

Beneath the Surface: Disease, Waste, Fear and Urban Control in *Warsaw's Old Town*



Explore Warsaw's Old Town slowly through a dense historic environment where infrastructure, legend, religious memory, civic symbols and reconstruction remain legible within walking distance.



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Practical Information



Starting location

Heritage Interpretation Centre, Brzozowa Street 11/13
Warsaw Old Town, Poland.



Distance: 2 km by foot

Duration: 120 - 140 minutes



Material Nedeed

Charged Phone, headphones if audio is used; digital or printed map; comfortable shoes; optional quote cards or reflection cards.



Accessibility Level

Easy to medium; compact route with cobblestones and emotionally demanding content; several stops are based on outdoor interpretation.



- The route is compact, but includes cobblestones, narrow passages and emotionally demanding content.
- QR codes lead to interactive tasks.

Route Itinerary:

Centrum Interpretacji Zabytków (Heritage Interpretation Centre), Gnojna Góra (Brzozowa Street), Barbakan i mury miejskie (Warsaw Barbican & the city walls), Krzywe Koło i Bazyliszek (Krzywe Koło Street & the Basilisk story), Pałac pod Blachą - the so-called Masonic Lodge, Archikatedra św. Jana (St. John's Cathedral), Muzeum Farmacji im. Antoniny Leśniewskiej (Museum of Pharmacy), Stare Miasto (Old Town Market Squire), Pomnik Syrenki (Mermaid Monument), Muzeum Warszawy (Museum of Warsaw).

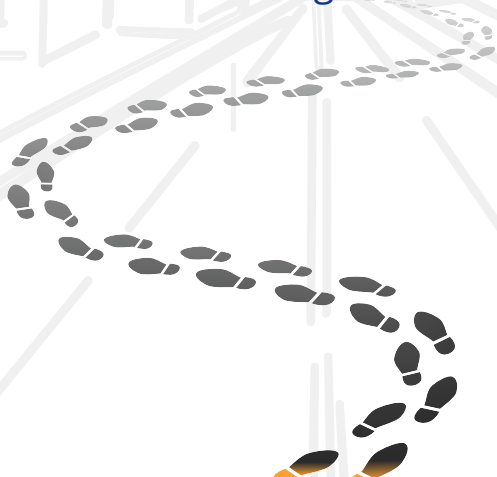
Tour Introduction

Welcome to "Beneath the Surface: Disease, Waste, Fear and Urban Control in Warsaw's Old Town"

The Warsaw Old Town you see today is a beautifully reconstructed monument, but underneath lies the memory of a remarkably resilient organism. For centuries, these historic streets and cellars were defined by a relentless drive for survival- a collective effort to manage diseases, waste, and develop effective systems of urban control. This walk is an exercise in deep, empathetic observation through an archive of loss and continuity. We invite you to peel back the layers of everyday history to discover the sheer ingenuity of the people who built, protected, and rebuilt this community.

Our journey begins at the Heritage Interpretation Centre to look at the archaeology of memory. From there, we will confront the invisible sanitary systems of Gnojna Góra and examine the protective, exclusionary walls of the Barbican. We will decode urban legends on Krzywe Koło as a language of collective fear, and separate myth from reality at Pałac Pod Blachą. Moving into St. John's Archcathedral, we will reflect on hierarchy and memory, before exploring professional trust and care at the Museum of Pharmacy. Finally, we will enter the Old Town Market Square to examine the public theatre of power, contemplate continuity at the Mermaid Monument, and conclude at the Museum of Warsaw to see how a city can responsibly interpret its own complexity.

Warsaw has always been a city of incredible endurance and adaptive power. Let us descend beneath the surface to discover the true foundations of its strength.



Stop #1: Heritage Interpretation Centre, Brzozowa Street 11/13



Hidden layers, exposed walls and the archaeology of memory.

Imagine the Old Town as a human being. What you see on the surface– beautiful, colorful tenements - is just carefully applied makeup hiding the scars of historical upheavals. To understand how this city truly functioned and what it endured, we must look beneath its skin. We descend into the cellars, where 14th-century walls remember repeated fires, wars, and devastating epidemics. Heritage is not about boring stones - it is an investigation where we decide which wounds from the past matter to us today.



