

The Phenomenon of a Polish Kresy Town on the Lithuanian-Belarusian Territory in the 1st Half of the 19th Century

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Kresy towns at the turn of the 19th century represented an important element of the Polish history. The Lithuanian-Belarusian territory was covered mainly with small towns and most of them belonged to Polish owners. After 1795, this land was annexed by Russia, which gradually made the area dependent on its political and cultural influences and started a slow russification process. The town of Świsłocz in the Grodzieńska county met the same fate. However, the urban-economical and cultural involvement of count Wincenty Tyszkiewicz, as well as his feeling of responsibility for the inhabitants, allowed him to create the phenomenon of a Kresy town in the first decades of the post-partition period despite difficulties. Perfect architectural foundations, magnificent marketplace and an amazing gymnasium were characteristic of the town. After the fall of the November Uprising, the uniqueness of the town started to wane and, with the loss of its Polishness, it lost its unique character.

Key words: town; Kresy; Świsłocz; Wincenty Tyszkiewicz; 18th/19th century

Kresy towns at the turn of the 19th century represented an important element of the Polish history. Each one of them was unique because of its history, tradition, culture and religion. By fulfilling many functions (cultural, educational, administrative, economical), they shaped the life of its inhabitants, especially after the fall of 1st Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Their uniqueness stemmed from, above all, their cultural-geographical location characterized as “borderlands.” It meant that Kresy towns acted as conduits between the civilization of the cities and civilization of the countryside by connecting the lives of their inhabitants, as well as connecting different nationalities, religions and languages. In particular, the north east territories of the Commonwealth, which were inhabited by many cultures (mainly Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian and Jewish, with the addition of Russian, German, Tatar and Armenian cultures), had an amazing social and cultural environment.

Historians point out to the specific structure of the contemporary towns that takes into consideration, for example, the dominant type of economy and the populace size. The inhabitants of towns were traders and craftsmen. However, the majority of them were farmers. When it comes to populace size, the settlement conditions need to be taken into consideration. However, it is hard to cite any concrete numbers as the settlement conditions were tied to the historical period, location and size of the town (the covered area, the number of houses and outbuildings).¹

Ina Sorkina points out to the main characteristics of towns on the Lithuanian-Belarusian from the turn of the 19th century, stressing that the rights to trade, craft and marketplace activity differed towns from villages. When it comes to the differences that set towns apart from cities, the towns lacked a municipal administration rights and its populace were not assigned city rights.²

At that time, different types of towns existed and they can be characterized by:

- a) being a subject to a particular rule
- b) size
- c) the proximity of cities (urban character)
- d) the dominant economic and cultural function
- e) trade routes
- f) architecture³

When taking into consideration the division of towns on former Polish lands (Lithuanian-Belarusian), they can be divided on state-owned (belonging to the crown and treasury), privately-owned and church-owned towns. Most of these town were in the hands of private owners (212 towns, around 77 percent of all towns) in the 2nd half of the 18th century. In 1807, out of 86 towns of the Grodzińska governorate, 78 towns were privately-owned (92 percent), 9 towns belonged to the treasury and 3 to the church.

After taking into consideration the populace size, towns could be divided on four groups:

- towns-villages, with up to 500 inhabitants
- small towns, with at least 500 and at most 2000 inhabitants

¹ Ochmański, J. (1958). *W kwestii agrarnego charakteru miast Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego w XVI w.*, Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 294; Aleksandrowicz, S. (1961). *Miasteczka Białorusi i Litwy jako ośrodki handlu w XVI – I połowie XVII w. Rocznik Białostocki*, p. 65.

² Sorkina, I. (2010). *Miasteczki Białorusi u kancy XVIII – pierszaj palowie XIX st.* Wilnia: Eurapijski gumanitarny universitet. p. 37–51.

³ Ibidem, p. 56.

