

## RUINS

On 14<sup>th</sup> February 1945, Allied bombers, targeting the Celje railway station, also hit the city center with high-explosive bombs. Twenty-two buildings were completely destroyed, and more than 100 residential and public buildings were either heavily or lightly damaged, including the abbey, several churches, and the birthplace of Alma Karlin. The archaeological collection from the Potočka zijalka cave in the Celje museum was also destroyed. In the most devastating bombing of the city during World War II, at least 47 people lost their lives.

Although Celje was not among the most important strategic military targets, and many believed that the Allies would not bomb occupied countries, fear of air raids grew as the war progressed – especially due to the city's location along the vital Maribor–Zidani Most railway line. From 1943 onward, the occupying authorities intensified and expanded air-raid protection measures. In addition to identifying and adapting existing spaces for shelters, they began purpose-built construction of bunkers and the digging of protective trenches.

The Allies first dropped bombs on Celje on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1944. From autumn of that year until 5<sup>th</sup> April 1945, the city was subjected to more or less systematic aerial attacks. Constant air-raid alerts disrupted daily life, altered routines, and interfered with school instruction. Many residents began to flee the city, resulting in a loss of valuable labour the authorities sought to mobilize for fortification efforts as the frontline approached. Over the course of 38 bombings, Celje suffered extensive material damage. Bombs, often missing their intended military and transport infrastructure targets, brought death and destruction – claiming at least 64 lives, the majority of them civilians, including children.

*"In an instant, I heard the drone of the airplanes grow louder for a moment, then came a sharp whistling sound – and then, deadly silence. I remembered what a wounded German soldier had told me the night before. I shouted, 'Bombs!' and threw myself down in the hallway that turned toward the toilet. My father jumped down the staircase to the ground floor – and then came the flash.*

*I don't know why, but I grabbed the vertical iron bars of the balcony railing with both hands. I placed my forehead on my left arm, bent at a right angle, and used my right arm to close off the angle. Right after the flash came the air blast. It would have swept me away if I hadn't been holding onto the railing. Later, I realized the shockwave had scraped the skin from both my hands – that's how powerful it was.*

*Then came the thunder, and at the same moment, the roof collapsed on top of me. Though I was choking on dust, I had enough air in the small triangle between my arms to breathe. I couldn't move – there was so much plaster and brick on top of me.*

*Then I heard my father calling out, trying to find me. I shouted from under the rubble that I was lying face-down in the hallway toward the toilet. My left leg, from the knee down, wasn't buried, so I kicked with it and cried out, 'I'm here, kicking with my leg!'*

*My father couldn't see anything at first, but then I felt his hand grab my leg, and with a few strong pulls, he dragged me out from under the bricks."*

*(Bert Savodnik, My War Against the Germans {Moja vojna proti Nemcem}, MnZC 2015, p. 77)*

## **SCARS**

*Eighty years later, the “scars” left by Allied bombing in Celje’s old town center are barely visible. Yet a glance at postwar city plans reveals gaps in the urban fabric where buildings still stood in 1944 or 1945. Even more traces of the bombings lie hidden underground – documented primarily by archaeologists working alongside urban construction projects.*

*One such case is a large pit discovered during archaeological excavations in the courtyard of the Prince’s Palace (Knežji dvor). Based on objects found in the backfill – notably shrapnel – the feature was identified as a bomb crater. A similar crater was uncovered during roadworks on Cesta XIV. divizije in 2005.*

*At Main Square (Glavni trg) 17a, a direct bomb hit destroyed an entire three-story building. Unexpectedly, archaeologists beneath the surface encountered intact Roman and medieval structures, which were preserved and even presented in situ (now visible in the Archaeological Pavilion on Glavni trg). Comparable preservation occurred in the courtyard of the National House (Narodni dom), where in 2004 archaeologists uncovered the well-preserved bath section of a luxurious Roman urban villa, and also at Okopi 13 during renovation of the Museum Square.*

*Although no bombs fell directly on today’s Herman’s Square (Hermanov trg) during the war, excavations in 2011 revealed widespread signs of destruction. The former marshy depression near the Sušnica stream had been filled after the war with rubble from destroyed buildings in the city center. The now-levelled surface gives no indication of what lies beneath.*

*(text by dr. Maja Bausovac and dr. Jure Krajšek, Celje Regional Museum)*