



Ailanthus

Object No. 6 | Žerotínovo Square

Tree of Heaven, or Ailanthus, which stands right in front of you, is located on a small green space at Žerotínovo Square. At this quite a busy place, various state institutions and schools can be found. For example, the building of the Constitutional Court, regional office or Rector's Office of the Masaryk University. Currently, this square is named after the Moravian patriot Charles of Žerotín, who lived at the turn of the 16th and 17th century. In the past, the square was for some time called Radwitplacz or Raduitovo square. It was named after French Marshal Jean-Louis Raduit de Souches, who was the Commander of the city of Brno during the siege by the Swedes in 1645.

Tree of Heaven, in Latin *Ailanthus altissima*, is a deciduous tree, growing to a height of 20 to 25 meters. Note its high, arched and not very large crown, which is carried by a straight and strong trunk. It is also typical for its long odd-pinnated leaves which unpleasantly smell like a mouse after the pulverizing. The liquid from the leaves could cause, similarly as a pollen, an allergic reaction when susceptible individuals are exposed to it. At the base of the leaves, a small upstart with a glandula is situated. The Fruits form oblong double samaras which have a greyish brown colour after the ripening, and usually stay on a tree until spring. When you see the Tree of Heaven in winter, you will certainly recognize it by these fruits. The original homeland of the Tree of Heaven is East Asia. Here it was planted for the first time in 1803 in Lednice in the South Moravia. Since then, it is used as an ornamental tree in parks, but gradually, the Tree of Heaven became a weed tree and spread throughout the Czech Republic. It grows very fast, it is resistant to the air pollution in the cities, and in addition, it has the ability to reduce the growth of the surrounding vegetation. It belongs to the 40 most invasive species in the world. For its resilience and ability to grow into a truly remarkable heights it is called "the heavenly tree from hell".

In the literary world it is linked, for example, with Brooklyn. This has happened thanks to Betty Smith, who is the author of the book *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. The Tree of Heaven appears here as a symbol of toughness and desire to grow up, out of a little amount of barren land to the sky. Here is a sample from the book:

Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*:

"It had pointed leaves which grew along green switches which radiated from the bough and made a tree which looked like a lot of opened green umbrellas. Some people called it the Tree of Heavens. No matter where its seed fell, it made a tree which struggled to reach the sky. It grew in boarded-up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps and it was the only tree that grew out of cement. It grew lushly, but only in the tenements districts. That was the kind of tree it was. It liked poor people."