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WHAT WIELKIE OCZY WOULD BE LIKE HAD WORLD WAR II NOT HAPPENED

Your treasure is where your heart is. These words relate above all to that special place where we live, grow up and have our very first experiences of living. It's more than just a place on a map; it's our hometown, a community of people who influence each other.

Our thoughts often go back to our hometown. But do we wonder what caused it to be the way it is and not some other way?

My little hometown, my home village, is Wielkie Oczy in southeastern Poland, about 20 kilometers south of Lubaczow. The history of my village has its roots in the 15th century, when it grew from a little settlement to become a municipality. It was in the hands of many famous families, such as the Tarnowskis, Fredros, Ostrogskis and Modrzejowskis. In 1671 Wielkie Oczy received municipal rights from the king Michal Korybut Wisniowiecki. The next owners of the town were the Laszcz, Potocki and Lubomirski families. After the first partition of Poland Wielkie Oczy went into the hands of German barons Hagen. In 1890 a lawyer from Przemyśl Dr. Karol Czerny bought it from the barons.

Military operations during World War I and the new administrative division caused Wielkie Oczy to lose its status as a town and its municipal rights in 1935.

While writing about its history and the events that caused my little homeland to be as it is, I can't skip over the opinions and memories of people, particularly people who remember the not so recent times that brought about the Wielkie Oczy we see it today.

A big influence on how I see the past, especially the time between the wars and during the World War II, is my grandmother Bronislawa, who was born in Wielkie Oczy in 1923. The interview I had with my grandmother let me see my motherland not through the eyes of an historian, but as it was seen by the common people who farmed the land of Wielkie Oczy.

Was Wielkie Oczy anybody's property between the wars?

Yes, but the word "property" shouldn't be taken so literally. Though Dr. Karol Czerny bought rights to this estate, in contrast to the times before World War I he wasn't the lord of the people who lived here. He just had a manor house, a distillery and a mill. He was an owner of property which stimulated the local economy that had been destroyed by the [first World] War.

Where were the mill and distillery? In which rooms of the manor did Dr. Karol Czerny live?

The manor house also contained a tannery, a mill and from time to time was also the home of the owner. Everything was in one building. Where today is the clubroom, then was the mill. In rooms in the eastern part lived the alcohol distiller, who was a Jew. Dr Czerny was married and had a son and a daughter. Lawyer Czerny worked in Lwow, where his office was. His children attended schools in Lwow. So, for the most part the manor was managed by the steward, also a Jew. The steward lived in farmhands' living quarters together with the ploughmen. He managed the lands and the agricultural property of Czerny. The living quarters were not far from the manor, and today in this place stands an apartment block. The Czerny family lived in the manor house only during holidays and the only reason for being there was to check to see that everything was going well. The manor house wasn't their summer home. In July and August the Czernys lived in the nobleman's house, later called "the watch-tower", which was established there in the 1840s. Today, only a part of this old building remains. Once, when Karol Czerny stayed there, the nobleman's house was full of life. A beautiful park, full of walking paths and benches, surrounded the house. There were a lot of flowers because behind the outbuilding was a garden. The outbuilding was a long one-storied brick house where guests stayed. It stood in front of the nobleman's house, and behind it were not only an orangery, but also a stable.

In those days the landlords and noblemen traveled by chaise, and that is why stables and a coach house were commonly found close to the living quarters. The large summer estate of Dr. Czerny extended to the stream that flowed east of the nobleman's house. The stately character of the house was clearly seen: in its four pillars, stairs and white walls, all densely covered by thick green walls of vegetation. The nobleman's house ("the watch-tower") was surrounded on three sides by a park. There were linden, walnut, chestnut and locust-trees. Unfortunately, only those who dwelled in the nobleman's house could enjoy this natural beauty. No outsider could enter the estate without permission of the owner. The village children who lived in simple wooden houses without a floor were curious about the silence beyond the green walls of vegetation and would peek through the hedge to see what the owners of the residence were up to. For the common people the nobleman's house and its surroundings were unapproachable, elegant and extraordinary in every detail.