- large towns, with 2000–5000 inhabitants
- fast-developing towns, with over 5000 inhabitants

In the urban towns (of urban character), the number of inhabitants that made a living by doing mainly non-agricultural work needed to surpass 500 individuals. The economy of these towns could represent one of three routes: industrial, trade-industrial or trade-agricultural.

The Lithuanian-Belarusian territories were dominated by small towns (up to 1000 inhabitants). However, at the end of the twenties of the 19th century on the lands of Grodzieńska governorate, there were towns with nearly 3000 inhabitants (e.g. Kamieniec Litewski) as well as towns that did not surpass 100 inhabitants.⁴

Towns were usually important communication nodes and trade routes dictated their creation. Each town had an original architectural design and the location of buildings was often decided using urban planning techniques. In the case of Grodzieńska governorate, it incorporated the west-european style of cities in the designs. The marketplace was considered a central point of a town, similar to the european cities of 18th–19th century. Other similarities include a network of streets converging on the marketplace and the close proximity of buildings like the church, shop, town hall, school, tavern, inn, workshops and houses.⁵

The administrative division of the Commonwealth, which was introduced during the Union of Lublin period (1569), that divided the nation into the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, was quite unique because of its stability. It survived in its fundamental form until the end of the Partitions of Poland. The Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were divided into voivodships that were further divided into counties. Over the years, the affiliation of towns with voivodships changed more often than that of counties.⁶

After the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, the eastern part of Grodzieńszczyzna territory, along with other Lithuanian-Belarusian lands, was added to the Russian Empire. For the next few dozen years it resisted russification. Only after the 1832, it started to slowly but surely become dependent on the Russian policy and cultural influences. The partitioner intended to make the social and legal situation of the forcefully annexed territories more in line with the situation on other areas controlled by the

⁴ Ibidem, p. 56–65.

⁵ Łakotka, A. I. (1999). *Nacynalnyja rysy bielaruskoj architektury*. Minsk: Bielaruskaja navuka, p. 137.

⁶ Kukliński, A., Swianiewicz, P. (1990). *Polskie województwo. Doświadczenia i perspektywy*. Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, p. 10.

Empire. To facilitate that change, a new administrative division was introduced on the former Polish lands that replaced voivodeships with governorates, along with Russian weights and measures, Russian monetary system, the Julian calendar, privilege for the Orthodox church or the new rules for mandatory service in the Russian Army. Over time, the rule of Russian law and Tsar's ukase were implemented.⁷

The first thirty years of the 19th century did not reveal the negative impact of this situation on the towns of Grodzieńszczyzna and the life of their inhabitants. What is more, an increase in the number of those towns and their development could be observed since the end of the 18th century.

One of the many towns functioning on the territory of the former Commonwealth was Świsłocz. From 1793 to the beginning of the 19th century, it changed its administrative affiliation several times (Grodzieńskie voivodeship, Słonimska governorate, Lithuanian governorate) to be finally added to the Wołkowyski county in the Grodzieńska governorate in 1801. This state would last for over 100 years. The town was located on the so called Świsłocz trade route, which connected towns belonging to four counties: Grodzieński, Wołkowyski, Prużański and Brzeski. However, it was not located on a postal route, which, in some situations, complicated its existence. The routes leading from and to the town were classified as 2nd class. This meant that local administration was responsible for the maintenance of the roads, which usually resulted in poor quality of the roads. In spite of that, Leon Potocki described the roads placed "within the Świsłocz area" as one of the best in the contemporary Europe in his memoirs from the end of 18th and the beginning of 19th century.⁸

Świsłocz was a privately-owned town belonging to Wincenty Tyszkiewicz since 1778 and was classified as small (up to 1000 inhabitants). The populace made a living from pottery, carpentry, ironworking, tailoring, coopering, farming and horticulture. The most advanced in terms of industry was the paper industry.⁹

Świsłocz was typical for its times and the area where it was located. However, from a modern perspective, it was very unique, especially considering the immense involvement and responsibility displayed by the

⁷ Stankiewicz, Z. (1981). Sytuacja prawna Polaków na Litwie, Białorusi i Ukrainie w latach 1772–1863. In *Historia państwa i prawa Polski*, t. III. Ed. J. Bardach, M. Senkowska-Gluck. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, p. 833–860.

