STEFAN ŻEROMSKI

The Fir-Tree Wilds

translated by Charles S. Kraszewski

To Aleksander Janowski
in fraternal respect

Your sighs and rustles fill my ears, O woods of my childhood and youth — even though it was not granted me to hear them in person for too long! In my daydreams I race along the summits of your sublime mountains — Łysica, Łysiec, Strawczana, Bukowa, Klonowa, Stróżna — the ranges of my homeland — Radostowa and Kamień — as well as all of your sisters afar. But it's no longer me, the man I am today, who draws that air into his healthy lungs, that invisible crystal, immeasurable and immaculate, pure good, cold and unsullied by foul breath, rotten exhalations, filth and dust — but someone else, someone who for a long time now is no more — that youth who once inhabited my being. Sometimes it seems to me that there never was such a boy, that he is nothing more than an imaginary figure, one of those that you find in the void, whom you create, and form, to show to others through the means of the scribbling that has been my mania since childhood — that it was that Rafał or someone else yet, who bounded at one time over these hills. That 'me', passed on and no longer in existence, with a gun slung over his shoulder, bends over the stormy, frothy, eternal waters of the Spring of St Francis, gazing at its swelling surface, as pure as a tear, in order to make of his reflected image the hero of some tale, a heroic figure both imaginary and yet his twin, a mysterious *quidam*, a two-legged creature deserving of being set in a drama for the ages, or an epic poem in ten books. And so this fellow's sitting on the bank of the roaring stream that flows from the Spring of St Francis, and rushes downhill, winding amongst the stones. He's listening to the voice of the wilds, which booms and dies along with the fluctuations of the wind as it comes and goes, telling me its story my whole miserable life long.

Scholars of the history of the earth, who burrow through the layers of its crust like unreachable moles or soar like birds over the lands and oceans of prehistory, leaping sprightly and surely through the millennia, persuade me that the rubble on the summit of Łysice, hoary with mosses, peppered with ferns and blossoms, and the quartz, brilliant with mica and shiny with mountain crystal, which lies at the summit of the range, secretes in itself the impressed fossils of large-eyed oceanic crabs that once became mired in the sands of this former shore of a northern sea. Whether that is true or not, let them busy themselves with the postmortem histories of crabs. I hate death. I love the new life of this region, even if its newness extends as far backwards as the first sprouting of the grass upon this crustacean cemetery.

I can see yet, with the eyes of a child, living crabs, black creatures of weird forms, which thrilled the imagination of the boy as they floated over the bright, miry bed of the stream that pulses from my home mountain to tumble downhill in dashes, quick turns, half-circle detours and sudden, downward cascades. The succulent vegetation that grows above it — viburnum, blackthorn, wolf's-tongue and the lush reeds, covered by large leaves, but hollow within, which serve so wonderfully as straws with which to draw into one's mouth sips of water from the spring so icy it makes your teeth hurt. The plants growing on both sides of the stream stretch out and intertwine above it. Hops winds about the stalks, and forest raspberries push themselves in here and there. In these thickets the shrikes forge their bell-like songs, and a cuckoo, hidden somewhere, plays hide and seek with the amused, frisky soul of the child. The black shadows of the firs rock and sway in a rhythmic dance on the turf of spring, an immensity spread with flowers. Butterflies, multicoloured, spotted, and adorned with patterns, flit to and fro, as if they also were in search of the cuckoo's hiding place. The voice of the stream, like a bell, rises from its bed; it would also like to join in the game, but its living waters, shredded by the rocks into little streamlets, must rush on, rush on downwards. They flash and sparkle in the sun, glistening, glittering brilliantly, a deathless image of the one and only, true happiness: the essential, indivisible and finite joy of life. O stream, O stream, where have you taken, where have you taken those waters I once knew!…

