



**Pawel Kaciuba, 2nd Place, 14 years old  
The Jan Kochanowski High School No 1  
Wielkie Oczy, June 2003**

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

Wielkie Oczy is today a village, a seat of the *gmina*, or district. Traces of the past can be seen in the buildings and life of its citizens. The village isn't big. Wielkoczers work in agriculture and other endeavors. Only some of them work in Wielkie Oczy and the nearby surroundings. Others go to work to other towns and abroad. The present geographical location of Wielkie Oczy is not conducive to its development. Maybe this a reason for why such terms as "sleepy" or "forgotten" are often used to describe the village.

Before the war Wielkie Oczy was a multi-cultural little town of the eastern borderland of Poland. Its citizens were Poles, Jews and Ukrainians. The evidence of the life here these people of three different cultures and nationalities shared are their places of worship, which stand close to the market square. There are: the Roman Catholic church under the invocation of the Virgin Mary, the unique Greek Catholic church and the Jewish synagogue. On Krakowiecka Street there is the Jewish cemetery. Still standing today are some houses where Jewish families lived. Older people remember the times when people of Wielkie Oczy lived in harmony, despite their different religions and cultures. Together they observed religious holidays, visited and helped each other. The period just before World War II and the war itself changed the situation. The Jews were expelled to the ghetto in Jaworow and the Ukrainians were transferred during Operation Wisla.<sup>1</sup> Yet even before prior then, the town had deteriorated and lost its municipal rights.

What would Wielkie Oczy be like had World War II not happened? In my opinion Wielkie Oczy would have had a chance to develop. It lies on the trade route between Jaroslawa and Jaworow. The shifting of the border [eastward] had a bad influence on the development of trade. The commercial trade route that had attracted earlier traders was closed. Yearly fairs and weekly markets were forgotten. In Wielkie Oczy there are no craftsmen, though before the war in almost every house there was a shop, from which an abundance of such goods as clothing, hats, haberdashery and especially baked goods were produced. The trade was concentrated in Jewish hands. They engaged Poles to teach them. The community of Wielkie Oczy was built from different occupations: bakers, shoemakers, tailors, smiths and others. Development was supported by its alcohol distillery, tannery, brickyard and slaughterhouse.

The location of Wielkie Oczy on the strategic trade route also supported development. If it were not for the war and the destruction it caused, there is no doubt that the political situation would have developed much differently. First of all

<sup>1</sup> The Jewish community was rounded up and expelled from Wielkie Oczy on June 10, 1942. Ukrainians were deported to western and northern Poland during Operation Wisla in 1947. [ed.]

the population would be bigger. People wouldn't leave looking for work because they would find jobs in local enterprises. Jews and the Ukrainians would still live here. - I think that some of them would not have wanted to leave the land of their forefathers. It would not then be strange to hear on the streets people speaking Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian. Young people would intermarry. They wouldn't change their faiths, and they'd attend the ceremony of other religions. The clergymen—Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian—would have good mutual relations, and some ceremonies would be jointly celebrated in three languages. Children would go together to the school and learn foreign languages, English, Hebrew and Ukrainian. Culture would quickly develop. Once a year a Jewish Culture Fair and a Ukrainian Culture Fair would be organized. Ambassadors, businessmen and folk groups would be invited. Economic and cultural expositions would be organized. During the Wielkie Oczy Fair craftsmen would present their products. The school would have contacts with schools in Israel and Ukraine; may be mutual visits of children would be organized.

Wielkie Oczy would start to try to recover the municipal rights it had lost. The three nationalities of the town would be represented at the local authority. Together they would guide the development of the town and settle whatever conflicts might arise. I think people would be indulgent and tolerant of one another. This they would in their early childhood. They would respect each other and be able to understand their religious and national differences. They wouldn't try to convert or obstruct and might even participate in each other's cultural and religious life.

So, a picture of better relations between people would be possible, but would it be real? I think it would, but on the condition that everyone would want it and nobody would poison minds against others.

In such an environment Wielkie Oczy would need a hotel in which guests and travelers would stay. The hotel would also attract people with exhibitions and paintings. Its kitchen would serve Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian dishes.

Maybe some misunderstandings between people would arise. We can see this happening throughout the modern world. I think, though, that people would find a common language [to resolve their differences].

But today, after so evil a war that differentiated Poles, Jews and Ukrainians we can't rebuild what was lost. We have to respect the places related to the religious life of former neighbors, for this is what remains to prove that once there existed in Wielkie Oczy a community of different nationalities and cultures.