

## “FROM PESTILENCE, FAMINE, FIRE...” – RURAL COMMUNITIES AND ELEMENTARY DISASTERS<sup>1</sup>

EWA BANIEWSKA-KOPACZ

INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY, CRACOW  
POLISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

### Abstract

The article presents behaviour caused by events that bring chaos to the everyday lives of individuals and local rural communities. It emphasises the changes in the types of actions undertaken to help the victims of the disasters, as well as the cultural and social consequences of new forms of aid, unknown to the so-called traditional communities.

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Tematem artykułu są zachowania wywołane zdarzeniami wprowadzającymi chaos w codziennym i uporządkowanym życiu, tak jednostki jak i społeczności lokalnej-wiejskiej. Uwaga zostanie zwrócona na zmiany w rodzajach podejmowanych działań, których celem jest pomoc poszkodowanym, a także kulturowe i społeczne skutki pojawienia się nowych form pomocy, nieznanymi w tzw. społecznościach tradycyjnych.

**Key words:** elementary disasters, local communities, strategies of coping with disasters, new forms of aid.

A look into *Kroniki klęsk elementarnych...* by A. Walawender (1932, 1935) and S. Namaczyńska (1937), or into *Chronografia albo Dziejopis żywiecki A. Komornieckiego* (Grodziski, Dwornicka 1978) reveals that people in previous centuries faced similar problems and burdens, just as they do today. The entries in the index added by the publishers to Komorniecki's *Chronografia* includes “elementary disasters”, listed in alphabetic order: crop failure, disease of cattle, drought, earthquake, famine, fire, flood, gale, hail, heavy frost, inclement weather, pestilence, plague of wild animals, caterpillars, mice, locust, or wolves. A similar classification is also presented by Walawender and Namaczyńska, who define an “elementary disaster” as crop failure, famine, plague, but also war or fire.

<sup>1</sup> The present article is an abbreviated version of one chapter (‘Individuals and rural communities in the face of elementary disasters’, pp. 98–142 of the typescript) of an unpublished dissertation of the author, entitled *Współczesna wieś karpacka w Polsce w aspekcie współdziałania i pomocy wzajemnej* (Contemporary forms of cooperation and mutual help in villages in the Polish Carpathians) written and defended in 2005.

Even in the relatively recent past, natural disasters constituted a much more serious threat to people's well-being or even their existence. Thus, events of this type were especially feared. Such anxieties are reflected in the lyrics of the *Supplication*, an invocation prayer still sung in Polish churches: "From pestilence, famine, fire and war deliver us, O Lord!" (*Od powietrza, głodu, ognia i wojny wybaw nas Panie!*). An analysis of the frequency with which specific natural disasters appear in Komoniewski's chronicle suggests that the most terrifying calamities that fell on the population in the past were pest and famine. Diseases, especially epidemic ones, also inspired fear. The state of medicine in those times only allowed physicians to alleviate the symptoms of the disease. The prophylactic measures taken during epidemic involved isolating the contaminated villages by shutting their inhabitants to protect the communities of the neighbouring hamlets.

The authors of *Kroniki kłesk elementarnych* also note that "certain phenomena often occur in a given order one after another or that one phenomenon precedes [...] another related one, which is to say that [...] elementary disasters dovetail with one another. Thus, drought creates conditions that raise the probability of a plague of locust, caterpillars and field mice, etc. – floods, on the other hand, cause insects to breed and fodder to rot, which in turn brings murrain or death to the cattle"<sup>2</sup> (Namaczyńska 1937, p. 27). The advances in knowledge, in a very broad understanding of the term, have given contemporary societies the means and measures to avoid the mentioned interrelations between natural disasters – means that our ancestors lacked. Despite this fact, we are not always able to prevent such calamities<sup>3</sup> or protect ourselves from other dangerous events. These remarks find their confirmation in the violent meteorological phenomena that have recently posed a threat to people's wealth and even lives. Although these phenomena occurred in many areas in central and eastern Europe, in Poland they were local in scale, incomparable to the floods which swept over the country in 1997 and 2001. Nonetheless, the people who experienced the new phenomena for a 'moment' found themselves in 'the eye of the storm'. The local character of these events increases the importance of direct interpersonal relations, especially if the calamity happened to a small community. The analysis presented below pertains primarily to the disaster-type events that occurred in 2001.

In 2001 I conducted field research in Morawczyna, one of the villages in the Orava-Nowy Targ Basin surrounded by gentle hills, far from all mountain brooks and rivers

<sup>2</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all translations of excerpts from Polish sources were made solely for the purpose of the present article [translator's note].

<sup>3</sup> Some natural disasters, e.g. floods, may be prevented by taking prophylactic measures, such as building levees, dams and reservoirs that could contain a large mass of water in case of prolonged or torrential rains. Maintaining a correct proportion of wooded areas is equally important, as forests act as natural reservoirs (cf.: Tylkowa 1978, pp. 16–17; Twardy, Kopacz, Kostuch 1998, pp. 169–176). It is, however, impossible to prevent e.g. rainfall (the direct cause of floods) or other weather phenomena that, if severe, may lead to a situation regarded as a natural disaster.

– “like by God’s oven”,<sup>4</sup> in the words of one of my respondents. Despite this fact, much of the village was destroyed by a tornado. Many of the interviewed inhabitants emphasised the helplessness of man faced with the forces of nature. It may currently be possible to make more accurate predictions about the coming disasters and alleviate their calamitous results using better measures, yet if an event of such nature occurs, what becomes especially significant is human behaviour and those interpersonal relations that make it easier for the victims to endure their misfortune.

