number of the cars produced in the factory amounted to 1700 and were famous for their highly resistant structure and high-quality finish. A “Praga-Oświęcim” was driven by Jan Kiepura, the famous Polish tenor, Zizi Halama, the cabaret actress, and Wojciech Kossak, the eminent Polish painter. Only one “Praga Oświęcim” has survived until today – a Piccolo, which at present belongs to the Museum of Motorization in Otębusy near Warsaw. It was exhibited during the celebrations of the Days of Oświęcim in 2001.

In the 19th century, several dangerous floods and fires destroyed parts of the town. Two subsequent floods, in 1805 and 1813, destroyed the castle hill – almost 25 square yards of the inner ward together with its buildings and walls fell into the River Soła, which changed its course. The Austrian authorities planned to demolish the devastated castle. Fortunately, the decision was not and has never been implemented. The fire in 1863 burnt two thirds of the town, including the steeple of the parish church, two synagogues, the town hall, and the hospital-shelter for the poor. In 1881, another great fire devoured the parish church, the parish house, the vicarage, the school and hospital.

In 1910, the Starosty of Oświęcim was established and its office was located in the reconstructed castle. After Poland regained independence in 1918, the castle housed the seat of the starost of the Oświęcim political district included in 1919 into the Voivodeship of Kraków.

From the beginning of World War II, Oświęcim belonged to the III Reich and its name was changed to the German Auschwitz. On the outskirts of the town the Nazis set up the KL Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, a centre for mass extermination of people from the whole of Europe. The Germans started to restructure the town and built an IG Farben factory in Dwory near Oświęcim. After World War II the factory was changed into Zakłady Chemiczne Oświęcim
(Oświęcim Chemical Plant) and is at present Synthos Company.

Already in 1945 after liberation on 27 January 1945, four companies started operating in Oświęcim. Life in the town was slowly returning to normal. In 1947, a State Museum was established in the former KL Auschwitz camp.

In 1951, the District of Oświęcim was created, which until 1975 was a part of the Voivodeship of Kraków.

In 1975 due to administrative reform, the District ceased to exist and the town was incorporated into the newly created Voivodeship of Bielsko. Since 1999, Oświęcim has again been the capital of the District and, just as it was several centuries ago; it once again belongs to the Voivodeship of Małopolska with its capital in Kraków.

THE CASTLE

The present building of the Oświęcim castle was erected at the beginning of the 16th century and later repeatedly restructured. The original castle, the seat of a castellan (the governor of a castle) in the 12th century, was probably wooden, just like the whole complex of buildings built on the castle hill around 100 years earlier. During archaeological excavations around the defensive tower, archaeologists discovered a large fragment of what was probably a road made of wooden poles. The town was fortified; it was surrounded with a wooden earthen wall with a palisade.

During the reign of Mieszko II of Opole in 1241, Oświęcim was destroyed by the Tartars. The burnt town was later rebuilt and the brick defensive tower was added to the castle.

The first duke to live in the castle was Władysław, the son of Mieszko I, the Duke of Cieszyn. During his reign, i.e. in the first half of the 14th century, the construction of the tower was completed, and from the funds provided by the Duke and his wife, the Dominican Church and Monastery were built. There are, however, no historical or iconographic documents of the castle. We do not even know its exact location on the hill, which was surrounded by defensive walls in the 14th or 15th century. At that time, the castle entertained many eminent visitors. Oświęcim, situated at the junction of the main communication routes, was a convenient stopover place. The first records mention Elżbieta Rakuszanka, the future wife of King Casimir IV, who at the end of January and the beginning of February 1454 stopped at the castle in Oświęcim on her way to Kraków. She was accompanied by lords of Bohemia, Austria, and Moravia.

After Duke John IV had sold the Duchy of Oświęcim to King Casimir IV, the castle was the seat of royal castellans. At that time, from 27 to 29 July 1471, unusual guests visited the castle: King Casimir IV with his wife Elizabeth, three Polish bishops and seven Silesian dukes wanted to say farewell to the King’s son, Prince Władysław, who was on his way to Prague,
after his rights to the Bohemian crown had been recognised by the Bohemian Parliament. They stayed in Oświęcim for three days, accompanied by 7 thousand cavalry and 2 thousand infantry, probably accommodated in the nearby villages.

Three years later, in 1474, Waclaw, the Duke of Rybnik, stopped at the castle. He was looking for help and shelter as he was running away from the forces of Matthias Corvinus, the King of Hungary.

The medieval castle burnt down in 1503 together with the parish church and a major part of the town. It was rebuilt within 5 years on the order of King Alexander. Reinforcement and reconstruction works on the walls lasted until 1534. A fragment of the defensive wall in the northwestern part of the hill and the oldest southern part of the castle has survived until today.

In 1510, the reconstructed castle was visited by a papallegate, who came to Poland on a special mission.

Several years later – on 11 and 12 April 1518, Bona Sforza d’Aragona, accompanied by a long train of noblemen and clergy, stopped at the castle on her way from Bari to Kraków, where she was to marry King Sigismund I and be crowned.

In addition, the future wife of Sigismund II Augustus, Elizabeth of Habsburg, stopped in Oświęcim at the end of April 1543. She was welcomed by a delegation of wives of the Polish dignitaries from Kraków.

Probably on the night of 18-19 June 1574, the castle gave shelter to king Henry of Valois, who was secretly running away from Poland to France.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the castle was again destroyed by fire. During reconstruction work, it was extended; the eastern wall was moved two metres towards the edge of the hill. Hence, under the floors of today’s rooms on the ground floor there are remains of the sixteenth-century walls.