⁸ Potocki, L. (1910). Wspomnienia o Świsłoczcy Tyszkiewiczowskiej, Dereczynie i Różanie. *Kwartalnik Litewski*, t. 2. p. 139–140.

owner in relation to the development of the town and the quality of life of its inhabitants. Additionally, its characteristic architecture, the annual fair and exemplary gymnasium could be considered a phenomenon.

Count Wincenty Tyszkiewicz inherited Świsłocz from his father (Antoni Kazimierz Tyszkiewicz) when he was 21 and the town was considered a "small, shapeless and dirty."¹⁰

The new owner prepared and implemented a plan for the development of the town. He surrounded the town with a rampart, marked out streets leading to the marketplace and, at the end of three of those streets, he placed stone gates resembling triumphal arches. When planning houses, he introduced unified designs that were to be used by all inhabitants. Even the color of the houses or the fences was chosen and maintained according to the design. Although the owners were allowed to make some changes to the buildings, they could not change the way the building looked from the front side.¹¹ The building permits for these kinds of changes were issued especially for houses located near the marketplace to facilitate the use of the front rooms as shops.

In the very center of the town, Tyszkiewicz placed a square with a 30-meter pyramid topped with a gilded spire. Five inns, a pharmacy and a restaurant with a pool table were located near the marketplace. On the marketplace itself, a rectangular building of the trade hall was located. One of the biggest fairs of the Grodzieński governorate (and 2nd after the Zelwie fair), the so-called Uspień fairs (08.25–09.25) took place in the hall. Tyszkiewicz was granted a special right to organize the fair by king Stanisław August in 1783. Once a year, the inhabitants of the nearby towns and bordering governorates, traders and peasants from Russian, Ukraine, merchants from the Kingdom of Poland, Austria, Prussia, France, Italy, Denmark and Turkey all came to Świsłocz because of the fair. The size and importance of the fair could be measured in the number of trade transactions involving a plethora of wares of different value. For example, wares valued at 200,000 rubles in silver were traded on the Świsłocz marketplace in 1829. Due to the considerable value of the wares, Tyszkiewicz created a special firefighting team.

The trade hall had a remarkable architectural composition. Built at the beginning of 19th century in the classical style, it had four ground floor wings, covered with pitched shingle roofs, that enclosed a central square.

⁹ Bolbas, M. F. (1966). *Razvitie promyshlennosti w Bielorusii (1795–1861 gg.)*, Minsk: Bielarus 1966, p. 253.

¹⁰ Potocki, L. (1910). *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

¹¹ Sorkina, I. (2010). *Op. cit.*, p. 132.

The selling stations consisted of 48 identical fenced kiosks that were opened only during fairs, as well as three warehouses placed on the corners. Two entrances to the marketplace were placed in the middle of the two longer wings. Above one of them, there was a trade chamber with a gallery from a wooden railing placed on brick columns. Tyszkiewicz also built a theater hall in the building, which hosted performances during fairs.¹²

Apart from the economical role, the fairs were also used to complete political goals. During various political unrests and uprisings, Poles could use fairs to gather and organize without drawing too much attention.¹³ Additionally, the annual *świsłocz* fair also stimulated the local populace and those arriving to the town. It was not only a chance for trade or to earn money but it also offered specially prepared for the occasion entertainment: dancing evenings, performances prepared by theater groups from Grodno and Warsaw, who were invited and sponsored by Tyszkiewicz, as well as various bands and circus artists. The local nobility used the fairs as an occasion to plan and organize visits, horse riding, dinners, balls, masquerades, trips to the theater.¹⁴

Building a second theater hall near the marketplace on the ground floor of a 200 square meters wooden building, as well as the creation of a public garden with swings, carousel and a shooting range, were also Tyszkiewicz's achievements. The manor of the owner of *Świsłocz* was especially unique. The manor garden had hedges, an orangery, a swan pond with an island in the middle and a drawbridge. The garden was also a home for over 100 fallow deer and a few dozens other deer. Tyszkiewicz decided everything should be accessible to the public, which made the garden into an additional attraction and drew visitors during fairs.

