



THE POLISH-JEWISH-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS IN WIELKIE OCZY

Wielkie Oczy is a village located now in Podkarpackie Province, Lubaczów County. The Wielkie Oczy administrative district (*gmina*) includes the following villages: Kobylnica Woloska, Kobylnica Ruska, Potok Jaworowski, Lukawiec, Majdan, Bihale, Skolin, Zmijowiska, Wólka Zmijowska.

The district is 147 sq. km in area and has an agricultural character.

According to the local legend the name (Big Eyes - in Polish) comes from two big ponds that once were here and that looked like two big eyes. In Yiddish the name sounds like *Vilkotch* or *Vielkatchi* and in Ukrainian, *Velyki Otchi*.

Now Wielkie Oczy is a small village, a center of the local administrative district (*gmina*), and the traces of past can still be seen here. These traces memorialize the days of magnificence of Wielkie Oczy. They are also evidence of the peaceful coexistence of three nationalities: Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian. That these three nations came together here was because of the geographic, mercantile and strategic location of the village.

There are different versions of how Wielkie Oczy came to be. Some sources talk about the 14th century, others about 16th. The village was in the possession of many families. One of them, a cavalry captain by the name of Andrzej Modrzejowski, secured for Wielkie Oczy the rights of a town to hold different privileges: markets every Thursday and fairs three times a year. As a result trade developed, helped also by the location of the village on the way from Jaworów to Jaroslaw, and many Jewish families settled here. It is known that in 1717 the Wielkie Oczy Jews paid a poll tax of 772 zloty and 40 years later there existed a relatively big Jewish community. In these times lived here a very famous rabbi Mordechai ben Shmuel from Kutno, an author of the religious treaty "King's Gate".

In 1799 in Wielkie Oczy there were 179 houses, 1087 residents and between them 402 Jews. In 1880 this number increased to 996 Jews, 589 Poles and 388 Ukrainians. During the 19th century trade was developed mainly by Jews, who were 50% of the population. Between trade enterprises there were also two tanneries, two brick yards, a steam mill, a slaughterhouse and 4 alcohol distilleries.

In the 1866 fire 15 Jewish houses were destroyed and the remains were stolen (probably by Ukrainians who lived in the neighborhood). The next damage to the Jews occurred in 1910, when a Ukrainian priest stirred people up and they beat some Jews and destroyed their property. This incident ended only after the police arrived. At the end of the century many Jews emigrated, mainly to America, looking for better living conditions. Their number decreased to 862 of a total population of 2,037. In 1910 the synagogue was built in the market place.

In the first days of WWI Wielkie Oczy was captured by Russians. The defenders killed a Russian scout. Later it appeared that the scout was a pious Jew, and in accordance with the

demands of a Russian officer the scout was given a religious burial.

In June 1915 the Russians retreated before the Germans and they set fire to the buildings of Wielkie Oczy, mainly to those around the market place. The synagogue and the Ukrainian church were also burned.

After the WWI the population of Wielkie Oczy decreased by 25%. The total population was 1,552: Poles 768, Jews 487 and Ukrainians: 297.

In 1925 the school system was reorganized and a 7-level state primary school was established. Some 200 Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian children studied in this school. The houses of worship, the synagogue and the Ukrainian church, were rebuilt. The funds for synagogue renovation were raised by Jewish emigrants from Wielkie Oczy.

In the period between the world wars there were no big conflicts among the population of Wielkie Oczy. Three cultures coexisted. There was mutual respect and visits; main holidays were celebrated together. Religious dignitaries were solemnly welcomed.

Before WWII Jews were mainly traders. They had about 30 shops. They were department stores (mostly with food products), haberdashers and shops with skins for shoes. In the entry of every shop was a little bell that signaled when customers arrived. The shopkeeper was often absent because the shops were located in the Jewish houses [where the shopkeeper also lived]. It was possible to run up an account. People were said "to buy on the book". Of course, the debt was later settled, including interest, in most cases by something from the house, such as a chicken, eggs, etc.

