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PEASANT WOMEN IN THE POLISH KINGDOM
(the 19th century — beginning of the 20th century)

Two different clearly delineated pictures of women can be found in publicistic writings and studies dealing with the peasantry of the Polish Kingdom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One presents a woman who is the mainstay of peasant culture and conservatism, a woman who calls in a quack instead of a physician when a member of the family is ill, makes it impossible for her husband to subscribe to a newspaper, objects to any change in farming, believes in sorcery and superstitious practices¹. The other picture portrays a peasant women, usually young, who leaves her home in search of bread, and also in search of an easier life, urban dress and an “urban” husband. Hundreds of thousands of girls of the latter group became domestic servants, learned a trade or gained skill in operating machines in factories; some few completed a secondary or even a higher school. Thanks to their contacts with their families they helped to spread in their native village the manners, dress, expressions and attitudes they had acquired in town. They propagated changes and modernization among peasants².

How was it possible for persons descending from the same social milieu to adopt such diametrically opposed attitudes? Before I try to present a possible answer to this question which is of fundamental importance for the history of Polish society, let me make it clear that my attempt will be a suggestion, a researcher’s reflection rather than a documented theory because of an almost complete lack of studies on the lives of peasant women in central Poland³.

One of the most important tasks with which peasant families were confronted after becoming owners of land was to ensure the best possible

¹ *Nieprzyjaciółki oświaty (Enemies of Education)*, “Gazeta Świąteczna” 1901, N° 10, 11, p. 1.

² Antoszką, *Przy kądzieli (At the Spinning Wheel)*, Warszawa 1906, pp. 50 ff., 85 ff.

³ The only historical study on peasant women in the Polish Kingdom is D. W a r z y k o w s k a – W i e r c i o c h o w a’s book *Z dziejów kobiety wiejskiej (A History of Peasant Women)*, Warszawa 1961. The author focuses attention on the educational work conducted by the intelligentsia, the beginnings of agricultural training and the peasant youth movement. Ethnographic studies are of a different character, their aim being to create a model image of a “housewife” and “a maid”, detached from social context and chronology. Cf. D. M a r k o w s k a, *Rodzina w społeczności wiejskiej. Ciągłość i zmiana (The Family in Rural Communities. Continuity and Changes)*, Warszawa 1976.

start in life to their children. It was generally believed that a girl should have a trousseau which would enable her to find a husband of no lower social and financial status than that of her own family. Another rule was that the property standing of the both partners of a newly married couple should be of the same value with the aim to prevent discrimination of the poorer partner⁴. A consistent observance of these two principles would have secured practical impartibility of peasant farms (one child together with his/her spouse would have taken over the parents' farm, the other would have gone to the parents-in-law). However, since a peasant family usually had four to six children, this meant that the other children would have been left unprovided for.

In everyday life various solutions were resorted to. Sometimes the principle of impartibility was maintained, sometimes each child received an equal share, but usually endeavours were made to ensure that young people get the minimum necessary to have a holding of their own (in the second half of the 19th century this consisted of an equivalent of 3–4 acres, a cow and a trousseau, at the beginning of the 20th century this was reduced to 1–1.5 acres but the possibilities of earning extra money were greater)⁵. The results of my research into the socialization of peasant youth in the Polish Kingdom indicate that only every third, at best every second, peasant child in the Kingdom could hope to receive the minimum which made it possible to set up a farm⁶. The other children had to content themselves with a repayment, which was often symbolic. Consequently, only a half of peasant daughters could hope to attain the social status of a housewife (including marriages between young girls and widowers).

It is worth emphasizing that the social status of "housewife" which a girl could achieve through marriage with an adequately endowed young man was most desirable. It gave the girl a high position both in the village and parish as well as a sense of security in life (a very important factor, rarely taken into account by researchers into the past of the countryside). A housewife participated in the management of the household, had a decisive say in

⁴ K. Kwaśniewicz, *Zwyczaj i obrzędy rodzinne (Family Customs and Rites)*, in: *Etnografia Polski. Przemiany kultury ludowej*, vol. II, Warszawa 1980, p. 91.

⁵ Statements like the following, though quite frequent, cannot be treated seriously: "A dowry consists of 100–1,500 roubles in cash or 33,600–112,000 sq m of land and a trousseau comprising 1–2 cows, bedclothes, a holy picture, two spoons, a bowl, a pot, a hen, sometimes a pig and underwear. Pre-marriage gifts to the bride: clothes, kerchiefs, shoes, rings"; J. Nakoneczny, *Pojęcia prawne ludu (The Common People's Legal Concepts)*, "Wiśła", vol. XVIII, 1904, p. 125. A rich girl usually received all these things and even more. But only a small percentage of girls was so well equipped. The majority received less, the standard in families of middle means being 150 roubles and a cow (plus trousseau).