Although the fair operated only during a specific, relatively short period of time, it had a large impact on the town and for the economic well-being of its inhabitants that lasted nearly for the whole year. However, the role of *Świsłocz* as an educator of the *kresy* youth was more important for the locals. The gymnasium was key for that role. It had a profound impact not only on the local populace but also reached far beyond the borders of the town, county or even governorate.

The Grodzieński Gymnasium of *Świsłocz* (as it was officially called) began its work in 1806 thanks to the initiative of the owner of the

¹² Sorkina, I. (2010). *Op. cit.*, p. 311.

¹³ A delation of a Jewish trader from Białystok aimed at Poles who organized secret meetings during the *Świsłocz* fair when the September Uprising was still in effect: Sorkina, I. (2010). *Op. cit.*, p. 128.

¹⁴ Potocki, L. (1910). *Op. cit.*, p. 145–148.

town: Count Wincenty Tyszkiewicz. It was the first and only secular high school in the Grodzieński governorate¹⁵ under the direct control of the Imperial University of Vilna. Because of the high level of education, qualified teaching staff and well-prepared teaching facilities, it was very popular among the Polish public. It was attended by not only the Grodzieński governorate's youth but also by the Mińsk's and Wołyń's youth.

In the case of this gymnasium, a rule, prepared by Tsar Aleksandr the 1st in the *Temporary regulations for the public enlightenment* (1803), stating that school of this level should be located in the capital of the governorate, or in this case in Grodno, was not enforced. There were a lot of arguments that made it possible to circumvent this rule but the direct involvement and plans of the count Wincenty Tyszkiewicz were decisive in this case. Thanks to his intervention in Petersburg, in 1804 he was not only granted the right to create a gymnasium, but also ensured its future by adding an appropriate entry in his will. The central location of Świsłocz in the Grodzieński governorate, and the important route joining Grodno and Brześć Litewski going through the town were one of the contributing factors that made this educational project possible. The argument that the youth should receive high quality education was also not without merit. This also meant that the school should also be placed in a place optimal from a health perspective (the proximity of the Białowież forest), it should not be too close to the governorate capital Grodno and its attractions and that the school was secular in nature, which was in line with the contemporary educational trends.

The fact that most of the Świsłocz populace was comprised of gymnasium students and teachers was beneficial for the town. On one side, they had a positive impact on the economic and cultural level of the town. On the other, thanks to those students and teachers Świsłocz was able to get the status of a town. Data from 1816 to 1818, when 53 percent out of the 614 inhabitants were teachers and students (328 individuals), seems to support this claim. In the school year of 1822/23, the size of the school community was 332 individuals (320 students and 12 teachers).¹⁶

For the locals, the gymnasium students proved to be an excellent source of income that lasted for the entire school year. Students coming

¹⁵ The two nearest gymnasiums located in Białystok and Grodno were monastic schools organized by the Basilian and Dominican Order monks.

¹⁶ In 1837, a plan to transform Świsłocz into a city was drafted, but the civil governor did not back that idea: Litewskie Państwowe Archiwum Historyczne w Wilnie [LVIA], f. 567, ap. 2, b. 1275, k. 38–48; Sorkina, I. (2010). Op. cit. p. 260.

to Świsłocz (as well as most of the teachers) provided a steady stream of income by renting rooms from September to July and by buying other services and products.

