

The Fortifications Trail

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AN INVITATION TO... – or an introduction to the publication

The quiet depths of the lake gleaming in the sun, surrounded by a ring of green forests, best viewed from the deck of a yacht in full sail – this is how we usually con-

note Mazury. When leaves fall off the trees and one takes a closer look – grey, concrete, black-yawning shooting stations can be observed on the lake shores.

How come this idyllic land hosts such sinister bunkers? We will definitely find the answer to this question while hiking along the Mazury Fortifications Trail. Not everyone knows that this colourful land of the Mazury lakes, forests and fields, among which numerous monuments of the past can be found, has an interesting, as well as complicated history. Testimony to the turbulent history of the region are the innumerable defensive structures, built from the time of the Middle Ages through to World War II. The magnificent scenery of hills and plains, cross-cut by ribbons of lakes and river valleys, next to the broad and large Śniardwy and Mamry lakes with marshes and wetlands hidden in the forest thicket. These are the natural defensive qualities of the Warmia and Mazury regions. The inhabitants and rulers of these lands have learned to use such gifts of nature, creating fortifications which were to protect their land against foreign invaders. Mazury and Warmia were parts of an area which has been an enclave surrounded by the territories of foreign states during almost the whole of its history. This is why the Teutonic Knights erected their huge, brick castles, which are still much admired. Ear-

lier, earthen ramparts and wooden palisades were put up by the pagan Prussians. In more recent times, the ramparts and brick walls of the Boyen Fortress in Giżycko were built in the area, while in the last century, hundreds of concrete bunkers appeared as well. Many of them are still shrouded in mystery, especially the huge shelters, similar to large mossy rocks, concealing the secret headquarters of the Nazi Third Reich's top dignitaries, with Adolf Hitler's headquarters in Gierłoż in chief.

When your hands go numb holding the sailboat rudder or droop with fatigue paddling in a kayak, it is time to come ashore and set off to the bunkers and forts. There are no mines or barbed wire fences here. You risk nothing but the chance of unusual experiences and the pride of a discoverer when finding some forgotten ruins in the forests!

At the gates of the Hitler's quarters,
photo GEP Chroszcz





CHAPTER I.

Who was building Mazury fortifications and why?



The Teutonic Knights,
fig. archives of iStockphoto.com

Władysław Jagiełło,
fig. archives of Wikimedia Commons

The land of Mazury with its lakes and forests is not only a place of magnificent scenery and wildlife, but also unspoiled nature. For centuries its inhabitants were able to exploit the natural defensive qualities of these areas, building fortifications and revetments.

In the early Middle Ages, the lands of today's Warmia and Mazury were inhabited by the Prussians, related to the Lithuanians and Latvians. Divided into a number of tribes, they were unable to resist the power of the Teutonic Knights, who founded their own powerful state here. Poland, divided into districts, and the emerging Grand Duchy of Lithuania, did not constitute a great threat for the Knights. In turn, the Teutonic expeditions destroyed the borderline lands between the two countries. However, in 1386, when Lithuania and Poland joined forces under the rule of Jagiełło, the allies tipped the scale. The Teutonic Knights, surrounded by the territories of hostile countries, were perfectly prepared for defense.

After the Thirteen Years' War with Poland in 1466, the Teutonic Knights lost Warmia and Gdańsk Pomerania thus called Royal Prussia from then on. Surrounded on all sides by the Teutonic state after the dissolution of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, in 1525 it became a secular duchy (the Duchy of Prussia) ruled by the former Grand Master Albrecht Hohenzollern.

In the 2nd half of the 16th century, the Duchy of Prussia was taken over by the electors of Brandenburg, who were also descended from the Hohenzollern dynasty. However, it remained an area surrounded by Polish and Lithuanian territory. Prussian princes were vassals of the Polish king, but they still strove to get their independence – and succeeded in doing so in 1657 during the 'Swedish Deluge'. Then Frederick William I, as the first one, rose against the Republic of Poland, siding with the Swedes, and then, for the cost of independence from the Polish king, he gave up on his ally. The next goal was to combine the two parts of the Polish state, previously separated by Royal Prussia. The goal was met over 100 years later, during the 1st partition of Poland in 1772. At the end of that century, thanks to the seizure of Greater Poland and Mazowsze as a result of the 2nd and 3rd partitions, the former Duchy of Prussia finally ceased to be a strip of land difficult to defend, and surrounded by hostile states. This lasted until 1807, when the victorious armies of Napoleon drove the Prussians out of Greater Poland and Mazowsze. The Duchy of Warsaw was founded there and East Prussia was again surrounded by the enemy from



the south and east. Although in 1815 Napoleon was finally defeated, and the Duchy of Warsaw was liquidated, the strategic situation of East Prussia did not change at all. From then on, the greatest part of the Duchy of Warsaw was subject to Russia as the Polish Kingdom. Although the czar was an ally of the King of Prussia, the Prussian army had to bear in mind the potential threat to East Prussia from the south, east and north posed by their powerful neighbour. Therefore, in the 19th century, numerous fortifications were built. Construction was also carried out after the reunification of Germany in 1871. A new strong state was no longer friendly with Russia, and soon the whole of Europe was threatened with the great war: the territory of East Prussia could well become the first victim of the tsarist army in a future conflict with the German Empire.

On the eve of WWI, East Prussia was one of the least-developed provinces of Germany. Located on the far fringe, with communication routes to the remaining parts of the country long and difficult to defend, East Prussia was exposed to attack by the tsarist army from the south and east. In the region there were some huge estates belonging to major Prussian aristocrats connected with the imperial court and army. Therefore there could be no question of withdrawal from distant defence, as it was of little importance to the whole country of provinces. Therefore, a network of fortifications and fieldwork was built in East Prussia. The most important was the Mazury Lakes, blocking the passage from east to west through the Great Lakes area. It formed a natural barrier with lakes, although there were isthmuses with roads between them. Their closure in the whole space between **Węgorzewo** and **Pisz** created a barrier of over 80 km. Based on the Boyen Fortress in **Giżycko**, which was the key to the entire zone, a number of field fortifications were erected.

North of the line of the Great Mazury Lakes, between **Węgorzewo** and the marshy valley of Pregoła, there was still a passage into the territory of East Prussia, up to its capital city of Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) of about 50 km in width. The specially-protected Piska Forest and forests stretching to the west up to **Szczytno** effectively secured the southern flank of the defensive line. A similar role was played in the east by Borecka Forest, making it difficult to approach **Giżycko**. The area containing the Great Mazury Lakes was the main effective shield for the part of East Prussia located to the west, with major cities and hubs. In subsequent years, during WWI, in 1917, a new network of fortifications called the Giżycko Field Position was completed. It covered as many as 255 shelters, creating a closed zone of defence which would be successful even if surrounded by the enemy.

After WWI the position of the region became even worse. Again, East Prussia was an enclave surrounded by Lithuanian and Polish territories. Again, the German authorities, especially during the reign of Hitler, sought to seize the Polish 'corridor' separating the German territories. The military plans of the Nazis intended Prussia as a means of defence in the form of an advanced flank. It could be a place to launch an offensive to surround the Polish army, which in September 1939 became reality. Earlier, after 1935, the fortifications of the **Giżycko Field Position** were much expanded, forming the Giżycko Fortified



Prussian helmet,
photo archives of iStockphoto.com



GENERAL HERMANN VON BOYEN

The famous Giżycko fortress was named after the Prussian, General von Boyen, a great supporter and the originator of its construction. When, in 1846, the fortress was named, the general held the position of Prussian minister of war. The names of the ramparts are also associated with the general. The ramparts, named *Schwert*, *Recht* and *Licht* meaning 'the sword', 'the law' and 'light', are the symbols on the general's coat of arms; *Hermann Ludwig Leopold von Boyen* was his full name.

Piska forest, photo GEP Chroszcz



THE MAZURY 'WAR FLEET'

The regular white fleet pleasure boat cruises are a great way to explore the Mazury lakes by water. They appeared before WWI, but with the outbreak of the great conflict, the boats were seized by the German army. These delicate, graceful boats were to become a formidable flotilla of war, armed with machine guns and lighter guns.

