

FROM OVERHEAD WHISPERS OF THE LINDEN TREE FROM BIENKOWICE

Guest, sit under my leaf, and take a rest... Listen to the singing birds nesting in my spreading crown, feel the breeze of a cool wind on your cheek on a hot afternoon, try to understand the quiet whisper of tiny leaves that every day evoke the history of years gone by. Immerse yourself in the past of a place that I have faithfully accompanied and co-created for centuries. After all, I am a silent witness to a series of events, complicated human fates, laughter, tears, nuisance. Do not hide overhead whispers for yourself. Gladly tell the overheard story. Maybe it will be a temporary respite for someone, maybe it will teach you something, will make you shed a tear...

The place where I am growing was once on the edge of a huge greenwood, known today as the Niepolomice Forest. A hunting lodge stood here at the time, where kings themselves – first the Piastovci, then the Jagiellonians – used to stop by during their hunting trips. They sometimes went to the banks of the nearby Raba River to watch the galleys used to float Bochnia's salt – the most precious good of the land at the time – towards the Vistula River. White gold was floated from Bochnia to nearby Uscie Solne, where the Raba River flows into the Vistula River. Through the queen of Polish rivers, salt could now flow several hundred kilometers north – sometimes even as far as the port of Gdansk.

In the 16th century, so auspicious and happy for Poland, the estate belonged for some time to the famous Queen Bona – the wife of Sigmund I the Old, who loved to hunt here. Bienkowice, then still known as Benedyktovice, was leased or pledged from the end of the 15th century by magnates with noble names. Among them were the Boner family, the Zamojski family and the Tegoborski family. Over time, the hunting lodge turned into a wooden nobleman's mansion – a mainstay of Polish identity. According to old custom, the birth of a nobleman's daughter, whose name, unfortunately, no one remembers to this day, it was decided to celebrate and commemorate by planting a linden tree in front of the front wall of the mansion.

And so I have been growing for 380 years. My childhood fell during the turbulent time of the reigns of Wladyslaw IV and Jan Kazimierz. To this day I remember the conversations held at the manor about the disasters and plunder of the Swedish Deluge, and then the joyful news of the defense of Jasna Gora and the gradual ousting of the Swedish invaders. I fondly remember the

disputes about the magnificent Victory of Vienna of Jan III Sobieski and the pride that was spreading among the interlocutors in the kontusz, who by that time sat in the shadow of my young crown. I remember the Saxon times and the unhappy period for our homeland during the reign of the last Polish king, Stanislaw August Poniatowski.

Particularly sad was the year 1772, when, due to the First Partition of Poland, the Bochnia land, along with vast areas of the then Republic of Poland, passed into the hands of the three partitioners. The local lands became part of the Habsburg Monarchy and this state of affairs lasted for almost a century and a half. The peaceful town of Bienkowice received joyful news about the adoption of the May 3rd Constitution, which was supposed to save Poland from collapse, but immediately afterwards there was also the sad news of further partitions and the complete erasure of the Republic from the map of Europe. It was under such depressing circumstances that the 18th century came to an end.

The year 1830 brought temporary hope of regaining freedom, but the skirmishes fought far beyond the Vistula River by the insurgents soon made everyone realize that the enemy was too powerful to snatch its independence. A dozen years after the fall of the November Uprising, a new manor was erected on the side of the old 17th century one. It was built of wood, and the walls were plastered and whitewashed. The partially basement building was set on a foundation of stone that remembers ancient times. Suffice it to say that the royal castle in Niepolomice is built of the same stone.

In this part of Galicia the year 1846 was particularly unfortunate and bloody, when the peasants, incited by the invader, led by Jakub Szela, rose up against the nobility. Peasant hosts roamed from manor to manor, committing looting, arson and cruel murders. They also disarmed insurgents preparing to fight and handed them over to the Austrians for money. With us in Bienkowice, the situation was quite different. Our heir was hidden by the peasants themselves under a heap of straw and taken to a safe place. When the robbery finally subsided, the heir returned, and rewarded the peasants who had saved his life lavishly.