The way that today leads to Zmijowiska was once closed because it leads to and crosses the Czerny estate. No peasant was allowed to go there. In the evening the silence of summer was broken by the sounds of family meetings in the nobleman's house. Voices of vivid

discussions, piano music and strong light in the windows contrasted with the emptiness that ruled there in the autumn, winter and spring. For the Czernys these were their routine yearly summer holidays. The quiet of the village and resting in the lazy summer air were for them something normal. But for the families of the villagers, tired and driven by everyday life, summer was a time of hard work. There was little time for enjoying Nature in the summer. Every day they had to fight off the heat and swelter. Only rainfall would allow them a pause in their hard work. I always dreamed that even for a moment I could be in the fanciful but simple rooms of the nobleman's house. I dreamed to see life through the eyes of people from such social circles.

And what happened to the stately character of the manor, which once belonged to such famous families as Potocki or Lubomirski? Was the manor now only a seat of alcohol-distillery and a grain mill?

For Karol Czerny and his family, the manor house—a symbol of strength for many centuries—wasn't the place they would stay in during summer holidays. Czerny found the manor house in much worse condition than it was in 17th century. In the manor house there was a mill for grinding grains to flour. The mill was driven by a steam engine. All peasants in the vicinity used the mill. In the mill worked a motorman, a miller and a miller's assistant. People who worked in the mill didn't live in the manor house. It was only their work place. But the alcohol-distiller, a Jew, had a room on the first floor. The evidence of the industrial and economic character of this building was a huge chimney attached to the back wall. It was used by the distillery. The rough spirit was sent to Lubaczow for further processing in special barrels called *kufa*, which were loaded on to rail cars. Also, ploughmen with carts drawn by two horses took two *kufas* on each cart. A *kufa* was about 1 meter in diameter and 1.5 meters high. About 10 carts would line up in a caravan to go to Lubaczow. The way to Lubaczow was long and tiring; clouds of sand were kicked into the air. Generally speaking the communication between villages wasn't easy.

What did the 17th century manor house look like between the wars?

From the stories heard from my grandparents, I knew that at one time the commercial center of Wielkie Oczy was a seat of counts and princes, representatives of rich and influential families. I remember that in my childhood it was a simple building with a big chimney for the distillery and beaten-down ground where cattle were held.

Why were the cattle held close to the distillery and the mill? There were no pastures in the vicinity.

You are right. There were no pastures, but close to the manor was a huge stable made of red bricks and could

hold about 100 head of cattle. It was necessary to have the cattle close to the distillery. The cattle ate a by-product of distillation called *bracha*. And so Karol Czerny was not only an owner of the distillery and the mill, but also a producer of milk.

Who bought these milk products?

Peasants purchased the whey for pigs. The milk was bought mostly by Mrs. Richter, a Jewish woman. She treated the milk in her little dairy close to the old school not far from the church. It underwent a special treatment to be kosher. Kosher is a food that fits the Jewish ritual and rules of preparation. Milk and non-milk foods can't be mixed together and should be served using separate dishes and utensils.

Mrs. Richter didn't work alone. Her women neighbors helped her. Her work was useful for the entire Jewish community because all Jews purchased her specially treated milk products.

What did the town market look like?

From my mother, I heard that the Wielkie Oczy town market between the wars was a hodgepodge of architectures. Beaten-down ground, sand on the road and poor houses were reminders of what it was like in the past. Not far from the newsstand, actually two meters from it, was a well. Here, where today there is a park, was clean ground. Once the town hall stood there, but I don't remember these times. Around the town market lived mostly Jews. They lived in the middle of the town to be close to their customers. Trade was the domain of this nation. Jews in Wielkie Oczy had grocery and clothing shops. They were also tailors, tin men and butchers. Some of them had bigger economic enterprises. For example Brenner had trade relations with Karol Czerny in the field of wood used to produce energy. Wood was the only source for heating houses. The Jewish and Polish communities were different from the economic point of view. Most Jews were middle-class. A Jew in Wielkie Oczy between the wars was a man with a little family business. A tight struggle for clients and a big number of competing shops meant that no one in the Jewish community became really rich. This way of earning money was enough only for everyday life. After all, in Wielkie Oczy everyone was, less or more, on the same level of economic standing.

Can we say that the look and character of Wielkie Oczy town square was dominated by the Jewish population?