Region. Along with older bunkers around the Great Mazury Lakes there were already 5000 shelters in total! These were supplemented by barbed wire, antitank firewalls and an internal network of communication lines. Two years after the outbreak of war between the USSR and Germany, when the situation on the eastern front turned to the detriment of the Third Reich, East Prussian fortifications were furnished again and their expansion began.

The sparsely populated and remote areas at risk from allied bombers in East Prussia where a number of fortified

THE 'PROPAGANDA' BUNKER

Concrete shelters may be relevant not only for military, but also political purposes. Traditionally, it was considered in diplomatic channels, that the construction of fortifications is proof of a sign of peace. After all, these were only meant to be the means of defence against external aggression, and not for use in the plans of attack. The shelter in the area of **Pisz**, erected after the campaign of September 1939, was to be used in such a propagandist act. Undisguised, visible from afar, the bunker was shown by Hermann Göring to his guests from the USSR to confirm the peaceful intentions of the Third Reich to Stalin. Part of a German inscription (surprising for a secret bunker) that reads: 'visiting is allowed' has been preserved to this day.

Shelter in the Pisz area, photo GEP Chroszcz



'Wolf's Lair' in Gierłoż,
photo GEP Chroszcz

command centres were created before the war with the USSR. Of these, the most important was Adolf Hitler's headquarters: **'WOLF'S LAIR' 1** in **Gierłoż**. The commander of the Third Reich relied on the fortifications, which had been put up at huge expense. The **Giżycko Fortified Region** especially, created on the base of the former Giżycko Field Position, seemed to be extremely powerful and capable of long-term defence. In fact, the Germans had already run out of time and resources required to create a modern system of fortifications, and that system turned out to be weak in comparison with the attacking Red Army. The German commanders of the armed forces operating there seemed to realise it. Therefore, when encircled by the enemy, they decided to surrender the Great Mazury Lakes area almost without a fight.

After the war, East Prussia in fact ceased to exist. Divided between Poland and the USSR (Russia today), it no longer existed (at least in Poland) as a strategic position. Abandoned bunkers and fortifications, mostly blown up in the last phase of the war, deteriorated over the years.

A part was occupied by the army – and still is. Only recently, more and more amateur adventurers have begun to explore the mysterious structures, and today tourists follow in their footsteps.



CHAPTER II. Defensive systems – what was defense like in the past?

A thousand years ago, when Mazury and Warmia were inhabited by pagan Prussian tribes, the country was almost entirely covered with woods, wetlands and lakes. A small population lived in smaller settlements, and in the case of invasion or threat they fled to the fortified strongholds. Their earthwork and wooden bulwarks in some places have survived to this day. Following the Trail of the Mazury Fortification, you can see two of them, raised in places of natural defence.

The Prussians, broken up into numerous tribes of a non-state organisation, had to surrender to the powerful war machine of the Teutonic Knights. The old settlements went into oblivion along with the development of war technology. Originally, the knights of the Order also built field earthworks with wooden palisades, but in the 14th century these were replaced with brick castles. In the Teutonic state, the basic building block of these fortresses was the brick. Teutonic castles represent a fairly uniform type of structure. Most often it was the proper castle, called the upper castle, surrounded by one or two rings of walls. The main building was secured by corner towers, and other ones were erected along the walls. Next to the upper castle stretched the ward, called the lower castle. Here rose the outbuildings, stables, warehouses, forges etc., and the whole place was surrounded by defensive walls with towers. The defence system of castles was often linked to the walls defending towns and cities. Sometimes even religious buildings were fortified. Within the defence system of the city of



St George's church in Kętrzyn,
photo GEP Chroszcz



BACK TO THE MIDDLE AGES

Right next to the well-known sluice of Guzianka in **Ruciane-Nida**, you can see a huge bunker among the trees. It resembles a tower with numerous embrasures and it is topped with real crenels. Is this another remnant of a Teutonic castle? From close up you can see that it is made of concrete! The bunker was created at the beginning of the 20th century. Why then (since castles with ramparts were built centuries ago), was this ancient form used again? Because the Germans feared rapid raids by the Russian cavalry who could seize important crossings and passages between the Mazury lakes. The bunker was armed with machine guns, so it was useless in defence against a heavily armed opponent.

A bunker next to Guzianka sluice, photo GEP Chroszcz

Kętrzyn the most important building besides the castle was the fortified St. George's Church.

With the appearance of firearms on the battlefields in the 16th century, new types of forts emerged. First, the Old Italian stronghold systems (pallazzo in fortezza), then rampart systems designed to defend against artillery and to be used effectively against the beleaguerer. In the region

PAPER WALLS?

'The bulwark may even be made from paper, as long as it enables the shooting of guns in appropriate numbers to prevent the besieger from placing any guns in the foreground'.

That famous utterance of a French general and military theorist, Marc René de Montalembert (1714-1800) perfectly summarised his innovative ideas for the construction of fortifications. They marked the end of the old rampart system, and the building of polygonal forts was created continuously (with modifications) for almost a hundred years later.

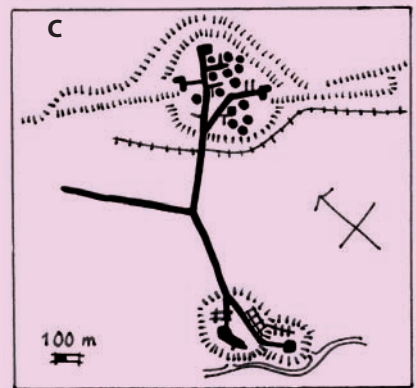
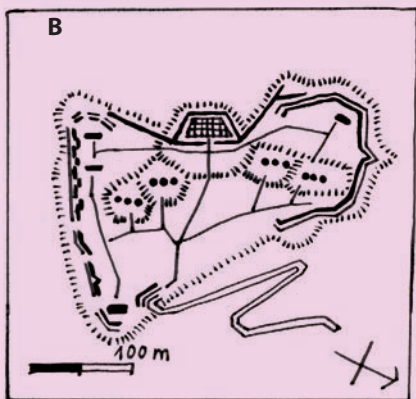
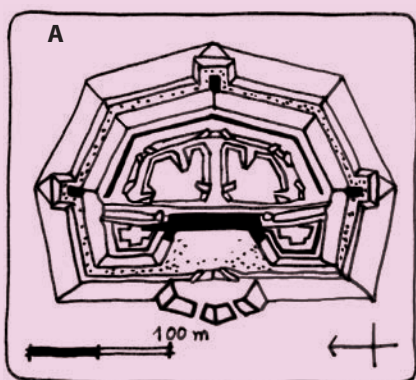
of Warmia and Masuria, however, such fortresses are not numerous. Only the **REMAINS OF EARTHEN BULWARKS OF A SMALL RAMPART FORTRESS ②** on **Czarci Ostrów Island, Lake Śniardwy**, might be of interest.

At the end of the 18th century rampart fortresses were already antiquated. The new system called 'Montalembert's style'

put pressure on the frontal defence of the fortress's foreground. Polygonal forts started emerging. Although the rampart system was no longer being built, the Boyen Fortress erected after 1841 in Giżycko had such an outline. This resulted from the specific landscape and the fact that many military architectural novelties were used to construct it.

The next revolution, in the way of building fortifications was triggered in 1870 when the howitzer, with threaded barrels, was invented. These enabled precise targeting and firing from a distance of several kilometres. Traditional reinforcements were extremely vulnerable to a howitzer blow. The solution was a new type of fort, where reduits replaced the main shelter and barracks hidden deep in the fortress. Strong batteries of artillery, separated by cross-bars, were erected on the bulwarks. These could house shelters for the soldiers operating cannons. With time, the type called standard artillery fort was modified to make space for infantry positions to defend the fort against direct attack.

The next revolution came in the late 19th century. The improved mortars and artillery shells with new explosives easily destroyed the existing brick walls of the forts. From now on, reinforced concrete was primarily used in their construction. The parapet on the walls was widened, and the buttress removed. Side shooting ranges provided defence and protected against attack from the front of the fort. The main artillery was often hidden in rotating armoured towers. The Boyen Fortress in Masuria was modernised partly following that style. Another novelty at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries were scattered forts. The idea was to arrange the individual parts of the fort in a larger space, so that artillery fire could not destroy several of the most important parts simultaneously. Shelters and barracks, warehouses, artillery positions of near and long range, were erected separately. The whole vast expanse of the fort was surrounded with a bulwark and barbed wire entanglement. Such a system was created in 1913-14 around the Boyen Fortress, on the isthmus between lakes Niegocin and Mamry.



