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The Case of “Białowieska” as a Universal Example of Cooperation Between Jews, Poles and Russians²

Abstract. Article analyses the phenomena of “*Białowieska*” forest as a starting point for cooperation between the Jewish, Polish and Russian nations. The research is based on historical, theoretical background as well as from the over national point of view. Analysed extraordinary status of “*Białowieska*” through the ages is not only universal but timeless. The research proves that multinational cooperation between nations can be achieved with respect for each other’s values and with positive mutually effective results.

Key words: Jews in Białowieska, Poles in Białowieska, Russians in Białowieska, cooperation between the Jewish, Polish and Russian nations, Białowieska Universal Case, Hassidic movement in Poland, Chabad Lubavich in Poland.

Is it possible to imagine a natural model of cooperation between nations which would reject religious, cultural and ethnic determinants and introduce some harmony between representatives of various nations? How to explain a peculiar phenomenon of cooperation between previously hostile nations who have pushed aside their mutual animosities and resentments? What is the natural element to eventually make people of diverse religions respect others and treat them as peers? Finally, what makes people start cooperating with each other by rejecting the wrong and choosing the right? Is it a top-down rule of conduct conceptualised as a legal norm? Undoubtedly, there is an unequivocal answer to these cognitive problems, namely commerce. Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, a political philosopher and

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2 The nationalities are listed according to the alphabetical order only, without any other criteria.

lawyer, stated in his “The Spirit of the Laws” that “Commerce is a cure for the most destructive prejudices; for it is almost a general rule, that wherever we find agreeable manners, there commerce flourishes; and that “wherever there is commerce, there we meet with agreeable manners” and “Peace is the natural effect of trade.” Two nations who traffic with each other become reciprocally dependent; for if one has an interest in buying, the other has an interest in selling; and thus, their union is founded on their mutual necessities” (Montesquieu, 1748).

However, commerce as a process between the parties needs an object of trade or the area on which this trade takes place. The question of object of trade raises no doubts. The term “Białowieska” mentioned in the title refers to a vast forest area called the Białowieża Forest (hereinafter: “Białowieska”). Originally, this section of primeval forest covered an area of approx. 1,900 sq.km. Historically, Białowieska adjoined the Jałów, Czerniłów and Łysaków forests to the north, and the Suwałki and Polesie lake districts, the latter on the territory of present-day Belarus (Kozieł M., 2010). The forest complex is of primeval character and straddles the territory of Poland and Belarus. It extends over an area of 1,560 sq.km., of which approx. 41% (c. 630 sq.km.) sits in Poland. Białowieska is situated on the westernmost part of the East-European Plain and is characterised by a moderate, cool continental climate with Atlantic influences, experiencing average annual temperatures of 6.8°C. (Kwiatkowski W., Stepaniuk M., 2008). A specific element of Białowieska is that a substantial drainage divide between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea basin extends along its eastern border, which significantly shaped the natural environment and promoted the development of trade, as will be discussed further on in this article (Iwaniuk H. 1996). Expressed in both historical and geographical terms, the undisputed capital of the region was that of Białowieża (in old-Polish Białwieszha), a town located in the very centre of the area. For centuries, Białowieża was the focus of universality in the sequence of events related to trade and multiculturalism.

In the literature on the subject of environmental protection and legal matters, special attention is paid to the fact that huge forest areas had covered the European continent in the early centuries of our era but, over time, they were subjected to massive deforestation. The only original and natural area of this type to survive is Białowieska (Gutowski J. 2000).

The reasons for its survival relates primarily to factors involving the private ownership of this area dating back to the earliest of times, as well as to the influence of multiculturalism which bred an element of cooperation within Białowieska that led to the harmonious coexistence of those who lived within its natural environment. Furthermore, it requires to be said that the sustainable development of Białowieska was also possible owing to its uninterrupted and stable existence, often in isolation from upheavals caused by periodic historical events. Also worth mentioning here, is that not only had Białowieska been the source of pride and esteem for successive

Lithuanian, Polish and Russian rulers for 600 years, it also provided a source of income for the people living within its boundaries.