The present article focuses on the activities that aim at bringing help in situations that distort the rhythm of everyday life. Particular attention is devoted to natural disasters – floods, land slides, tornados and fires.

The scope of natural disasters is usually broad. They affect more than one family, household or farm. Fire is the only exception from this rule, since the flame may not spread to other buildings. Nonetheless, it poses a threat to all the houses in the neighbourhood.

Protection against fire and the **help provided to the fire victims** belongs to the oldest forms of cooperation practiced until modern times. As Baranowski writes, “in the olden days any fight with fire was extremely difficult, but not futile. A well-organised neighbourly action was able to if not save a burning building, then at least locate the flames and prevent them from engulfing the entire village” (1950/51, p. 714). For this reason counteracting the spreading of a fire has been the responsibility of the whole community. Information – sometimes very detailed – on how to prevent fires and how to extinguish them can be found in old village laws and calendars from the interwar period. Such documents also mention the responsibilities the village community has to any victim of a fire. The *Willkür* (charter of laws) written in 1616 for the villages belonging to the monastery in Oliwa contains the following passage: “all inhabitants of the village, together, neighbour by neighbour, are to help in transporting timber and in any other matter, for the sake of Christian love and concord” (Kutrzeba, Mańkowski 1938, p. 72). Such delineation of the community’s obligations to the members whose belongings were destroyed by fire appears to have been common throughout Poland (Baranowski 1950/51, pp. 686–689). Similar statements – though much less frequent in existing sources – specified the duties of the community with regard to the victims of other natural disasters, such as floods, hail, loss of cattle and also theft. Old village laws precisely defined the manner of help that was to be given to neighbours, listing the amount and type of grain or the sum of money should be handed to the victims. Many of the statutes end with the following passage: “Should some other common misfortune befall the village, one is obliged to save another” (Baranowski 1950/51, p. 689). An interesting aspect of such statements is the fact that any person refraining

<sup>4</sup> “Like by God’s oven” (*Jak u Pana Boga za piecem*) is a fixed expression signifying great comfort [translator’s note].

from giving aid to victims of natural disasters is subject to punishment. It is, however, difficult to image a situation in which neighbours – living near and far – would not be willing to help if there was a fire in the village. Fire was, after all, a very real danger to all villagers. It seems probable that the mentioned passages were a form of a security measure for the owners of the village, protecting them from having to provide for the victims of any disaster (Baranowski 1950/51, pp. 684, 706–713). The mentioned calendar from 1935 with guidelines for *sottysi* (village leaders) includes the following advice: “In case of a fire the community should extend help to the fire victims, organise a collection to provide them with sowing grain, fodder for their livestock, grain for sustenance and timber for rebuilding their household. The village leader, as the manager of the community, ought to ensure that the victims receive compensation for their losses from the Universal Mutual Insurance Company as soon as possible” (*Kalendarz i wskazówki... 1935*, p. 122).<sup>5</sup>

According to contemporary respondents, cooperation in the event of a fire is still considered obvious and natural. When asked about help in such situations, people often said: “*half the village would get up and run to help; even later they helped however they could*”. Very often the aid went beyond collecting money and giving it to the fire victims; it also included manual labour, such as help in rebuilding the house or farm buildings. Such a wide range of help was reported by A. Wierzchniówna who conducted research in the Silesian Beskids: “They hasten to offer fire victims considerable help [...] the inhabitants of Istebna even provide them with timber for rebuilding. Who has no wood, offers money, linen, sometimes clothes or underwear. They also donate *szynkioty* (shingles), a quarter or half a three score, a many as they can spare. Sometimes the people who offer wood bring it themselves immediately, more often, however, the *spalony* [fire victim] has to *napytać koni* [borrow horses] and bring the timber they got as part of the *pobaba* [neighbour help] [...]. Neighbours may also voluntarily come to work for the fire victim. Usually they work for one day, but if need be they assemble once more, for however long they can” (1950/51, p. 563). These remarks pertain to the situation in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Similar accounts were given by my own respondents who lived in other villages and mountain regions, such as Jaworzynka, Kamesznica, Krempachy and Małe Ciche. Between the years 1995–2005 the help for fire victims proceeded in several stages. The first involves the spontaneous help of the closest neighbours who, seeing the fire, came running to help save some belongings and extinguish the fire. This stage was well described by one of my respondents who lived next to a fire victim: “*Before the fire brigade got there, anyone who was near, all men rushed to the place. They left everything, their work, and came running to help [...]. This is what we do when* [some-

<sup>5</sup> Similar instructions may also be found in *Przewodnik dla sottysów i radnych gromadzkich na rok 1939*, Biblioteka Samorządowca, No. 69, 1939, edited by St. Podwiński i P. Typiak.