Defense systems at the turn of 19th/20th centuries, fig. RS

A. Artillery fort. B. Prussian system of group forts.

C. The French school's fortified structure.



The Great World War called WWI reached the lands of East Prussia (still and quiet for over 100 years) shortly after its outbreak in August 1914. At the end of the month, the Russian armies were defeated by the Germans at Tannenberg. The victory was of immense importance for the German propaganda: it was presented as revenge for their defeat by the Slavs at Grunwald, as according to German historiography the battle of Grunwald took place precisely on the spot that became Tannenberg (now Stębark near Grunwald). The Germans succeeded due to the strengthening of the Great Mazury Lakes area. The Russian troops had to encircle them from both sides, while the Germans could operate on shorter internal routes, fighting the subsequent Russian armies.

PIGEON COMMUNICATION STATION

In an era of public communication, mobile phones and the internet, we tend to forget that a hundred years ago such technical achievements were unknown. Therefore, communication took other forms. The Boyen Fortress in **Giżycko** housed a special unit of homing pigeons, with nearly one thousand birds! They were to provide communication with the outside world in case of siege. The pigeon unit did an excellent job at the beginning of WWI, when the Russians surrounded the fortress in 1914.

Lessons learned from the battles of WWI contributed greatly to the art of erecting fortifications. From then on entire fortified areas were built, consisting of small parts with different functions. Because of the rapid increase in firepower and the development of aviation, most objects were placed as deeply under the ground as possible. On the surface there were only combat and observation shelters, and communication between every part of the underground fortifications was provided through corridors or trenches. The old bulwarks and walls retaining the besiegers were replaced by lines of anti-infantry barbed wire, mine fields, ditches and other antitank barriers. German reinforcements in East Prussia were built in accordance with these rules, both in the interwar years and during WWII. The main parts of the shelters housed heavy machine guns or artillery. German fortification concepts assumed the creation of frontal defence oriented revetments, and so neglected the sides which could pose a threat of encirclement. Shelters did not provide sufficient protection for shooters operating fortress guns. This meant that the seemingly powerful lines of German reinforcements failed at the time of the Red Army offensive in 1944 and 1945. Allegedly the most powerful section of defence in East Prussia, the Giżycko Fortified Region, surrendered almost without a fight...

Boyen Fortress, photo GEP Chroszcz





CHAPTER III. The Mazury Fortifications Trail – how to visit?

Castles and forts, bunkers, shelters and fortresses as well as other attractions and monuments can be seen on a trail of over 438 km. It is intended primarily for tourists with cars, but you can walk the whole trail or cycle along shorter sections.

The main loop of the trail is 286 km long, leading from Reszel through Kętrzyn, Węgorzewo, Giżycko, Orzysz, Pisz, Ruciane-Nida, Mikołajki, Ryn and back to Kętrzyn and Reszel. Additional sections go from Pozezdrze through Krukłanki and Gołdap up to Stańczyki and Żytkiejm (87 km) on the eastern edge of the region, and to the village of Jeże south of Pisz (65 km).

The trail is marked with signs in brown, with a distinctive bunker logo. Clearly displayed arrows lead your way to the main attractions on the route. In addition, there are 27 large signs with information in selected villages on the trail. The signs feature a schematic map of the whole route, a description of the chosen area and interesting monuments in its surroundings as well as photos of some of the places described. These photos are numbered and marked on the map.

The main attractions are easily available, accessible and open to the public. There is no problem finding them. However, many of the fortifications from the last century, forming long lines of reinforcement, are hidden in the midst of fields, woods and copses. They usually stand on private plots, and finding them within a thicket of bushes can be very difficult, especially in summer

when leaves obscure the view. Therefore, the description of the trail includes information about monuments and places which can be relatively easy to locate in the area, also with the use of such signs. Some of them are far away from roads, so you should be prepared for a long walk.

If you plan to hike along the trail, you need to remember a few safety rules. Shelters and bunkers, which were blown up, form rubble which includes concrete and iron rods. It is advisable not to go in there. Some ruins may be structurally



Trail information board


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unstable with partially collapsed walls and floors. Protruding pieces of rusty steel might cause injury. Although many years have passed since the war ended, and the areas of fortifications were searched through by sappers, duds may still remain under the piles of debris. You should always be cautious, even in places that appear to be in better condition. In dark corridors you can discover wells and niches, some which at times can be flooded. Unfortunately, in many bunkers there are mounds of garbage which can be especially dangerous due to broken glass. For such exploratory expeditions you will need some hard soled shoes, old clothes you do not mind getting wet, stained or even torn, and naturally – a torch.

THE MAZURY FORTIFICATIONS TRAIL – LET’S GO!

Reszel – Kętrzyn – Gierłoż – Mamerki – Węgorzewo – Pozezdrze – Kruklanki – Gołdap – Stańczyki – Wydminy – Giżycko – Orzysz – Pisz – Jeże – Ruciane-Nida – Mikołajki – Ryn – Kętrzyn

Hiking down the fortifications trail can begin with walking around charming Reszel, a Warmia town situated about 65 km northeast of the capital city of Warmia and Mazury, Olsztyn, and approximately 50 km west of Giżycko and the Land of the Great Mazury Lakes.

Reszel

Red roofs, church towers and the castle of the bishops of Warmia stand out against the green landscape. Reszel, a small town where the trail of the Masurian Fortifications begins, attracts visitors with its peaceful, unhurried atmosphere - the town belongs to the Cittaslow network. There are also some interesting monuments of military architecture.

The picturesque **CASTLE OF THE BISHOPS OF WARMIA** ③ is just above the ravine of the Sajna River. Approached from the side of the castle gate, its unusual shape surprises its visitors. Instead of a symmetrical building with corner towers over steep roofs, typical of a Teutonic mansion, we see a massive cylindrical tower with a square base combined with a gate tower portion of a defensive wall with machicolations, and an archivolt top with a slim, high tower on the other side.

The quadrangle of building around the courtyard is a classic example of the Gothic style. The castle now houses a comfortable hotel (Kreativ Hotel, Reszel, ul. Podzamcze 3, phone: +48 89 7550109, email: info@zamek-reszel.com, www.zamek-reszel.com). Large rooms in the southern wing house the 'Castle' Art Gallery, a branch of the Museum of Warmia and Masuria in Olsztyn (Galeria Zamek w Reszlu, Reszel, ul. Podzamcze 3, phone: +48 89 7550759, www.reszel.muzeum.olsztyn.pl). You can also enter the main castle tower. For the final part, it is worth going around the castle, looking down at the picturesque ravine of the Sajna River and seeing the internal peripheral walls.



Sunset over the castle, photo D. Zaród

City panorama, photo GEP Chroszcz



THE HISTORY OF RESZEL CASTLE

The eastern side of Warmia was inhabited by the Prussian tribe of warlike Bartians. They did not easily surrender to the Teutonic Knights, and roused people into rebellion against the knights with black crosses on their white coats. The wooden Teutonic watchtower, built in 1241, was regularly destroyed by the rebellious Bartians. Although in 1254, the building became the property of the bishops of Warmia, Teutonic troops stationed there until 1300 due to the constant threat. In 1350, the construction of a brick castle was begun. The stronghold later served as a hunting residence for the bishops and lost its military significance. After 1772, when Warmia was taken over by the Kingdom of Prussia, the castle housed a prison. In the early 19th century a great fire destroyed the entire settlement of Reszel along with the castle. Later, part of the building was converted into a Lutheran church. The mismatched tower over the archivolt top was added at that time. The splendour of the stronghold was restored with major renovations carried out in the 1970s.



ŚWIĘTA LIPKA

Part of the road from Reszel to Kętrzyn is marked with Baroque chapels of the rosary stations placed at equal distances. They led pilgrims to the Marian shrine in Święta Lipka, 6 km from Reszel. Nestled among the woods is a picturesque village with a Baroque pilgrimage temple from the 17th century, surrounded by a ring of galleries with corner chapels. Its lavish interior is famous for the inclusion of an organ from 1721, which after renovation in 1905 features 40 voices and over 4,000 pipes.



