



TRANSITIONS ONLINE: **Separate Lives**

by Gosia Wozniacka and Wojciech Kosci

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At first sight, Belarusian Tokary looks no different than Polish Tokary. But crossing the distance between them is getting harder every day.

TOKARY, Poland--Down Napoleon Highway, where the French emperor marched his troops to Moscow, a road winds through thick forest, barren fields, and hamlets cocooned in lingering morning mist. Wooden huts perch on the edge of clearings.

Around the bend, the village of Tokary appears almost out of nowhere. A Catholic cemetery, guarded by an Orthodox wooden cross, marks the entrance. At the crossroads, two border patrolmen chat next to their jeep on the empty and wind-swept road.



A mile into town, Eugeniusz Wichowski is having a hearty mid-day meal. He's 42 and in his fourth term as mayor for a cluster of villages on the Polish-Belarusian border. His family is one of the oldest and most respected in Tokary--his grandfather was granted land here in recognition for fighting against the Germans in World War II.

Wichowski's mother, Antonina Wichowska, 72, shuffles around the kitchen serving pancakes and tea with lemon. Thanks to the mayor's efforts, his parents' house--like 99 percent of households here--has running water and electricity. And the village, like most others, has paved roads and telephone booths.

The main street of Tokary.

But it is only half the picture. The other half peeks out from behind the trees a few hundred meters away, in Belarusian Tokary. The Polish-Belarusian border slices the village in two, and, as of 1 May, that border gained added significance. With Polish Tokary now in the EU, its Belarusian twin--though within walking distance--is worlds apart, and the border may additionally become a dividing line between prosperity and stagnation.

EU membership has not been officially discussed for Belarus, or for another of Poland's former Soviet neighbors, Ukraine. Some fear that Tokary's impoverished Belarusian counterpart--and the villages like it that dot the borderlands--will be sealed for years to come behind a new "iron curtain."

AN OPEN AND SHUT CASE

Antonina, perched on a wooden stool by the white-tile stove, says the best thing her son ever did as mayor was to unite the two Tokarys, if only briefly. Her husband, Konstanty, has four brothers on the Belarusian side of the village and a sister in Brest. During the course of Konstanty's lifetime, Tokary belonged to Poland, briefly to Germany, then to the Soviet Union, again to Germany, and, finally returned--or half was--to Poland.

As mayor, Wichowski was able to open the border in Tokary on two occasions during religious holidays, in the early 1990s. Prior to this, Konstanty had not seen his



relatives for forty years. His wife and son had never met them.

“You should have seen it when we met again for the first time,” Antonina recounts. “We were all kissing each other and cursing those who had divided us. My husband was crying. They [the relatives from Belarus] slept here; the house was full with three generations of our family.”

Things are more complicated now. To cross from one Tokary to the other, Poles now need to go to Bialystok, the province’s capital city 130 kilometers away, to get a visa. And the nearest border crossing is in Polowce, 25 kilometers away.



The frontier.

Minority populations live on both sides of the border. There are Catholic Belarusians and Orthodox Poles. In Tokary, as in many towns and villages in this area, a Catholic church and an Orthodox chapel coexist. Despite past misunderstandings, the Catholic and Orthodox adherents of today attend each other’s services, especially weddings, funerals, and major religious holidays. Many villagers here speak a local dialect, a mixture of Polish, Ukrainian, and Belarusian, and on the Belarusian side, some still speak Polish.

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

A mile into the forest, a little past a sky-blue Orthodox chapel, a razed tract of earth stretches like a phantom road. From behind an iron gate, Belarusian Tokary is visible through the trees. Occasionally, the border patrol rumbles by in a jeep.

Ireneusz Koziejuk, 35, an Orthodox priest based in Polish Tokary, says he sometimes sees people driving up with old maps and waiting. “They sleep in their cars, and in the morning they are baffled as to why the gate is not rising. [I imagine] it used to be so nice, people going back and forth, back and forth. Now that’s just a memory.”



Ireneusz Koziejuk by Tokary’s Orthodox church.

At least at first sight, Belarusian Tokary looks no different than Polish Tokary. In a wooden house that’s only 10 years his junior, Jan Gorbaczuk, 78, looks at the telephone, his gaze mixing resignation and sadness. “These were my friends, my guys,” he says of his lost relatives and neighbors. “We used to go see girls together. Now I don’t even have a telephone number for Kostek [Konstanty Wichowski].” Jan and Konstanty’s fathers were brothers.

Maria Zajec, who runs the *kolkhoz*, the village collective farm of about 160 workers, says financial reality won’t allow villagers like Gorbaczuk to visit Poland. Belarusians live on an average monthly salary of \$50, and a single-entry visa costs \$12.

“The European Union will not do us any good,” she announces categorically standing in her driveway. “We won’t be going to Brest anytime soon to get a visa, because most people here don’t even have a car, and if we did, we couldn’t afford to pay the

[visa] fee.”