one] *is in need...*" (J/29/1954).<sup>6</sup> The next phase usually includes the participation of a local priest or the village leader, who informs the people of a collection of money or material objects for the fire victims or of a planned collective works to rebuild the destroyed houses: "*The priest would organise help at once. He'd talk in Church about the misfortune, and funds were collected. Everybody gave as much as they could. People also brought bedding, towels and other things. All that is needed in a household*" (J/1/1946). According to the respondents, the help came from neighbours living close or further away from the victims. It mainly involved clearing the site and preparing the pit for a *ława* (the foundations of a house). At times the victims received aid from the owners of local companies, who rented specialist equipment and tools free of charge (J/1/1946). Help could also include providing the victims with necessary building materials or household items that enabled them to lead a normal life. A collection of everything that was needed to run a household – i.e. necessary for a family to survive – is the next stage of neighbourly aid. Such a situation occurred in all of the mentioned villages. The respondents reported: "*Everyone donated. When hay burnt down or the like, people collected these things. One has to help another*" (K/23/1965). In the year 2000 in Krempachy in Spisz six neighbouring farm buildings burnt to the ground. Owing to the help of all inhabitants of the village and the neighbouring hamlets, the destroyed structures were quickly rebuilt. The local community organised a collection of the necessary amount of hay, grain and other agricultural produce and presented it to the people that suffered from the fire. The village leader of Krempachy commented: "*All villagers offered aid, first they helped clear the site, then each person gave whatever they could – either the materials [...] for rebuilding, or money, and later also grain, hay or other products and, naturally, their assistance during the rebuilding. Similar help came from the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages. Hardly a month had passed when all was rebuilt, there was no trace of the fire*" (Kr/1/no data). This kind of help may also take another form, which perhaps used to be more popular in the past. The respondents knew of it, but did not see it done within the analysed period of time. The custom is known as *chodzenie po pogorzelsku* (asking alms after fire) and involves gathering all products indispensable for running a household. The person to perform this task was usually the householder whose family was affected, sometimes a close relative of his or a neighbour. The respondents emphasised that *chodzenie po pogorzelsku* could also be done in other villages than one's own. "*There were also situations when they came from afar, even from unknown regions, but they came with a paper, so we helped them too. I gave what I could. Sometimes money, sometimes clothes, but mostly they collected money*

<sup>6</sup> The statements quoted in the present article come from the author's own research. The abbreviations in parentheses represent respectively: the first letters of the name of the village/the number of the interview/ the year of birth of the respondent. The list of places where the research was conducted may be found at the end of the article.

*this way*” (J/31/1960) or “*Even if they came from another village and had a [document] from their commune of their village leader saying that something happened – because when it was someone from our own village, we knew that they got burnt down, but those people had to have [a document] and folk offered alms to these people too*” (K/44/1925; also in: K/31/1928; K/43/1927; J/32/1940 *et al.*).

To recapitulate, the aid that the fire victims received in the analysed period of time was very similar. The course it took and the degree of people’s involvement was determined by the strengths of the ties between the members of a given community and by the opinion the locals had of the people who suffered losses because of the fire. The help provided to the victims of the two large fires that occurred in Kamesznica in the 1990s are a good example of the mentioned phenomena. In both cases the village leader and the parish organised a fund raiser in the local church; material aid was also given directly to the affected families. One of the respondents reported: “*When a house in Czerwińskie burnt down, where only a father and his children lived, the neighbours were helping. The priest announced a collection and gave them money. [...] There in Czerwińskie people live in harmony and they helped him rebuild and buy everything*” (K/45/1949). This account suggests that the people most committed to helping were the closest neighbours and that the place where the fire occurred was known for good neighbourly relations and friendly atmosphere. In the local inhabitants’ opinion these factors had a positive impact on the course of the aid. In the second case the victims also received help. However, due to an ‘alcohol problem’ in the affected family the means were carefully distributed. Instead of cash, the victims received the materials necessary for rebuilding their house and household items. The family became an object of scrutiny and interest of the local community, who paid attention to how the means they provided were being used (K/7/ca. 1955).

Aid tends to be more generous if the victim is perceived as one of ‘us’. Corroboration for this thesis may be found both in the quoted statements and in the words of the village leader of Krempachy. When I pointed out the scope and extent of the help given to fire victims, he remarked that as far as he can remember, the villagers of Spisz always helped one another if misfortune fell on someone.<sup>7</sup> The feeling of community, affinity stemming from living in the same area prompts people to help even those families who do not live by the values appreciated by the rest of the society (as evidenced by the example of the family in Kamesznica). Many people pointed out that in the case of such calamity everyone tries to help – even if the victims are strangers – because as it is “*better to give ten times than to be forced to ask once*” (Kt/1/no data).

The next section of the present article focuses on the behaviour related to **helping victims of a flood, a landslide or a tornado** – natural disasters caused by inclement

<sup>7</sup> The inhabitants of Krempachy perceived the villages of Spisz as: Dursztyn, Łapsze Niżne and Łapsze Wyzne, Nowa Biała, Frydman, Trybsz, Niedzica and Czarna Góra.

weather. Such phenomena occurred in 2001. The participant observations were made and interviews conducted shortly after the crisis, i.e. at a time where people met by chance were filled with emotions and ready to speak spontaneously and openly. The time between the disaster and my visit was longest in Morawczyna and shortest in Lachowice. The inhabitants of another village – Budzów – had the time to recover from the recent shock, yet each they the receding waters revealed more damage. This was the place where the disaster affected the largest group of people. To me, the flood that swept through Budzów was merely one example of the tragedy which was taking place in the entire region of the Maków Beskids or, broadly speaking, in the Vistula river basin. Before presenting the analysis of the observable actions of the local community, I shall recount (in chronological order) the events that occurred in the mentioned villages.