In my youth, over the course of many years, I became quite familiar with the living waters of this woodland Nida, which from many pure streams swells into a mighty rolling river. From time to time she received me in her friendly, icy embrace, when I threw myself trustingly into her black depths after rising from a deep sleep, the sleep of the just, as soon as the dawn blushed the sky rose beyond the summit of Łysica. She bore me along on her bosom like a good mother and I swam, now on my back, now swimming a breast-stroke, now side-stroke, now treading water upright. Sometimes when I penetrated her depths, exploring for too long the mysteries she held amidst the bifurcated trunks of trees of the wilderness that had once been toppled into her stream, and now planted in her channel's bed, she would expel me to the surface with a mighty upswell from her seemingly infinite depths. Back then, I became expert in the customs and nature of fish; in the shyness, wisdom and instincts of wild ducks, teals, snipes, water hens, ringdoves, and hawks. I answered the cleverness and defensive intuition of the antlered tribes, the foxes, and the hares, with the cleverness and slyness of humanity. I was both hunter and fisherman, though more by name than judging from the results of my efforts. For I was the greatest (because the only) poet of the Holy Cross Mountains, pretending to be a hunter and a fisherman. I had in me the lightness of the fox, the legs of the stag, and, it seemed, the wings of the snipe at my shoulders. I wrote my miserable verses in forest and on uneven country roads, during long summer rains sheltering beneath the cover of an alder near the smudge of the Nida, or beneath the roof of a rick in the stubblefields of Wilków — and in the sylvan chapels near the cloister of St Catherine.

I composed dramatic works, chaotic and not fit for the stage, from the legends of the Uprisings in that desolate region where the bloody footprints of warriors overcome had not yet completely dried, — where the exterior walls of the roadside inn were still black and riddled with bullet holes like a sieve, and every grownup person who had lived through those bloodsoaked days talked of nothing else, depositing their stories in my ears as if laying them up in a warehouse. They often defined their lives by what went before, and what came after the Uprising. I worked up endless, and of course poorly constructed, novels of Marek the peasant from Krajno, who led his own peasant unit during the Uprising, and spun an epic concerning the cursed and shunned traitor from this same village — Janic — who for divulging the conspiracy led by Ścięgienny, the pride and glory of these black woods of ours, received medals and five colonies in exchange for his treason, before he drank himself to death out of despair, croaking like a bum in a ditch.

I can still see you in my mind's eye, ah, little temple, formerly a hermit's cell, you cradle of my — dear God! — wretched poems…

Surrounded on all sides by a fence of fir pickets, you stand in the middle of a fragrant meadow. Your door dry-rotted long ago, the latch gone rusty, and the jambs warped to the point that it can no longer close. Once, the wind, which suffers no mystery or barrier, blew it wide apart, slamming it against the wall, and thus it remains with the aperture forever spread open to the eye. And the trapdoor in the floor, leading down into the cellar, has also crumbled away and fallen in. Anyone curious enough might take a peek at what is to be found there, underground, in the depths! The dry, shrivelled remains of some unknown Polish knight lie down there, in a musty coffin. Perhaps he is that very same knight depicted asleep on the marble monument in the old cloister church of St Catherine, resting his helmeted head upon his iron fist. That very same one, perhaps, whose life, lauded in a Latin inscription, has been painted over and over with lime by the sisters in their praiseworthy ardour for cleanliness, year in and year out, for holiday and feast, and so diligently and effectively that not much can be made out today of the chivalric paean inscribed there save many, illegible incisions, while the knight himself, along with his chanson de geste, is slowly being transformed into a mass of lime, a sort of understructure of the mute wall. I'm certain that still today on the walls of that woodland chapel, whitewashed for the last time — thank goodness! — before the Uprising, one might read the inscriptions, of which one, scratched into the plaster with some sharp instrument, is somewhat incomprehensible: *The summit of my suffering reached the height of this mountain 1863.* There is no name appended to it. It was as if that year of all years — 1863 — inscribed these words with a shattered sword or broken bayonet, for no one in particular, but for all. Next to that declaration, which became the theme of a certain blood-soaked tragedy that filled a forty-groszy notebook from cover to cover, is scrawled *Stefan Żeromski, second form*, and beneath that: *Jan*

Stróżecki, second form. However much that person in 1863 all too effectively kept his name a mystery, we two, pupils of the second form, did all that was in our power to immortalise our own. Later too Jan Stróżecki did all that was in his power, for he went off unbowed, unafraid, into that most severe of places, Siberia, where he bore up to the end against the Muscovite Tsar and his empire, and later, after years of battling, he gave his life in France saving that of another drowning man. An honourable death worthy of our comrade from the same school bench in Kielce. But — ah, Janku! — what if the sisters, for some feast day or other, decide to give that chapel at the foot of Łysica, at the edge of the woods, a fresh coat of paint, destroying your sole epitaph as well as the traces of my glory, that of the greatest poet to be found between Łysica and Mount Radostowa, transforming them into dumb and dead lime — just as happened to the praise of the knight down there in the crypt! Only lilies of the valley and wild strawberries keep alive the memory of the free souls of knights. Round about the old chapel, in the lush and fragrant grasses, you'll find them pushing in as always in springtime, toward the wide open door to extend past the dry-rotted threshold their red fruit and white blossoms, as if with pious intent they wished to offer their scent as a posthumous gift of thyme, to warriors forgotten by their fellow men.