During the Swedish invasion in the 17th century, the castle was captured twice and finally burnt by the Swedish troops. That time marked the beginning of the castle’s slow decline. In spite of a parliamentary resolution ordering renovation work, it never regained its former splendour. In 1765 the castle was surveyed – the report describes the terrible condition of the buildings and defensive walls: “On our entering the castle we can see a bridge, and a gate with double doors (...). Behind the doors there are walls on both sides of the passage leading onto the ward; the walls are scratched (...) on the ward, there is the town archive, with iron doors (...) a window with iron bars (...). Next there is the kitchen (...), the pantry with a lock (...) behind it there are wooden stairs leading to the second floor, where there is a wooden gallery (...). On the right, there is a room with a window and a ceramic stove (...). Next, there is a hall (...) with scratched walls. An empty chapel. A small room (...). A brick tower in the corner.” Out of all these buildings, only the tower has survived over the centuries.

At the beginning of the 19th century two floods occurred, both catastrophic in their impact. In 1805, the River Soła changed its course right under the castle hill, and eight years later, it rose so rapidly that almost half of the hill together with the buildings collapsed into the water. The ruined castle and tower were then used as a salt warehouse. Several years later the Austrian authorities decided to demolish the castle, but the ruins were bought at auction by Kajetan Russocki, the former adjutant of Napoleon Bonaparte, who established an administrative office and a post office. His daughter, Leokadia Dąbska, inherited the castle; her children later sold the mortgaged building to three Jewish tradesmen: Landau, Schnitzer and Schonker. The new owners converted it into commercial storage rooms.

In 1904, the castle was bought by Karol Kaszny – a railway clerk, who renovated both the castle and the tower and turned them into a hotel called Zamek (The castle), a wine-vault and a beer-house. At that time the castle was extended – another floor was added, on the eastern wall a coat of arms was placed featuring a stylised Piast eagle with a letter „O” on its breast, a reference to the history of the Duchy of Oświęcim.

In 1910, Kaszny leased the castle to the newly created Oświęcim Starosty. After Poland regained independence in 1918, the castle housed the offices of the starosty.
The next owner of the castle was Jacob Haberfeld, who converted it into a warehouse for vodkas and wines produced in his factory.

In 1926, the Biała Krakowska District Department bought the castle and in the years 1928-1931 carried out its renovation. Between the tower and the castle, the former single-floor building was replaced by a two-floor building featuring a neo-renaissance attic with a metal crowned eagle. For the last several years, a copy of the eagle has again adorned the attic.

In the years 1929-1932, the castle was the seat of Oświęcim District self-government. In 1932, the Biała District Department put it up for sale. However, until World War II nobody wanted to buy it. During the war, it was the seat of the German occupational authorities, after which the castle provided offices for the gmina local district authorities and since 1952 – the District National Council in Oświęcim. In the years 1975-1987, the castle accommodated Oświęcim’s municipal authorities. Since 1993 the castle has housed – among others – The Historical and Ethnographic Museum, which exhibits documents and items connected with the town’s history.

In the years 1999-2000 the stairway joining the castle with the tower was demolished. Archaeologists carried out work within the area, which allowed them to prepare a renovation plan.

On 1 January 2010, a new cultural institution of the “Oświęcim Castle Museum” was opened, now housing the already existing historical and ethnographic collections.

DEFENSIVE TOWER

“The castle in Oświęcim has a brick tower, fairly tall and slender, dominating over it. It would be easy to capture the whole town, if you only captured the tower,” wrote Jan Długosz, a famous Polish chronicler, in the 15th century about Oświęcim’s most valuable monument. The Gothic defensive tower is one of the oldest brick structures in Małopolska and the tallest Gothic wall preserved in the south of Poland.

Its construction was probably started after 1241, during the repair work after the castle had been burnt by the Tartars. The first element of the structure is an ashlar stone wall, which today is below the level of the ward. A fragment of the never completed wall at the corner of the tower probably comes from the same period. The wall might suggest that, originally, the tower was supposed to be part of a bigger – never completed – defensive system. The tower was built on a square plan with about four-metre-thick walls. The construction was interrupted for unknown reasons. The work was taken up again at the beginning of the 14th century and construction was completed, no longer with the use of stone but manually formed brick.
The tower was built as a freestanding structure, the so-called tower of the last defence. Its lower part was inaccessible from the outside and there were no passages inside it. Initially, there were two or three upper floors. We do not know what the highest floor and the roof looked like – we can only suppose that it resembled the image of the tower on Oświęcim’s coat of arms. The only original entrance to the tower, with a stone pointed-arch portal, is 10 m above the ward today. In the past, there was a flight of wooden steps leading to it. On the level of the entrance, there is a residential hall with a cloister vault, restructured in the 16th century, a fireplace in the corner and a window in the eastern wall, where we can still see a fragment of a platform for archmen. Today’s floor is a temporary wooden platform. Until the 19th century this room had an opening in the floor, which was used to climb down a rope to the lower level, where prisoners were sometimes kept. Higher floors are accessible by a flight of stairs embedded in the wall. In the 16th century, the tower was raised by another floor, which has not survived. The top floor was covered by a shingle roof crowned with a copper sphere. After the Swedish invasion, the tower and other buildings on the castle hill gradually fell into ruin.

In the 19th century, a new entrance to the tower was added at the ground level and a temporary wooden staircase was built inside. At the beginning of the 20th century the castle’s owner, Karol Kaszny, had both the castle and the tower renovated. He received a subsidy from the Kraków Conservation Office on the condition that he would donate all excavated artefacts to the museum in Kraków. Kaszny repaired the tower walls and covered the upper floor with a tiled pavilion roof.

In the years 1928-1931, the tower was joined to the castle by means of a two-storey building, thus losing its original character of a freestanding construction.

During the conservation works carried out in the years 1984-1986, the roof and stairs inside the tower were replaced. In 1997 the garages built in the 1950’s were demolished, thus exposing the northern wall. During further archaeological work between 1999-2000, the staircase in the tower wall was also demolished – for years it had been in danger of collapsing. In 2003 the restoration of the interior walls started and the interior wooden stairs were pulled down. The tower is going to be opened to the public in the future.