Here are the names of some Jews and their occupation:

- Giecył - bought cows and sold them in Jaworow;
- Wais (Weiss?) - haberdasher's shop;
- Klang - haberdasher's shop;
- Taler - grocer's shop;
- Tandalaj - clothes shop (was a tailor);
- Halper - tailor;
- Just - inn owner;
- Majus - shop with hats;
- Kunio - butcher;
- Jukiel - butcher
- Malka - a little grocer's shop;
- Srulka (a nickname?) - textile shop
- Brener - squire's woods administrator
- Bleiberg - a teacher
- Tadeusz Grinzajd - doctor
- Kilhawer - was an owner of the fields, Poles and Ukrainians worked for him;

- Lypa - was a poor Jew (brought water to richer people, and in this way earned a living)

In Wielkie Oczy there were three Jewish dairies. Jews also worked in handicrafts. They owned two big tailoring enterprises, and they also taught Poles to sew. There were also two bakeries. Only Jews worked in the bakeries. They made bread, bread rolls and sweet buns, which they called *lejka*. Jews distributed them personally to the houses (they went to the houses, where they expected to be paid for their products or to get some goods, milk for example). They also dealt with mobile trade. They engaged for this reason carters with carts and horses. (Jews themselves didn't raise horses).

Jews didn't kill animals at their houses. Slaughtering was done in slaughterhouses, so called *jatka*. There were four slaughterhouses and 4 inns managed by Jews, where mainly alcohol drinks were served and visitors brought something to eat.

Polish and Jewish children learned together in the school. They attended all lessons together, except for religion. Before the religion lessons Jews left the classroom. Beside the primary school in Wielkie Oczy were two Jewish schools, so called *cheders*. Probably, the religion was taught there.

Jews helped the poorer of them.

The bath was managed by the Jew Mojsiu. Poles took there baths as payment. It was in a wooden house. It stood in the place called Pasternik, behind the synagogue. Inside was wooden well with crank. Close to the well was a pool called a *kuszer* only for Jews. For Poles there was a special room with wooden bathtubs. Hot water was taken from a boiler (a lot of steam went from it). Close to the boiler were about eight wooden stairs. People sat on them. It was a kind of sauna. Inside it was semi-dark because the light came from one paraffin lamp. Poles used to take a bath on Saturday evening after the Sabbath (before Sunday). Jews took their bath on Friday, because their Sabbath began Friday afternoon. During Sabbath Jews did not work, and they would pay a so called *goy* to work. On Saturdays they always ate chicken broth with potatoes. They also ate veal, but only the front parts of the animal. The back parts they sold. During Saturdays they prayed in the synagogue and afterward celebrated the holiday at home with their families. During some holidays, probably in October, but I don't know what holidays they were, Jews prayed in so called *kuczki*. It was like our summer-kitchen. The walls were made from bean-stalks. During holidays they used other kitchen utensils then during the week-days.

During holidays in spring Jews ate *matzo*. It is big, thin bread baked on leaven.

Jewish wedding ceremonies, so called *mazaltop*, were held on Saturday evenings. The ceremony was held in the synagogue or close to it under a canopy that looked like umbrella. On the way out they broke glasses. A modest party was held at home. They drank a quart of vodka, ate chicken or goose (depending on their level of wealth). There were not a varieties of cakes. Usually they baked only one cake that looked like dark honey-cake.

The bride had a crown on her head and dressed long white dress. The groom dressed black suit and kind of bowler hat. No music was played. The visitors sang by themselves and danced.

A funeral was a sorrowful ceremony. The body of the dead was not in the coffin, it was wrapped in white sheet. The body was taken on the bier to the Jewish cemetery and buried. The funeral attendants prayed at the grave. The widow or widower didn't enter the cemetery. They stayed before the gate. Children did not attend the funerals.

In Wielkie Oczy, besides a large farm, there were smaller farms in the woods close to Majdan. It was called Korczunek. There was built a big wooden house, covered by red roofing-tiles, and there lived five workers families: Mroczkowski, Trela, Barczyk, Szal and Szuszkiewicz. There were also big wooden stable and barn. These two buildings were called *gumno*. All the works in the farm was managed by a Jew by the name of Strassberg.