The village of Morawczyna<sup>8</sup> includes ca. 180<sup>9</sup> houses. Most of the inhabitants run small households dealing in husbandry, primarily rearing dairy cattle. On 29<sup>th</sup> May 2001 Morawczyna and the neighbouring villages were devastated by a tornado. According to the respondents, the disaster came unexpectedly. One of the inhabitants remarked: *"Nothing indicated that such a thing may happen. It was a cloudy day, the thunder rolled once or twice and suddenly the wind appeared"* (M/4/no data), *"[...] it happened in a flash, literally a moment. I just took the children and ran to the lower part of the house"* (M/2/no data). *"Everything lasted only a short moment"* – says another villager – *"I was downstairs, my daughter upstairs in her room, studying. When I saw what was going on, that the neighbour's roof flew away, I ran upstairs to my daughter. We met on the stairs and went down to the cellar together. The glass was hitting us something fierce"* (M/7/no data).<sup>10</sup>

The wind in Morawczyna affected ca. 100 residential houses, 50 of which sustained serious damage. The roofs were torn off, the windows smashed, the doors ripped away. The structure of the upper floors was weakened. One household was utterly razed to the ground – only the foundations remained. The entire village sustained losses in infrastructure – e.g. the telephone lines and electricity cables were damaged.

Budzów<sup>11</sup> is a village in the Maków Beskids. It has a population of more than two thousand five hundred people living in ca. 520 houses. The village is crossed by a stream called Paleczka and its four tributaries: Kamieniec, Zachełmka, Droszczyńska and Wrotkówka. After several days of constant drizzle, on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2001 a torrential rain fell on Maków Podhalański near Budzów. The rainstorm caused the water in the mentioned brooks to rise, instantly turning them into rapid rivers which destroyed everything in

<sup>8</sup> Nowy Targ County, Gmina (administrative district) Nowy Targ.

<sup>9</sup> According to the *sołtyś* (village leader) of Morawczyna, only 123 buildings have their own numbers. The remaining residential houses do not have a number.

<sup>10</sup> The glass mentioned by the respondent came from her own windows. The wind caused the window glass to shatter. In the house of this respondent and many other villagers the tornado destroyed all windows and doors, and tore off the roofs. The brick walls around the houses were also damaged.

<sup>11</sup> Sucha County, Gmina (administrative district) Budzów.

their paths. The inhabitants of Budzów report that the flood was very swift.<sup>12</sup> One of the younger householders clearing up his yard offered the following comment on the events: “*Everything started around 3 PM. The water arrived suddenly and disappeared equally quickly. Three hours later one could already go out and see what happened to whom and what were the losses*” (B/1/no data). However, there were places where the water did not recede as fast, but stayed for a longer period. A respondent whose house stands below the centre of the village, near one of the brooks, described the events and the help she received: “*For two days we were cut off from the world. The first ones to arrive were the GOPR (Mountain Volunteer Search and Rescue). They sent us bread and water by rope; checked how we were doing. Later they came in boats and brought us food*” (B/3/1933).

The silty trace left by the swollen Paleczka was a clear division line between the parts of the village that sustained damage and the ones that remained intact. The most affected buildings in the centre of Budzów included farmhouses and households located on the left bank of the stream. To make matters worse, one of Paleczka’s tributaries that merges with its waters in the centre of the village flows to the left of the river. The high water level prevented the brook from finding its regular mouth and caused it to form a new riverbed that flowed through residential areas. The terrain on the right bank of the stream, as the higher ground, sustained less damage. The central buildings of the village – a small shopping centre, the health clinic, the administrative district office, the church and the school all managed to survive. The regional road and the bridge that stood below the centre were completely swept away.

The waters of Paleczka in spate flooded sixty five residential buildings with farmhouses. Due to construction damage, six of these were later earmarked for demolition. The entire village suffered heavy losses in infrastructure. Local roads, bridges, power and telecommunication lines were all destroyed. Wells and water sources were contaminated, waterworks suffered serious damage. The prolonged and intense rainfall caused many landslips on a local scale, which in turn resulted in further losses, mainly in agricultural crops. In some places the landslides disturbed the structure of the buildings.

Similarly to Budzów, the village of Lachowice<sup>13</sup> lies in the Maków Beskids. It encompasses a hamlet called Zawodzie. On 27<sup>th</sup> July 2001 a large part of the slope of Parchałówka mountain, on which the hamlet stands, lost stability and slid. According to the geologists from the Polish Geological Institute who conducted research in the

<sup>12</sup> In mountain regions floods run a characteristic course – they are usually highly violent and destructive, but very brief. Typically the water appears quickly and recedes equally fast; the waters flow to lower areas, where they usually form pools that tend to linger for longer periods (see: Starkel L. et al. (ed.) 1998, *Powódź w dorzeczu górnej Wisły w lipcu 1997 roku. Konferencja naukowa w Krakowie 7–9 maja 1998*, Cracow). This fact was also reflected in the statement of one of the respondents: “*The flood here is totally different than in the city. Here the flood is like this it comes and goes fast. It takes what it is to take, destroys, disappears and the things are gone. Totally different*” (K/32/1960).

