



Roman Kobendza: a pioneer of environmental history

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Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest przybliżenie postaci Romana Kobendzy (1886-1955) oraz prezentacja treści artykułu *Roślinność ruderalna na gruzach miast polskich*. Kobendza był botanikiem związanym ze Szkołą Główną Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego w Warszawie oraz Uniwersytetem Warszawskim. Specjalizował się w dendrologii i biologii roślin drzewiastych, był także propagatorem idei ochrony przyrody, przyczyniając się do utworzenia kilku rezerwatów. Obok licznych publikacji specjalistycznych Kobendza wydawał opracowania przeznaczone dla szerokiej publiczności, co stanowiło istotny składnik jego działalności popularyzatorskiej. Był on także aktywnym uczestnikiem międzywojennego życia naukowego, m.in. współzałożył Polskie Towarzystwo Botaniczne i współorganizował Polskie Towarzystwo Dendrologiczne. Tematyka artykułu pt. *Roślinność ruderalna na gruzach miast polskich* sytuuje się na skrzyżowaniu zainteresowań badacza: fitosocjologii, badań nad roślinnością terenów piaszczystych, ochrony przyrody. Punktem wyjścia Kobendzy jest konstatacja zmian, jakie w krajobrazie – w tym wypadku głównie Warszawy – wywołała wojna, przy czym w oczywistym fakcie, jakim było zrujnowanie miasta, widzi on nie tyle destrukcję, ile powstanie nowych, niespotykanych wcześniej w tym miejscu warunków środowiskowych, skutkujących zmianami w szacie roślinnej.

Słowa kluczowe

Botanika, Kobendza, rośliny, ruiny, wojna

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present Roman Kobendza (1886-1955) and his article "Ruderal vegetation on the ruins of Polish cities (1949). Kobendza was a botanist associated with the Warsaw University of Life Sciences and the University of Warsaw. He specialized in dendrology and the biology of woody plants and was also a promoter of nature conservation, contributing to the creation of numerous national parks. In addition to numerous expert studies, Kobendza also published works intended for a broader audience, which was a vital part of his popularizing activities. He also contributed actively to the interwar scholarly life, as a co-founder of the

Polish Botanical Society and co-ordinator of the Polish Dendrology Society. The article entitled “Ruderal vegetation...” lies at the intersection of the researcher’s interests: phytosociology, studies on the vegetation of sandy areas, and nature conservation. Kobendza’s set out with noting the war-induced changes in the landscape—which in that case mainly meant Warsaw and its environs. Simultaneously, in his eyes, the evidently ravaged city did not spell destruction alone, but rather the emergence of new, unprecedented environmental conditions in the sites he examined, which subsequently gave rise to distinct vegetation.

Key words

Botany, Kobendza, plants, ruins, war

Roman Kobendza (1886–1955) was a botanist associated with the Warsaw University of Life Sciences and the University of Warsaw.¹ He specialized in dendrology and the biology of woody plants (in the early 1930s, he established the Department of Dendrology at the Faculty of Horticulture, Warsaw University of Life Sciences, and at the end of that decade, he began conducting lectures on forest botany at the Faculty of Forestry). From 1917 until the end of his life, he worked at the Botanical Garden of the University of Warsaw. Kobendza was also a promoter of nature conservation, contributing to the creation of the Kampinos National Park in 1959, which encompasses the Kampinos Forest, to which he devoted his doctoral dissertation (*Phytosociological Relations in the Kampinos Forest*), defended at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw in 1926. In that research, as well as in later investigations, Kobendza was accompanied by his wife, Jadwiga Kobendza (1895–1989), a geographer and geomorphologist.² Kobendza was an advocate for the protection of e.g. the Bielany district of Warsaw, discovered the source of the Łyna River and a created the nature reserve surrounding it. He was also interested in other natural areas of Poland, including the Białowieża Forest and the Świętokrzyskie Mountains, as well as in parks (*Parks of Warsaw and its Surroundings* [1930]).

In addition to numerous expert studies, which he regularly submitted for publication since 1911–1912, Kobendza also published works intended for a broader audience, which was a vital part of his popularizing activities. He also contributed actively to the interwar scholarly life, as a co-founder of the Polish Botanical Society, co-ordinator of the Polish Dendrology Society, and member of multiple scientific

1 T. Górczyński, *Życie i dzieło Romana Kobendzy*, “Sylvan,” vol. 100, 1956, no. 9, pp. 43–49 (with a bibliography of works); J. Kobendza, *Wspomnienia pośmiertne: Roman Kobendza (1886–1955)*, “Rocznik Towarzystwa Naukowego Warszawskiego,” vol. 46, 1983, pp. 225–228; P. Kubkowski, *Państwo drzewoznawstwo*, “Kontakt,” 2019, no. 40; <https://magazynkontakt.pl/panstwo-drzewoznawstwo> [last access: 20.10.2025].

2 M.I. Milewska, *Jadwidze Kobendzinie*, “Przegląd Geograficzny,” vol. XLVIII, 1976, Issue 3, pp. 371–375 (bibliography of works on pp. 375–378 [compiled by H. Tuszyńska-Rękawkowa]).

associations (the State Council for Nature Conservation, the Horticultural Society, and the Polish Forest Society).

