OSADA UŁANOWSZCZYZNA (Ułanowicze/Ułlanowka)

gm. Zuchowicze
pow. Stołpce
woj. Nowogródzkie

Ułanowszczyzna (originally Ułanowicze) was situated between Połoneczka and Wolna on the road from Mir to Stołowicze and Baranowicze. The coordinates were 53deg North and 26deg East of Greenwich, roughly. The size of this settlement (osada) was close to 130 hectares. It was not exceptionally fertile land and it had not been cultivated for some time prior to 1920.

To the northeast it was bordered by forests belonging to the Radziwill family in Połoneczka; the southeast bordered by lands of Szczerbowicze village; to the southwest lands of Zadwieja village and to the northwest was a larger village of Wolna. Połoneczka was one of the Radziwill family’s main homes; they had a palace there where during hundreds of years many Radziwill children were born. Today the Palace stands in a derelict state; the land surrounding it is used as a playground by local children. During the summer many town meetings and festivals are held on the field between the Palace and the church.

In 1920-22 this parcel of land was divided into plots (działki) and given to nine settlers – of different ranks, so that the higher the rank one had in Piłsudski’s Army, the larger was the plot of land. Our ‘dzialka’ was about 12 hectares all in one piece on a rise with slight slopes but rather stony in parts; cultivation of it was difficult but not impossible. The other plots were similar in nature. We had some other land elsewhere, which father had bought and we also had some ‘turf’- peat for fuel, which was dug in the summer and used as fuel during the winter months to supplement wood logs and roots which were bought from the Radziwill estate.

There were no streams near-by and each settler had to dig a well to a depth of 12 metres or so to obtain water for home use and his animals. There was no domestic drainage whatsoever. A central field-road linked seven plots, but two other plots were on the other side of the main Połoneczka -Wolna road and they were nearer to the river Zmiejka. These plots had land of a better quality.

Settlers of the ‘seven’ group were:- Ogonowski Antoni with wife Józefa and children – Felek, Bolesław, Irena, Teresa and Leonarda; Chwoszcz Józef with wife Ana and son Janek; Nowicki Kazimierz with wife Michalina and children Jan and Apolonia; Kuzmicz Szymon with wife Józefa and children Lolek, Lutek, Jan and Leo; Sawicki Konstanty with wife Maryja and boys Bronek?, Kazik? Janek?; Kazimierski Maciej, wife Józefa, sons Antoni and Stanisław and daughter Leokadia. One plot next to us was empty, as the occupant – possibly Piwakowski Zygmunt left to go to western Poland sometime in 1937, so the land was not cultivated. Two plots on the other side of the road were Tomko Maurycey and wife Dominika, but they had no children; Szystowski Remigiusz, capt. with wife Katarzyna and son Andrzej who was studying in Paris so we hardly ever saw him. They were my Godparents and had the largest plot of land as part of our osada system. My closest friends of my own age were Janek Chwoszcz, Lolek Kuźmicz and Felek Ogonowski.

In 1921, after marrying my mother, father with some help from my grandfather Maciej Kuzmicz and uncle Antoni built our house and set up a farm. There were several buildings to house horses, cows and pigs, some sheep (rams only) as well as chickens, geese and turkeys which we bred successfully.

We had a huge barn to store crops and hay under cover as winter fodder for the animals. There was a well in the centre of the farmyard and on the side of the paddock there was an orchard with fruit trees of all kinds.

Below the barn was a kitchen garden where vegetables were grown as well as hemp, which was used in the manufacture of ropes. This was done at my grandfather’s place in the village of Szczerbowicze.
Grandfather had a smithy just outside the village where I learnt a great deal about metal work and repairs to agricultural equipment and shoeing of horses. Who knows, that might have been my trade if circumstances had not changed as a result of the war in 1939.

On our land we grew potatoes, barley, corn, wheat, oats and flax: for weaving into linen during the winter months which my mother used to do at my grandfather’s home as there was a lot more space to set up looms. Mother and aunt Regina used to produce some lovely damask linen and beautifully-coloured bed covers with stunning designs.

The atmosphere on the osada was always friendly and this allowed us to visit each other’s homes frequently. All the children played together and of course, older ones marched to school together to Poloneczka as we had no school or church nearer to the osada. Poloneczka was two or almost three kilometers away, depending which way one went. The shorter route was via a forest and avoided Szczerbowicze; the longer way was more interesting because we could join up with friends from the village with whom we played regularly by my grandfather’s smithy, which stood by the river at a junction of two roads.

We all went to church on Sundays and as part of our schooling we learnt the Catechism at the church house a couple of afternoons each week. To start with we attended school in people’s private homes but in 1938 a new school was built. It was absolutely modern in design and comfort with laboratory facilities and lovely, airy classrooms centrally heated, with sizeable playing fields for games nearby. There was an interesting library, well stocked with all sorts of books which we could borrow and take home to read. In this building we had a shop where we could purchase ink, notepads, pencils etc, as well as some sweets or chocolates. It was very useful for all the pupils.