⁶ W. Mędrzecki, *Socjalizacja dzieci i młodzieży chłopskiej na ziemiach Polski centralnej 1864–1939 (The Socialization of Peasant Children and Youth in Central Poland 1864–1939)*, typescript at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

questions concerning the part of production traditionally carried out by women, could use the money obtained from the sale of goods produced by her and her female helpers the way she liked, controlled the work and upbringing of the female members of the family, had charge over the family's cash and ran the farm after her husband's death⁷. She also performed magical and religious rites to secure the family's prosperity. A housewife was usually helped in her work by older children, a servant or at least a parent. She worked in her own house at a rate she herself determined.

The situation of a girl was, of course, worse immediately after marriage. She was either under the absolute control of her mother-in-law as long as the latter was in authority or, if she became mistress of the house immediately after marriage, she had to do all the work herself while looking after the children that were coming into the world. But this was a transitional stage.

It was the housewife's predominant influence which ensured the maintenance of the entire traditional system of social life; she saw to it that customs were observed, shaped the model of family life, controlled the upbringing of children (especially girls). She endeavoured to instil in her daughters respect for the values she herself upheld, first and foremost a sense of pride that in the future they too would become housewives. It was unbecoming for a future housewife to play with workwomen. A correspondent of a popular newspaper "Gazeta Świąteczna" (*Holiday Paper*) was convinced that a distance should be kept between the two strata: "it is wrong to say that haughtiness and insolence do not allow farmers' daughters to associate with the daughters of landless peasants and farm-hands... the reason is that poor girls frequently go to Prussia to earn money. It even pleases... me that farmers' daughters do not hobnob with these girls... It is true that not all those who go to Prussia are depraved, but since it is not easy to judge the worth of every individual person, parents who have God-fearing daughters forbid them to associate with seasonal labour seekers"⁸. Girls from more prosperous families were guarded more strictly than poorer ones. "Public opinion demands more from the daughters of rich farmers than from poor girls, and while it forgives the latter a lot, it demands that the former pay more attention to what they do, for it is not becoming for a farmer's daughter to behave like any wench"⁹. Let us point out that boys were brought up much more liberal than girls.

To a girl brought up in discipline and under strict control, "marriage meant a new household, a change of dress and hair style, a woman's cap,

⁷ S. Szykiewicz, *Rodzina (The Family)*, in: *Etnografia Polski. Przemiany kultury ludowej*, vol. I, Warszawa 1976, pp. 486-487.

⁸ *Do bab co pisały w gazecie (To the Old Women Who Wrote in "Gazeta")*, "Gazeta Świąteczna" 1910, N° 33, p. 5.

⁹ K. Skrzyńska, *Kryjce*, "Wisła" vol. IV, 1889, p. 93.

breaking off relations with old friends, new relations with married women, liberation from parental care, long wanted freedom and, finally, enjoyments, dances and entertainment". This opinion is, of course, exaggerated, but it shows why many women in the countryside defended the traditional system of village social life in which the "housewife" played one of the principal roles¹⁰. This system also justified the existing model of a peasant family and of the organization of the family farm and household.

There seems to be not a shadow of a doubt that a peasant housewife was an advocate of the traditional model of social life and a supporter of conservatism (in the meaning proposed by Stefan Czarnowski)¹¹. The picture of the village woman as an ignorant being thoughtlessly believing in superstitions, "an enemy of education", seems to be unjust. In a reply to "Gazeta Świąteczna" Piotr Kaczyński wrote: "We have one school per 10,000 people... and yet you cannot find a 12-year old unable to read well. Whom do we own this to: to Mothers"¹². Many peasant diarists emphasize the great role played by mothers in awakening the intellectual interests of their children (even if they themselves were illiterate)¹³.

It should be emphasized that although girls were sent to an elementary school more rarely than boys, they were treated on a par with boys in home education (which was widespread). As a result, the number of women able to read (if not write) was systematically rising (though of course too slowly).

The character of what was known as women's economy was changing too. The many changes introduced in land cultivation — especially the replacement of sickles by scythes in the harvesting of corn, the ever wider use of weeding machines — shortened the time a woman had to spend in the fields. Thanks to this, housewives could devote more time to their children, vegetable garden, the raising of hogs and poultry. They went more and more often to the nearest town to sell the goods they produced: eggs, butter, cheese, etc.¹⁴

During the last few years before the outbreak of World War I, ever better results were achieved by a group of women activists who proclaimed that a peasant housewife should be a modern, enlightened person engaged

¹⁰ Antoszką, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹¹ S. Czarnowski, *Podłoże ruchu chłopskiego (The Foundations of the Peasant Movement)*, in: *Wybór pism socjologicznych*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 167 ff.

¹² P. Kaczyński, *List o kobietach z puszczy kurpiowskiej (A Letter about Women from the Kurpie Forest)*, "Gazeta Świąteczna" 1901, N° 26, p. 1.

¹³ Cf. A. Bogusławski's memoirs. Archives of the Centre for the History of the Peasant Movement in Warsaw, call number P-30/1.

