



## THE OUTLOOK OF THE HISTORY OF JEWISH CULTURE IN WIELKIE OCZY BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

The Jewish nation comes from ancient Judea. Despite the fact that Jews have lived in the Diaspora and were dispersed all over the world, this nation preserved its identity based on common religion, tradition and customs.

Dispersed Jews were not the most welcome guests in many places, but some of them found refuge in Poland. Trade and commercial relations of Poland needed "guides", smart and wise people with funds. Jews, expelled from the western Europe, became such an element in eyes of Polish king, Kazimir the Great.

Polish historical chronicles were in many ways fulfilled by believers of Judaism, but the last pages of our joint Polish-Jewish history tell about human disaster primed by war.

The years 1919-1945 were a time of big changes for the little slice of south-eastern Poland where Wielkie Oczy is located. During this period Wielkie Oczy was a little, ramshackle town, destroyed by the fighting of WWI. But was a place where Jews were part of the population.

When we speak about Jews, we can't skip the most important thing in their life, their religion. Judaism is based on the idea of the one and only God. For millions of believers all over the world the principle of "one God" grew from the religion of the ancient Israelites. Jews are a nation whose social and religious code came in response to the demands of only God.

Jews chose for their house of prayer a place at the crossroads of Kazimierza and Krakowiecka streets. In this place they built their synagogue where men and women prayed. During Jewish holidays men wore long, black coats and black striped cloths. Jewish women had their separate place in the synagogue, much smaller than a place where men worshipped their God. Women in the synagogue were obliged to cover their heads with a black, lace shawl.

Religion united the Jews of Wielkie Oczy and their traditions, valuable in themselves, evidence of the spiritual unity of the community members. In the Jewish tradition group prayer is especially important. The number of prayers, their complexity and their aims are different and depend on the hour, day of month and the faction of Judaism.

Wielkie Oczy Jews observed rules and their religious service was composed from:

- Amida, a set of thankful greetings and prayers adoring God;
- Shema, profession of faith; and,
- Public reading of Torah fragments.

The service was led by a rabbi. A cantor would sing and lead the singing of the congregation.



The synagogue in Wielkie Oczy as painted by Anita Kracyla.

The most important festivals are:

**Shabbat** (the Sabbath), a day of rest comes after six days of work, according to story of Genesis when God rested after creating world. This day starts on Fridays at sunset and lasts until Saturday evening. During In this time work is forbidden.

**Rosh ha-Shana** is the Jewish new year. This holiday is observed in the first and second day of Hebrew month Tishri. Tishri usually lasts from mid-September until mid-October (the Hebrew religious calendar is a lunar calendar).

**Yom Kippur** occurs shortly after Rosh ha-Shana, and on this day Jews all over the world observe a Day of Atonement.

**Sukkot** is the Festival of Crops, also known as a Festival of Tents or "Kuczki". It lasts eight days and usually is observed in October (of the Gregorian calendar).

**Chanukha** is usually observed together with the Christian holidays of Christmas. It is known as the Festival of Lights to commemorate the rededication of the Temple mount in Jerusalem by Judah Maccabee after it was defiled by Antioch the 4th Epiphanes in the 2nd century B.C.

Chanukka begins on the 25th day of Hebrew months Kislev (usually in December).

**Purim** starts on the 14th day of the Hebrew month Adar (usually at the end of February or the beginning of March). Purim commemorates the salvation of the Persian Jews from extermination, as we read in the Book of Esther. During Purim it is the tradition to give gifts and show generosity to the poor.

**Pesach** (or Passover) is the most important holiday, that starts on the 15th of Nissan, to commemorate the exodus of Jewish nation from Egyptian slavery. During this holiday Jews don't eat food which includes yeast. It is observed usually in the end of March or the beginning of April.

**Shavuot** (or Pentecost) is a holiday of thanksgiving for a good harvest and for receiving the Torah from God. It is observed in the sixth and seventh day of Sivan, during May or June according to Gregorian calendar.

Jewish wedding ceremony is known as **kiddushin**. The ceremony is held under a canopy called *chupa*. It includes breaking of glass to signify the sad fact from the Jewish history of the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.

Funeral ceremonies were held in secrecy, so the local non-Jewish people didn't know too much about this ceremony.

One of the characteristic aspects of Judaism is observing of a very detailed code of behavior, code of this ancient nation.

### **Education in Life of Jewish Children**

Education and studying are important elements of Jewish experience. The Book of Proverbs advises the believers: "Train up a child in the way he should go" (22:6). Children before the school age attended *cheders*. It was a place where they learned Hebrew, studied the text of the Torah and Jewish tradition. Cheders were located in private houses.

There were no differences between Jewish and Polish children in the school age. In the "tough" reality of poor population in Wielkie Oczy the important thing for children was to have as many friends as possible to play with. Unfortunately children did not have too much time to play.

Jewish girls were exactly the same as Polish teenagers. Many Jewish girls had Polish names as: Basha, Zosha. Others were Estera, Yudit or Rivche.

School in Wielkie Oczy was close to the church. Classes were attended by all in this cultural mosaic, that is by Jews, Poles and Ukrainians.

### **Principles of Nutrition**

Specific rules of nutrition served one aim, to ensure health and good frame of mind, and were an additional example of keeping promises made to God by his People. The ritual purity and avoiding of eating of impure animals is a very important Jewish tradition. The term *kosher*

describes fulfilling the rules of Jewish ritual, standard methods of food preparation. Kosher food comes from ruminant and even-toed animals, killed according to the special rules of slaughter. Kosher meat can't have any remains of blood. Sea animals are kosher if they have gills and fins. Poultry is kosher if was killed and prepared like meat. The rules of kosher nutrition forbid eating dairy products during, shortly before or shortly after eating meat. Different utensils and dishes should be used for eating dairy and meat meals.

During Shabbat Jews didn't work so Catholics came to their houses to help with some house-work; for example they set fire in stoves.

**Jewish houses** looked exactly like Polish houses. The furnishings were in according to financial capabilities of the owner. In addition to house utensils, there were also religious articles like a menorah and a Chanukah chandelier. By the entrance door, there was a slanting metal stick. Under it was a card with the Ten Commandments. Every Jew was obliged to touch this stick when crossing door sill of the house. Jews didn't go in much for farming or gardening. Gardens in their houses were very rare.

### **Cloths**

Most Wielkie Oczy Jews belonged to Orthodox faction. Their attitude to the religion was literal and fundamentalist. They wore a head-cover called *yarmulka* and also black hat and black coat. Young Jewish women dressed like Polish women, but older women were different in that they wore wigs.

### **Trade**

The main source of earning a living for Wielkie Oczy Jews was trade. They were tailors and sellers. They also worked in alcohol distilleries and were administrators in manors. Poles were their clients. We can find evidence for this in such Jewish nicknames popularly used in Wielkie Oczy as: Alper, Urin, Sens, Nuta, Suchy, Szmul. These were the names used by Poles when they talked amongst themselves about transactions with Jews. Among the Polish majority were some people who thought that for Jews the terms of fair-trade and pure competition don't exist. But if we want to know about the Jews of Wielkie Oczy in a more detailed way, we should look at every person individually. Everyone is different and each member of the Jewish community in Wielkie Oczy was different.

### **War**

The anti-Semitic, Nazi Germany of Hitler led Europe to a policy of brutal and systematic extermination. Nazi ravages were accompanied by genocide which caused death of millions Jews and millions murdered people of other nations. The Holocaust didn't skip over Wielkie Oczy. The war changed this village to the place where the synagogue and memories of elderly people are the only remnants of Jews.