The conquering of space in the days of youth through the agency of muscular power, which was up to every challenge, and conquered every distance without the least bit of effort, imprinted its indelible figure on the comprehension, or rather the realisation, of all dimensions, by the grown man. For me, the measure of space was and continues to be the distances between various points in those home regions of mine. Two versts — that's the length of the road from Ciekoty to Wilków. Three versts — the highway from Krajno to Górno; three miles: that from Kielce to St Catherine's as the crow flies. In my imagination, every difficult, great, hard labour of whatever sort, literary work, library work, or any other, is measured by and compared to memories of my muscular strength, and the force of my nerves, back then, measured against the height of Mount Radostowa. So now I'm at the foot of the mountain, in Leszczyny, in Mąchocice, in Bęczków; now I'm at the top of the first slope, the second, the third — I'm almost there — I'm at the summit! And now I see my end goal: my home hearth! And down I come, swiftly loping. Now I'm at the balk of our fields. I see our door, I cross our threshold… And exhausted with effort I throw myself down for a joyful and quiet rest…

Just like all the people through the ages who clambered up these mountains and penetrated the deep forests, inebriated with the same rustling soughs of the firs, drawing deep into their lungs the aromas, the same pure atmosphere — so I. The first to arrive in these parts, spear in hand, or perhaps carrying a bronze hatchet, was a man coming from the south, from the regions inhabited by the Wiślanie, or perhaps from the north, from Mazovia. At any rate, he arrived in prehistory, before human gossip and rumour was to grasp, and in their own way, solidify common knowledge for times to come. Certainly he trembled as he went along, gaping with fear-widened eyes at the wilderness of Łysica. For what he saw all around him were savage trees, thick backwoods, sublimely tall pineforests stretching on and on as far as the eye could see. An awful terror filled his soul as he went on through the unknown region, never seen before, with its cylindrical, mighty trunks shredded with fissures and dripping with resin, stretching a hundred ells into the sky. Clutching with the crooked claws of their roots the rocky rubble of the weatherworn mountain quartz, squeezing themselves in between the barricades of criss-crossed fallen trunks, swaying to and fro, their crowns dragged flat by the strong winds, coated in the green garlands of fresh needles, burdened with countless arms like mighty rafts of timber, fragrant with the balsamic oils locked in their seeds — they lifted up before him the song of their rustles and moans, their wild breath, which all that is human knows and remembers. An ancient, primeval voice, unchanging and profound, came upon his soul from the depths of the dark wood, rising to rush upon him. A high-pitched voice of warning and admonition, a laugh and a sob, a poetic musing that died away in the deep, deaf woods. But just as the woodland note softly died away, the howling of a wolf sprang up from the midst of the wilds, or the sonorous hooting of an owl, piercing the man's heart with a terrible fear. And the chance intruder bowed low in mysterious dread before the trees of ancient growth. He longed to understand their voice, so like the confused and blurry babble of a deaf man, so as to discern within it some answer to his questions concerning the uncertainty, the mystery, the fragility of life. But this murmur that arose from the silence and departed in silence carried within itself not only the realisation of sudden, unexpected death lurking

so close at hand. In his fright, the man also believed that in these pine-forests there hid, concealed, breathing the melodious wind, the omnipotent spirit Świst-Poświst himself, the very deity of death.

This first of all humans who penetrated my woods so long before me was the companion of my youthful days. I liked to imagine him creeping through the same thick undergrowth as I, through the same vales and ravines through which rush the same streams, making his way along the same gentle hills and low smudges of mist-covered marshes, hunting the brown beaver that builds his domed lodges along the banks of our black river; the furry, chestnut-coated, slender and lithe marten, the pelts of which were used as money — ten making up a *grzywna* — legal tender; the bear and the wolf, the stag and the ferocious boar, who could hold his own against a pack of ten hunting dogs when they had him at bay; the clever fox, the stocky sloth, that pedantically tidy sluggard the badger, and the vulture perched in the forks of the tallest tree on Łysica. I liked to dream of him slipping through the woodland paths, marten pelts slung over his shoulder, paths known only to him, leading toward Tarżek on the banks of the little river Świślina, at the edge of woods where for long ages now the uniform fields of fertile Sandomierz clay stretch all the way to the deep old-stand woods. It was at the market there where, as far back as human memory reaches, hunters and poachers, people of the forests, savage folk, always ready for a tussle, would come into contact with people from the Polish plains and meadows, tillers of the fields, who sowed rye and wheat, who milled flour and were adept at grafting delicious cultivated fruit branches on wild fruit trees. In exchange for pelts of marten, badger, and bear, for wolfish dogs and collars of beaver, they would trade forged iron implements, tanned leather straps, flour and salt, sweet fruit and fired clay pottery.