Not totally, but most of dwellers of the central part of the village were Jews. These people didn't care to have a garden close to the house. Jews didn't like to work in agriculture. They preferred to live in brick houses, one close to another. I remember all the dwellers of one street

that led to the church. The first family from the church was the Majus, the next a Pole a Mrs. Lin, the wife of German farmer and after her a Jew named Just. The next family was Palczak, a Jewish baker Hazon and the last Urim. The general character of the market was influenced by two Jewish houses of God. The newer one still stands today. Once it was used only during Jewish feasts. The every-day place of prayer was the older one. It stood opposite to the new one, on the other side of the street. It was wider but lower. Mostly older people were seen going to pray. The young people did it more rarely.

Was Wielkie Oczy populated only by Jews and Poles?

No. There were also Ukrainians. They lived rather on the outskirts of the village. They were similar to Poles as far as culture was concerned. Ukrainians were mainly farmers. The many orthodox churches in and around Wielkie Oczy were evidence of the religious separateness. Other evidence of their national separateness was the strong tie based on a shared patriotic spirit. Ukrainians deeply believed that the time would come when they would have their own homeland.

In Wielkie Oczy in the 1930s were there any organizations for different social groups?

Organization is a good word for the Agriculture Circle in Wielkie Oczy. This organization was for people who worked the land and who wanted to increase and sell their crops. Meetings were organized in a clubhouse. The old clubhouse stood where today is "Ramzes" shop. It was a small one-storied building. The place served not only as a place of presentations and discussions aimed at improving the work of the people of Wielkie Oczy population, but also served as a place where Polish youth could meet socially twice a month. There was room for a band and a big dance floor. I personally never was connected to the Agricultural Circle because *The Knighthood of Jesus - The Eucharistic Crusade*, a Catholic organization, played a large role. Even today, I still store a little document that includes the basic rules of this mainstay of spirit in my prayer book:

THE KNIGHTHOOD OF JESUS
OR
THE EUCHARISTIC CRUSADE
BRONISLAWA MARTYNOWICZ
WAS ACCEPTED AS A MEMBER
OF THE EUCHARISTIC CRUSADE
UNITED BY THE APOSTOLATE OF PRAYER
UNDER THE BANNER
OF THE EUCHARISTIC HEART OF JESUS
JUNE 30, 1935
THE CENTRAL OFFICE OF THE CRUSADE
CRACOW, 26 KOPERNIKA ST.

Duties of the members of the Knighthood Crusade:

- *Receive the Holy Communion often, according to your word. Be prepared to it as well as you can and afterward celebrate a warm thanksgiving. Offer the Holy Communion for the intention of Crusade, along with your other own intentions.*
- *Always be an apostle of prayer, and with good words and acts of kindness to bring others to God.*
- *Read the newspaper "Advocates of Eucharist"*

Practical ways of adoring of the Holy Sacrament:

During weekdays participate willingly in the Holy Mass if you have time for it; if during it you do not receive the Holy Communion accept Jesus to your heart spiritually;

The everyday offer of the Crusaders:

I offer you the Holy Heart of Jesus by the Immaculate Heart of Virgin Mary; I offer all the prayers, matters and crosses of this day, as an indemnity for all our offences. I join them to the intentions offered by Yourself on our altars. I offer them to You for our Holy Church and for the Holy Pope Pius XI.

Amen

Only school children belonged to the organization. Father Turzynski, our spiritual guardian, took care that all the members of the group would have the same uniforms. It was very important, because poor children appreciated every gesture and sign of kindness. The uniform was navy blue with a big white collar, in the style of a sailor's collar. Girls wore pleated skirts and boys wore navy blue trousers. *The Knighthood of Jesus* was a group of children led by Father Turzynski and a nun from the St. Boromeus convent, Sister Wladyslawa Jankowska. Sister Wladyslawa sewed and embroidered the banner, the material expression of our surrendering to God. On photographs one can see the banner with the chalice and brightened Eucharist and above it an inscription "The Eucharistic Crusade in Wielkie Oczy". All it this was embroidered in blue on the white background. All parishioners knew about our existence because we weren't secreted. We took active part in processions of Corpus Christi. Girls threw flowers and carried pictures. Children decorated the church for feasts and represented

the life of Jesus in Nativity plays in the clubhouse. We all were one big family with no better or worse members. Unfortunately it was only a Polish family.

How much from those times remain today? Is the reality of Wielkie Oczy today only a poor remnant of what was once the climate of the village?