**DEFENSIVE WALLS**

At the northeastern end of the castle hill there is a six-meter-long fragment of the defensive wall with a circular structure adjacent to the corner of the tower. These fortifications, today almost in complete ruin, come from the period when the castle was being reconstructed after the great fire of 1503. The wall, ca. 2m thick, was built from brick and rough stone. It is clearly visible that it was repeatedly restructured...
and repaired. The circular structure, which was an element flanking the fortifications, was built on the plan of a circle 4.5m in diameter. It will be possible to determine its original form and the way in which it is connected with the defensive wall through architectural and archaeological research.

**HISTORICAL UNDERGROUND PASSAGES**

According to Jan Stanek, “the local legend says that the castle in Oświęcim used to be joined with the former Dominican monastery by means of an underground passage.” The monastery now belongs to the Salesians. Perhaps there is a grain of truth in this legend, as the Dominican church and monastery were located on a hill towering over the Sola river, which is a location naturally difficult to access. During the Nazi occupation, according to what J. Stanek wrote in 1959 in his book Z dziejów ziemi oświęcimskiej – “during the work around the old Jewish temple at ul. Berka Joselewicza (...) a tunnel was discovered leading from the castle to the monastery.” Today only archaeological excavations could prove the legend true.

There are two underground passages at present; they intersect ca. 11m below the castle’s inner ward. Their history is, however, much shorter. The older one, a narrow tunnel running along the east-west axis, has been traditionally called the “long” or “Austrian” passage. It was probably built around 1914. Initially, its openings were located on two opposite sides of the hill. At present, the only opening can be found on the western slope, at ul. Bulwarowa along the Sola river. The tunnel has a pear-shaped profile and brick walls. About 20m away from the opening is a well, which was originally accessible from the castle ward, and which reached below the subterranean water level. The other tunnel, north-south oriented, was carved out by the Germans in the years 1940-44 and it is called a “cross passage”. Its walls were made from ferroconcrete shells with the cross-section of incomplete ellipses. It was used as an anti-aircraft shelter. Its construction was never completed, and as a result, after several decades, its ceiling collapsed in several places, thus endangering the structure of the castle. In 1984, intervention and archaeological works were started on the castle hill. The collapsed structures were filled up, the tunnel’s construction was reinforced and the most damaged fragments reconstructed. For the past few years, both tunnels have been open to visitors.

**CHURCH OF OUR LADY HELP OF THE POOR**

The history of the Salesian church goes back to the first half of the 14th century, when Duke Władysław of Oświęcim and his wife Eufrozyna, built, or to be more precise, completed the construction of the Dominican monastery complex in Oświęcim, begun by his father, Mieszko II of Oświęcim. According to Jan Długosz, it was the fourth Dominican monastery in Poland, which stood out from among the others thanks to its size and beautiful location on a hill over the River Sola, “a notable construction built from burnt brick.”

The monastery complex consisted of the oriented Gothic Church of The Holy Cross and the adjacent quadrilateral cloister surrounded on all sides by the monastery buildings.

The only surviving parts of the old Dominican monastery are the Gothic chapter house (present-day St. Jack’s Chapel), and fragments of the Church walls, restructured by the Salesians at the turn of the 20th century.

The Gothic Church of the Holy Cross was a single-nave structure with a rectangularly-closed choir. It was ca. 55m long and the nave walls were about 21m high. The nave was covered with a wooden ceiling and the choir – lower and narrower – with a cross-ribbed vault. The church was oriented; the entrance for the congregation was located on the northern wall, the entrance for the friars – on the southern wall, i.e. from the cloister.
Inside, there was the high altar and three side-altars: the altar of St. Nicholas, St Madeleine and Our Lady of the Rosary - at present the painting from this altar can be seen in the Church of the Assumption in Oświęcim. Under the choir, there is a crypt where, according to Jan Długosz, dukes and castellans of Oświęcim were buried.

Since 1782, the Dominican buildings gradually fell into ruin, as upon the decree on the dissolution of religious orders issued by the Austrian Emperor Joseph II, some of the friars had to leave Oświęcim, while all the possessions and lands belonging to the monastery were confiscated. Six friars, who refused to move to other monasteries outside of the Austrian sector, remained in Oświęcim. They were, however, unable to maintain the church, the monastery buildings, or for that matter themselves. In 1845, the church roof, which was in danger of collapsing, was demolished, and the vault over the choir collapsed. Władysław Łuszczkiewicz relates, “The white church walls were now and again decorated with polychromy, and through the charming rosettes of slender Gothic windows, which had by now almost turned into ruin, sun rays stole into the building, playing on the greenness of the church floor.”

The abandoned Dominican buildings often changed hands. Kajetan Russocki, who, in 1819, inherited the monastic property bought by his uncle, Idzi Russocki, the parish priest of Oświęcim, used the ruins as stables for post horses and as warehouses for hay and straw. In 1872, two Jewish tradesmen, Landau and Schonker, bought the ruined buildings and set up storage rooms for their merchandise there.

A wooden shack was put up to store kerosene in the church choir. Barrels with kerosene were rolled over a platform made from the medieval gravestone of Mikołaj Myszkowski, torn out from the choir floor.

In 1898, the ruins were taken over by the Society of St. Francis de Sales, invited to Oświęcim by Andrzej Knycz, who at that time was the chief priest in the parish of the Assumption. The remains of the residential buildings were demolished. The former Church of the Holy Cross, from now on the Church of Our Lady Help of Christians, was rebuilt according to the design of Mario Ceradini. A new choir was added on the western side and the church was re-oriented; a new main entrance was made in the former altar wall at ul. Jagiełły. On 19 August 1900, the first mass took place in the reconstructed part of the ruins. In 1906, the work was interrupted because of a restaurateur’s intervention. The reconstruction, the result of which is the present form of the church, was completed only in the years 1975-84. Nothing of the previous furnishings remained in the church.

In 1904, the high altar was decorated with a statue of Our Lady Help of Christians, presented by the Salesian Society from Turin, Italy. In 1907, the statue was replaced by a copy of the Turin image of Our Lady, painted by a local artist – Jan Szczęsny Stankiewicz. In 1906, eight side altars were set up. After the war, in 1958, an organ was built, and in the years 1962-64, the high altar was restructured according to the design of a Salesian friar, Jan Kajzer.

