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

*People's fates, my fate, flow on the water,
I can't find mine, though looking for it
every day,
Oh, how hard is the life, how bad,
At the alien's table, in the alien land.¹*

Close to the border between Poland and Ukraine, on a slightly undulating plain bisected by the bed of a shallow stream called Gron, surrounded by beautiful borderlands, lies little village Wielkie Oczy (Velyki Ochi in Ukrainian, and Vilkotch in Yiddish). Once it was a little town; today it is a village in the eastern part of Sandomierz Dale, in the middle of Tarnograd Plateau. One needs a detailed map of Poland to find this little village so rich in events and history. A cradle of three cultures, nations and religions.

In 1671 the Polish king Wisniowiecki granted to Wielkie Oczy the rights of a town. It accelerated the development of the town where there settled Jewish families, along with Poles and Ukrainians. There was a Jewish community in Wielkie Oczy. In the period between WWI and WWII the relations between Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian populations were relatively good. In his book *Wielkie Oczy*² K. D. Majus noted "A *tzaddik*³ visiting Wielkie Oczy also received by the mayor and the local priest, accompanied by distinguished farm owners. The Catholic bishop was also received in a similar way when he came to visit the town. The bells rang in the Catholic and Greek Catholic churches. Jews went out to the outskirts of the town with Torah scrolls. The bishop used to come out from the canopy and kiss the Torah. On Jewish holidays, during prayers at the synagogue, the mayor used to come for a short visit, especially when a prayer was said for the Polish President Ignacy Moscicki, or Marshal Pilsudski."

The small territory (147 sq. km) of the Wielkie Oczy *gmina* [sub-district] was made up of 10 villages in which there lived 4,000 people of different religions and political views. In spite of their differences that were evident on their respective Sabbaths in their distinctive houses of worship, on weekdays they were united by work. The *gmina* was and still is largely agricultural. The fertile lands yield abundant harvests.

¹ From an anthology of the country poetry of Polish Jews, author unknown.

² *Wielkie Oczy*, Krzysztof Dawid Majus, Tel Aviv, 2002 [in Polish, ed.]

³ Yiddish literally, "righteous one." The term refers to a completely righteous individual, and generally indicates that the person has spiritual or mystical power. [ed.]

During 19th century tanneries, two brick kilns, slaughterhouses and four alcohol distilleries were established in the town. There were about 50 craftsmen. There was also a steam mill belonging to the local landowner Karol Czerny and benzene mill belonging to Brenner Mendel & Co. There was also an active Craftsmen Society and Traders Society.

The lands of Wielkie Oczy belonged to Tarnowski and Fredro families and later to A. Modrzejowski (a hero of Chocim and Vienna⁴) who secured for Wielkie Oczy the rights of a town. Later the lands passed to the famous aristocratic families of Laszcz, Potocki and Lubomirski. The estate⁵ and other goods were later inherited by the German barons Hagen and then on to the last possessor Karol Czerny.

This beautiful history, the common life of Poles, Jews and Ukrainians was broken by World War II with its concentration camps and extermination. First taken were daughters and sons of the Jewish nation—only because they were Jews. The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact changed everything, the very way of life in Wielkie Oczy. The way that otherwise would lead to freedom and independence the future.

Nineteen thirty-nine was a year of change, a year when Wielkie Oczy belonged to the Soviets. Many Jews were forced to emigrate. Many stayed, for their ill fortune. Unfortunately, images of the bloody war remain stuck in the Polish society. Memories of these times are cruel; they deeply touch everyone. How one can understand the murder of little children, their mothers and fathers by Ukrainian partisans? Fighting was everywhere. All against all. Poles and Jews suffered, Ukrainian villages suffered, settlements were burned and brother killed brother.

There is no place here to reflect on the reasons for this or for the rationale for such hatred which entered into hearts and poisoned kinsmen's blood. This baggage of hatred is carried in hearts even today. No one wants to hear explanations of who gave the orders, of who was responsible for the campaigns, which for tens, or may be for hundreds of years poisoned relations between the nations. The common people for whom the most important things are: family, house, land and neighbors suffered the most.

⁴ 17th century battles where Polish forces were instrumental in stopping Turkish advances in Europe. [ed.]

⁵ Agricultural estates, their manor houses and the estate system reflected the feudal economic system of Poland that was the basis for the wealth of the magnates and for the prerogatives of the wealthy ruling families.

Pole, Jew and Ukrainian should have lived to build better a future for themselves. But fate chose other way. Now we would have to build the way through reconciliation and cooperation, because only by joining together would we be able to protect ourselves from a common enemy, Russian communism and imperialism. The precondition for such cooperation would have to be a cleansing of the atmosphere and mutual forgiving. But can we forgive internecine fighting? It is easier to start it. We should live in harmony and love our neighbors as taught by priest, rabbi and pope.