Another important factor that allowed the town to function uninterrupted was getting an agreement, arranged by Tyszkiewicz, stating that no standing troops will camp in Świsłocz. Despite the fact that the local lost some business opportunities because of this, the lack of a garrison meant that, in case of war, there was little chance that the city will come under armed threat. In addition, this arrangement ensured a calm and stabilized existence for the locals, keeping indecency to a minimum (prostitutes, gambling, alcohol) and stopped the spread of venereal diseases. Tyszkiewicz was able to get the agreement because of the location of the gymnasium in the town, which was crucial to the education of young men. It was beneficial for the educational process as it allowed for greater control over the students, made it easier to keep discipline as well as removed distractions and allowed students to focus on their studies instead of on the appeal of military service.

The Świsłocz gymnasium produced good teaching results. Good grades and the opinions of inspectors who visited the school twice a year support this. They commended the school for "diligence" and "progress" as well as the "manners" of the students.¹⁷ The excellent teaching staff, among whom were the graduates of the Vilna University as well as foreign universities, was largely responsible for the success of the school. Additionally, the Świsłocz gymnasium had a well-developed library as well specially-prepared classrooms (physics, mineralogy).¹⁸ The educational programs and school textbooks, many of which were prepared in the times of the Commission of National Education, had also a large impact on the educational process. They reminded the youth about their responsibility for the nation, its people, the necessity to act for their benefit and about the importance of the rule of law. The Vilna University authorities made sure that it would stay that way for as long as

¹⁷ In the National History Archive of Vilna, there are documents written during school visitations in the area of Vilna Scientific District in the years from 1803 to 1832, including documents about the Świsłocz gymnasium: F. 567, ab. 2.

¹⁸ The summaries of the school visitations point to the lists of items gifted to the gymnasium by civilian and military citizens, including former students and Wincenty Tyszkiewicz. E.g. in the report to the University of Vilna from the 20th of March, 1815, the principal of the gymnasium lists the following items: Homer's "Iliad," 23 copper medals depicting Polish kings, a golden ring with an engraved bust of the kings Stanisław August, a map atlas from 1752, with a total value of 64 silver rubles: LVIA, f.567, ap. 2, b. 509, k. 90–92.

possible.¹⁹ All these factors had a strong influence on the students, who not only learned about the Polish history, literature, natural law, political law and national law, but also about the national heroes and ideas key for every nation and its people: the concepts of motherland, freedom, constitution, patriotism.²⁰ The creation and existence of two illegal societies (the Moral and Scientific societies) in 1819–1820, which were shaped after the Philomaths and Philarets, was a testament of the political consciousness of the students. Later on (1822–1825), a patriotic group called *Zorzanie* set up a branch in the gymnasium. The branch was later on transformed into The Society of Military Friends (which was organized as a military-civilian conspiracy of Russian Decembrists).²¹ At the end of 19th century, to curb any attempts of disobedience by young Polish conspirators, an anonymous Russian publicist described the activities of Świsłocz school societies from the 1st half of 19th century in the following way: “In all of them, a spirit hostile to the authority was discovered. Only preposterous children stories were spread among them to incite hatred against the authority. All of them were punished. [...]”²²

The involvement of count Tyszkiewicz in the continuous existence of the Gymnasium was tremendous. Not only did he built the first two wooden buildings of the school but also financed its most crucial needs: firewood and the necessary maintenance. He started the school library by donating a considerable collection of his own books. He rented and paid for the rooms for teachers to use until the construction of a building that could house them was finished. In a similar manner, he took care of the poorer students. He rented the rooms for them and the poorest were provided for using his own assets. He was keen on what was happening in the gymnasium. He raised the profile of the school ceremonies held at the start and at the end of the school by attending and handing out awards for the brightest students.²³ When students got sick, he sent out for a doctor who came from Grodno and was paid by Tyszkiewicz for his services. He started a tradition of inviting students and teachers to visit

¹⁹ Beauvois, D. (1991). *Szkolnictwo polskie na ziemiach litewsko-ruskich 1803–1832*, t. 2, Rzym – Lublin: Fundacja Jana Pawła II – KUL, p. 307.