There the woodsmen would also hear accounts of worlds other than their own black one. They listened to the reports of strange men constructing a stone temple in Żmigród, men who pour water over hardworking people and teach them soft, new beliefs. The people of the wilds were then eager to leave the market in Tarżek and head back into the mountains. Joyously they greeted the woods upon their return, where the highest summit suddenly falls away into the chasm of the cold valley below like a thunderhead full of hail. Their hearts would soar in speechless wonder upon beholding a white cloud arising from the dark depths, impenetrable to the eye, to soar along the blue rocky gnarls toward the sublime summit — just as our own hearts do, ever the same hearts of people of the wilds.

At one time there was another market too, far past Radostowa and Kamień heading south, among the hills where a warrior folk had built a fortress for the Polish king. It was there, at the foot of that castle, on its outskirts, where guests arriving from foreign lands — clever merchants — would bring sharp weapons, swords, and ingenious tools of iron to barter in exchange for marten pelts. It was from this fortress, raised in Kielce, that the Hungarian prince Emeryk once departed, bearing in his arms the holy Cross unto Łysiec, where already a Polish king named Mieczysław, or maybe it was Bolesław, surnamed the Brave, or maybe the Wry-Mouthed, had built a church, not a large church, but thick-set, built of stone in the old Greek manner. This same king had summoned there twelve Benedictine brothers, all of Italian generation and tongue, from far-off Cassino, establishing them in a monastery. Now it was a long path of sand and gnarly roots that the Hungarian prince Emeryk traversed in the company of Lambert, Bishop of Kraków, piously bearing five fragments of the Holy Cross set in a golden reliquary cross of five arms. And the savage people of the woodlands dared not fall upon those defenceless pilgrims. The heavy hand of the King already rested upon their capricious nature; the traces of his power yet remain in the names of the mountains: Królewska Góra — Royal Mountain; Książęca Góra — Princely Mountain. It was only recently, eight centuries later, that the villainy of the bandits resumed its capering. When the cannon-balls of war had destroyed the church tower on Holy Cross Mountain, a thievish hand burst open the sacred reliquary and stripped the gold plate off the fragments of the Cross, hurling the relics of the sacred Wood somewhere amongst the filth of the earth.

Then came the time when the prince ruling in Kraków granted the mountain range and swaths of forest to the episcopal see of Kraków. the lands administered by the border castellans in Kielce and Tarżek became strongholds and refuges of the new lords of the region. In Tarżek — the name of which over the years became Tarczek — the bishop established a hunting lodge. There, rulers who more than once toppled kings from their thrones, enjoyed holidays in the wilderness. More than one of them, a son

of the common people who, on account of his virtues, intelligence, refinement, cleverness, and expertise in worldly ways acquired in the Ausonian regions, became great benefactors of the woodland areas, when elevated to such a lofty eminence. They established new cities, like Kielce and Bodzantyn, raising sky-scraping collegiate churches amidst the untouched wildernesses, and palaces decorated in the Italian style, with defensive walls like ribbons extended over some gigantic palm, populating their cities with hosts of artists and masters. From upper and middle Ponidzie they summoned colonists with hatchet and ard to cut and clear the edges of the woods in the vicinity of Kielce castle. Farmland was parcelled out to the agricultural folk of Wola Kopcowa, Radlin, Górno, Leszczyny, Wola Jachowa and Napieńków. But the taller forests remained a long while as they had ever been. Only later were the farmers to creep closer, cutting woods and clearing fields where the whitewashed walls of Bieliny stand, where Porąbki stretches, gnawing at Łysica itself, with Krajno hanging on its beetling slopes. Just as earlier unvanquished monarchs and powerful Cracovian princes hunted here, so later did the chivalric bishops: Lambert, Gedko, Prandota, Bodzanta, Florian Jelitczyk z Mokrzka, Paweł z Przemankowa, Zbigniew z Oleśnicy, Gamrat, Zadzik, and others. Surrounded by the healthy, proud nation of mountaineers, tempered and toughened by the harsh climate, mighty of thew and brave and valorous at heart, with shrewd, keen commoners acting as beaters and trackers, sly poachers who seemed gifted with a canine sense of smell, amid their hounds and stallions, mongrels for boars, dachsunds for foxes and badgers, as well as kennels of all sorts of dogs rousing the summits with the echoes of their barking, they coursed through the wilds clad in armour, with spear and bow in hand. Breast to breast they contended with the shaggy bear, the enraged wolf, and the dreadfully dangerous wild boar who, flailing savagely when cornered, tore dogs with his tusks and flung their corpses aside.