The literature on the subject (Kozieł M., 2010) predominantly takes into account the fact that it was not until the reign of Władysław Jagiełło, that Białowieska was granted its special status. However, such a statement is not entirely valid if one considers the economic and commercial aspects involved. Prior to 1409, which is the conventionally assumed year in which Białowieska was declared a royal hunting ground, this area had been dominated by the influence of Lithuanian grand dukes (Gediminas, Kestutis), while earlier, in the 12th century, it was ruled by the princes of Volhynia³. The beginnings of settlements in Białowieska and surrounding areas can be traced back to the 15th century.⁴ However, the first mention of trade in leather and furs from hunting activities appears in the 12th and 13th centuries. The 14th century entailed the development of forestry, including mostly beekeeping. Before Białowieska became subject to supervision and special protection by its Polish and Russian rulers, the activities involving sourcing and use of natural resources, such as firewood or edible forest products, were freely accessible and unrestricted. It was not until the fifteenth century that these activities became limited and subject to regulation. The nobility and clergy who wanted to use the resources of Białowieska estate were required to apply for a special privilege referred to as 'right of entry' (Pol. *prawo wchodów*) which provided a source of revenue income to the royal coffers.

The impulse for the development of Białowieska and its special character, took place when King Władysław Jagiełło, Duke Vytautas, the Deputy Chancellor of the Crown Mikołaj Trąba, and Khan Tokhtamysh of the Golden Horde, met in 1509 (Samojlik T., 2005). The event was accompanied by a royal hunting party to gather food supplies for the army. Once hunted, the game was salted in barrels and shipped to Płock. During the reign of Zygmunt I Stary (Sigismund the Old), another of Poland's rulers, a law was issued in 1538 on the organisation of royal hunting. Apart from these regulations, forest laws were enacted during the reign of Zygmunt Stary and Zygmunt August (issued in 1514, 1529 and 1557). They prohibited logging, and this ban was not lifted until the 17th century.⁵

3 Only after the Grand Duke of Lithuania Władysław Jagiełło issued on 14 August 1385 the act referred to as the Union of Krewo or Act of Krewa, we can talk about Białowieska as a territory under ducal Lithuanian and then royal Polish jurisdiction.

4 It is worth noting that the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania may only be vaguely perceived by the reader. In the fifteenth century (and later), the Duchy of Lithuania did not territorially coincide with the territory of the present Lithuanian state. In the fifteenth century it included large urban centres, now located in the state of Belarus, such as Brest, Kobryn, Vawkavysk, Pinsk, Svislach and Babruysk.

5 Only two cases of logging permits being issued occurred in the 15th and 16th centuries. In 1521, Zygmunt I Stary granted a permit to the Orthodox church in Szereszewo, and in 1537 Queen Bona gave a similar privilege to the Catholic church in Szereszewo.

The issue of delimiting the borders of Białowieska was regulated by so-called *ordynacje*, i.e. laws governing the protection and accessibility of Białowieska and the rules of conduct of security guards. The oldest to be preserved comes from 1639 (Samojlik T., 2005).

Following the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, Białowieska was incorporated into the Russian Empire. In 1888, the forest complex became a royal domain of the Tsar. Under the rule of the Russian tsars, modern French rules of hunting management were introduced, which are characterized, from the point of view of protecting the ecosystem, by the extermination of predators and the protection of ungulates, including their feeding during winter.

The turn of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries is characterised by the consistent and harmonious development of Białowieska, which means, using contemporary terminology: its sustainable development taking into consideration the element of human population involved and its contribution.

As regards the universalism of Białowieska in the multinational dimension, one needs to take into account the human factor. It is the presence of multinationalism that has proven to be an important determinant in the preservation of Białowieska as a primeval forest and constitutes a significant and unique contribution to cooperation between the Polish, Russian and Jewish people (Moroz-Keczyńska E, Keczyński A., 2008).

In the context of coexistence with Białowieska, we may speak about the distinctive features of the Polish, Russian and Jewish people. Thus, to make the brief description of Białowieska presented above complete, we should now consider the unity in distinctiveness of the communities that contributed to its universalism.