By the middle of the 19th century, my crown was already spread out enough to tower over the hipped roof covering the oblong, one-story manor house. By then I was already equal to my big brother, which is growing on the north side of the manor – a beautiful noble elm tree. On hot summer days, successive owners of the state sought shade by my mighty trunk. I well remember Mrs. Aniela of Wierusz-Kowalski, who married Mr. Goslawski – a participant in the January Uprising – and after his death married Mr. Sylvester Jasinski. Many times I heard the host's stories about battle clashes with the Russians and the sometimes sad fate of other insurgents. In the spirit of ardent love for their homeland, the children of Mr. And Mrs. Jasinski – Aniela, Witold and Celina – grew up here.

Mrs. Aniela and her husband farmed in Bienkowice for a long time and in unison. In 1900 they passed the village to their son Witold, who married the beautiful and educated Mrs.

Janina. They also farmed in Bieknowice for many years. Three children were born to them – Zbigniew, Tadeusz and Helena. I remember how they rejoiced together in Poland's regained independence, with what enthusiasm they worked, knowing that they were already working for a free homeland. At home there was always the current press. „Gonca Krakowskie” was sometimes read together and aloud, absorbing news concerning the affairs of the reborn state. I remember particularly clearly with what anxiety Mr. Witold reported the news from the front of the war with the Bolsheviks and how pompously Marshal Pilsudski's victory was feted afterwards.

Mrs. Janina, young Helena and grandmother Aniela loved roses. Their rose garden was famous throughout the neighborhood, and the dining room and library tables were often decorated with magnificent rose bouquets. The library, by the way, was a place where Ms. Janina loved to sit. She became engrossed in books, which she regularly bought not only in Bochnia and Cracow, but especially in Lviv, which was then the cultural capital of Galicia, and to which she often and willingly traveled. She meticulously stamped all her books with the family exlibris. The lady of the house also enjoyed rides in the countryside. On bright, sunny days, she would get into a light carriage, protecting herself from the sun under a light, lace umbrella. On cloudy days, on the other hand, she used a dark and covered carriage. She also liked to take village children from the neighborhood on her rides, such as tiny Otylka...

The mansion of Mr. and Mrs. Jasinski was famous for its excellent cuisine. I still remember the smell of the locally famous broth with lovage, usually served at Sunday sinner. The shelves of the manor's pantry always yielded to the weight of excellent preserves, prepared under the supervision of the mistress of the house, and sometimes by herself. At the time, the garden was cared for by a trained gardener, Mr. Tulak, who even ran a greenhouse. Zbyszek sometimes brought plant novelties from various exhibitions. The young couple often hunted, held parties, and the sounds of piano playing came from the windows of the manor.

Mr. and Mrs. Jasinski were extremely respected by local residents. They were valued for always being willing to help in times of need and, above all, giving employment at the manor. They took exceptional care of their employees, even honoring their family celebrations with their presence. A beautiful wrought iron bucket, which Mr. Heir personally gave as a wedding gift to Mr. and Mrs. Nowak, has survived to this day. The intricately crafted stainless steel vessel found its way back to the manor several years ago, donated by one of the residents of Bienkowice – the great-grandson of the gifted employee. For many generations it was a family heirloom, eventually making its way to the manor to remind its former residents.

Three years before the outbreak of World War II, the irrepressible Mr. Witold died. Zbigniew, the elder son of Mr. and Mrs. Jasinski, became the heir to the estate. The young heir, who was less than 30 years old, struggled with various difficulties, including his

health. The year 1937 was particularly hard, due to financial troubles associated with the spring flood that swept through the Lesser Poland and the great crop failure that followed this devastating element. Money in the manor was in short supply for everything, and on top of that, according to rumor, the young heir fell unhappily in love with one of the local girls. This could not end well...