I'd like to have a machine to bring me back to the beginning of the twentieth century, to the 1930s. I'd like to have the power to change fate and to not allow the tragedies of World War II to occur. Then mothers wouldn't cry and brothers wouldn't hate brothers. Wielkie Oczy would be a land of "milk and honey". The Ukraine, rich in resources and fertile land, would yield abundant harvests and no one would be hungry or poor.

It is difficult to talk about creating a modern democracy. I'll focus on the economic development of this little region, where I live with my family. The land should be developed in harmony with Nature.

Today, Wielkie Oczy is an insignificant village in Podkarpackie province with beautiful woods, wild animals, cart tracks and an asphalt road ending immediately after the village. Here is like being at the end of the earth. It is a village to which the benefits of civilization have hardly come. It lies between two border crossings [with the Ukraine], Korczowa and Hrebenne. It appears in tourist guides and literature. Once it was a "town" (Wielkie Oczy lost its town rights in 1935). There were fairs, horse markets, and commerce extended to Jaroslaw-Jaworow and further to Lwow. Traders came from Podolia and Valachia. Schools and offices were closed to enable everyone to participate in these fairs.

Today Wielkie Oczy is a little village close to the state border. Once the border was far from Wielkie Oczy. The eastern borders of Poland reached as far as Romania and Turkey. I wonder what the borders of our country and our village would look today if not for the destruction of war, without Nazi and Soviet invasions. It would not have been divided up into German and Soviet zones. Development of our democracy would not have been subjected to Soviet influence. There would be no communists. Poland, including Wielkie Oczy, would have had chance to develop in an atmosphere of peace and democracy in the wide meaning of the word. Poland would be one of the most important countries in Europe.

The twentieth century was an era of industrial development in Europe, in the world and in our village. In the beginning of the century Wielkie Oczy was on the top of its

development. The resourcefulness of its population led to the establishment of four distilleries and spirit bottling works. Well water had extraordinary taste and was valued for its clarity. It would be used not only in the production of vodka but also sparkling water. The town would be very crowded and full of traders concentrated around the town market. Here would begin the road to Jaworow to Jaroslaw and Lubaczow. Trade would develop very quickly, thanks especially to the Jews. Tailor shops would spring up, famous not only in Poland. Well-known trademarks would spread the name of local dressmakers among the big fashion parades. Maybe even among the great houses of fashion like Dior or Channel the famous tailor of Wielkie Oczy Mr. Halper would be mentioned.

A lawyer from Lwow by the name Karol Czerny purchased the estate of Wielkie Oczy in 1908 and contributed to its prosperity. Because of his family the cultural life in the town flourished.

Many new "water eyes"⁶, e.g. ponds would be created where different kinds of fish would be bred (carp, perch, etc.). People would be hard working and natural conditions would support development. A stud farm for horses would be created. The stud farm in the estate would be famous for different horse breeds, which would be sold in Poland and abroad. Hunting would be organized and many famous people from Poland and abroad would participate. Carts would be rented for excursions into the woods.

Grandsons of the landlord, Karol Czerny, would sponsor the arts and enable cultural development. Among the local population many popular artists would be found. Painters would add grandeur to the landscapes of 19th and 20th centuries. There would be performances of Jewish music and Ukrainian dances; a Polish choir would perform famous scenes of Europe and America. The mix of Jewish, Ukrainian and Polish culture would find its expression in joint performances in, for example, the festival of *Unity*. The festival would be well known in United States, thanks to the former citizens of Wielkie Oczy. Many Jews emigrated to England and United States looking for better life, because nobody believed that Wielkie Oczy was "paradise on Earth".

In town there lived one Jewish family in particular who earned their livelihood from trade. Their traditions were passed from generation to generation. They started from a tannery and would be known in all the region for their excellent of skins. My father would have been a regular

⁶[The phrase "water eyes" and the reference to ponds refers to a local legend, according to which the name of the village—Wielkie Oczy meaning "Big Eyes" in Polish—was derived from two lakes that no longer exist and that looked from a neighboring hill like two big eyes with the first houses of Wielkie Oczy situated between them. [ed.]

buyer of skins, because although he breeds sheep, he wouldn't have the expertise and time to worry about selling his goods. From their little shop, the Majus family would develop a big shop and may be even a network of shops selling wonderful skin products and other goods. Other Jewish families would earn their livelihood from sewing, for it is well known that Jews were good and precise craftsmen. They would create beautiful goods. The Majus family would sell its goods in different far and wide, in Lwow, Paris and New York.