This little country town was an interesting centre with its square where we could watch detachments of cavalry parading each Sunday after church service. We all loved the horses and it was very exciting to see the gleaming regalia of the riders. The cavalry detachment was stationed at the Radziwill Palace stables only a short distance from the church. Naturally we saw many important dignitaries who were guests of the Radziwills. It was there that every year a fair with a carousel used to come and we loved to visit and enjoy the show; especially the ice creams and sweets we could buy.

Father was somehow connected with the Agricultural Institute in Chorzów so on many occasions we had students and professors visiting us. It was something to do with soil sampling and development of fertilizers; we also used special corn and other seeds as experimental crops to be grown on poorer soils; all this was very interesting to us all.

In 1937/8 my father and other settlers established a co-operative association in Poloneczka for the collection of milk and the production of cheeses and other dairy products. They built a dairy so that each farmer could take his milk there for processing. In those days there were no fridges at any of the local houses. Father was the co-op secretary.

Some of the settlers belonged to KOP (Korpus Ochrony Pogranicznnej) Border Guards Corps and took part in “boundary watching” over the Polish-Russian border to prevent intruders as well as saboteurs and subversives entering Poland. Near-by there was a huge wooden observation tower placed strategically on a hill. We could see lots of activity in that area especially when army maneuvers were taking place. Father on the other hand was an army reservist and frequently visited his infantry unit in Baranowicze. I used to go with him on occasions and that gave me an opportunity to stay with my aunt who lived not far from the army barracks. We also went to a market in the town square and occasionally we took our own produce to sell.

The spring of 1939 changed our peaceful life at the osada as my father and uncle Antoni were called up into the army in March that year. No other settlers were called up as I recall. Germans marched into Slovakia and were threatening Poland. Father was posted on the Czechoslovakian border and stationed at Raba Wielka/Nowy Targ area. Life at the osada became difficult and mother tried to run the farm as best she could; we all helped. Our friends and relatives from the village responded as well and we managed to get all the crops in and stored for the winter.
It was especially difficult after 1st September 1939 when Germany attacked Poland and more so after 17th September when Russian forces crossed the Polish border from the east.

There was panic and turmoil as we were threatened and subjected to possible arrests. Father was away in the army and we did not know what might have happened to him. We tried to look after all the animals and at the same time tried to move about and hide in secure places to avoid arrest. We did not sleep in the same place many nights. Many people were arrested and mistreated. We had no idea what was happening. Children had to attend school and the teaching of Polish was stopped. We had to learn Russian and German languages. We also saw many German planes flying eastwards, but had no idea why. All the time there seemed to be movement of Russian troops along the Połonецка-Baranowicze road which was littered with broken down vehicles. The poor soldiers suffered from the winter cold as they stood by their machines, as help for them was not immediately available. I don’t think Soviet Army logistics were all that good.

The winter of 1940 was exceptionally cold with lots of snow. On 10th February 1940 we were awakened early in the morning by militia with a couple of Russian soldiers present who told us to pack some clothing and some food. We loaded as much as we could onto a sleigh and we were taken to a train at the railway station at Horodziej/Pogorzelce and eventually sent to Jeglic posiolek – a work camp in Archangelskaja oblast. All the other settlers were deported in the same way and to the same camp in Archangelskaja with the exception of Szystowski who escaped to Rumania and the Sawicki family who were left at the place they lived. We often remarked about this and questioned why it was so. Szystowski eventually joined the French Army in Lebanon and after the war returned to Paris via England. I kept in touch with him until his death. His son Andrzej, who lives in Verneuil, near Paris, is not in touch with me.

A couple of years ago I went back to Połoneczka now in Belarus, to visit my remaining family; aunt and cousins who lived in Szczerbowicze in my grandfather’s house. Also to see what had happened to our osada and the houses of all our neighbours. All I could see were fields newly ploughed and no sign of any houses or trees. All were destroyed or removed and re-erected somewhere else. The little roads were ploughed over; wells filled in and orchards leveled so that combines and other farm equipment belonging to the kolkhoz management could travel over them uninterrupted.

One feature I remembered from before was a tall post near where grandfather’s smithy stood, although now it too was gone. There was a huge stork’s nest on it with both birds busy repairing it, ready to raise their family in this nest, just as many birds before them had done in the past. The nest was well over a meter high, built over so many years. Below the stork’s nest there were other birds sheltering and possibly they too had nests there. It looked as if there was a sort of bird community on this one post. The stork is the national bird of Belarus and many of them thrive there because of the natural forest habitat and lots of peat bogs and marshes with frogs, eels and lizards in abundance. In that area many such nests can be seen and locals encourage storks to come every summer and make their homes there.

The people in the village and in Połoneczka were very friendly and welcomed us warmly; some even remembered our families but were careful in what they said. They did not comment on their lives under the communist administration or indeed about any hardships they encountered. When visiting our relatives they put out all their food on the dining-room table to show us how they enjoyed entertaining and treating us as guests. We were pleased but at the same time were somewhat worried that such a show would put a strain on their resources, while enjoying the hospitality offered to us. Naturally we gave them gifts we brought with us in return.

It was really strange to visit my place of birth and as I recalled the life we had there I thought, while looking around, why is it that almost 70 years later life in that area had hardly changed? Homes looked poor and so were the people, but their spirit lived on in determination that perhaps tomorrow, with God’s help, there might be some joy for them.