I remembered well the warm August afternoon. The estate was quieter than usual, as Mrs. Janina had been in Lviv for several days. The heir had brought musicians to the manor, whom he ordered to play sorrowful religious songs in the shade of my spreading boughs. At one point, a loud, piercing shot came from the court library. The music fell silent in an instant, the players froze, someone ran to check what had happened in the house. From the mouths of frightened people could soon be heard the broken words uttered in tears: *the master shot himself..., heir Zbigniew is dead..., eternal rest grant to him, O Lord...*

Zbigniew's funeral was given by the parish priest of nearby Orthodox Church – Father Jan Zlotnicki. Sad days were experienced by the other residents of the manor, orphaned by the sudden death of the master. Mrs. Janina cried bitterly all day, and Zbigniew's siblings Tadeusz and Helena also could not come to terms with the tragic death of their brother for a long time. Moreover, since Zbigniew's death, strange things began to happen in the manor at night. The clink of breaking glass and rearranged furniture could be heard, and even the figure of the dead master was seen. At Mrs. Janina's request, exorcisms were performed twice. First it was done by the local parish priest, but when they proved ineffective, they were repeated by the bishop himself. Only then did the haunting stop. Tadeusz – Zbigniew's younger brother – was already an aviator at the time.

Zbyszek's death was, unfortunately, a harbinger of another misfortune. In 1939, a terrible war broke out. Poland was invaded by Germany, which was soon aided by Soviet Russia. After twenty years of freedom, the neighboring powers again divided our native land between them. Once again, it was a sad time, but I remember that partisans and soldiers of the Home Army often visited the manor house at night during this time. They sought shelter here, conferred, made plans. At this time Tadeusz went through the combat trail and ended up in England, where he served as an aviator in Squadron 300. He remained faithful to his family's patriotic traditions. He was awarded the Order of Virtutti Militari for his heroic combat. However, he never returned to Poland. He missed his family home very much, but had a great regret in his heart for the complicated fate of his homeland.

In December 1946, Mr. and Mrs. Jasinski were expropriated under the Land Reform Decree. The state owners completely neglected the manor building, mutilated it, cut off the beautiful porches, destroyed the garden and park. And although the place was still important for the villagers – they met here, laughed and played – it was, however, with great pain that I watched the mansion gradually become empty, deteriorated until it was

in total ruin. Over time, the walls of the building cracked and the roof collapsed. The once beautiful garden became completely feral, overgrown with bushes and hideous greenery. Almost nothing of the former splendor of this magnificent estate remained. I looked with sadness at the ruins that filled the place more and more every year.

Nonetheless, lovers still came here for dates, and I protected them with my shade and made them drunk with my fragrance, as I once had. One May afternoon in 2006, Slawomir and Margaret came here. And although I didn't look beautiful, nor did the mansion and garden, they stood in front of me for a long moment, as if delighted. They listened to the birds singing, walked slowly, and finally touched me, smiled and said that it was wonderful here, and I was a treasure...Since then, they began to visit me frequently.

A change came recently. In 2010, Mr. Slawomir Potrzebski bought his wife Margaret the ruined mansion and park for a naming gift. I remember him telling her about it in the shade of my boughs, adding immediately: *We will rebuild this place....* Since then, with love and care, they have been trying to restore its splendor. Thanks to the restoration, everything here has been revived, and I can once again delight in the fullness of its charm. I proudly tower over the noble structure of the old Polish manor house, rebuilt with care. I rejoice at the sight of the beautiful garden. I watch with delight as the place I have been connected to for four centuries reconnects and rejoices the local residents. In the park, the new owners are planting more linden trees, giving them names. After many years, the storks have returned to us. Once again life and happiness have settled here...

I smile joyfully when I see Bienchovichians come here to take family photos at important moments in their lives, and thoughtfully listen to concerts under the linden tree, the tradition of which has been revived after many years. I love how children run here or old people come to the bench with their memories, and lovers surreptitiously kiss each other. Sometimes someone from very far away will come especially for me. Then they say of me: *this is our TREASURE*. In the difficult year 2021, local residents sing our anthem here. My heart rejoices again when I see that the shade of my leaves has once again become a place that brings people together, a place of meeting, joy and kindness. I burst with pride, rejoice and eagerly whisper behind the linden tree of Master John of Czarnolas: *Guest, sit under my leaf, and take a rest ...*