¹⁴ W. Nowosz, *Zajęcia rolnicze i hodowlane (Agricultural Occupations and Livestock Breeding)*, in: *Enografia Polski*, vol. I, p. 237; *Zarys historii gospodarstwa wiejskiego (An Outline of the History of Farming)*, vol. III, pp. 456, 493; E. Pietraszek, *Wymiana dóbr. Handel (Exchange of Goods. Trade)*, in: *Enografia Polski*, vol. I, p. 416.

in the modernization of the family farm and that she should help her husband in organizing an agricultural circle, a fire-brigade and a co-operative. It was the agricultural school at Kraszynek that was the first to propagate new attitudes among peasant girls¹⁵.

Every village community knew which girls would in future reach the status of a housewife. On the whole, this was beyond the reach of the daughters of landless, homeless peasants, labourers and at least some daughters of small-holders. Paradoxically, the granting of land to peasants aggravated the conditions in which many peasant girls started life. Under the serfdom system and even till 1864, the question of endowing a girl with land did not exist. Having "got a cow and a couple of rags" (trousseau), a girl went to the farm of her husband's parents or received land and farm-hands from her lord¹⁶. When peasants had been granted land, a dowry became indispensable to quickly achieve a decent social and financial position. Personal qualities counted less and less, the role of money increased. At the beginning of the 20th century bachelors living near Tomaszów Mazowiecki used to say: "What do I need a girl for? I need 500 roubles, and not a girl"¹⁷. This example would be enough (and many similar ones could be quoted) to show that the peasants' well-known practical sense, clearly noticeable in the way they arranged marriages, was caused not only by the attitude of parents. Farmers' daughters, too, were disinclined to marry poor farm-hands. Social decline and the poor financial prospects such a marriage offered were unenviable.

The life odds for the majority of girls born in peasant cottages were not very good. If they had no dowry, they could at most count on marriage with a well-off widower, and this had many dark sides. As a rule, the girls had two alternatives. They could go into service in a richer family's house and remain there until they married an equally poor farm-hand or labourer. If the husband had a house of his own, they both became labourers, if not, they had to live in somebody else's cottage. Marriages of this type were contracted relatively late (when it was high time to set up a family) or when a woman became pregnant. This way of life was almost universal in the first few years after Polish peasants were granted ownership of land. But as urbanization and industrialization progressed in the Polish Kingdom, more and more girls refused to spend their life as workwomen with no house of their own. They left home in search of work and a place where they could live. As a rule they had no qualifications. But they had determination, physical strength, endurance and the wish to keep their head above water.

¹⁵ D. Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ O. Kolberg, *Dzieła wszystkie (Complete Works)*, vol. XXVI, Warszawa 1963, p. 20.

¹⁷ "Gazeta Świąteczna" 1908, N° 14, p. 7.

The girls who left their village went in two directions. The first was a town. They looked for a job as servants, unskilled helpers in shops, craftsmen's workshops, in services or as scrubwomen. As industry developed, opportunities opened to find work in a factory. If a girl succeeded in finding a regular job in town and met a man inclined to marry, she usually stopped thinking about going back to her village. The other way was emigration. Some of the girls who chose this way to get out of their village did not want to return either. They went mostly overseas or to France. The girls who did not strike roots in town or were seasonal emigrants usually returned home. Some brought money with them, sometimes 200–300 roubles, which was equivalent to a decent dowry.

At the present stage of research we cannot say how many girls left their village for a short time and came back after several months or years. But migration was undoubtedly a mass phenomenon. At the beginning of the 20th century over 100,000 women took part every year in seasonal emigration, several hundred thousand must have worked as domestic servants, hundreds of thousands in trade, services and handicrafts. Some of the girls employed in industry did not break contact with their home village either. They exerted a great influence on the life of their family and village. Since they were dressed in the urban manner and sometimes had a substantial sum of money at their disposal, they found ardent followers among young people and young married women despite the fact that they were laughed at and denounced by old people. Under their persuasion more and more peasant daughters learned to use a sewing machine, furnish rooms and prepare meals in the urban way.

To return to the observation made at the beginning of this study we can say that the two images of woman presented in publicistic writings at the turn of the 19th century were, on the whole, true, though exaggerated. Peasant housewives were not so ignorant and hostile to all progress and those who left their village did this not because they were inspired by emancipation ideas but because they were forced to do so by needs of life.

As to the much discussed topic of women's role in the struggle for national identity when Poland was under the partitioners' rule, and females' role in the struggle for independence, I feel it my duty to emphasize that up to 1914 the overwhelming majority of peasant women had been indifferent to the national question. One of the most essential consequences of this fact was that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the upbringing of peasant children lacked patriotic elements. A peasant mother at that time was not a truly patriotic Polish mother; such a role was played, however, by women of Polish landowners or Polish intelligentsia.

(Translated by Janina Dorosz)