ST. JACK’S CHAPEL

St. Jack’s Chapel is the only building that remains from the Dominican monastery complex in Oświęcim. Its erection, like that of other Dominican buildings, was funded by the duke of Oświęcim in the first half of the 14th century. Originally, it had the function of a chapter house, i.e. the place where friars met and debated. Along its interior walls were wooden or stone pews, unfortunately, however, they have not survived. In 1594, the chapter house was transformed into the Chapel of St. Jacek Odrowąż, a Polish Dominican friar who had at that time been canonised and become the new patron of the congregation. In the 19th century, the abandoned and ruined buildings were used as storage-rooms. St. Jack’s Chapel was turned into a storage place for bones and rags. In 1894, the citizens’ committee set up by Andrzej Knycz bought the chapel from two Jewish tradesmen. Thanks to the committee, the chapel was restored under the conservational supervision of Professor Odrzywolski and on 19 August 1894, St. Jack’s Day, the building was consecrated.
By that time the chapel had been partially reconstructed – the vestibule had been pulled down and its rose window placed above the entrance.

Besides, the hipped roof had been replaced with a gable roof. Gables with blind windows had been added, windows enlarged and a small bell placed on the roof.

Apart from these changes, the chapel has preserved its Gothic character. It is a two-bay unplastered brick structure, built on a rectangular plan, with buttresses, a cross-ribbed vault, stone ribs and keystones. Nothing from the original fittings and decorations remained, apart from a seventeenth-century marble memorial plaque of Mikołaj Mstowski in the chapel wall. During the reconstruction of the ruined Church of the Holy Cross, the bones of the people buried under the church choir were moved into the Chapel.

CHURCH OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY

It is likely that in the location of today’s Church of the Assumption, already in the 12th century there was a wooden parish church for the inhabitants of the village around the castle.

Inside the town, on the castle hill there was probably a chapel. This first church in Oświęcim was burnt, just like the rest of the town and village, during the Tartar attack in 1241. In the
second half of the 13th century a new brick parish church was erected in its place. Its existence was recorded by Jan Długosz in his chronicles. The medieval church was destroyed by fire in 1503 together with the castle and a large part of the town. It was rebuilt in early Renaissance style. The construction work was also carried out between 1527 and 1529. The portal from the sacristy to the choir with the inscribed date of 1529 comes from that period. From the medieval church only two relics remained. The first is the stone pointed-arch portal in the southern wall of the nave (the side of ul. Dąbrowskiego) with a plastered entrance, and an image of St. Christopher. The second relic is the pointed arch entrance, also built up, with forged iron doors in the western wall next to the church steeple. The choir of the 16th century church was covered by a barrel vault with lunettes. The nave and steeple walls up to the windows were made of brick, whereas the walls, the nave roof and the steeple above them were wooden.

In 1656, Swedish troops burnt the town, including the parish church. Its reconstruction took almost 25 years. The nave walls were rebuilt fully in brick and covered with a barrel vault.

In the 19th century Oświęcim was ravished by two great fires. In August 1863, two thirds of the town burnt, including the parish church steeple, whose bells melted. The reconstruction of the church and the whole town took 14 years. In June 1881, another fire devoured the church with the parish house and the vicarage. Again the church was rebuilt. This time the upper storeys of the tall church steeple were built of brick. The church silhouette has been preserved in an unchanged form until today.

The Church of the Assumption is an oriented structure with a nave and two single aisles, a rectangularly-closed choir, a steeple on the western facade axis and a chapel at the northern aisle wall. Inside, the vaults and pillars have been decorated with scagliola ornaments. The high altar, late-Baroque in style and decorated with life-sized figures of St. Peter and St. Paul, comes from the 18th century and was restructured in the second half of the 19th century. Apart from the altar, two beautiful crucifixes are worthy of attention: a seventeenth-century crucifix in the porch under the steeple, and an 18th century crucifix outside, on the eastern choir wall. In the passage from the nave to the choir, opposite the pulpit, there is a marble baptismal font with a metal lid from 1613. Initially, near the font there used to be marble memorial plaques, or epitaphs, plastered into the walls, after the renovation in 2001 they were removed and placed on the southern pillar and western nave wall. The oldest plaque comes from 1681; made from black marble, it is dedicated to Father Hieronim Russocki. The remaining epitaphs come from the 19th century.

In the church, there are also three post-Dominican paintings from the 18th century: the painting of Our Lady of the Rosary and two paintings featuring St. Jack and St. Dominic,
an 18th-century feretory and chasubles, and several antique chalices.

After the renovation carried out 2000-2001, the post-war polychromes disappeared. They were scenes from the Old and New Testament in a limited range of shades of grey, dull red and ochre and simple, almost cubist, style. Today the bright bare church walls are decorated only with gold ornaments on stuccowork. (At present, the high altar is being renovated.)

Until the end of the 18th century, the Church of the Assumption was surrounded by a parish cemetery, around which there was a wall with several entrance gates. The cemetery was liquidated; some graves and gravestones were moved to the new cemetery established on what was then the outskirts of the town. The wall surrounding the cemetery was demolished by the Germans in 1941, who widened the street now known as ul. Dąbrowskiego right up to the church wall.

**CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF SORROWS**

The first building of the Seraphic convent in Oświęcim was erected in 1895. Two years later the foundation stone for the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows was consecrated. Paweł Muller, an architect from Bielsko, began the construction free of charge, “because of the nuns’ poverty”. The church was completed and consecrated in 1899.

The Church of Our Lady of Sorrow; late 19th century; view from the west

The oldest nunnery building in neo-Classical style was joined to the Church by means of a ground-floor passage. Another building matching in style was built in the 1950’s. Within the complex there also is a turn-of-the-century building of Caritas (a Christian charity organisation) erected in 1905-10 and two kindergarten buildings from the 1930’s. On its western and eastern sides, the complex is flanked by an orchard and a garden.