Zajec, in her late 40's, believes the West is out to exploit countries from the former Eastern Bloc. “We'll all become their slaves,” she says. “The West doesn't need your goods. It only needs your land and labor.”

“But if I had the choice,” Zajec adds quickly, “I would like to live in Poland. I often watch Polish soap operas on TV. It's so nice there. In Poland you can be the master of your own life. There is something to look forward to. Here, it's the collective.”

By the fence of Zajec's house, an old woman pushes a rusted bicycle down the asphalt road. Weronika Samczuk, 78, got married three months before the border closed in 1948. Her house, which stood in the borderline strip, was dismantled. She was stuck with her husband in Belarus and never made it back to Poland. “Please, tell me how everyone on the other side is,” she implores.

Mayor Wichowski calls the closing of the border in Tokary “a mistake.” For years he has been working to re-open the crossing. “I feel like Don Quixote tilting at windmills, especially now that the European Union is here,” he says. “The new visa regulations have created so many problems. Contacts between people [on both sides of the village] used to be easier. Today it's worse than ever before. People have stopped visiting each other.

“Contact with the Belarusian border region is one of my priorities as mayor,” he adds.

SERVING COWS IN APRONS

Wearing a stretched, gray sweater marked with holes and pieces of earth, Kazimierz Zalewski, the Tokary village administrator or *sołtys*, has just finished mucking out the pigsty. He smiles heartily from under his thick moustache when he speaks. Zalewski, 48, has 23 hectares of poor-quality farmland from which he must sustain his wife, their six children, and his parents. He produces about 80 percent of the food his family needs on his farm.



Kazimierz Zalewski in front of his house.

According to Zalewski, farmers in Tokary are not enthusiastic about the changes the EU is to bring.

“They don't have any hope,” he says, pulling on his moustache as he stands on the steps of his white-brick house. “They don't believe in the EU.”

Zalewski says the EU will be beneficial for Warsaw, but not for fringe villages like Tokary, citing the cumbersome regulations that farmers must fulfill to operate in the new market as the main reason for his pessimism. Using his own case as an example, the *sołtys* says he might have to give up milk production and sell his four cows, even

though they now bring him about \$250 per month in income through milk sales. He simply can't afford to build the modern, roofed cowshed separate from other buildings in his farmyard that EU regulations dictate.

“This is baloney,” he sneers. “What are we supposed to do? Take care of the cows in white aprons?”

EU membership will bring with it EU agricultural subsidies, but at only half the level that Western farmers receive. That inequality will continue until 2013, when subsidies will finally level up. According to a study by the European Commission, Zalewski and other local farmers like him can count on receiving up to \$300 a month.

SURVIVING, NOT THRIVING

With or without the subsidies, people in Tokary are trying to make do. Some have jobs in the neighboring village of Adamowo, where they're helping expand the local oil pumping station, a part of the "Friendship" pipeline that runs from Russia to central Poland. Others work at the post office or at the juice plant Hortex in the town of Siemiatycze, 30 kilometers away. Still others cultivate their own small plots of land. But many, Zalewski says, have already left.



Jan Gorbaczuk, of Belarusian Tokary, waits for a phone call from his relatives.
funerals.

For some, it all comes back to the dormant border crossing.

"Young people leave because they don't see a future here," Bohdan Sawicki, the village's Catholic priest, says. "I am quietly hoping that the border crossing will reopen here in Tokary. This would mean increased movement and trade, hence a hope for monetary gains. People here are strong, capable. They just need a chance."

Without a border crossing, the 48-year-old priest says, this village may die. Only two baptisms were celebrated this year, but he's presided over four

Despite ambivalence about both their future in the EU and the increasing formalization of the dividing line between the two Tokarys, people here still chose to vote yes in the referendum on Poland's accession to the EU in June 2003. Anemic turnout aside, 67 percent of villagers in border towns like Tokary who did choose to go to the polling station cast a yes vote. And in April, Mayor Wichowski hired two advisors to help local farmers fill out paperwork for EU projects and subsidies.

But even the optimistic Wichowski sounds worried about the future of the tiny place where he was born. The divided village's Polish part—even though it is most certainly better off than its Belarusian twin—is still a long way from prosperity. While he busies himself with learning how to fill out forms for EU benefits, Wichowski says he sometimes wonders about the wisdom of it all. Maybe if villagers in the Belarusian and Polish parts of Tokary were given the chance to stick together, Wichowski muses back in his office, both Tokarys could make it.

"When a poor guy gets together with another poor guy, they both get rich," he says, coining an aphorism. "But when a poor guy gets together with rich guys, the poor man only gets poorer."

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Photos by Gosia Wozniacka.

This autumn represents 15 years since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the changes that swept through Central and Eastern Europe, heralding the end of the communist era. To mark the occasion, TOL and the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California-Berkeley have teamed up on a *transatlantic collaborative reporting project* that examines the transition since then, through profiles of people across the post-communist region.

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