Once, as the story goes, the mighty Bodzanta reclined to rest there upon the mother-mountain's sloping bosom. Wearing over his breastplate a soft tunic embroidered in patterns, he dismounted and cast himself down on the grass. With a wave of his hand he dismissed the swarms of flatterers, clowns, jesters, and all other of his attendants. He had his dogs leashed and led away. Resting his head on his hands, his legs in leather leggings spread apart, he lay there, gazing up at the sky, over which little white clouds were sailing above the gentle summits. He lay there on his back, listening to the mournful, immense song of the firs — the only song worth listening to, as it never ends, never grows weak — the song of the invincible power and bold desires of youth — and the rotten despair of decrepit age — the passions and furies of the frenzied soul. It summoned him to prayer and, raising an orison heavenward, his soul felt burdened with a sighing sadness, as dread arose within him, a world-weariness, as he reflected upon his years past, years which had flowed away, never to be seen again, ever. Secret sins, which held him bound like a prisoner chained in a dungeon, of which no one knew save these trees which stirred him, arousing and drawing him to something other, something unknown. Bishop Bodzenta pressed their singing to his bosom, conjuring them on all that was most holy to keep up their incessant song…

It was through this wooded land, still unpopulated and undeveloped, that the sons of the pinewoods skulked like beasts themselves, tracking down and putting to death both animals and any daring merchant who should boldly set out upon the rooty, sandy, wet path leading from the castle outskirts in Kielce to the outskirts of the castle in Bodzantyn with their wares. And yet there did arrive people unafraid of the Holy Cross bandits, who settled for good along that old road. These were anchorites, Benedictine hermits. They built themselves little huts from the fir trunks that had been torn from the earth by the strong winds and strewn upon the grasses. It was watery places they sought — this one by the eternally seething, bubbling spring, that other alongside the stream that sparkles in the sunlight, brilliant and ever-changing in the patterns of its reflections, and a third farther down yet, beside the rivulet grown over with blackthorn, hobble-bush, and a thicket of wild raspberries, where the shrike forges his bell-like songs and the cuckoo, concealed somewhere, plays hide and seek.

Their little dwellings have endured to the present day, transformed into wayside chapels, though the hermits are no more; all memory of them has vanished, and when no one any longer knows them, when no one remembers, no one can understand why these little divine retreats are found here of all places. These new arrivals feared no attack, as they owned nothing worth robbing. The hermits led a harsh life, abstaining from meat for years on end, even on the greatest feast days, reluctantly accepting meagre

alms, if any at all. They served the people sprinkled out over this area all the way to Kamień Kraiński, or along the riverbanks, as guides, giving shelter to those wandering lost through the great forests. They were also the first to speak with the hunters and settlers of the mystery of existence, and death. The first anchorite, supposedly, was an Italian. When he arrived in these dark green wildernesses, how the soughing of the firs must have set him to thinking of the southern sky, the vistas of the Neapolitan Campagna, the blue islands in the azure sea, visible like clumps of mist from the summit of Monte Cassino, or of that most graceful of slopes in the world, where the sea slips into the land near Santa Maria Ligure — that hive of monks. He must have lost himself in recollections of the silver hues of the olive trees flowing down towards the scarlet of the roses below, roses who imaged forth the Santa Rosa Mistica, and remembered the cherry and almond trees, which grow pink, then white, to sway in the breezes of March. Lonely doldrums and regret will fall upon the soul of a man from such regions, blossoming and fragrant, to whom the wild beauties of the northern forest are foreign and hostile. But strength of spirit and an unbreakable will had him search out a medicine for doldrums and regret in mortification of the flesh and prayer. Above his hut the dark green wilds would keen with their satanic siren songs, the *świst-poświst* of their whistling, which he chased away with his discipline. Since there was no return for him now, he would escape into the mountains, higher and higher, beyond the desires of the flesh, beyond human nature, beyond angelic nature, hastening to the welcoming embrace of the God-Man.