It is a small single-nave brick building, neo-Gothic in style, unplastered, clasped with buttresses, with a narrower and lower choir closed with an apse. The gable roof of the nave is topped with a small belfry. The walls of the church and the cross-ribbed vault have been plastered and painted white. The neo-Gothic high altar, the pulpit and benches all come from the late 19th century. The side altars with the paintings of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Anthony of Padua, the Pietà, the confessional, and the chandelier come from the very beginning of the 20th century.

During World War II the church was partly destroyed. It was rebuilt after the war and in 1947 a figure of Mary the Immaculate was placed before it. In 1950 new stained-glass windows illustrating the seven sorrows of the Holy Virgin Mary were fitted into the church.

Detail of the gravestone of the Founding Mother, Maria Małgorzata Szewczyk - inside the Church
URBAN LAYOUT OF OŚWIĘCIM
- THE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

The urban layout of Oświęcim from the turn of the 15th century has been included in the Polish register of historical monuments. It includes “the building complex of the old town from the turn of the 20th century with its main dominants: the castle, the church and the monastery.”

Oświęcim’s urban development has had many stages. During the first stage, which probably started around the 12th century, the castle’s lands extended over both banks of the Vistula River, including the region of Żywiec and in the east reaching over to the River Skawa. At that time, there was a fortified settlement on the castle hill surrounded by a defensive earthen rampart and flanked from its northern side by a village. There was also a market square. Around the square a trading settlement developed, which extended over the eastern part of the present-day town. The settlement was an oblong oval with a spindle-shaped market square inside – the area of today’s Mały Rynek and ul. Piastowska. On both sides of the square there were plots of land in a typical fan-shaped arrangement, whose traces have been preserved in the present arrangement of the buildings at ul. Piastowska and on the eastern side of Mały Rynek. At that time, there was a church inside or outside of the settlement. It might have been located in the area of today’s Church of the Assumption, but it is also possible that the first church in Oświęcim was St. Nicholas’ Church, which no longer exists and which was located around today’s ul. Mikołajska.

It is most likely that the settlement was not surrounded by any defensive structure. The Tartar invasion in 1241 put an end to this stage of the town development, destroying both the town and the settlement. After it had been rebuilt, the spatial layout of Oświęcim was totally changed.

In the second half of the 13th century the town was granted the founding charter. Unfortunately, the exact date is not known, and the actual document has not survived. The surrounding of the town with a defensive structure in the first half of the 14th century can be considered the final stage of its medieval development. The main market square was finally established in
the 14th century. The frontages of the square were marked by blocks of wooden buildings.

Adjacent to its southeastern corner was the square of the former oval settlement. It served as an additional market place. It is impossible today to determine the location of the public utility buildings. The slaughterhouses were probably located within the main market square, the storage rooms for salt and lead in the northern part of the town. At the time, the town extended in the south over to the Dominican monastery built at the beginning of the 14th century. Being a mendicant order, Dominicans usually settled outside of town areas. Oświęcim was surrounded with defensive walls at the time when it was the capital town of an independent duchy. St. Nicholas’ Church was outside the walls, and probably served as a church-hospital. The fortifications made of wood and earth had only two gates in the north-south axis, in the area of today’s crossroads of ul. Górnickiego and Klucznikowska, and ul. Jagielły and Zaborska. The town buildings at that time were probably wooden.

A constant influx of people had a very significant influence on the further development of the town. In 1457, after the duchy had been sold to the King of Poland, many Jews settled in Oświęcim. In royal cities, the de non tolerandis Judeis law was not in force, and by that time Oświęcim had become a royal town. In 1563 Jews were prohibited from buying houses around the main market square, which resulted in creating separate Jewish quarters in the area of present-day ul. Berka Joselewicza and on the outskirts of the town, outside of the walls.

In the 16th century the network of roads was extended, the city walls were repaired and modernised, and after the great fire in 1503 the castle with its walls, the parish church and the Dominican church were rebuilt. Probably around that time a third gate was created in the area of today’s crossroads of ul. Dąbrowskiego and Sienkiewicza. A town hall was built in the market square. It survived until the 19th century.

The 17th century marked the beginning of Oświęcim’s slow decline. The Swedish invasion destroyed the town in 1656 and started its slow fall, which lasted for 200 years. Towards the end of the 17th century, probably during reconstruction work, the driveway to the castle hill was moved from the northern side to where it is today, up the southern slope of the hill. However, the castle fortifications had not yet been connected with the town fortifications. In 1772, under the treaty on partitions, Oświęcim and its lands fell under Austrian rule. The town boundaries were then changed and held in force until 1939.

All roads leading out of the town were regulated, the parish church cemetry was liquidated, and a new one established outside of the city walls. The Dominican Monastery was dissolved.

In the 19th century, brick buildings constituted only a half of all the buildings in Oświęcim. The economy was at a standstill, two most precious historical monuments were falling into ruin – the castle and the abandoned post-Dominican monastery. In 1863, a fire devoured almost 2/3 of the town, including the town hall, two synagogues and the church steeple. The town centre was rebuilt, mostly in brick, after the fire.

Not until the second half of the 19th century, thanks to the development of rail and the establishment of a railway junction in Oświęcim joining Kraków, Vienna and Katowice, did industry and trade start to develop in the area. This, in turn, resulted in the increase in the number of inhabitants and the expansion of the suburbs at the turn of the 20th century. The road from the railway station to the town centre was gaining in importance. In 1912, the town started the construction of the roads leading to a new bridge, which was to be built over the Soła River.

The bridge was to be located to the south of the castle and was opened in 1924. Today it is called Most Kieslowski.

At the turn of the 20th century, major influence on the town development was exerted by the arrival of the Salesian Friars and Sisters. The newly erected nunnery, the Salesian school and the reconstructed post-Dominican church became the new dominants over the town’s landscape, together with the castle and the steeple of the Church of the Assumption. The church and the Surefire nunnery closed the eastern frontage of the New Market Square, at present Place Kosciusko.