It is true that the world of my childhood is an irrevocable past, as all the past. But the look of this village is the Wielkie Oczy between the wars transformed by time and the younger generation of citizens. There remains a lot from that reality, not only memories but also the architecture.

The Wielkie Oczy manor house is no longer an industrial building, but a proud seat of the local authorities and the place where a rich collection of books is located, because in its central part there is a library. The former mill is no longer a space full of flour dust trembling from the voices of a motor. The place in front of the manor remains with its smell a jasmine and quince. Once it was a seat of the landlords of the town, which today is only a village though rich and full of contrasts of history.

The summer seat of Karol Czerny doesn't radiate with the inspiring character of the manor. Only a fragment remained from it, but even this fragment without a beautiful its porch hints at its noble history. Three families live there today. The outbuilding is shabby, but remains untouched and still is a place where people live. The orangery and stable are only memories now overgrown with wild vegetation. The paths, the benches, the carefully trimmed lawns, the smell of rose and jasmine are lost fragrances of the park silence; today the summer camps for children are there.

Wielkie Oczy today is not the same village full of dialects and languages of three nationalities. The cruel fascist ideology took the life of millions people in Europe, and our territory also was a place where death was harvested. The Jewish population was grabbed and exiled. Only few succeeded in escaping to communist Russia. Such huge loss is irreparable. It has to leave its trace on future generations. The present Wielkie Oczy population has only Polish roots. The streets are full of people speaking in the same language, thinking in similar ways and wearing the same clothes. War took from Wielkie Oczy not only its citizens but also destroyed its architecture. The old synagogue, most of the Jewish houses, the *cheders* where Jewish boys learned secrets of Judaism are no more.

With outbreak of the war the life of many innocent children became a nightmare because they lost their families, their tranquility and dreams. Hate took the remnants of the poor luckless life of the villagers. The destroying force of this drama erased the future of many young people.

The memories of my grandmother helped me to reveal the past of the place I live in. The past is so different from the reality I grew up in.

Sometimes I think about what could have been if World War II never happened. What would my little village look like if this drama had never happened? What would the life of the people in the eastern borderland be like? I'm sure the democratic political system would have continued and that Poland would have avoided communist rule. Poland wouldn't have had to be born again in 1945 from the ruins of the war, but would have flourished as a town of diverse cultures. When I think about this little piece of land, as Wielkie Oczy is, I think of how many human beings have lived here over time. How many of them had lived to reach an old age. Everyone influences his environment. I think of those who were killed in war and how they might have changed their environment, which is now also mine.

In my opinion if World War II had never touched our land, in my opinion Wielkie Oczy might look something like this: Going out from my home to school I would see people of three nationalities walking in the streets. The town market would be full of shops, including clothing shops. The sellers would be mostly Jews. I would visit my friends, a Ukrainian and a Jew because I like to know and to be friends with people who may bring something new to my life.

We would go together to the school, which would be in the place where today my grammar school is located. On the way we would hear the voices of the engine, coming from the old manor serving as a mill, and from the huge distillery chimney streaks of smoke rise up. In the houseyards Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian children would be running and playing. Older people would view their world with fond memories, remembering their happy and tranquil childhood. The lessons would be in Polish, but I would also try to learn about the culture and history of other Wielkie Oczy citizens.

After the school my friends and I would always choose the way home of crossing the estate of the Czerny family. The way would be open to everyone. On the way we would see the white walls of the nobleman's house, the ivy-covered pillars of the porch, flowers in the windows and women doing their everyday work in the garden. In the outbuilding would live the teachers teaching the Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian youth.

The quiet and silence of the park surrounding the nobleman's house would be disturbed during summer days when the children and grandchildren of Karol Czerny would come here from their houses in Lwow. Approaching my home I would hear voices of Jewish children learning the Jewish language in *cheder* located in the next house to mine. In the evening, on my way to the church, I would see

the lights of the orthodox church and people going to the orthodox service. Jews would be seen going during the weekdays to the old synagogue and during Sabbath visiting the new synagogue that stands till today.

My life would be different, more interesting and full of memories related to experiencing new cultures and religions, not from the books and the Internet. I would never have to hear the painful memories of old people who were witnesses to the suffering during the Second World War.