It's possible that one of these anchorites of Polish blood and speech, who came of a distinguished clan, delivered to the gathered people in their own Polish tongue that sermon on St Catherine, which happens to be the oldest written monument of that old language. Was the little church consecrated to that saint standing amidst the hermits' dwellings already? Presented first to the Bernardine order, and later to the Bernardine sisters, it has endured long centuries. It was the sisters who taught the people of the neighbouring villages how to read and write, as well as manual crafts. It was they who planted a decorative garden behind their cloister, where the loveliest lilies to be found on earth grew, blooming always on Sundays in June so as to grace the altar dedicated to the great martyr Catherine — and from which garden blossoming apple-trees stretched up and over the high wall. A stream regulated by a stone channel babbled its waters through the garden, while the great, dark forest gathered to its bosom that blossoming cloister garth.

But the old native gods of wood and field didn't just die off. Strigas and incubi, imps and goblins, loitered about the porches, in embers and under thatch. The evil one capered along paths, lurking at crossroads and wandering about the homesteads. The demon of plague dragged about the rutted roads in evil days, even though crosses of aspen were set up to block his progress. A deep, deaf faith, as dark as night, a faith of the woodlands, a native faith, was not to be uprooted so easily. It crept silently through the villages, the *kolenije*, which now climbed upwards towards the very summit of Radostowa and along the Kamień divide, spreading on both hands — Klonów, Psary — on the clearings of the pinewoods. Witches, wise women, and spectres still prowled about, flying up the summit of Łysica to gather mysterious herbs, casting spells and evoking misfortune. And then sorcerers of long generational pedigrees could undo illness and spell, infallibly healing the afflicted in the old ways, mumbling ancient formulas, incomprehensible ones, over a knot of hair or tatters of a hanged man's clothing, the claw of a bat, moss from a stone cross at a crossroads, boiling water, embers, or bread.

And there were accretions of new magic too, as when, for example, during Elevation, the old monk who served St Catherine's Church as pastor would lift the heavy golden monstrance to the level of his eyes and gaze through the blue smoke of incense at the crowd that packed the little church. The old 'lads' of the Holy Cross villages sought to hide behind the backs of others, or covered their faces with their hands, as they had more than one blotch on their consciences, and the oldest people present reminded each other in whispers that old Fr Kazimierz can gaze right through the Most Holy Sacrament to see every crime committed as plain as day. Terror walked amongst the peasants with staring eyes.

And who can explain the power made palpably present by that song-force 'Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us!' when a whole host, a whole community, entire villages

would pour it forth from their lungs, crowded inside the ancient, thick-walled, short and stocky little church of St Catherine!

They lifted their petitions from their lowliness, humbled peasant-wise at the feet of God —

'From pestilence, famine, fire and war, deliver us, O Lord! We sinners beseech Thee, Lord…'

But they couldn't stave off war with their prayers. It arrived, a horrible and long war. More horrid and four times longer than the Uprising. Like a thunderhead spilling hail it clattered with a rattle above the high mountains and the low cottage roofs. Those vile Austrians came armed with axes to chop down the dark woods, which even the dirty-brown Muscovites dared not touch. But the forest fought back with its wildness, its sudden ravines, the stoniness of its roads, the mountain crevasses and channels that sent rivers thundering downhill when the downpours came. They couldn't reach Łysica!

And then Poland resumed her place anew. The Muscovites had not transformed the cloister of St Catherine into a cavalry barracks, as they had planned to do; nor did the Austrian set his axe to the root of the forests. The house of God stands there still. One can glimpse its white tower from all sides of the valley, violet-hued from the woods that stretch towards it from near and far in great swaths yet. It is something of a keystone that holds the many wild places together. The eye sweeps the area to come to rest upon its white shape, and once sculpted in the eye, it remains in the heart forever.

Eternal life to you, O little temple, garden of lilies, heart of the forests! Evil times have passed over you and away, times soaked with human blood. Others are on their way now, others… But who can tell whether a new tribe of people, for whom all is mutable, nothing known, should send out woodsmen once more with axes so as to chop and hew to the root the mother-woods of fir on the basis of some new law, on behalf of some business, someone's essential profit. Whatever law that should be, whosoever should enact it, I shall cry out to the barbarians down through the ages — I shall not permit it! The royal wilds, the princely, diocesan wilds, the Holy Cross, peasant wilds must remain for all ages a forest untouched, the seat of ancient deities over which the Sacred Stag will bound, a refuge for anchorites, the great breath of the earth and the living song of eternity!

The wilds are no-one's — neither mine nor yours, nor even ours, but God's, sacred!