Way of the Cross in Święta Lipka, photo D. Zaród



Sanctuary in Święta Lipka, photo D. Zaród

Modern Art. Gallery, photo GEP Chroszcz

From Reszel we go east along the road leading to the small town of **Święta Lipka**, known for its Baroque **MARIAN SHRINE** ④ (see frame), where the road turns to the northeast. Finally, after a 20 km drive, we arrive in Kętrzyn.

Kętrzyn

The old town of Kętrzyn was founded between the green ribbon of the river Guber and the small Kętrzyńskie Lake, now surrounded by buildings. Most tourists go around the city, heading

for the quarters of the 'Wolf's Lair' in Gierłoż or the sanctuary in Święta Lipka. However, Kętrzyn also has several unique monuments.

The settlement of **Rastenburg** was founded by the Teutonic Knights in 1357 next to their wooden watchtower which in time was transformed into a **STONE CASTLE** ⑤. The rectangular brick building is now used by the Wojciech Kętrzyński Museum (pl. Zamkowy 1, phone: +48 89 7523282, email: mwk@muzeum.ketrzyn.pl, www.muzeum.ketrzyn.pl). It is a post-war building. The castle, like the whole town, was burned down in 1945 by the Red Army.

On the west side of the old town in Kętrzyn you can see the high red roofs and towers of the magnificent **St. George's Church** ⑥. The brick temple, with three naves, was built in the Gothic style in the



2nd half of the 14th century. Due to reconstruction in the 15th century, it earned the characteristics of a defensive building. Two towers were added to the body of the temple. Included in the string of city walls, as the south-western flank, it was a stronghold as powerful as the castle. The deviation of the presbytery from the choir aisles is surprising. The aisles are topped by a rare diamond vault. This is a result of the rebuilding which took place after a fire in 1500.

If you go east along the road from Kętrzyn towards Giżycko for 5 km, you can take the side road to Gierłoż. Beyond the isthmus between lakes Mój and Siercze, you enter a forest which conceals the next destination of our journey: Hitler's 'Wolf's Lair' quarters.



Diamond vault at St. George's church, photo GEP Chroszcz



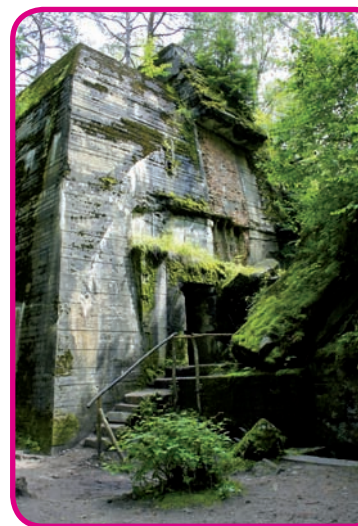
Castle in Kętrzyn, photo GEP Chroszcz

Gierłoż

In the damp and dark forest, in somewhat mysterious scenery, every now and then you can spot strange grey stones between the trees. Their monstrous sizes and angular shapes suggest the work of man. And in fact it is: these big shelters are the remains of Adolf Hitler's secret quarters named 'Wolf's Lair'.

The location for building the quarters was carefully selected. East Prussia was too far away for the bombers to fly to from the western theatre of war. From the east, the area around Kętrzyn was secured by a vast system of fortifications - the Giżycko Fortified Region. Its distance from major urban centres helped maintain its secrecy. Gierłoż was also close to the border with the USSR, established after the partition of Poland in September 1939. Therefore, at the outbreak of the planned war with the Soviet Russia, it became an important centre of command. The construction of bunkers began in 1940. During the war, the quarters underwent an expansion with the addition of more shelters. In the existing main bunkers the walls and roofs were thickened.

Wolf's Lair, *Wolfsschanze* in German, was divided into three zones of security surrounded by rings of barbed wire and minefields. The external 3rd zone included shelters and reinforcements preventing access to the quarters. Zone 2, located on the south side of the road and railway line crossing the forest, was to be used by troops and other staff, and was designed as a huge, double anti-aircraft shelter. The most important area, zone 1, was situated on the north side of the railway line and the road. Here stood Hitler's bunker, now in ruins, with a ceiling as thick as



Hitler's secret headquarter, photo GEP Chroszcz



ASSASSINATION

On July 20, 1944 the silence of the Wolf's Lair quarters was torn by the sound of an explosion. A stone barrack with a string-concrete ceiling (wood finish inside), located near the shelter for visitors to zone 1, was completely destroyed. People ran around panicking or waited for something to happen. At that time a briefing was being held in the barracks, chaired by the leader of the Third Reich. The assassin, Colonel Count Claus von Stauffenberg, managed to escape, convinced that Hitler had been killed.

The bomb planted by the Colonel was part of a conspiracy planned by senior Wehrmacht officers who wanted to seize power in Germany and make a declaration of peace to the Western Allies. Unfortunately, another reconstruction was in progress in Hitler's bunker where the briefing was usually held, and people were temporarily moved to the barracks, where the force of the explosion was dispersed. In addition, the briefcase, containing the bomb brought by von Stauffenberg, was removed (after he left) and put under a heavy oak table used for discussions. The table shielded Hitler from the explosion. **The Führer** suffered only slight injuries, and soon arrested the conspirators, including the bomber.

Tablet commemorating the conspirators, photo GEP Chroszcz



THE QUARTERS IN RADZIEJE

In the woods north of the village of Radzieje, next to an inactive railway line from Kętrzyn to Węgorzewo, are the remains of the smallest of the Mazury quarters intended for the leaders of the Third Reich. Here, surrounded by a ring of barbed wire, was **THE QUARTERS CODE-NAMED 'WENDULA'** ⑦, built for the head of the Reich Chancellery, Hans Lammers. You can reach it by a well-preserved road of concrete slab, built, together with the quarters, in 1940-42. Hidden in the forest are 2 large shelters: one blown up and in ruins, and the other preserved in good condition.

*towards **Radzieje** after Mazany (see frame). Going straight ahead, we pass by the junction with the road leading to Sztynort and enter the forests and quarters in Mamerki.*

8 metres. In total, up to 200 different buildings were located in the three zones, covering 800 ha. The area also had two airports, and the quarters had its own power station, waterworks, teletype switchboards, railway station and a heating plant. The main buildings, especially the bunkers, were camouflaged with plants and masking nets.

The most important parts of the quarters, zones 1 and 2, are now ready for exploration as part of a tourist route (Wilcze Gniazdo, Gierłoż, tel: +48 89 7524429, email: kontakt@wolfsschanze.pl, www.wolfsschanze.pl). Most of the bunkers are in ruins or seriously damaged although their destruction was not due to the Red Army. The Germans withdrew from here in January 1945, destroying bunkers and buildings, not even attempting to defend themselves. The remains of the bunkers in Wolf's Lair external zone 3 are scattered in a vast

wetland area of the forest around the tourist route. Reaching them is possible, although many places are difficult to get to and overgrown with thickets and nettles.

Leaving Hitler's quarters, we take the same road further, and soon turn left (to the north) in Parcz. Next, we head right



Bunker in Radzieje, photo GEP Chroszcz



Mamerki

On the shores of the vast Lake Mamry, among wetland forests, we reach the other huge German quarters. The mossy walls of the bunkers look amazing but it is not easy to spot them among the trees.

THE QUARTERS – CODE-NAMED 'ANNA' 8 were the position of the Commander-in-Chief of the Land Forces. The extensive area contained about 220 buildings, including 30 heavy and reinforced concrete shelters. It was the largest quarters in Warmia and Mazury. In 1941-44, there lived 1500 soldiers and officers, including almost 50 generals. It was actually a town with a network of streets, a railway station, a nearby airport, some power plants, residential shelters and many other buildings. The whole area was divided into zones: Quelle, ('the source' in German) which was taken by the land army quartermaster; Fritz, which was the most important in the whole area, housing the land army quarters; and finally a smaller zone called Brigitten Stadt ('Bridget's Town') occupied by auxiliary staff, mostly female.