Kobendza spent World War II in Warsaw and, after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising, relocated to Krakow, where he continued to be involved in clandestine teaching. When the war had ended, he returned to Warsaw and began working in the Physiographic Laboratory at the Office for the Reconstruction of the Capital. He was responsible, among other things, for the reconstruction of the destroyed Botanical Garden of the University of Warsaw, as well as the resumption of academic activities at the Warsaw University of Life Sciences. As part of his work for the Office, Kobendza called for the creation of a capital's botanical garden, located in the vicinity of the Kabacki Forest (the garden opened in 1975 as the Botanical Garden of the Polish Academy of Sciences).

In the post-war period, Kobendza focused on nature conservation (articles in the magazine *Chrońmy przyrodę ojczystą*), dendrology and floristics, studying and describing rubble and dune vegetation. Kobendza's botanical interests were also reflected in the photographs he took both in the Botanical Garden and during his numerous hikes. They are currently held in the Garden's collection.³

Not only were nature reserves named in honour of Roman Kobendza (The Prof. Roman Kobendza Łyna River Source Nature Reserve”), but also natural monuments (Kobendza's Oak in the Kampinos Forest, Roman and Jadwiga Kobendza's metasequoia growing next to their grave in the Służew Cemetery), as well as plant species (intermediate yew, apple tree, buttercup [*Ranunculus kobendzae* Halamski]).

The article entitled “Ruderal vegetation on the ruins of Polish cities” lies at the intersection of the researcher's interests: phytosociology, studies on the vegetation of sandy areas, and nature conservation.⁴ Kobendza's set out with noting the war-induced changes in the landscape—which in that case mainly meant Warsaw and its environs. Simultaneously, in his eyes, the evidently ravaged city did not spell destruction alone, but rather the emergence of new, unprecedented environmental conditions in the sites he examined, which subsequently gave rise to distinct vegetation. He describes the latter by identifying species that came to grow in “microclimatic conditions of the rubble fields [...] similar to those of deserts” and in specific locations where variable habitat properties depended on the type and composition of the rubble.

Kobendza's article is one of the few studies devoted to the subject; also, it was written almost immediately after the end of hostilities. Although the role of botanists and the importance of botany for the belligerents was indeed studied at that

3 https://www.ogrod.uw.edu.pl/floratheca/?locale=pl#zbior_kobendzy_w_skrocie [last access: 20.10.2025]; 2012 saw an exhibition entitled *Archiwum botaniczne [A Botanical Archive]*, which showed photographs by Kobendza as well as the photographic works by Basia Sokolowska that they inspired (<https://faf.org.pl/uncategorized/botanical-archive/?lang=en> [last access: 20.10.2025]).

4 Published in Polish and English in this issue.

time, the interest in the environmental impact of armed conflicts came to the fore much later.

While the scientific and documentary value of the text is doubtless, it is still quite compelling given the two different perspectives: historical and contemporary. As a botanist, Kobendza draws attention to the landscape of the destroyed Warsaw, which was also noted by others. The comparison of the capital's ruins to a desert is not metaphorical, but brings out the "geographical" characteristics of the new—and, as the author notes, temporary—landscape, which appears to be natural, even though it was made by human hand. A similar approach, albeit powerfully emotional, may be found for instance in the writings of Kazimierz Wyka, an eminent Polish literary historian and critic:

Every city, seen from a distance, has its own landscape. The walls, towers and churches of Warsaw have not changed their location over the centuries, and those who wished to see the landscape of Warsaw from the Vistula River would recall the panorama of the capital painted by Canaletto. At least, that is what I always did. I go down Nowy Zjazd, close my eyes and still see it in my mind's eye, saturated with the same precise light as today. I do not want to lift my lids, because that landscape that beats within me I do not know at all. This city is alien to me, as utterly foreign and different as a mountain range that would grow where I never expected it. In vain do I look for any resemblance to the former landscape of Warsaw in the jagged outline of these crags. I have an impression, and this is the most potent that I took away from Warsaw, that I am facing an *entirely novel and hitherto unseen phenomenon of nature*.⁵

Wyka compares the journey through the streets of Warsaw in 1945 to making his way through a gorge. A somewhat lighter mood lays over the city in the account of another Polish writer, Jerzy Waldorff, who walks "between the gentle, greenery-covered hills that used to be Świętokrzyska Street" to Warecki Square (erstwhile Napoleon Square, present-day Powstańców Warszawy) more or less at the same time. In the square, where a large patch of green used to be before the war, Waldorff sees:

The weeds that grow over the ruins of the Warecki Square on the Mazowiecka Street side have settled in well over the six years. They grow lushly in green tufts, cleverly using the recesses in the rubble to shield themselves from the wind. The fresh, post-uprising debris is overgrown with very puny greenery, which has not yet managed to root its way into the sufficiently nutritious piles and deposits of ash.

