

# Charcoal Kiln from Medvednica

During the first half of the 20th century, the improvised huts of charcoal burners could still be found in the beech forests of Medvednica. These huts were built next to large charcoal kilns—cone-shaped structures made of wood, leaves, and earth—where carefully stacked wood was burned to produce high-quality charcoal for heating Zagreb households.

The construction of a charcoal kiln required considerable skill. The first step was choosing a suitable location—ideally a clearing near a stream—so that any potential fire could be easily extinguished. Next, the proper wood had to be selected; the highest-quality charcoal is obtained from beechwood through slow combustion. The logs could be neither too dry nor too damp to maintain optimal burning conditions.

The collected wood was carefully stacked into a circular mound of the desired height. The kiln was then covered with leaves, grass, moss, or fern, and finally with a layer of earth about half a metre thick to prevent air from entering.

According to traditional belief, it was considered good luck for a woman to light the kiln. Once the fire was taken hold, small openings called “žarnice” were made at the base, allowing controlled airflow into the structure.

Experienced charcoal burners could determine the exact stage of the combustion process by listening to the crackling within the kiln and observing the colour of the smoke. These sensory cues told them precisely how to regulate the kiln to ensure a perfect burn. Once they assessed the process as complete, all air openings were sealed and the kiln was left to cool for another 48 hours.

Once cooled, the earth covering was removed, and the charcoal pieces were extracted using special tongs or shovels



Charcoal kilns and charcoal burners on Medvednica and the their dwellings

Vladimir Horvat, before 1963 / MGZ