Interactive task:
approx. 5–10 mins

Scan Me!

Now it is time to check how this urban organism eliminated its toxins. Having examined the deep foundations, let's step outside to a place where, for centuries, everything the city preferred to forget ended up.

NEXT STEP



Walk to Gnojna Góra on Brzozowa Street.

Stop #2: Gnojna Góra, Brzozowa Street



Waste, smell and the management of what a city rejects.

You are standing in a spot that today serves as a perfect backdrop for Instagram photos. But for hundreds of years, no one would have wanted to spend leisure time here. Gnojna Góra was a gigantic dump for rubbish and human waste. In order to survive, the city had to "excrete" its waste somewhere. Who worked here? People pushed to the margins of society, who - amid the stench and threat of disease- ensured that wealthy residents in the center had clean streets. This proves that the city's history is also a story of dirty, thankless work for the common good.



Now that we know how Old Warsaw dealt with its internal waste at Gnojna Góra, it's time to see how it isolated itself from external threats.



Interactive task:
approx. 5 mins

Scan Me!

NEXT STEP



Let's walk along the line of the old defensive walls towards the Barbican. Let's think about what and who this city was so desperately trying to shut out.

Walk towards the Warsaw Barbican and the city walls.

Stop #3: Warsaw Barbican and the city walls, Nowomiejska 15/17



Security, exclusion and the city after dark.

The defensive walls and the Barbican look proud today, but in the past, they were a symbol of constant fear. Living in a medieval city meant that security came with a high price: the restriction of freedom. The city gates were closed for the night, and guards decided who belonged to the safe world inside, and who had to stay outside, alone with the darkness. Fear was literally built into these bricks. Residents were not just civilians – each of them had a duty to defend a designated section of the wall.



Interactive task:
approx. 5 mins

Scan Me!

Step back inside the (theoretically) safe walls, and we will quickly find that fear did not disappear when the gates were closed. Let's turn into Krzywe Koło Street. Human anxieties, which the walls could not defeat, gave birth to monsters in the dark corners that the residents did not understand.

NEXT STEP



Continue to Krzywe Koło and the Basilisk story.

Stop #4: Krzywe Koło and the Basilisk story

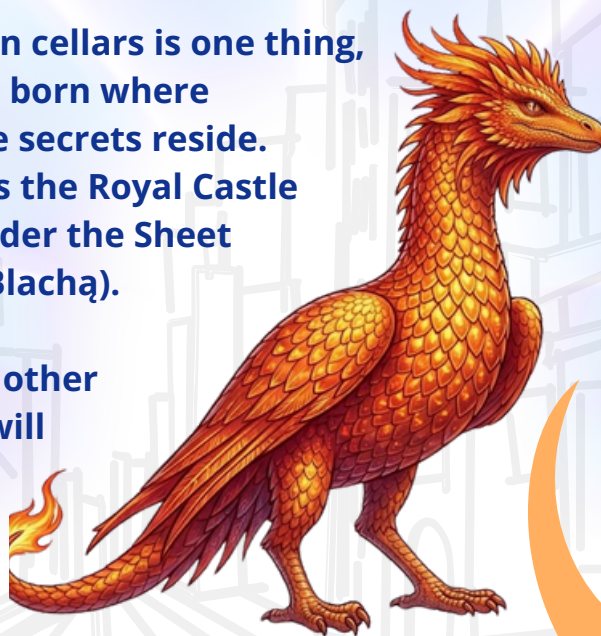


Urban legend as a language of fear.

Why did adults believe that a monster killing with its gaze lived in a dark cellar on Krzywe Koło Street? Some cultural historians suggest that this belief intensified between the 17th and 18th centuries - a period when Warsaw was repeatedly devastated by devastating epidemics. While the legend has many roots, one compelling interpretation is that the Basilisk served as a symbolic language for collective anxiety. In an era before microscopes, when people could not comprehend how deadly diseases spread through dark, damp spaces, the human imagination sought to personify the biological unknown lurking beneath the floorboards.