In Mamerki you can visit numerous bunkers similar to those found in Wolf's Lair in Gierłoż. You can climb up one of the bunkers using the recently-built wooden bridges. A viewing tower has been built on its 7 m thick roof. The area of the quarters is now ready for exploration and open to tourists (Mamerki, Karolewo 22/33, phone: +48 89 7524283, email: info@mamerki.com, www.mamerki.com). Between individual buildings there are tourist trails of various lengths, and the whole area is open to visitors from the beginning of May to late October.



Open-air museum of fortifications in Mamerki, photo GEP Chroszcz



Mamerki is not far from another interesting place on the trail (only 10 km away). Shortly after leaving the forest north of the quarters we arrive at the intersection with the main road. You will reach Barciany if you take left. If you go ahead, you will arrive at the sluice of Leśniewo Górne (see frame). Going right, you are heading for Węgorzewo.



MONUMENTAL SLUICE

From the northern side, the forest with the Mamerki quarters confines the Mazury Canal. Its construction started in 1911. The aim was to combine Lake Mamry and the whole system of the Great Mazury Lakes, through the Łyna River, with the Pregola and the Baltic Sea. The construction was never completed, although a number of sluices were erected. The large, unfinished **SLUICE LEŚNIEWO GÓRNE 9** near the village of Leśniewo, 4 km northwest of the bunkers in Mamerki, is very impressive. Along with the nearby sluice, Leśniewo Dolne, it was designed to help ships overcome the difference in water levels (32 m) between lakes Mamry and Rydzówka. Each of the sluices is higher than 17 m. The highest of the two, the Leśniewo Górne sluice, has a clearly visible gap where a huge golden eagle was to be placed. It is especially worth seeing.

Rope park at the military badge in the sluice in Leśniewo Górne, photo GEP Chroszcz

Węgorzewo

The Mazurian port in Węgorzewo is called the Gate of Mazury. Here begins the waterway of the Great Masurian Lakes. A small town near the northern edge of Lake Mamry is located on an island. The Węgorapa flows around the old centre from the south, east and north. The Młyński Canal cuts off the arch of the river from the west and separates Węgorzewo from the mainland.



Teutonic Knights' castle in Węgorzewo,
photo GEP Chroszcz

Right next to the bridge over the Węgorapa, by the road to Giżycko, stands a former **TEUTONIC CASTLE 10**. However, at Bema Street (the exit road towards Giżycko) there are many former German military barracks. Tall rectangular towers of concrete anti-aircraft shelters stand out among the other buildings. These were built just before or during WWII. The barracks were to give shelter, after

1941, to the Chief Command of the German Land Army, whose quarters were located in Mamerki. The majority of the former German barracks are now occupied by the Polish Army.

*Let us now set off from Węgorzewo towards Giżycko, taking the main road, and passing by the small settlement of **Ogonki** on our way. It occupies a narrow isthmus between the lakes Świącajty and Stręgiel, connected by the Sapina River. Over the stream we will cross the bridge next to an existing bike path drawn here along the previously-existing railroad crossing. The bridges, and the isthmus near Ogonki, had considerable strategic importance as one of the passages between the lakes which had to be fortified to make the area of the Great Mazury Lakes a defensive zone. Thus, during World War I, two points of resistance of the Giżycko Field Position were created here and then reinforced in the 1930s during the creation of the Giżycko Fortified Region.*



The largest bunker
of the Himmler's headquarters,
photo GEP Chroszcz

Pozezdrze

Between Ogonki and **Pozezdrze** stretch forests hiding many secrets, just as some other places in Mazury. These are not only the fortifications of reinforced regions, but also other quarters dating back to WWII. The commander of the SS and Gestapo, Heinrich Himmler, quartered at Pozezdrze. His **QUARTERS, CODE-NAMED HOCHWALD 11** ('High Forest'), consisted of only 9 buildings, including 6 reinforced concrete shelters. Himmler's bunker stood centrally, originally identical to the remaining bunkers erected in 1941. Three years later it was strengthened with a protective coating making the walls 7 m thick, similarly to the bunkers in Gierłoż and Mamerki. The largest local bunker (21 m long, 19 m wide and 9 m high) is also the best preserved. The quarters are located near Pozezdrze, on the edge of the forest. To reach Himmler's shelter, you need to follow the blue trail.



From Pozezdrze we can go straight to Giżycko or continue hiking along the fortifications of the Giżycko Field Position. In the area of Pozezdrze there are many other fortifications associated with the Giżycko Fortified Region. They secured the north-eastern line of defence stretching along the Sapina among numerous small basins located between lake Stręgiel in the north and Gołdapiwo in the south. Strongholds of WWI were located on the west side of Stręgielek (all blown up) and in the west of **Przerwanki**. Here you can find some well-preserved **INFANTRY AND EMERGENCY SHELTERS** ¹² near the small hamlet of Wyludy-Kolonia. These were called 'Infanterieraum' and 'Bereitschaftsraum'. Other buildings were destroyed. In the 1930s, numerous shelters were built between the villages of Stręgielek and Przytuły, securing access to the Sapina River between lakes Wilkus and Stręgiel, and a group of shelters on the east side of Przerwanki between lakes Gołdapiwo and Wilkus. All were blown up and remnants are now hard to find in the woods and among the fields.



Shelter in Przerwanki,
photo GEP Chroszcz



From Przerwanki we go to Kruklanki beyond the southern end of lake Gołdapiwo.

Kruklanki

Near the village of Kruklanki we can see some parts of the two fortified lines. Along the Sapina River they close up the isthmus between lakes Gołdapiwo and Kruklanki.

As one of the key nodes of resistance, the isthmus near Kruklanki was protected in 1915-17 with as many as 4 points of resistance and nearly 50 shelters. As part of the Giżycko Fortified Region they were modernised, and in 1944, many standard German shelters were added, contemptuously called '**KOCH'S POTS**' ¹³ by the Wehrmacht soldiers. Together with earlier buildings they created a barrier of more than 80 shelters. Although most were blown up by the retreating Germans or destroyed by the Soviet sappers, it is worth approaching the ruins with the aid of a marked Fortifications Trail of the Giżycko Fortified Region or a hiking path of a didactic nature ('Discover the secrets of Kruklanki with us'). Close by, in Grądy Kruklaneckie, the single span of a huge railway bridge over the deep valley of the Sapina is really impressive. The bridge was blown up in 1945. It was the biggest in Masuria, only a little smaller than the famous bridges in Stańczyki.



The remains of the railway viaduct,
photo GEP Chroszcz



From Kruklanki we can continue travelling down the trail to the south towards **Wydminy** and **Miłki** (see p. 17) or go to places remote from the main route, such as in the north-eastern part of the province. To get to Gołdap from Kruklanki, we need to travel around lake Gołdapiwo with side roads from the south and east, and then go north to Banie Mazurskie. Here we can join the road from Węgorzewo to Gołdap (to the right).

KOCH'S POTS

When in 1944 the Germans started to renew and strengthen the fortifications around East Prussia, they built a large number of simple shelters of unsuccessful design. It was an Italian design used in 1940 in the vicinity of Tobruk (North Africa) and modified by the Germans at a later time. The soldiers did not like the pot-like bunkers and called them contemptuously the *Kochtöpfe* (Koch's pots). There were rumours that a general from the fire brigade named Fiedler, reportedly a close friend of Gauleiter and Minister-President of East Prussia, Erich Koch, made a fortune on the mass production of these prefabricated shelters.

Gołdap

The town lies on the edge of the picturesque Szeskie Hills. Known for its clean air, it is the only spa in Warmia and Mazury. The spa district is called Kumiecie, and is situated on Lake Gołdap, northeast of the centre, on the edge of the Romincka Forest. The trail of fortifications leads us right here, as Kumiecie was the quarters of the *Luftwaffe* (the German Air



Remnants of the Luftwaffe Research Centre, photo GEP Chroszcz

Force Command) during WWII. **THE QUARTERS WERE CODE-NAMED 'ROBINSON'** ¹⁴ and contained a station for special trains: the staff train and a train belonging to Marshal Hermann Göring, who had his hunting manor in Rominty (now Krasnolesje in the Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia). The quarters were secured with heavily-reinforced concrete shelters, standing today within the 'Wital' sanatorium resort. In the forest, on the eastern side of the road leading to the border crossing with Russia, there are some **REMNANTS OF THE LUFTWAFFE RESEARCH**

CENTRE ¹⁵ founded back in the 1930s, before the war. Here remain large concrete fire pools and the ruins of a building identified as an engine test bench for jet engines.