After 1917, a residential district called Nowe Miasto (New Town) or Oświęcim III was built in the area of Zasole. It consisted of 22 residential houses and 90 wooden barracks. In the centre, the development extended towards the east, along ul. Dąbrowskiego.

World War II marked the development of the IG Farben chemical factory and the so-called “concentration camp zone of influence”. The historical town centre was only partially restrucutred, as the Germans did not manage to carry out their original total reconstruction plan.

After 1945, blocks of flats were built around the historical town centre, changing Oświęcim’s layout. The function of the town’s cultural and shopping centre was taken over by the Osiedle Chemików district. Over the past few years there have been attempts to bring back, at least partially, the original appearance and significance to the Old Town.
In the first half of the 14th century, the main market place (present-day main market square) in Oświęcim was set up. The frontages of the square market consisted of wooden buildings, and their arrangement was largely identical with the current layout. We know that in the 16th century a two floor brick town hall was erected, but the buildings around the square were still wooden. In the 19th century the main square was described by Jan Niepomucen Gątkowski in his Rys dziejów księstwa oświęcimskiego i zatorskiego from 1867, “in the centre of the square formed mainly by rows of wooden houses, was a two-floor town hall, renovated in 1792 and fitted with a clock. The only ornaments of this small and simple square were aristocrats’ houses, a statue of St. Jan Nepomucen and the municipal well – very deep, with a wheel to draw water, which nobody drank as several people drowned there. Next to the town hall there was a reservoir with water used for extinguishing fires.”

After two fires in the second half of the 19th century, the buildings around the square were rebuilt mostly in brick. During World War II the square was partially restructured by the Germans. The arcades at ul. Plebańska and on the corner of the former Herz Hotel were realised according to a more complex restructuring plan. At that time, the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior and the statue of St. John Nepomucen were removed from the square. The Germans cut down the trees planted in the inter-war period. Over the past few years the main market square in Oświęcim has been illuminated with stylised street lamps, the pavements have been replaced and some buildings renovated.

The Town Hall had stood in the middle of the market square since the mid-16th century. The building, at that time already 200 years old, was renovated in 1792. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by fire in 1863. Nine years later a decision was taken to construct a new magistrate building for the Royal Town of Oświęcim. The construction work started in April 1872 under the supervision of architect Leopold Michel. After three years, the local authorities moved to the completed building, which served them until the outbreak of World War II. After the war the municipal authorities moved to the castle, and since 1987, they have had their seat in the
building at ul. Zaborska. Today, the former town hall houses offices of the Friends of Oświęcim.

In the building of the former town hall, we can distinguish references to various styles, but most elements are neo-Gothic. It is a brick, plastered building; it has a cellar, a ground floor and a top floor with a gable roof.

Its peculiar asymmetrical facade has a tower along the main entrance axis. The top of the tower features an attic with crenellation and two side turrets. A corresponding stringcourse above the gate separates the two floors. In 1876, a clock was installed on the town hall tower, which was replaced by a new one in 2001.

For many years, the building has not performed its original function. However, since 1993, it has displayed the official flag with Oświęcim’s coat-of-arms and at noon, we can hear the official hymn-tune of the town – a fragment of a polonaise composed by Aleksander Orłowski.

The former Town Hall; second half of the 19th century

### HOUSE OF THE ŚLEBARSKI FAMILY

At the beginning of the 19th century a spacious, two storey house was built in the northern frontage of the main market square.

It was erected by Michał Ślebarski, who at that time was the chief priest of the parish of the Assumption.

The house of the Ślebarski Family; early 19th century

During World War II, the Germans slightly restructured the building, adjusting it to serve the needs of their municipal authorities. A small ridge turret was then added on the roof and the interiors were restructured. After the war, the building housed offices of the leading Communist party officials and today it is the seat of the District Court in Oświęcim.

### FORMER HERZ HOTEL

In the 19th century, on the eastern frontage of the main market square, a two-floor building was erected, which housed the Herz Hotel. It became famous when, on 7 February 1915, Józef Piłsudski, who at that time was a brigadier, stayed there together with the officer corps of the Polish Legions. He was there to celebrate the anniversary of the January Uprising, which had taken place in 1863.

It is a brick, plastered building with a cellar, a ground floor and a top floor. During World War II, the Germans restructured
it in the so-called Heimatstil style, according to the design of Hans Stosberg. During the renovation, the arcades on the corner and mansard dormer windows were added, while the cornice under the roof-eaves and the attic with the name Hotel Herz were removed. For many years now, the building has housed a pharmacy.

At present the building is also called the Palace of Weddings, because after its conservation and modernization, the former Births, Marriages and Deaths Register Office was transferred here. On the top floor, there is a beautiful wedding room with a separate entrance from the garden. For the past several years, the building has also housed the seat of the Oświęcim Municipal Council.

The Palace of Weddings; A. Ślosarczyk’s house from the early 19th century

PALACE OF WEDDINGS

Dr Antoni Ślosarczyk built his house between 1903-1912 at ul. Jagielló. Until the end of the inter-war period, it was a private house.

Its style features many historical allusions, with the majority of neo-Renaissance and neo-Baroque elements. It is a brick building with two floors and a cellar, built on a rectangular plan, with a projection in the northwestern corner and a porch facing the garden. The porch is accessible from the outside through a flight of steps with a landing. The building is covered with a mansard roof; the projection has a broach roof. In the past, along the eastern wall of the building, there was a big garden, which is a car park today.

The house used to be called a “small castle” or “small palace” thanks to the highly decorative mansard dormer windows and the projection resembling a turret.

The former Herz Hotel; 19th century

The former Herz Hotel; 19th century

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The Palace of Weddings; A. Ślosarczyk’s house from the early 19th century

CHAPEL- MAUSOLEUM OF THE HALLER FAMILY IN DWORY

To the east of Dwory, there is a former castle complex from the first half of the 19th century. At present ul. Zwycięstwa divides it into two parts. There are some ruined castle buildings in the southern part. The northern part comprises a park with the only well - preserved building from the whole complex - the Chapel-Mausoleum of the Haller family.