Fear of monsters in cellars is one thing, but true control is born where influence and elite secrets reside. Let's walk towards the Royal Castle and the Palace Under the Sheet Metal (Pałac Pod Blachą).

As we look into another set of cellars, we will see how human imagination can create a legend around places to which only a few had access.



Story



Interactive task:
approx. 5 mins

Scan Me!

NEXT STEP



Walk to Pałac Pod Blachą.

Stop #5: Pałac Pod Blachą, the so-called Masonic Lodge



Secret cellars, elite myths and the imagination of hidden power.

We are entering the world of high-society secrets. Beneath this palace lies a vaulted cellar traditionally called the 'Masonic Lodge'. The Freemasons were an elite, secret society surrounded by hundreds of rumors. People have always feared what is hidden and powerful. Although historical evidence of a lodge in this specific spot is fragile, this cellar perfectly demonstrates the mechanism of control: secrets breed rumors, and rumors help us understand how society imagines those who rule the world from behind closed doors.



Find the ramp to the vaults.
Why does this secluded spot
perfectly feed rumors about
secret power?

Share your quick theories!

NEXT STEP: Walk back to Świętojańska Street and enter St. John's Archcathedral. From elite secrets of earthly power, we move to where control over life's end took its monumental form.

NEXT STEP



Walk to St John's Archcathedral, Świętojańska 8.

Stop #6: St John's Archcathedral, Świętojańska 8



Death, burial, and political memory in the sacred centre.

We enter the religious and political heart of old Warsaw. The cathedral is a place of coronations and royal funerals, but beneath our feet lie crypts filled with the bones of rulers, dukes, and prominent citizens. In ancient times, where you were buried defined your worth in the eyes of God and men. The most powerful were buried closest to the altar; the poor ended up in nameless graves outside the walls. The Church managed not only faith but also memory. Death in this place is not a spectacle - it is a reminder of hierarchy, order, and that social control extended even beyond the boundary of life.



Notice how some names are carved in grand marble to endure forever, while the ordinary people who built this cathedral lie nameless beneath the cobblestones.

Discuss in small groups:

Is a permanent monument the only way to preserve dignity, or do quiet, unrecorded acts of daily survival carry even more weight?

Let's leave the crypts of the Archicathedral and walk to Piwna Street, straight to the Antonina Leśniewska Museum of Pharmacy. Here, we will see how the city transitioned from a paralyzing fear of epidemics to scientific control over the human body.

NEXT STEP



Walk to the Antonina Leśniewska Museum of Pharmacy.



Stop #7: Antonina Leśniewska

Museum of Pharmacy, Piwna 31/33



Healing, expertise and the history of the body.

We enter the ancient realm of potions, medicines, and scents. The Museum of Pharmacy shows the moment when the city stopped merely fearing diseases and began to systematically fight them through science. Old pharmacies were like alchemical laboratories – this is where medicines and ointments were created on-site.

The patron of this place, Antonina Leśniewska, reminds us of another struggle at the turn of the 20th century: the access to knowledge. Graduating in 1900 and later opening her pharmacy in Warsaw in 1933, she was one of the first women in the world with a degree in pharmacy, proving that institutions of care and science excluded women for centuries.



herStory

Interactive
task: approx.
5 - 10 mins



While medicine and science offered hope in the quiet of pharmacy laboratories, a completely different, public spectacle was unfolding outside – in the city's main square.

Let's leave Piwna Street and head straight to the Old Town Market Square.

This was the pulsing heart of commerce, but it was also where the authorities staged a theater of punishment and demonstrative control.

NEXT STEP



Walk to the Old Town Market Square.

Stop #8: Old Town Market Square



Commerce, punishment and the public theatre of the city.

The Old Town Market Square is a place that gathers almost all the layers of our narrative. Today it is associated with cafes and tourists, but in the past, it was an arena for the public theater of power. This was a place of trade, but it was also where the pillory stood, where criminals were publicly humiliated and flogged, and sometimes death sentences were executed. Social control had to be visible to everyone. Additionally, what you see around you is a great post-war project – a precise reconstruction of the destroyed city, which makes the Market Square both authentic and re-created.