<sup>13</sup> Sucha County (Sucha Beskidzka), Gmina (administrative district) Stryszawa.



area: "As a result of long-lasting, violent rainfall, the slope of Parchałówka mountain became saturated with water and destabilised" (Oszczypko, Golonka, Zuchiewicz 2002, p. 893). The slide started around 2 PM and lasted for ca. 15 minutes. The village leader of Lachowice, who had gone out to assess post-flood losses, witnessed the event. The sudden instability of the slope put people's lives in direct danger. All the interviewed persons emphasised that it was a fortunate coincidence that the event took place during the day and not at night. The fire brigade sent for by the village leader started evacuating people from the site. The people living on the sliding slope were shocked by what was happening. "The Trzpon family – we read – had to be forcibly removed from the place. They stood and watched the final moments of their house, which collapsed in front of their eyes" (Starzak 2001, pp. 21–22). The landslide in Lachowice was one of the largest ones ever reported in Poland. A fragment of soil 600–700 metres wide broke apart several dozen metres above the buildings, causing the entire slope to slide down, destroying everything in its wake. Many houses were devastated as the land slid; other ones were severely damaged. The mass of slipping earth commixed with fragments of the ruined households reached as far as the riverbed, where it piled up to form a mound more than ten metres tall. This barrier created further hazard, as it threatened to dam the waters of the stream which could flood the densely populated Lachówka valley. The fire brigade proceeded to remove the new peril. Within the next few days, new evidence of damage appeared on buildings that had only been slightly affected. This was true mostly of brick houses and less so of wooden ones whose structure is usually more resilient. The landslide caused complete demolition of three households – the inhabitants did not manage to save anything. The structure of nine more houses was damaged so severely that the families living there had to be relocated.

The natural disasters that occurred in the mentioned villages differed in scale; the number of damaged households was also different. The number of people affected by the calamity was smallest in Lachowice, yet it was them who suffered most – they lost their homes, plots of land for construction and mostly even their fields. The number of affected people was largest in Budzów. As the local village leader put it, it is difficult to name a villager that did not sustain any loss – "*maybe not everyone was directly affected by the flood, maybe the water did not damage every household, but in many cases large areas of arable land were damaged, either by local landslips or the silting of fields*" (B/5/no data).

In all the mentioned villages the people who were most affected by the disaster received aid that may be divided into three categories.

The first of them involved the support of the closest neighbours (many of whom also sustained losses), family members and also other inhabitants of the village and the neighbouring settlements. On the initiative of the *sotys* and the village council of Lachowice a committee was set up to collect financial aid for the families whose houses stood on the area affected by the landslide and on the land that was in danger of slipping. Persons with adequate housing conditions offered their homes to those

families that suddenly had no place to stay. The inhabitants of the neighbouring villages also sympathised with the victims, organising collections of money and necessary products. Inhabitants of the neighbouring village of Koszarawa whom I met by chance reported: “*We in Koszarawa were lucky to escape such misfortune. Now we are organising a collection. These people lost absolutely everything, all their belongings. One has to think of the winter. Every one of us wants to give something, to help these people somehow*” (L/1/no data). The revenue from an outdoor festival organised in the administrative district of Stryżawa (to which Lachowice belongs) was also allotted for the same purpose. The inhabitants of Budzów helped one another in a slightly different manner. According to local sources, there was hardly any household – not only in Budzów itself, but in the entire administrative district – which did not suffer as a result of the mentioned flood. This may explain why no campaign such as the collection of money and material donations organised in Lachowice took place in Budzów. The aid in the latter village was mostly limited to mutual help from the neighbouring households who lived harmoniously and were used to cooperating in ordinary situations. During my research in Budzów the help I observed involved mostly lending the equipment needed to repair the damage. It must be remembered that the water did more than just damage house interiors – it also took away most farm tools and other goods (such as firewood for the winter) and sometimes even livestock. Neighbour aid also consisted in giving each other advice on how to proceed with the repairs and how to apply for state compensation. The tornado that swept through Morawczyna shocked the inhabitants of the village, prompting everyone to help the victims – primarily to assist them with tidying the site. The respondents – most of whom suffered losses themselves – all agreed that they often got much help from people whom they only had a nodding acquaintance with, or even from strangers that lived in one of the neighbouring villages.

The second aspect of aid involves spontaneous help given by random persons, often ones who do not live in the vicinity of the place where the disaster occurred. There were people who, upon hearing of the misfortune that befell the inhabitants of the mentioned villages, reacted immediately, bringing help selflessly and anonymously. Their aid could take many different forms. A number of such helpers followed the example of the GOPR (Mountain Volunteer Search and Rescue) trying to reach the flooded households to bring them basic supplies or even to inform the isolated families that they were not alone and that help would soon arrive. One of the respondents, who suffered great losses as a result of the flood in Budzów, came by her new couch in such a way. She recalled that “*as the water receded and our house could be reached some ‘private’ people came, from Cracow, I think, and brought us this brand new couch. The one I used to sleep on got soaked in the flood and was beyond repair. When the water drained away, all was mud. Pretty much everything that was left in the house and had been flooded could well be thrown away*” (B/3/1933). Other victims received fungicides which proved very useful in the process of repairing the house, rubber shoes, warm

socks etc. The *soltys* of Lachowice repeatedly mentioned the selfless help he received since the landslide. He reported that apart from regular convoys there came individual people who brought all they could share with the victims.