Among the hills and small lakes we head east along the edge of the scenic Romincka Forest. Taking the side road from the village of Błękąły, we can reach Stańczyki.

Stańczyki and the neighbourhood

Stańczyki is known for its impressive **RAIL VIADUCT** ¹⁶ over the deep valley of the Błędzianka. The slender pillars and arches of the double bridge resemble Roman aqueducts. They were made of concrete in 1926 on the railway line linking Gołdap and Żytkiejmy. Trains travelled along this line until 1944. Today there are no tracks left. Both of the parallel viaducts are 180 m long and as much as 36 m high.

The area has several bunkers as part of the fortifications of the Mazurian Border Position. It was built in 1940-41. Unlike most German fortifications from the 1930s, it did not form a line. It consisted of some specially-designed points of resistance. The concept was modelled on the Czech and Polish fortifications which the Germans found difficult to conquer during the September campaign. To see a perfectly-preserved bunker at one of these points of resistance, you need to go to **Prawy Las**, 3 km southeast of Stańczyki. In the vicinity of farms and a small lake, with the green tourist



Railway viaduct, photo GEP Chroszcz

trail running nearby, stands the **105C BUNKER** ¹⁷ with an original elongated orillon, i.e. an oblique wall protecting the side wall of the shelter from diagonal fire. Steel crenel shields and an observation dome have survived to this day.

Other bunkers of the Mazurian Border Position are located in **Przesławki**, east of Żytkiejm. There were **THREE 105C SHELTERS** ¹⁸ with observation



domes and positions for heavy machine guns, but all of them were blown up and are now in ruins.

We return from Stańczyki and Gołdap, taking the same road to Kruklanki. From here we can take a side road to the southeast via Żywki and Sołtmany, passing by the lakes of Kruklin and Wydmiańskie from the east. Wydminy is located at the southern end of Wydmiańskie Lake.

The areas of Wydminy and Miłki

Near the village of Wydminy, we can find the remnants of dozens of bunkers. Exposed, devoid of natural cover or obstacles in the form of lakes or rivers, it was necessary for the neighbourhood of Wydminy to be well protected with defensive structures. Thus, many bunkers and fortifications were built to the west and southwest of Wydminy up to the lake of Ublik Wielki.

The line of fortifications of the Giżycko Fortified Region in this area extends from the southern edge of Lake Krukliny through Siedlisko up to the settlement of Lipińskie, then to the village of **Miechy**, through Jedamki Forest and up to Wyszowate and Ogonki. This section was the longest part devoid of natural cover so, exceptionally, many types of shelters were built here. Similar to shelters in other places, the ones here were blown up at the end of WWII. It is worth seeing the bunker near the bridge over Staświnka River, near the road from Siedlisko to Lipińskie. An original building is the **SHELTER IN MIECHY** 19, provided with an armoured dome for artillery observers. Further to the west ran the lines of fortifications of the earlier Giżycko Field Position, passing around Miłki from the north near Staświny, from where they reached the isthmus between lakes Buwełno and Woźnowo near Marcinowa Wola.

Before we set off from Miłki to Orzysz in the south, it is worth going back to the north, to the central point of the German fortifications in the Great Mazury Lakes – Giżycko.

Giżycko

Giżycko lies at the heart of the Land of Great Mazury Lakes. An excellent location on the isthmus between the lakes Niegocin and Kisajno, it has a large marina, **THE MASURIAN SHIPPING COMPANY HARBOR** 20 and numerous interesting monuments which attract many tourists.

The town has developed because of its important strategic position on the easily-defended communication route. Therefore, in 1340, the Teutonic Knights built their **CASTLE** 21 here. In 1889, over the canal connecting Lake Niegocin and Kisajno, a **SWING-BRIDGE** 22 was constructed, a rare example of such a bridge, which is still in operation. The mechanism moving the 100-ton span sideways can be operated (manually!) by one man, with the whole procedure taking about 5 minutes.



Shelter remains in Prawy Las,
photo GEP Chroszcz



At Kisajno Lake, photo GEP Chroszcz





Near the centre of Giżycko, exactly on the isthmus between lakes Niegocin and Kisajno, stands the enormous **BOYEN FORTRESS** 23 (Giżycko, ul. 1, phone: +48 87 4288393, email: gcktwierdza@gmail.com, www.boyen.gizycko.pl). It is so impressive that it is interesting not only for the enthusiasts of fortifications, but other tourists as well. Visitors can wander over the bulwarks and visit a small museum. The construction of the fortress began upon the order of King Frederick William IV of Prussia in 1844, right after the cornerstone ceremony. During the 11 years of its construction it cost over 2 million rix-dollars, and amounted to as many as 16 million bricks.



Although at that time polygonal forts were often erected, here the outline of the rampart, discarded nearly a century before, was re-utilised. The entire fortress covers 120 ha. The main entrance leads through Giżycka Gate, one of the 4 gates that once led to the courtyard of the fortress. The barracks, home to a regiment of 3,000 soldiers stand here, housing a bakery, gunpowder and food storehouses, a station for homing-pigeons and a few other buildings. Bulwarks rise above and around, built on a pentagonal plan with six ramparts. The northern section of the embankments was made in accordance to the forceps design. Surrounding the fortress is a moat. A 3-metre wide Carnot wall was built at the bottom. It is specifically positioned away from the slope, so that it is more difficult to hit with siege guns. A strong caponier, and artillery gun posts with embrasures are attached to the wall. In subsequent years the stronghold was continuously modernised. Significant reconstruction works were undertaken in the late 19th century. Using the natural defensive qualities of the lakes extending from Giżycko to Ruciane-Nida, a line of fortifications, called the Mazury Lakes Position, was created. Its main element was the Boyen Fortress with its reinforced-concrete ceilings for buildings and caponiers.

A few years before WWI, the strengthening of the isthmus was extended. Because of the advances in the art of war the fortress itself became outdated. At that time, 15 shelters for the infantry and artillery were built, together with



Swing bridge and a castle in Giżycko,
photo GEP Chroszcz

Boyen fortress in Giżycko,
photo GEP Chroszcz

MAZURY LAKES POSITION – SZYMONKA, ZIELONY GAJ, KULA

At the end of the 19th century, the German soldiers decided to protect East Prussia from a sudden attack of the Russians. Originally, the German war plans had been to attack France with powerful forces in Western Europe, while the weaker cover troops remained in the east. Therefore, it was decided to secure the strategically important places with fortifications. It was feared that the Russian cavalry would raid Mazury and take over the strategically important isthmuses and bridges in the vicinity of the Great Lakes. Thus, the fortification system, later named the Mazury Lakes Position, was built from Giżycko to Ruciane-Nida. It was not a closed zone of defence designed for fighting when surrounded, unlike later fortifications in the region. As part of its creation, the Boyen fortress was modernised and fortifications on the Giżycki isthmus were extended. Also, the crossings and bridges in Mikołajki, Guzianka and Ruciane were protected.

Forts, guarding passages and channel routes connecting two reservoirs through a number of smaller lakes, were built to the south of Giżycko, between lakes Niegocin and Tały. Thus defence nodes were made in the area of Zielony Gaj, Szymonki and the Kula Peninsula. The Mazury Fortifications Trail passes right next to these, running along the bridge, over the channel between lakes Boczne and Jagodne. Remains of a point of resistance for infantry (*Infanteriewerk*) are preserved at the bridge. Remains of artillery batteries are still present at the side of Boczne Lake.



A view of the Tower at the bridge
in Ruciane, fig. RS



ammunition storehouses and observation stations. Some of these have been preserved to this day, including **THE REMAINS OF SHELTERS 24** upon the Niegociński Canal in **Wilkasy**, between the railway line and the shores of Lake Niegocin. Slightly older are the brick reduits, securing the railway bridge over the Łuczański Canal between Giżycko and the Boyen Fortress. Today the restored building houses a café.