The Ukrainian church of St. Nicholas, the Miracle Worker, was rebuilt in 1925. It served about 45 Ukrainian families. The Ukrainians (or Ruthenians, as they were called), were farmers.

The dwellers of Wielkie Oczy attended the catholic church or Ukrainian church. Mixed marriages were common. Children from such marriages were baptized in the Catholic church or Ukrainian church, depending on the religion of their fathers or mothers - girls according to belief of mothers, boys - according to belief of fathers. In such families both Roman-Catholic and Greek-Catholic holidays were celebrated. People visited and greeted each other.

On January 19 Ukrainians used to celebrate the Jordan Holidays in Wielkie Oczy. On this day two processions marched with flags and holy pictures, one from the Ukrainian church, the second from the Catholic church. Both processions would then meet at the market square in the center of the village and bow their flags to each other. The priests greeted each other. Further away the processions would walk together up to the Gron river, where they blessed the water.

Good relations were fostered by the Ukrainian priest Eustachy Cepinski. He came to Wielkie Oczy on holidays from Zmirowiska, where there was a Greek-Catholic parish and cemetery.

The conflicts started during the WWII (1941-1942). The provocateurs were mainly the Ukrainian priests Tarasewicz and Halinka. They incited a differentiation and separation among the local population. The incident by the wayside shrine of St. John is remembered as a time when the Ukrainian priest had an earthen mound built there to bury the "Polish shackles" that threatened Ukrainian national aspirations. In the following years Wielkie Oczy was attacked a number of times by the UPA, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, units that murdered the Polish population. The aim was expulsion of the Poles from the village.

During the evening of July 20, 1944 Wielkie Oczy was attacked by units of *Zaluzniak* and *Kruk* or *Jastrub* and the wooden houses of Poles were burned. The property was looted. Some who remained hid in the church, where they stayed until dawn,

in spite the attack of the UPA. In the morning Poles left their homes and escaped to Radymno, behind the San river.

Many Jews escaping before the Germans in 1939 stayed in Wielkie Oczy. Some of them found jobs here, others continued their escape further to the East. The population received identity cards with special sign of the nationality: P for Poles, U for Ukrainians and J for Jews.

Administrative power was granted by the Germans to the local Ukrainians. The persecution of Jews started. Some Ukrainians, co-dwellers and neighbors collaborated with the Germans in their persecution of the Jews.

On June 10, 1942, the Wielkie Oczy Jews were removed to ghettos in Krakowiec and Jaworów. They gathered in the market place and sat in a circle. They were guarded and prevented from escaping. Jews could take from their homes only the most necessary things, what they could carry with their hands. They made their way to the ghettos on foot. Only elderly persons and little children were taken on horse carts. The total number of forced to leave was 422; about 100 hundred escaped to the woods. Ukrainian police were told to find them and send them to their families in the ghetto. However, those who were caught

were shot. Also these Jews who survived the war and came back to Wielkie Oczy were killed.

The houses of the Jews (96) were sealed and later along with their furnishing were granted to Ukrainians settlers.

Time has not erased all traces of the past in Wielkie Oczy. The past exists in buildings, memorial plaques and in the minds of the people. The traces are evidence for the co-existence of people of different cultures, mutual respect and tolerance. The former multi-culture is seen mainly in the market square, where close to each other three prayer houses exist: Roman Catholic church, Greek Catholic church and Jewish synagogue. These last two served after the war as warehouses and are now in ruins.

Some initiatives have been undertaken to save the Jewish sites from deterioration. The initiator of these steps is Mr. Majus, whose ancestors lived in Wielkie Oczy. He, together with his compatriots, is trying to raise the funds to rescue the remnants of the Jewish culture here. Finishing these plans would be a lesson of history for the future generations.

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Photo submitted by Urszula Kaciuba taken in the 1930s. In the photo are a group of Christian children, and in the background the "new" synagogue and behind it, a fragment of the old Beit Ha-Midrash, which no longer exists.