The third aspect of aid involves the help of large charity institutions such as the CARITAS, the Polish Red Cross, the Sovereign Military Order of Malta and others, as well as all-national campaigns organised by the media, such as "Gazeta Wyborcza" Radio "Zet" or the television. Such campaigns move the entire society to help. An example of this phenomenon could be observed in the communities of Kamesznica and Jaworzynka, where I conducted planned stationary field research at the time. The inhabitants of these areas joined the all-national campaigns organised e.g. by the CARITAS or the Red Cross. They contributed by offering money and material gifts later allocated between the flood victims by the charity institutions. What is more, already in August 1997 – i.e. very soon after the flood – the inhabitants of Kamesznica invited the children from the flooded town of Racibórz to come and stay in their village. The initiative was started by the *soltys* of Kamesznica and the local parish priest. It must be emphasised that during their stay in the village the children were provided for by the local community. One of the local students recalled the initiative: *"Our village welcomed the children of the flood victims. The inhabitants of Kamesznica were bringing food for these children to school. They lived there"* (K/27/no data – survey). Children from Racibórz also went to the administrative district of "Trójwieś – Istebna, Jaworzynka, Koniaków", to the sanatorium on the hills in Kubalonka. According to the respondents, the proposal for inviting the children of flood victims came from the director of the sanatorium, while their arrival and stay was organised by nuns from Racibórz and the local authorities of the administrative district of Trójwieś (J/22/1963). It must also be noted that some village communities and individuals that suffered as a result of a natural disaster voluntarily forfeited the right to apply for special government subsidies to eliminate the consequences of the disaster, stating that other regions suffered more. Such a situation occurred e.g. in Krempachy in the Spisz region. As the village leader of Krempachy stated, the flood that struck the area<sup>14</sup> caused particular damage to twenty households. Their owners qualified for receiving (apart from compensation) special government subsidies for eliminating the losses. Six of these persons applied for the subsidies, whereas the remaining ones decided they could finance the necessary repairs themselves and renounced the right to the subsidy. In the opinion of one of the respondents, their decision was greatly influenced by the fact that these people knew what damage the flood made in other regions that year (Kr/1/no data).

<sup>14</sup> As in other mountain regions, the flood in Krempachy struck very fast. It began on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2001 after a violent storm. As a result, the water level in a local stream kept rising ca. 20 cm every five minutes. Such a situation continued for more than four hours, after which the water level stabilised. The violent flood caused major harm to seventy households, which later received compensation from the PZU (Polish National Insurance Company) (Kr/1/no data).

THE FACTORS INFLUENCING COOPERATION AND MUTUAL HELP  
IN SITUATIONS THAT DISTURB THE ORDER OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Social psychologists emphasise the circumstances related to aid and mutual assistance stating that such behaviour belongs to the natural tendencies of a human being which constitute the basis for any community (Cooley 1996, p. 325; Tönnies 1996, p. 319). In traditional folk culture, mutual neighbourly help was present in all crucial moments of the lives of both individuals and entire communities. The factors that justified the custom and constituted its basis were the principles of reciprocity and equivalence of service. As Zawistowicz-Adamska writes, “the *do ut des* principle determines that no member of the community may defy the custom, because by defying it people lose the right to receive help in their time of need” (1950/51, p. 26). The principle is in effect both in everyday life and in extraordinary situations such as natural disasters. The respondents expressed it using the following phrase: “*Today I give to you, tomorrow you give to me*”. This may be understood as a kind of mutual insurance, suspended in time until the person giving support at the present moment will be in need of help at some point in the future. The internal obligation of reciprocating the help received may be observed not only in relatively small village communities such as the ones analysed in the present research. It was also common among the inhabitants of Wrocław who suffered due to the flood in 1997. This obligation was one of the main reasons why the Wrocław community participated in the 2002 campaign to send aid to the flooded inhabitants of Prague in the Czech Republic.<sup>15</sup>

Another important factor that has already been mentioned is the public opinion and the principles of coexistence that prevent people from refusing to help a neighbour in need. Villagers stated that the community does not look kindly upon those withholding their help. Such behaviour is only accepted if the person in question is truly unable to contribute. A greater degree of tolerance could be observed in the case of refusing to help strangers that suffered as a result of a natural disaster. Nonetheless, people who refrain from contributing are not held in high regard, even if the campaign is organised by national institutions and organisations cooperating with their foreign branches. It was also emphasised that participation in such campaigns is always dependent on the material situation of the prospective donors.

Another significant factor influencing mutual help is the authority and status of the persons or institutions responsible for coordinating the aid. Participation varies depending on who calls for help. This thesis finds confirmation in the statement of one young woman from Jaworzynka, who said: “*It’s obvious that people are more prone to believe a priest, and when it’s the priest that collects they donate more willingly*”.

<sup>15</sup> The events organised in Wrocław included a one-day-long concert in the town square. The revenue from the performance was donated to help save the monuments of Prague.

*than when it's someone else*" (J/88/1980). The respondent recalled the time when she collected money for Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy (The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity, an annual charity fund-raiser) and admitted that donations were not generous or frequent and "*some priests were against it*" (*ibidem*). Her account is consistent with other reports I heard in the course of my research. "*The Church is a bit sceptical about this Owsiak guy. So here money is not collected. It's collected in Żywiec [...]*" (K/32/1960). Many respondents admitted that they are more willing to donate money if the campaign is organised by the Church. As one person put it: "*I prefer when it's with the Church that when someone just walks around and asks for money [...] because then I never know who this person is*" (J/88/1980, also J/45/1939, K/44/1925 and others).