The construction of the chapel began in 1805, after Barbara Rottman née Haller had died. It was built in classicist style, in brick and was later plastered. Based on a central plan, it is surrounded by Ionic pillars supporting the cornice and the cupola decorated with a metal cross. The arch over the main entrance is supported by two pilasters and it has a decorative keystone.
One of the stones is dedicated to Major Cezary Haller de Hallenburg and another to Cezary Antoni Haller, the last member of the family, who died on 8 July 1972. In the floor, at the main gate there is an entrance to the crypt with tombs.

The chapel is surrounded with a devastate park. Two rows of park benches have been placed in front of the main entrance. As the building belongs to the parish of the Assumption, on Sundays and other holidays, holy masses are celebrated here.

PARISH CEMETERY

The Roman Catholic cemetery belonging to the parish of the Assumption in Oświęcim is located in the eastern part of the town. It was established in the first half of the 19th century and it was later extended in the second half of the 19th century, the inter-war period and after the war.

Before this now historical cemetery was established, there had been three Roman Catholic cemeteries in Oświęcim. The first, at the Church of the Assumption, functioned until 1784. There were also cemeteries at the two remaining churches.

The cemetery at the Dominican church was used until the end of the 18th century and the cemetery at St Nicolas’ Church, demolished in 1749, was open until 1850’s.

The parish church was established on an irregular quadrilateral plan. In its centre and northern part, we can see traces of the original layout with the chapel, the mortuary, the main alley and the row of old trees along the original eastern edge.
The chapel comes from the inter-war period. It is a brick, plastered building, built on a rectangular plan and covered with a broach plate roof. In the central part of the cemetery, there is a complex of over 200 of the oldest historical tombs. Many of them are beautiful examples of the sepulchral art, both those chiseled in stone and those forged. One of the oldest gravestones is the sandstone obelisk constituting a part of the Russocki and Dąbski family vault. Several gravestones of Austrian soldiers who fell in battle against the Prussian forces on 27 June 1866 can be seen. Four family vaults have been classified as monuments of cemeterial architecture. These include the neo-Romanesque Stankiewicz family vault and neo-classicist Wojciechowski family vault with a beautiful statue of a weeping angel.

Since 1986, the parish cemetery in Oświęcim has been listed in the register of historical monuments. Today, only the already existing graves are open for burials. The function of Oświęcim’s main necropolis was taken over by the municipal (communal) cemetery situated outside of the town-centre, as it was in the case of the parish cemetery over 150 years ago.

We do not know the exact date when the synagogue at Plac Kościelny (now Plac Ks. Skarbka) in Oświęcim was built. The available documents of the Lomdei Misznajot Association suggest that the synagogue existed already in 1900, but it was probably located in a different building. In the years 1905-1912, the house at Plac Kościelny belonged to Józef and Gella Glas. Since 1912, it has belonged to the Lomdei Misznajot Association. We do not know exactly when the synagogue
building was erected. The construction might have started in 1913 or as late as 1928-30. Inside, there is a marble erection plaque from 1928. It says (translated from a Polish translation from Hebrew by Y. Reisner and J. Proszyk): “This house of prayer was built in memory (of the synagogue administrators and protectors) of Jakir Singer [Let Him Live Long], Chaim Goldstein [Let Him Live Long], Alter Neuberg [Let Him Live Long] in 5688 (=1928) according to the longer measure of time.” The other preserved votive marble plaque – shiviti – has been placed to the right of Aron-ha-kodesh. It says (translated from a Polish translation from Hebrew by Y. Reisner and J. Proszyk)

“Be aware before whom you stand. Before the King of Kings above Kings – the Holy [God] – Blessed Be He. I always have my God before me. It is a gift of a woman Hind Cweth [Let Her Live Long] to worship the Omnipresent and honour her dead husband. Our teacher and rabbi, Shlomo Zelman Pelsman [Blessed Be His Memory] from the town of Kęty in 667 (=1907) according to the shortened measure of time.” The two plaques are the only two items to remain from the furnishings of the synagogue.

It is a single-floor building, built on a rectangular plan, with a simple compact form and a gable roof. Its facades are decorated with plain architectural detail. The windows are varied in shape. Their arrangement is non-symmetrical, but it corresponds with the internal division of the synagogue into two parts – the bigger one for men and the smaller room for women. The furnishings were destroyed during and after World War II and then restored on the basis of descriptions by older inhabitants of Oświęcim.

In spring 1941, on the square in front of this synagogue, Jews from Oświęcim were gathered and then transported to the ghettos in Będzin, Sosnowiec and Chrzanów. In 1945 some of them returned and tried to reestablish the Jewish community. At that time the cemetery was restored and the Lomdei Misznajot synagogue was converted into a public synagogue. The post-war Jewish community in Oświęcim left the town by the end of 1960’s.

Theoretically, until 1977, the synagogue was owned by the Lomdei Misznajot Association, then upon the decision of the District Court in Oświęcim, it was taken over by the state Treasury. In 1997, the building was included in the register of historical monuments. Previously, it had been a carpet wholesale warehouse. In 1997, under the law on the restitution of Jewish property, the Lomdei Misznajot synagogue was the first to be returned to the Jewish community in Bielsko-Biała. Archeological and conservation works were then carried out. The synagogue was opened on 12 September 2000 and today it is primarily a place of prayer, but it is also open for visitors who are interested in the life, culture and religion of the Jewish community, which before the war constituted 50 per cent of Oświęcim’s total population. The Jewish Centre, which takes care of the Lomdei Misznajot synagogue, organizes exhibitions, conferences and lectures there.

KIRKUT – THE JEWISH CEMETARY

At present, we do not know where the first Jewish cemetery in Oświęcim was located. Jews had settled here since the 1450’s, therefore, there must have been a place where they buried their dead- a so-called kirkut.