For the Polish and Jewish communities, this unity in distinctiveness in relation to Białowieska could already be seen at the end of the 17th century, when King Jan III Sobieski, exercising his royal prerogative, entered into a contract with Judge Piotr Przybędowski for the supply of forestry goods. Under the contract, Piotr Przybędowski agreed to pay fifty thousand Polish zlotys a year, payable in two instalments, as a fee for the right to harvest resources from the forest. However, this right was not unlimited because wildlife refugia were excluded from the contract. Thus, "oak planks, oak beams, pine laths and ash planks" became economically harvested. This readily available material was rafted down the Narew River, which flows north along the edge of the forest before wending its way westward to merge with the Vistula River, which in turn flows north to the ports of Gdansk and Gdynia on the Baltic coast. Some archived documents were found in Lisbon and Madrid, confirming that shipbuilding materials had been imported by sea from Gdansk as early as in the 15th century. Oak from Białowieska was also used for the construction of some churches in England (Samojlik T., 2005).

Timber harvested from Białowieska was processed on site by *budniks* (people professionally involved in forestry activities) who were burning wood to obtain

charcoal, pitch and tar. These products were very saleable. Charcoal was used for metal smelting and in the production of gunpowder. In the second half of the 18th century, forest workers were recruited from the Mazovian population and settled in newly established villages in Białowieska. Concurrently, parts of the Narewka River were regulated and a canal constructed connecting it with the Narew, which provided a navigable route to the sea.

It is undeniable that the parties to particular contracts used the services of representatives of the Jewish community who, in addition to being educated, stood apart from the clergy, hitherto the literate part of the society. The intellectually developed Jewish diaspora in Poland was unrivalled in Europe at that time, while the emerging Hasidic movement was conducive to contacts between various geographical areas of Poland and commercial relations.⁶ For example, Białowieska was a region of extensive activity by Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch (Pol. *Dow Ber z Międzyrzecza*)⁷. In the nineteenth century Białowieska was also influenced by the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, whose name derives from the village of Lyubavichi (Rus. *Любавичи*) in the Smolensk oblast, originally founded by the Baal-Shem Tov's followers.⁸ An additional significant asset of the Jewish community was the fact that they used the Yiddish language, which facilitated contacts throughout Europe wherever a Jewish diaspora existed.

6 Hasidism (Heb. *חסידות*) also known as Hasidic Judaism. A mystical movement that originated in the eastern territories of Poland, nowadays the present western part of Ukraine, which is a movement having a special social dimension. It was a response to Orthodox Judaism. The founder of Hasidism as a religion was Israel Ben Eliezer "Baal Shem Tov" (Master of the Good Name). The movement spread very quickly to the entire territory of Poland at that time. The Hasidim were organized in so-called schools, each led by a tzaddik referred to as *Rebbe*. To-date, certain Hassidic factions have survived throughout the world, the largest of which is Chabad-Lubavitch. Present Hasidim still speak Yiddish. [In more detail: D. Assaf, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism*, Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry, 2011.]

7 When Baal Shem Tov died, Dov Ber of Mezeritch, called Maggid, took a central position in Hasidic movements. His disciples were active mainly in the territory of what is now present north-eastern Poland, Belarus and Lithuania. Thus, Białowieska came under their influence. In the 1780s the first Hasidic publications appeared. These included three classic doctrinal works: *Toledot Jaakov Josef* by Jaakov Josef of Polonne (first edition in Korzec in 1780), *Maggid devarav le-Jaakow* by Dov Ber of Mezeritch (Korzec 1781) and *No'am Elimelech* by Elimelech of Lizhensk (Lviv 1788).

8 In the Polesie region, the influence of the Hasidim belonging to the Aron Perlov's dynasty from Karlino was also noticed in the mid-nineteenth century. The main branches of this dynasty contributed to the formation of the following dynasties in the second half of the 19th century: dynasties of Noah of Lyakhavichy, Moshe Pelier of Kobryn, Shlomo Chaim Perlov from Kojdanów, and Abraham Weinberg from Słonim. [For more detail: D. Assaf, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism*, Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry, 2011.]