One should not disregard the feeling of kinship and affinity based on the place of residence, on the personal acquaintance with the victims. This feeling is reflected in the following statement: "*It's like, in such smaller villages people are close to one another and help each other in a hard time*" (J/42/1986). Another of the respondents said: "*Some people really don't have enough and cannot cope* (the statement was related to helping with farm work when the master of the household is dead – EBK), *but won't ask. People see that. They know who is in what situation and if there is no other way, they help*" (J/31/1960, also J/29/1954 and others). The psychological factor of kind feelings towards the victims also has some importance, though it influences mostly minor everyday behaviour and tends to lose significance in situations commonly regarded as a misfortune. The respondents from the villages under consideration – the ones that suffered losses and the ones that did not – emphasised the fragility of a human being confronted with the forces of nature, as well as the fact that a similar disaster may befall anyone. This feeling is reflected in local sayings, such as: "*No-one knows; today it's you, tomorrow it's us*", "*Who can tell who is going to need whom?*". Experiences give rise to the feeling of a shared fate and weakness in the face of a disaster.

The situation after the analysed events in Morawczyna, Budzów and Lachowice includes one more factor. The mentioned villages are unique with regard to the force of the natural disaster (a tornado, a flood and a landslide) that occurred in these areas. Events of this scale are uncommon in Poland; for this reason they were immediately publicised by the media. The importance of information communicated by the mass-media is emphasised by Hajduk-Nijakowska. She claims that in the year 1997 the media failed to notice the increasing flood hazard in Opole. As a result, the predictions as to how the situation may unfold were very scarce, which in turn dulled the alertness of the local inhabitants, who were not aware that the city might be flooded (Hajduk-Nijakowska 1999, pp. 396–397).

The role of the mass media cannot be overestimated. The television, the radio and the press provide almost direct broadcasts from the sites. Journalists in search of good stories rushed to the mentioned villages reporting what they saw. Such actions not only accelerated the flow of information, but – more importantly – showed how existence

looks like after a disaster had struck. The media reported the living conditions of the people who were affected. It was conducive to empathy and inspired sympathy – the most natural and humane reaction to such events, resulting in a wish to provide some comfort to the people undergoing such painful experiences.

Traditional communities did not have such technological means at their disposal; therefore they found other methods of spreading word. All news, not only bad ones, was circulated by mostly means of direct contact, i.e. orally. Communities were sometimes informed of elementary disasters and the need to help the victims by priests during Mass. This form of spreading information pertaining to a given community still belongs to the most popular ones. Information circulated in the form of parish announcements can be related not only to the life of a specific religious community, but also to all matters connected to the entire society of the village. This medium is used by the authorities of the administrative district,<sup>16</sup> schools and all other institutions and individuals that wish to reach the inhabitants of a given village. In the Kamesznica area in the interwar period, any information concerning the entire community was spread by a so-called *policjant* (policeman), who walked around the village and repeated the news. According to one of the respondents announcements were not used at that time and if all villagers had to be informed of something – “*then a man would walk around. He was a local. He had a drum and walked around the village, through the hamlets. Every stretch of way he would stop, beat the drum and announce that there would be taxes or some other events in the commune. We called him ‘policeman’. This was before the war. Now it’s usually the priest who does the announcing*” (K/2/1932).

As mentioned before, in the case of fires the victim or a close acquaintance drove around the entire village and sometimes through the neighbouring ones in a cart, performing the customary *chodzenie po pogorzelsku*. The aim of this trip was to secure aid by gathering items donated by other villagers. At times the person held a document to confirm that a given event really did take place, authenticated by a representative of the local authorities, e.g. the village leader.

The sharp contrast between the traditional and the modern means of communication has one more consequence. Publicising certain events on a national scale increases the number of people who know of the occurrence and with it the number of potential benefactors. To a great extent, the inflow of material and financial aid was brought about by the mass media. Without the modern media publicity, the situation in the affected villages would undoubtedly be different and the process of rebuilding would take much longer.

<sup>16</sup> During my research project I had the occasion to hear – as a part of parish announcements – a plea issued by the authorities of Milówka directed at people who had not yet mown their fallow fields even though it was already late spring. The authorities wanted the fields mown in order to prevent weeds from spreading onto arable land.

It must, however, be added that the appearance of various forms of external help (i.e. from outside the communities under consideration) also created situations which led to many conflicts and misunderstandings. Scholars analysing the communities affected by the flood (primarily urban ones) described several stages of changes that occurred in these groups.<sup>17</sup> The first stage involves the disturbance of the known order and, as a natural consequence thereof, the appearance of a new set of rules, the so-called 'community order' (Sitek 1997; Hajduk-Nijakowska 1999). The helplessness of the local authorities and their failure to fulfil their duties – including the obligation to guarantee order and safety – prompts small groups of people to take the initiative. Control is taken by self-named leaders, in most cases the most efficient individuals. Their aim is to protect the common interest, but on a short scale, i.e. to prevent or counteract the flood. This state is the antithesis of the everyday order binding in ordinary circumstances. It is a way of fraternising with one another in the face of misfortune. Observable manifestations of this new attitude included e.g. an intensification of interpersonal contact, but also revealed some traces of anarchy (Sitek 1997, pp. 19–22). "The common experience drew people together [...]. The threat forced them to cooperate, weakened former conflicts and selected local leaders" (Hajduk-Nijakowska 1999, pp. 399–400). The peril caused the group to integrate, but only for a short time. As soon as steps were taken to restore the order from before the disaster and to reinstate the previous authorities in their righteous place – which was also related to the arrival of organised aid campaigns – the 'community order' created in the time of danger shatters. "Results of empirical research [...] suggest that social support may pose a threat to the integration of a local community and lead to many conflicts with far-reaching consequences" (Sołdra-Gwizdź 1998, p. 31). Even though the research results presented here pertain to large urban communities, mostly the ones in Wrocław and Opole,<sup>18</sup> yet during my stay in Lachowice, Budzów and Morawczyna I had the opportunity to observe similar behaviour that corresponded to the stage of the dissolution of the 'community order'. As a result of the inflow of very generous donations to the analysed communities and their distribution which was not always perceived as fair, traditional feelings of mutual kindness and solidarity were replaced by envy and animosity. The offerings,