Look at the windows of the reconstructed tenements. How does the open structure of this square make it the perfect urban theater for public control?

Share your thoughts.

Walk to the Mermaid Monument in the center of the square. Moving from stories of trade and harsh punishments, let's examine this protective figure to understand how the city heals its wounds and is reborn anew.

NEXT STEP



Move to the Mermaid Monument in the Old Town Market Square.

Stop #9: Mermaid Monument, Old Town Market Square



*Urban symbols, survival, and the afterlife
of the city's image.*

Before you stands the Warsaw Mermaid – half woman, half fish, with a sword and a shield in her hands. In the context of our walk, this is a fascinating symbol. Why did the city choose a figure with a weapon as its protector? Because Warsaw, due to its location, has always had to fight for survival. This specific monument was moved, damaged during wars, restored, and eventually replaced by a copy to protect the original. The Mermaid is proof that even when the physical urban tissue (buildings, streets) is completely destroyed, the identity of the residents hidden in symbols can survive any catastrophe.



**We have come a long way
– from underground cellars
and ancient waste, through
defensive walls, fears, and elite
secrets to the spiritual heart
and life-saving institutions.**

**It is time to gather all these scattered fragments of knowledge into one,
coherent whole.**

**Let's take just a few steps and enter the portal that connects all these
stories – the Museum of Warsaw, located in the tenements just behind
the Mermaid.**

NEXT STEP



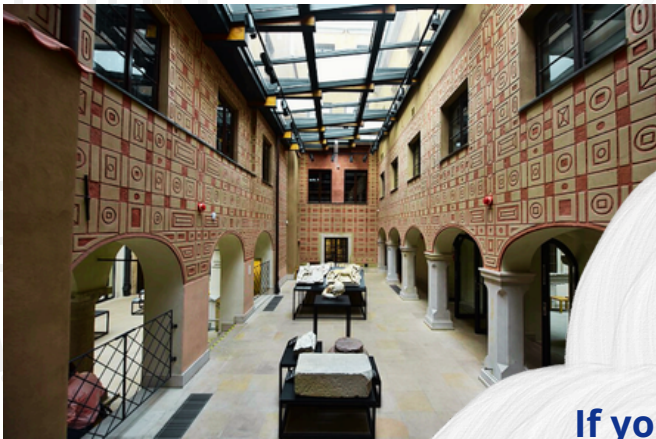
Walk to the Museum of Warsaw on the Old Town Market Square.

Stop #10: Museum of Warsaw, Old Town Market Square



*From fragments, absences, and symbols
to responsible public interpretation.*

Our anatomical journey beneath the surface of Warsaw ends here. After completing this route, you do not return with a single, simple answer, but with a whole set of questions about how a city functions. The Museum of Warsaw is the perfect finale because this is exactly where hundreds of authentic fragments, ruins, everyday objects, and rescued details are arranged into a narrative of survival. Difficult heritage - waste, fear, pain, and control - becomes useful only when we can talk about it openly and draw conclusions for the future.



Before you leave the Museum of Warsaw and return to the bustling streets of the surface, take a quiet moment with your group for one last thought:

If you could choose just one object, place, or story from today's journey that best embodies Warsaw's incredible power to endure, heal, and rebuild - what would it be, and why?

You did it!

Congratulations, you have discovered what the city hides beneath the surface! Thank you!

This booklet was created by Fundacja Rozwoju Demokracji Lokalnej
im. Jerzego Regulskiego (FRDL) as a part of the project
Empower Youth, Explore Stories (EYES)

Contact us:

Katarzyna Doherty
katarzyna.doherty@frdl.org.pl

Małgorzata Zielińska
malgorzata.zielinska@frdl.org.pl



[http://www.](http://www.dlamlodych.frdl.pl/projekty/empower-youth-explore-stories-eyes)

dlamlodych.frdl.pl/projekty/empower-youth-explore-stories-eyes



[FundacjaRozwojuDemokracjiLokalnej](https://www.facebook.com/FundacjaRozwojuDemokracjiLokalnej)



[company/fundacja-rozwoju-demokracji-lokalnej](https://www.linkedin.com/company/fundacja-rozwoju-demokracji-lokalnej)