From beyond the charred walls, there rear the heads of trees from the garden of the U Aktorek café, which connects with the Batavia garden into the green interior of a block

5 K. Wyka, *Miecz Syreny*, in: idem, *Życie na niby*, Krakow 1984, p. 202.

of former houses, enclosed by Świętokrzyska, Szkolna, Kredytowa and Mazowiecka Streets. At a glance, the appearance of the gardens has changed little. The trees have covered their wounds with leaves, and the lawns are even more exuberant than they were a year ago, with only their formerly even surface now creased with rows of graves.⁶

The contrast between the ruderal vegetation—lush and, despite everything, capable of evoking “idyllic” associations, whilst having all the appearances of “weeds”—and the ruins must have been striking. Not only men of letters wrote about it, as it was devoted an article in *Stolica* entitled “Ruins and Flowers”. Although its author, admitting to a certain inevitable dose of sentimentality, focuses on the flowers sold at the florist’s and street stalls, the illustrations accompanying the text mainly depict the landscape that Wyka had seen, overgrown with “very puny greenery” mentioned by Waldorff.⁷ Kobendza thus focused on what was perceived as a paradoxical complement to the ravages of war, as a “natural” component which underscored element the enormity of the destruction caused by human actions.

The fact that the ruins of Warsaw were not infrequently green and that vegetation quickly took over the space abandoned by people is still surprising. Perhaps this is due to the overly literal treatment of ruins as a barren desert devoid of vegetation, and the fact that—just as in the illustrations accompanying Kobendza’s study or the article in *Stolica*—the photographs that feed our imaginary are black and white, which leaves no room for greenery.⁸ Another contributing factor is the tendency to treat nature solely as a backdrop to the theatre of war in which human actors play the leading roles.

However, environmental history has been developing dynamically for quite some time, making successful attempts to overcome that anthropocentric perspective by demonstrating, among other things, the environmental facet of armed conflicts, the role which flora and fauna play in hostilities, and finally the impact of military operations on ecosystems.⁹ In this light, Kobendza’s text in some sense anticipated what would come to develop many decades after its publication. One cannot fail to note that “Ruderal Vegetation...” has been frequently invoked in recent years by the writers concerned with the environmental history of Warsaw during World War II.¹⁰ Natalia Budnik, author of *Ląka pamięci* [*Meadow of Remembrance*], a project

6 J. Waldorff, *Żaby na placu wareckim*, in: idem, *Dolina szarej rzeki*, Warsaw 1993, p. 10.

7 S. Wolski, *Ruiny i kwiaty*, “*Stolica*,” Year II, 1947, no. 11(20), pp. 6-7; published in Polish and English in this volume.

8 J. Rolińska, *Roślinność ruderalna*; <https://wydawnictwoproby.pl/roslinnosc-ruderalna/> [last access: 20.10.2025]; the authors cites the text by J. Waldorff.

9 M. Praczyk, *Historia środowiskowa jako praktyka badawcza*, “*HISTORYKA. Studia Metodologiczne*,” vol. 50, 2020, pp. 351–376.

10 A. Kuś, *Pamięć drzew. Drzewa jako eko świadkowie historii Muranowa i Mirowa* (2021), <https://1943.pl/arttykul/pamiec-drzew-drzewa-jako-eko-swiadkowie-historii-muranowa-i-mirowa/> [last access: 20.10.2025]; A. Kuś, *Pyszne pomidory i ponętka zwana “Warszawianką”*. *Rośliny ruderalne i pamięć ogrodów getta na gruzach Warszawy* (2021); <https://1943.pl/arttykul/pyszne-pomidory-i-ponetka-zwana-warszawianka-rosliny-ruderalne-i-pamiec-ogrodow-getta-na-gruzach-warszawy> [last access: 20.10.2025]; K. Wróbel-Bardzik, *Krajobraz ruderalny (po)wojennej Warszawy*, “*Teksty drugie*,” 2020, no. 3, pp. 367–380; eadem, *Między ruralizacją miasta i ‘urbanizacją przyrody’*. *Historia środowiskowa*

accompanying the exhibition *Korzenie powstania. Opór w getcie warszawskim* [*The Roots of the Uprising: Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto*] (2023),¹¹ also drew on Kobendza's findings.

In retrospect, Kobendza's text proves to contain other inspiring themes. Two are particularly noteworthy. First, the unsentimental idea that ruination is an inalienable element in the "life" of landscapes is increasingly present in contemporary reflections on heritage. Second, the author is interested in the vegetation growing "between stones, slabs or in cracks in the asphalt", "on rubbish heaps, courtyards, under fences, in squares, on embankments and railway tracks", meaning synanthropic vegetation growing on what is known as urban wasteland and tends to be treated in both practice and theory as an uninteresting upshot of the urbanization processes that destroy nature. Recently, however, more and more attention has been paid to that "third landscape" (a term coined by Gilles Clément) or "fourth nature" (Ingo Kowarik's term), recognizing its environmental and aesthetic values. Ruderal nature no longer merely accompanies cities or "wild" nature, but constitutes an intrinsic component of the former and the successor to the latter.

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¹¹ <https://www.jhi.pl/artykuly/laka-pamieci-prawdziwe-korzenie-na-korzenie-powstania,7008> [last access: 20.10.2025].

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