²⁰ Jędrychowska, B. (2007). Wychowanie patriotyczne i obywatelskie w szkolnictwie polskim pod zaborem rosyjskim. In *Historyczne konteksty edukacji obywatelskiej w społeczeństwach wielokulturowych*, A. Szerląg (Ed.). Kraków: Impuls, pp. 35–48.

²¹ Skowronek, J. (1994). *Młodzież polska i jej organizacje w ruchu narodowym 1795–1864*, Warszawa: Neriton, p. 42, 53–56.

²² M. Svisłocz-Volkovyskaja (Istoriczeskij oczerk), (1895). *Grodnienskije Gubernskije Wiedomosti*, nr 5–9.

²³ LVIA, f. 567, ap. 2, b. 239, k. 106 (2. VII. 1810).

him in his manor on Sundays. He invited the principal, two professors (each week someone else), and, during exams, also the best-performing students.²⁴ All students were allowed to use his garden and pond boats. However, the most important contribution to education and to the development of the city he made was the entry in his will that granted the funds necessary to build a new school building. Thanks to this entry, it was possible to build a new, modern, bricked, storeyed gymnasium hall after Tyszkiewicz's death. The opening of this new building took place in 1827.²⁵

The phenomenon of Świstocz started to wane since the thirties of the 19th century. After the failure of the 1830 uprising, the Tyszkiewicz fortune was confiscated by the Russians and it was assigned to the Ministry of National Goods for over 30 years. The manor was transferred into a nursing home for peasants belonging to the government and, in 1845, into a primary school (the so called palace school), which was funded by the treasury. After 1863, the whole estate was sold to a Russian official.

The process of degradation of the gymnasium started in 1832, when Russian was introduced as the primary teaching language. After 3 years, the status of the school was lowered from a governorate to a county school. In 1845, only a progymnasium (with the first four school years) was functioning in Świstocz, while the gymnasium was transferred to Szawel in the Kowieński governorate (from 1851). Finally, the participation of students in the January Uprising and its failure sealed the fate of the school which was closed in 1865. The apartments of the teaching staff were assigned to officials and allocated to a 2-year people's school. Since 1876, the Tyszkiewicz's gymnasium was used as a Russian seminar for teachers studying to work in people's schools. This state of affairs continued until the outbreak of the 1st World War. After Poland regained its independence, a Teaching Seminar started operating there in the school year of 1923/24. In 1935, the Seminar named Romuald Traugutt as its patron. Traugutt was the director and hero of the 1863 uprising and a student of the Świstocz gymnasium. He attended the school from 1836 to 1842 and graduated with a silver medal. Only one building and a statue of Traugutt lasted through the USSR era.

Along with the slow demise of the gymnasium and the waning Polish influences since the thirties of the 19th century, the Świstocz fairs also

²⁴ Potocki, L. (1910), *Op. cit.*, p. 145.

²⁵ In 1806, the gymnasium had 2 wooden buildings that housed 7 classes, a library, a mineralogy and physics classes, exam hall and 7 teacher apartments: LVIA, F. 567, ap. 2, b. 107, k. 49–50.

became less important. Their amazing history ends with a fire of the trade hall in 1872, which completely destroyed the building funded by Wincenty Tyszkiewicz. There was an attempt to replace them with an Orthodox church at the end of 19th century.

The Great Friday fire of 1886 wiped away most of the Tyszkiewicz's Świsłocz. Brick houses took the place of burned down wooden buildings with little regard to the old town plan.²⁶

Never has Świsłocz regained its uniqueness and former glory. Without its Polish owner, who was a guardian of the Polish spirit, it forever lost its unusual character.

²⁶ Wasilenko, M. (2015). Świsłocz: dziejowe blaski i cienie:
[www: kresy24.pl/69356/swislocz-dziejowe-blaski-i-cienie/](http://www.kresy24.pl/69356/swislocz-dziejowe-blaski-i-cienie/)