From Giżycko we can go south along the western shore of Lake Niegocin via Wilkasy to Bogaczewo. Immediately beyond the village, we turn left onto the road leading to Rydzewo across the Kula Peninsula and the bridge across the canal connecting the lakes Boczne and Jagodne. On the peninsula, there were once some reinforcements of the Mazury Lakes Position (see frame). From Rydzewo, taking the side roads, we pass by a finger lake linking the south-eastern end of Lake Niegocin and the north-eastern part of Lake Śniardwy. Between several finger lakes there are isthmuses of various widths, which were protected by fortifications in the past.

Between Miłki and Orzysz

The line of lakes Wojnowo, Buwełno and Tyrkło became the basis of the south-eastern part of both defensive fortifications built in the 1st half of the 20th century around the Great Mazury Lakes. You can find older fortifications of the Giżycko Field Position, going from the Kula Peninsula to Marcinowa Wola. As many as 4 points of resistance near the isthmus between the two lakes were erected. However, in the winter of 1914-15, before their construction was completed, the Russian army managed to defeat the Germans there and in nearby Cierzpięty. Fortunately for the Germans, they managed to stop the tsar's army before it could advance on the other fortifications of the Mazury Lakes Position. Therefore, after 1915, numerous shelters and artillery batteries were built. Additional protection was provided by two further points of resistance on the western shore of Lake Buwełno. Among them, some buildings adjacent to the hamlet of **Przykop** have been well-preserved, with **4 SHELTERS FROM 1915-17 25**, there are buildings near the village of Truksy which are still in good condition. South of Marcinowa Wola, parallel to the road to Cierzpięty, the fields are heavily scored by an antitank ditch from WWII.

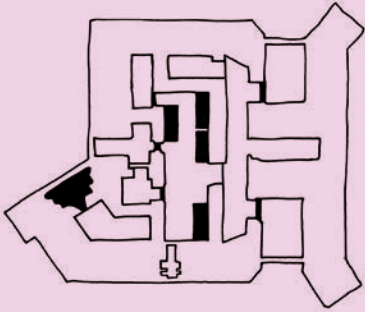
Another **4 COMPLEXES OF BUNKERS 26** erected near **Cierzpięty**. It was necessary to defend an isthmus wider than that in Marcinowa Wola, the one between lakes Buwełno and Tyrkło. Remains of many shelters from 1915-17 can be found in the forests on the isthmus. Each point of resistance consisted of two typical shelters: infantry shelter *Infanterieraum*, emergency shelter *Bereitschaftsraum*, and some also had a guardhouse *Wachtraum*. Resistance point No. 5 has also survived in good condition. It is the only one in this region which is fully preserved. Its four shelters can be found in the woods on the western side of the forest road that leads along the isthmus, about half a kilometre to the north of Lake Tyrkło. In the foreground of the fortifications, and behind them (in the area on the inside of the strand making a fortress or closed system), a number of newer shelters of the Giżycko Fortified Region were built, but all were blown up in 1945.



Bunker in Cierzpięty, photo GEP Chroszcz



Other fortifications were placed along Lake Tyrkło, and near the villages of Węzewo and Okartowo. Two complexes of shelters of the Giżycko Field Position were built in the forests on the west side of an elongated picturesque finger lake. The third one guarded the railway bridge in Okartowo. Before WWII, it was supplemented by several new bunkers built around the bridges in Okartowo and on the edge of the forest east of Węzewo. Most shelters are almost completely destroyed - and difficult to find. A well-preserved combat shelter (B1-2a) with a station for heavy machine gun operation (HMG) is situated near the western shore of the lake, and the green tourist trail running alongside. Also **THE B1-27 BUNKER 27** in Węzewo is well-preserved. The remnants of a point of resistance in Okartowo are easy to find in a group of trees on the south side of the tracks, a few hundred metres from the railway bridge.



Leaving Okartowo and going towards Orzysz, we leave behind the zone of fortification of the Giżycko Field Position and the Giżycko Fortified Region. Other fortifications can be found south of Orzysz, on the way towards Pisz.

Pisz

The capital of the Pisz District is located on both sides of the Pisa River. Just outside the town grow the Piska Forests, and near them, to the north, winds the blue ribbon of Roś Lake amidst fields and forests.

The names of the town and its surroundings are connected with the wetland areas (the Old Prussian word *pisa* means 'moors'). These once impassable lands were home to the Prussian tribe of Galindians, defeated by the Teutonic Knights at the end of the 13th century. Soon the Knights built a castle defending a ford on the river.

Although no medieval fortifications have survived in Pisz, you can see some much younger fortifications in the area of the town. After the experiences of WWI, when the small hills near Pisz were successfully defended in 1914 by the Russians, the German command, in the 1930s, decided to build the Piska Position as part of the defence line on the border of East Prussia. 17 shelters of the most important points of resistance of the Piska Position were built in 1939 on the west side of the town, between the railway line, the settlement of Snopki and Małyńskie Lake. The best preserved and most interesting

facility is the heavy **COMBAT SHELTER REGELBAU 107A 28**, the largest facility of that type of all surviving in Mazury. It has 6-metre reinforced-concrete walls and ceilings, and embrasures secured with 20-centimetre thick armoured steel plates. Also interesting is the **PASSIVE SHELTER REGELBAU 502 28** with an armoured observation dome and the remains of a combat shelter for HMG and 3 shelters for anti-tank guns. All the



Diagram of shelter 107A, fig. RS



Regelbau passive shelter, photo GEP Chroszcz

WOODEN ARMY

In the winter of 1945, despite the readiness of the fortifications of the Piska Position for defence, the 4th German Army of General Hossbach abandoned the area of Pisz without a fight. To confuse the Russians, numerous fake guns and tanks, made of wood, were put in front of the masked fortifications around Pisz. The retreat of the Germans, despite blowing up crossings and bridges, was conducted so secretly that the Red Army commanders did not notice it. General Boldin, whose soldiers were to conquer Pisz, gave orders to his army to perform manoeuvres encircling the already empty bunkers and planes, and subsequently bombing the wooden German army. The attackers figured out the truth a whole 2 days after fighting began! The furious general ordered the destruction of Pisz in revenge.



facilities can be seen on the (marked) historical path of the Piska Pozycja Ryglowa [Piska Blocking Position]. Shelter Regelbau 502 has been carefully restored - tourists wishing to view the shelter are required to phone prior to their visit (Historical Society Piska Pozycja Ryglowa, Karwik 3/2, Pisz, phone: +48 603106955, prezes@rygielpisz.eu, www.rygielpisz.eu)

Before we leave Pisz for Ruciane-Nida in the west, we can go south towards Kolno, taking the main road. This way we will reach the village of Jeże. Some very interesting bunkers can be seen in this area.

Jeże

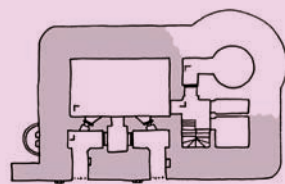
Very few people rushing down the road to the south spot the inconspicuous steel dome near the road. It is a part of one of the bunkers of a powerful point of resistance.

Two German lines of fortifications were joined near Jeże. From the east, parallel to the former border, ran the fortifications of the Mazury Border Position, covering the border of East Prussia with Poland, and after the campaign in September 1939 – with the USSR. At the level of Pisz, from north to south, run the lines of the Galindzka Position (Pisa in German). At the junction of the two positions, on both banks of the Pisa, rise the Jeże East and West Points of Resistance (Woliska Point of Resistance). The 1st point had 6 shelters, including the large 2-storey shelter, Regelbau 113d, assigned to the section commander, with positions for HMG in an armoured dome, 3 smaller shelters for active defence and 2 passive shelters. The best preserved one is the **REGELBAU 105C SHELTER** 29 with a position for HMG and an armoured observation dome. The dome and the bunker itself, a few dozen metres from the road leading from Pisz to Kolno, are perfectly visible from the road when the leaves fall off the trees. On the west side of the river, near the former village of Woliska Małe, there are **2 WELL-PRESERVED PASSIVE SHELTERS FOR INFANTRY AND A LARGE BUNKER WITH AN ORIGINAL ARMoured DOME FOR MACHINE GUNS** 30. A little further north, near the road from Jeże to Woliska Wielkie, there is an interesting **INFANTRY SHELTER WITH A GARAGE FOR AN ANTI-TANK GUN** 31.