Traditions would pass to the next generations. In this way quick development would be possible. The fertile land would give abundant crops. People would have work and the village would be rich

Near the estate would be park and botanic garden. Beautiful lanes in the shape of rectangle would be planned with linden, hornbeam, oak and maple trees. The old trees would attract tourists and Sunday guests. They would rest under the trees—some old and preserved from 19th century—thinking about life and ways to create something new. Unfortunately only few old trees left today and nothing is left from the estate.

Discovery of gas deposits would bring an even bigger boom. The construction a gas extraction facility in Wielkie Oczy would provide jobs for many people. New roads would be built, maybe even highways. Certainly a ring road to the gas fields would be built to protect the natural environment. Old trees, parks, the estate and manor house would be saved. Mines would be built far from houses and antiquities.

Not far from my house there is a villager's cottage from 1918 with the ridge roof in so called "Polish style". It was designed by the famous Polish architect Jan Sas Zubrzycki. The cottage would be preserved as one of five old brick buildings.

Unfortunately, during the war the Jews were expelled and some of their house were partly burned and destroyed, but they would have been preserved for their historic value till today. Some of them would be enlarged and gardens would be added.

Thanks to its development Wielkie Oczy would get back the status of town. The town with its beautiful town square (that was totally destroyed), the manor from beginning of the 17th century, the baroque church and monastery, and the synagogue and orthodox church would have chance to be immortalized in art. Many artists would paint these beautiful buildings. They would be houses of God, full of religious and cultural life. Today they are only dilapidated ruins.

My way to the school leads along the Jewish cemetery with new growing nettles and weeds. There are a lot of old

tombstones in the cemetery. It is a place of rest of rest for those Jews who died and were murdered. It instills in me a feeling of fear. All young people learn respect for the past and that cemetery is a historic site that should be treated with dignity. As a scout I lit candles for many years at the monument of murdered people, though at the time didn't know for whom because I didn't know about the Jewish citizens.

Also educational system would be different. Sports fields, tennis courts and a pool would surround the school for all children. The Polish language would be predominant of course, but Wielkie Oczy would be proud of the fact that Hebrew was also taught (so beautiful, but forgotten by the people). The second foreign language would be English, and the third Ukrainian. Wielkie Oczy would lead in the region in teaching foreign languages.

Also, scouting would be active in the school. The youth would learn the history of the region, wander in the forests, and achieve different scout ranks. Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian children would all belong to the scouts. There wouldn't be enmity; there would be solidarity and active cooperation.

A big contribution to the developing of the educational system would come from the Jewish families. Thanks to their knowledge of languages and general knowledge, people here would be educated. Illiteracy wouldn't exist. A great library would be created to house with books in Yiddish, Ukrainian and Polish.

A mayor would govern the little town. He would have a Council of Seniors consisting of a rabbi, a manor steward, a professor, a farmer and a worker. Every man in the town and his needs would be taken into consideration. Life would be run in harmony and with cooperation. There would be some conflicts, but they would be resolved. When a man loves other man it is easier to forgive. Love doesn't know borders. Religion would cease to be a barrier for intermarriage. A Polish woman might marry a Ukrainian man, and a Jewish man might marry a Polish woman. The mixing of different cultures would enrich the development of the town. The number of population would increase and reach six thousand.

Today our village has only two thousands citizens living in modest or somewhat more substantial houses. But it possible that things might have looked very different if multi-storied and beautiful house were built around a beautiful square with its many crossroads.

Along the market would stand the church, the synagogue and the orthodox church. People would meet in the center in little coffee shops, to talk about their business, drink coffee, tea or vodka from the local distillery. The town's prosperity would be noticeable in different ways. Old mills

would not only be a attraction, but also would produce electricity for citizens.

Wielkie Oczy would be a paradise on Earth. Unfortunately, it isn't. People are sad; they can't find themselves in these times. Unemployment rules. Lands lie fallow. People lack the enthusiasm for work. The enthusiasm was killed during communism times, when lands were taken and collectivized agriculture came into being. Today people's hearts are empty.

Every man should be committed to his family, his little "homeland", his nation and other people. Life in little towns is rather quiet. National politics also has its influence on the politics of villages and little towns. I think here about development of our country (and our village) and how it might have evolved toward democracy.

I wonder could the common life of these three different nations—Poles, Ukrainians and Jews—in the beginning of 20th century have been the beginning of a united, common life in modern Europe? Poland then would be the precursor of a United Europe. Life without borders and hate. Life in brotherhood and love.

The most important thing is a foundation we put under the building that will be realized by the future generations. We need our generation to be a smart builder of the future. And a smart builder is one who hears the words of God and realizes them. And it is not important where he hears it, - in an orthodox church, in a synagogue or in a Latin church. The important thing is that man will take responsibility for what he does.