Today’s historical Jewish cemetery was established at the beginning of the 19th or, possibly, in the 18th century. The oldest preserved gravestone dates back to 1757. It is made from sandstone and the Hebrew inscription says, “Abram returned where he belonged.” The buried man was righteous among the philanthropists; he walked the ways of good people. Respected master and Rabbi Abram Aba, son of Asher Zelig, died a respected man, on Thursday, on the seventh day of Marcheszwan month (...) “Let his soul be tied in the knot
of eternal life].” The remaining stones, mostly devastated, stand in rows. Some of the most destroyed gravestones have been collected on two special platforms.

The cemetery used to be square, now it is closer to a trapezoid. It was devastated by the Nazis during World War II, part of it was then destroyed due to the widening of the today’s ul. Dąbrowskiego.

The Jewish Cemetery.
Devastated gravestones

Castellans. Another piece of information comes from a book by Jan Stanek Z dziejów ziemi oświęcimskiej, written in 1959: “During the Nazi occupation, the gravestone was used by the Germans to reinforce the riverbed”, and after the war “in 1948 the author took it out of the River Sola right next to the castle.” It was probably carried over to the castle ward, sealed back with cement mortar and affixed to the southern wall of the defensive tower. After almost 50 years, the figure and inscription, exposed to changes in temperature and humidity, almost completely disappeared. In October 1999 after a two-year conservation work, the stone was placed in one of the rooms belonging to the Historical and Ethnographic Museum. In the year 2000, a letter was found, written by Andrzej Knycz in 1895, the head priest of the parish of the Assumption, and including two photographs of the gravestone. Przemysław Mrozowski from the Art Centre of the Royal Castle in Warsaw investigated the pictures to read the inscription on the gravestone and managed to read the date – April 1482 and the first name of the dead person – Mikołaj. Mrozowski also thinks that the gravestone is connected with the burial of Mikołaj Myszkowski, who was the chancellor of the Duchy of Oświęcim during the reign of John IV, the last Piast Duke in Oświęcim. The gravestone was made from Jurassic limestone; it might have come from one of the shops in Kraków. It is 92.5-inch long, 37.4-inch wide and 11.8-inch thick. It was made in bas-relief technique.

MIKOŁAJ MYSZKOWSKI’S GRAVESTONE

The medieval gravestone of Mikołaj Myszkowski is one of the most valuable exhibits in the castle.

Initially, the gravestone was located in the fourteenth-century Dominican Church in Oświęcim. It was first mentioned in the book called “Rys dziejów księstwa oświęcimskiego i zatorskiego” written by Jan Nepomucen Gątkowski in 1867 who claimed that it was the gravestone of Wawrzyniec Myszkowski- one of the Oświęcim
It will be possible to reconstruct the figure of the dead castellan on the basis of photographs from 1895. We can see a bald man standing with his arms folded, with a characteristic beard and a moustache, dressed in a long, folded robe, typical of szlachta, i.e. the Polish gentry, at the end of the 15th century.

In 1979, the Museum was included into the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The former KL Auschwitz camp attracts around million visitors a year. Apart from Polish and foreign visitors, it is visited by many official delegations, heads of states and representatives of international social and religious organisations.

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU MUSEUM

The State Museum in Oświęcim, renamed in 1999 the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum in Oświęcim, was created on 2 July 1947 on the site of the former concentration camp.

The KL Auschwitz camp was established by the Nazis in the Polish army barracks in Zasole. On 14 June 1940, the first transport of 728 prisoners from Tarnów was brought to Oświęcim. The so-called “concentration camp influence zone” expanded continuously over the four years when this biggest death factory in Europe operated. The KL Auschwitz I had numerous sub-camps and branches: KL Auschwitz II–Birkenau and KL Auschwitz III–Monowitz, created in the years 1941-1942. On 19 January 1945 the last transport of prisoners was removed the camp. The retreating Germans blew up the gas chambers and crematoria in Brzezinka, they also burnt some of the barracks. The camp was liberated on 26 January 1945, and the next day the Soviet army marched into Oświęcim.

Two years later, in the camp buildings of the mother camp KL Auschwitz I, the State Museum in Oświęcim was established. It is a centre for scientific research and education, which collects, processes, preserves and renders accessible the archival materials and exhibits connected with the concentration camp.

The Oświęcim Castle Museum was created on 1 January 2010. However, its origins date back to the activity of the Historical and Ethnographic Collection created in 1993 as part of the City Cultural Centre, and from 1996 to 2009 – as part of the Oświęcim Cultural Centre.

From its very beginning, the objective of the Historical and Ethnographic Collection was to give new generations the opportunity to learn about the heritage of the past of Oświęcim and the region. The Collection fulfilled its objective by collecting and archiving items related to the city through history, ethnography, archaeology and art.

The museum’s collections have grown thanks to the passion of the inhabitants, collectors and supporters who worked for the creation a city museum. The collection includes documents, seals, coins, maps, books, photographs, everyday articles, archaeological findings. Most precious exhibits include the tombstone of Mikołaj Myszkowski, a knight's sword from the 15th century, a map the Duchy of Oświęcim and Zator from the 16th c., and a collection of postcards with views and images of the city from the Galician and interwar times. Most of the showpieces are presented as permanent exhibition, a part of which can be visited since December 2008. It shows the everyday life of people living in the city before the war. We can see a kitchen, the study of Aleksander Orłowski, a dining room, and rooms of Jewish and Polish families. An additional attraction of the exhibition are photographs of the former inhabitants of Oświęcim and the region. This part of the presentation will be completed with the historical part presenting the city at the turn of the 19th and 20th c.

The location of the museum is also strongly related with the history of Oświęcim. The Oświęcim Castle, with its tower, defensive walls and buildings on the castle hill, is one of the most important historical monuments in the city, and a sign of its 800 years' tradition. It is the venue of the city’s most important histori-
cal events, now serving also representation, cultural and education purposes.

The Oświęcim Castle Museum is continuously working on expanding its collections, which means constant search for new exhibits and items related to the history of Oświęcim.

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