Returning to Pisz from Jeże we go further west along the trail. The main road goes through the vast Piska Forests with hidden German bunkers from WWII (see frame). After driving nearly 20 km from Pisz we go over the bridge on the Nidzki Canal, and then we enter Ruciane-Nida.

Ruciane-Nida

The green forests and blue lakes create a beautiful setting for the town of Ruciane-Nida. A popular **MARINA** 33 and a hub for canoe, hiking and cycling routes, it lies near the Nidzki Canal, connecting the lakes Nidzkie and Beldany



The Regelbau 105C shelter scheme, fig. RS



SECRET BUNKERS OF THE PISKA FOREST

In the heart of the Piski Forest, by Jegocinek Lake on the north side of the road from Pisz to Ruciane-Nida, you can sometimes see massive bunkers behind barbed wire. These are the perfectly-preserved buildings of the former **QUARTERS OF THE LUFTWAFFE COMMANDER** 32, Marshal Hermann Göring, code-named Breitenheide (Wide Forest). A railway siding coming from the line from Pisz to Ruciane-Nida was built especially to accommodate his armoured train. Before becoming the quarters of the Marshal in 1940, there was a secret *Luftwaffe* experimental centre created in 1935-37, and the largest bunkers date back to that period. As was recorded later, work on rocket engines, and even anti-aircraft targeted missiles, was conducted here. Unfortunately, the well-preserved shelters cannot be visited, as the closely-guarded area was taken by the Polish army after the war and is still occupied.



Guzianka sluice, Ruciane-Nida,
photo GEP Chroszcz

One of the three concrete towers,
Ruciane-Nida, photo GEP Chroszcz

through **THE GUZIANKA SLUICE** 33, and the smaller lakes Guzianka Mała and Guzianka Wielka. Sailors, sailing across the channel connecting the two large lakes, and tourists travelling by land often do not notice the remarkable historical fortifications in the town.

The strategically important **INLET WITH A ROAD BRIDGE AND RAIL BRIDGE NEAR RUCIANE AND A SLUICE IN THE ESTATE OF GUZIANKA** 33 reinforced in the late 19th century as the most southern point of resistance of the Mazury Lakes Position. The line of fortifications crossed the Land of Great Mazury Lakes from Giżycko in the north, reaching Ruciane. The fortifications were to protect the Germans from a rapid invasion by the Russians, as Russian cavalry could have commandeered important passages between the lakes and bridge crossings. Therefore, three concrete towers with machine-gun positions (preserved to this day) were built after 1898. Similar to medieval donjons, they are crowned with embrasures and crenels. A 4-storey tower stood on the south side of the western abutment of the railway bridge, similar to that located between the railway bridge and the road bridge but one storey lower. Another 3-storey structure stands next to the Guzianka Sluice, directly on the road. All three are in good condition; you can even see the original fortress grating shielding the entrance. In the woods near the sluice and south of the railway bridge over Nidzki Lake, are some less interesting but well-preserved infantry shelters from

the 1920s. Upon Guzianka Mała Lake there are some concrete shelters with shelters for the troops operating the battery of 53 mm guns, mounted on a mobile tower.

We leave Ruciane-Nida, taking the main road west towards Szczytno, and then let us take the side road to Ukta. There, we will take the road to the north running through vast forests straight to Mikołajki.



Marina in Mikołajki, photo D. Zaród

Mikołajki

The name of this town is known to anyone who has ever sailed in Mazury. A beautifully-situated **MARINA** 34 a charming village are located on the two banks of a narrow inlet connecting Lake Mikołajskie and Tały. A long line of finger lakes with high edges creates a magnificent landscape, and close proximity to the largest Polish lake (Śniardwy) makes Mikołajki probably the most visited place among the Great Mazury Lakes.

The Mazury Fortification Trail also reaches Mikołajki, so fans of military architecture will find something of interest here. The town has some strategically important



bridge crossings: both road and rail, which in the late 19th century were included in the string of fortifications of the Mazury Lakes Position. Around 1899, **TWO TOWERS FOR HMG** 55 were built at the west abutment of the former road bridge (now a pedestrian walkway). Both towers stand here today, housing small catering stalls. An additional bunker, disguised as a residential house, partially destroyed and surrounded by buildings, was erected on the east bank during the interwar years. Now it is enclosed within a restaurant.

The railway crossing was also secured against sudden attacks. On the western abutment of the bridge in 1910 stood **2 GUARDHOUSES** 56, up to today. On the eastern shore stands an outpost with a piece of fortress grating and a shelter for the guards at the foot of the railway embankment.

We leave Mikołajki by the main road to Orzysz. Where the trail heads to the west, in Pszczółki, we can take the road to the left leading straight to Ryn. You can also take the turn a bit further on: beyond Woźnice towards Giżycko. In Szymonki, with the remains of the fortifications of the Mazury Lakes Position (see frame "Mazury Lakes Position: Szymonka, Zielony Gaj, Kula"), we can take the side lanes to Ryn via Stara Rudówka and Hermanowa Wola.



A disguised bunker in Mikołajki,
photo GEP Chroszcz



Ryn and its neighbourhood

The roof of a castle, which once belonged to the Teutonic commanders, dominates the high bank at the north end of Lake Ryńskie. The town occupies a narrow isthmus, because north of the castle, just behind the houses, lies Ołów Lake.

It was already in the Middle Ages that the place was strategically important. Around the year 1377, the Knights built a **FORTRESS** 57, securing the eastern border of their country, along with the now non-existent watchtower close by in Orło village. Today the castle houses a luxury hotel but some rooms can be visited with a guide from May to the end of August (Mazury Congress and Leisure Centre: Zamek-Ryn, Ryn, pl. Wolności 2, : +48 87 4297000, email: hotel@zamekryn.pl, www.zamekryn.pl).

In the vicinity of Ryn you can see some examples of late military architecture. To the west of the town were German fortifications from the 1st half of the 20th century. Four points of resistance of the Giżycko Field Position were built during WWI in the woods west of Ryn, between Rominek Bay of Ryńskie Lake and Guber Lake. A little further west, before the line of older fortifications, the Germans, in the period before WWII, prepared shelters and field facilities in the Giżycko Fortified Region. There are 9 types of bunkers and a 2-storey Regelbau 112b shelter, which was assigned to the section commander, along the road connecting the village of Wejdyki with the main road from Ryn to Mrągowo. Although the complex was partially blown up, one armoured dome for machine guns (the only one preserved in the Giżycko Fortified Region) is still present. Ruins of other facilities are located between the road and the village of Krzyżany. Further on the lines of fortifications ran arching towards the southern end of the Guber Lake.



Ryn castle, photo GEP Chroszcz



After visiting the bunkers west of the city, scattered around Ryn, we can head north. The road runs along the western side of the lakes Olów and Orłó, and then straight to the village of Sterławki. Here we come to a junction with the road from Giżycko to Kętrzyn, and we turn left, to Kętrzyn. Right behind Sterławki the road leads through a forest, and when the forest ends, on the left (southern) side of the road, we will see the buildings of Martiany, among which we will find a perfectly preserved bunker.




The interior of a shelter in Martiany,
photo GEP Chroszcz

Figure of the shelter in Martiany,
photo GEP Chroszcz

Martiany

The small town by the road from Giżycko to Kętrzyn lies between 3 small lakes. A very well-preserved combat shelter of the Giżycko Fortified Region is one of the attractions of Martiany.

The area of Martiany formed the zone of fortifications protruding to the north-west. These were built after 1937 between lakes Guber and Wersminia. The next section ran to the west and north of the village, closing the open space between Lake Wersminia and towards the north-western end of Lake Dejguny. The concrete bunkers erected in this area were blown up in 1945 – all but the one standing amid the buildings of Martiany. The bunker was probably saved due to the fact that it was hidden under an ordinary barn until the 1960s. It is a **REGELBAU 105B SHELTER**  a position for HMG. Inside are some well-preserved German descriptions concerning the operation and safety of the shelter, which was built in 1939. The bunker is located on private agro-tourist property, but the owner allows tourists to explore it.

Many facilities of the four points of resistance of the Giżycko Field Position were built earlier in the neighbourhood of Martiany, on the east side of the village. These were, however, largely destroyed, and their remains are not easy to find.

From Martiany we can go along the road to nearby Kętrzyn. And it is here that we close the loop of the Mazury Fortifications Trail.