In addition to the innovative Hasidic movement, a very important element was traditional Judaism, whose followers focused around the orthodox religion and its rabbis. The 19th century, which was a troublesome period for the Polish nation due to which found itself subordinate to invaders. Nonetheless it proved a fruitful time for the development of Białowieska in terms of furthering its sustainability. Such thesis is supported by the fact that the nineteenth century was characterised by the pursuance of cooperation within the region of Białowieska. Jews began intensive settlement in Białowieża which at the time belonged to Russia and was in the Pruzhany powiat under the Grodno Governorate (now: Hrodna in Belarus) (Lockwood K., 2014). It should be emphasized that the Jewish community at that time in Grodno, Pruzhany, Kobryn, Shershevo and Bielsko, ranged from 45% to 60% of the total population of these towns. The settlement was connected with trade and services linked with Białowieska. It was said that the Jewish population dealt with the trade in wood and the valuation of wood, and “no serious timber sales transaction took place without them, as they were good appraisers” (Wishniakov E., 2001). At that time distilleries and wood tar factories were also established, owned mostly by Jews and Russians, with the finished products mainly going to St. Petersburg and points further to the east. The sawmill industry grew rapidly both for local and long-haul trade. The economic development of Białowieża is evidenced by archive documents in Hrodna, which illustrate that the Jewish population in Białowieża was not only economically aware but also prosperous, which encouraged them to invest in real estate insurance⁹. The rapid development of Białowieska and its neighbouring towns (Pruzhany, Hajnówka, and Shershevo) took place during the years 1888-1910. When Białowieska became the private property of the Tsar in 1889, work began on the building of a palatial Hunting Lodge. Such a magnificent edifice also entailed the need to construct the infrastructure to go with it, including that required to provide for transportation, which in turn led to a rapid influx of Russians into the area. It is worth noting that during the nineteenth century a large contingent of Russian Orthodox people from the interior of the Russian Empire, flocked to Białowieska. In 1903, Georgy Karcov wrote: “about 75% of the inhabitants of the Białowieża Forest profess the Orthodox faith, about 12% profess the Catholic religion, while the remaining (i.e. 13%) are followers of Judaism” (Karcov, 1903/2015). These data correspond with the information contained in the Geographical Dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland and other Slavic Countries (Pol. *Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego i innych krajów słowiańskich*) of 1895.¹⁰ The Russian census of 1897 also confirms the high proportion of Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish believers among the

9 Sums insured under home insurance ranged from 10 to 100 roubles. National State Archives in Hrodna, Files no. 780.1.1.

10 Chlebowski B. (Ed.). (1895). *Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego i innych krajów słowiańskich*. Vol. XIV. Warszawa: Druk „WIEKU” Nowy-Świat Nr. 61., pp. 451-452.

population of Białowieska. At present it is difficult or even impossible to distinguish Poles and Russians from the population professing the Orthodox religion and provide a percentage for either of them. It is not true that, in the nineteenth century, Poles confessed only to the Catholic religion, while Russians were only Orthodox Christians. A certain percentage of Poles adhered to the Orthodox religion,¹¹ which was typical in the eastern part of what was then Polish territory during the partition era. Belarusians, in turn, professed mainly to Orthodoxy.

The construction of the Hunting Lodge for the Tsar gave impetus to the settlement of a large number of tsarist officials in Białowieża, leading to the construction of an entire housing estate to accommodate them. To this end, the necessary buildings for the tsarist administrator of Białowieska and the head of municipality were constructed. At the end of the 19th century, Białowieża had a post office, two schools for children, a clinic, the office of the head of municipality and the branch office of a bank. In Białowieża itself, not counting the neighbouring towns of Stoczek and Podolany, there were three large-scale sawmills, a feed production plant, a wine cellar, numerous shops and a marketplace. Development of the Lodge and of the town, led to the construction of a railway station in Białowieża and a railway line connecting Białowieża with Hajnówka (1897), and subsequently the railway line connecting Białowieża with Siedlce (Bajko P, 2015). Construction of the railways resulted in a further economic boost for Białowieża. In addition, a modern roadway was built in 1903 to connect with Bielsk and Hajnówka on one side and with Pruzhany on the other (this roadway still exists today).

At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that there were no pogroms of the Jewish population in Białowieska either in the forest or in the towns located on its territory, as was the case in other parts of the Russian Empire. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander in 1881, a wave of pogroms of Jews by a group of revolutionaries swept through Russia. There were about ten such pogroms in the Hrodna Governorate itself. The largest taking place in Białystok in 1906 and Brest in 1905. However, they did not affect Białowieska (Polonsky A., 2014).

In Białowieża, the symbiosis of nations was so harmonious and steady that the construction of the Lodge (a.k.a. Białowieża Pałac) and the Towarowa railway stations, involved Jewish workers from as far afield as Lublin¹². The uniqueness of

11 Apart from the Orthodox Church, there were also representatives of Greek Catholicism appeared alongside Roman Catholicism and Judaism. This denomination was predominant in the present-day Western Ukraine, professed by Ukrainians.

12 The links between Lublin and Brest, Białystok and Hrodna, including those involving the Jewish community, were particularly vivid in the 19th century. In general terms, these ties were based on the fact that all these cities belonged to the Russian Empire. On the other hand, in the context of the Jewish community, Lublin was one of the strongest Talmudic, Hasidic and academic centres of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, Lublin was the seat of one of the most renowned Jewish universities of the time – *Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva* (Hebrew: *יְהִיבֹל ימְכָה תְּבִישִׁי*).

Białowieska can be demonstrated by the fact that the architecture of the Białowieża railway station combines the symbol of the Empire - a two-headed eagle, with that of Judaism - the star of David.¹³

Fig.1 Tsar's arrival in Białowieża. Picture downloaded from <https://sztetl.org.pl/>

The first shadow to be cast upon Białowieska in its history, and an omen of what was later to come during the Second World War, was the period of the Germans' stay in the Forest during the First World War. With the entry of the Kaiser's army in August 1915, the Germans methodically began logging on a grand scale. They built the largest dry wood distillation plant in Europe and a wood wool factory in Hajnówka. They also constructed a 130-kilometre-long narrow-gauge rail network in the forest cut timber to the processing facilities. A total of 8,000 local workers and 3,200 Russian and French POWs, were employed in logging. In three years, Germany harvested 5 million cubic metres of timber from the forest.

A similar situation occurred after Poland regained its independence in 1918. The government, facing a budget deficit in 1924, granted a logging licence to an English company, *The European Century Timber Corporation* (Wiecko E, 1984). Under the licence issued, that company was entitled to harvest a maximum of 325,000 cubic metres of timber a year, with new plantings left uncut. However, within a period of five years the company logged 2.5 million cubic meters, which led to the contract being terminated by the Polish government. Apart from these negative examples, Białowieska was subject to harmonious development until the Second World War. After Poland regained independence, Białowieża began to take in significant numbers of Polish settlers who adhered to the Catholic faith. A Roman Catholic parish, under the invocation of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, was established in Białowieża during the interwar period. The faithful were forestry and sawmill workers, as well as officials, together with their families. Before the outbreak of the First World War the number of Catholics in Bia Puszcza Białowieska did not allow for the creation of an independent parish. Only two Catholic families lived in Białowieża before the First World War. After 1918, the number of Catholics in Białowieża began to grow very fast so that by 1924 they numbered 1,200. In the second half of the thirties, the municipality of Białowieża was inhabited by 3,000 Catholics. By decree of 15 August 1926, the church authorities established the Białowieża parish. Construction of the church began in June 1927. After two years, construction work was almost finished but there were no funds available to complete it. It was not until April 1930, when President Ignacy Mościcki learned of the difficulties and undertook to assist the parish, that the remaining works could proceed to completion. Consecration of

13 More about links between religions at: Ch. Saiman, *Legal Theology: The Turn to Conceptualism in Nineteenth Century Jewish Law*, Journal of Law and Religion, Vol. 21, Issue 1, 2005-2006, s. 40-66.

the church took place in 1934. During the interwar period, the municipal centre of Białowieska was home to synagogues and houses of prayer (Pawleta E., 2009) , Catholic churches and chapels and Orthodox churches (Sosna G. & others, 2012), allowing its inhabitants to live in both harmony and safety.

Sadly, the sustainable development of Białowieska and the harmonious and safe existence of its residents, came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of World War II. The symbolic date of 1 September 1939, marks the beginning of terror, the Holocaust, the extermination of Jewish, Belarusian, Polish, and Russian people, and resultant German and Soviet occupations.

However, no matter how horrific the events may have been that took place at that time, it seems that the spirit of Białowieska lived on and survives to this present day (Perkowski M. & others).

It might be said that Białowieska, as an element of nature gave rise to a timeless phenomenon. The environment, in the broadest sense of the word, of Białowieska, proved beyond doubt that the peaceful coexistence of people of different nationalities, each having a different historical, religious and cultural background is both reasonable to expect and possible to achieve. The case of Białowieska is all the more exceptional in that it demonstrates that nature itself can lead people to harmonious coexistence, cooperation and mutual respect.

Perhaps the example of Białowieska should be cited whenever a dialogue begins on the topic of human relations, especially such dialogue between Belarusians, Poles, Russians and Jews.

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