<sup>17</sup> See: Sitek, 1997, *Wrocławianie wobec wielkiej powodzi. Wspólnota i zagrożenie. Socjologiczny przyczynek do analizy krótkotrwałej wspólnoty*, Wrocław; Hajduk-Nijakowska, 1999, *Sytuacja komunikacyjna w stanie zagrożenia*, [in:] Smolińska (ed.) *Folklorystyczne i antropologiczne opisanie świata. Księga ofiarowana Profesor Dorocie Simonides*, Opole, pp. 395–407; Sołdra-Gwizdź (ed.) 1998, *Spoleczne skutki powodzi w lipcu 1997 roku w województwie opolskim*, Zeszyty Odrzańskie. Seria Nowa, no. 17; Nycz (ed.) 1998, *Spoleczności lokalne w sytuacji zagrożenia i kataklizmu. Materiały z III Kędzierzyńsko-Kozielskiego Seminarium Naukowego „Społeczeństwo wobec sytuacji zagrożenia i kataklizmu”*, Opole–Kędzierzyn-Koźle.

<sup>18</sup> Communities affected by the flood were also the subject of psychological research focused on the impact of traumatic experiences on individuals, the mechanisms of coping with long-term stress and the interrelations between the accepted system of values and dealing with trauma. The researchers also emphasised the influence of cultural environment on coping mechanisms (Kaczmarek, et al. 2003, pp. 27–47).

state subsidies, the arrival of construction equipment meant to facilitate the repairs and other forms of aid set people against each other, uncovering resentment and avarice. One of the respondents from Budzów interrupted his account of the help that was arriving to admit with a sigh: *“I don’t recognise people after this flood. They used to work together to build bridges between their households, and now they can’t agree who should be the first to have the bulldozers come. At whose place it is more urgent to do something first. People don’t understand one another anymore. We already had quarrels over the shovel and the wheelbarrow [...] Why they were given to someone and not to someone else”* (B/5/no data). The *soltys* of the village is of the opinion that *“solidarity was there at the beginning, but now everybody feels entitled (to everything)”*. Many people I spoke to in Budzów confirmed that the help was not administered in a controlled way, especially at first. As the *soltys* stated, *“the donations came by many routes and it could happen that one family got several gifts and another got none. Surely, especially at the beginning, everything was very spontaneous”*. The controversy surrounding the distribution of donations in Budzów and the neighbouring Maków Podhalański resulted in creating lists of individual victims of the flood which became the basis for allotting funds and material donations to every given family. In each of the villages under consideration special committees were set up to divide the incoming donations. The committee members included representatives of local administrative district authorities, village authorities, the Church, the social service, members of the parish council and the community cabinet. They comprised a number of individuals – ten in the case of Morawczyn and Budzów. If a generous benefactor wished to e.g. sponsor the rebuilding of the house of one of the affected families (as it happened in Lachowice) or offered some other form of substantial aid to the victims, the task of the committee was to decide and choose the family that would receive help.

In the words of Hajduk-Nijakowska, the dissolution of the community that formed in times of danger does not mean that the situation returns to the state from before the flood. *“The experiences people got through together created a myth of community”*. The inhibiting of emotions was directed towards ‘celebrating’ memory. *“Mending the damage caused by the flood, repairing houses and workplaces, the reconstruction of damaged roads, the recultivation of land – all of this prompted people to cooperate once again”*. According to Hajduk-Nijakowska, the circulation of practical information related to restoring the former assets proved to be the most efficient method for integrating the community affected by the flood” (1999, pp. 405–406).

As a final thought on mutual assistance and cooperation related to a natural disaster, it may be pointed out that the forms of participating in such actions are very varied. Naturally, the most traditional way involved direct help delivered to the victims on the spot, e.g. through presenting them with material gifts or assisting with restoration works. The new forms, which were not practiced in traditional communities on the same scale as today, involved actions undertaken through intermediary bodies that



organise larger campaigns, often on a national, or even international scale. The modern forms of aid include: offering money to fund-raisers, bringing material gifts to places they are collected, making transfers to special bank accounts established by the affected administrative districts or charity organisations. One may also help by purchasing special postal stamps or postcards, as well as by attending a concert the profit from which is used to provide financial aid to the victims. The most recent methods of donation involve the use of mobile phones or other modern media (the Internet). It must, however, be added that such means are rarely employed by the members of the communities under consideration, and – if so – only by the younger generation. The appearance of all the mentioned forms of aid is a relatively new phenomenon. It ought to be emphasised that in most cases the methods aim at giving aid to total strangers.

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To recapitulate the analysis of mutual aid in extraordinary situations, it must be stated that such behaviour belongs to the common features observable in all the village communities under consideration. Traditional village existence involved both family tragedies, household misfortunes and natural disasters, yet local communities had to devise measures of coping with such problems on their own. Due to a more limited circulation of news and a low degree of population mobility, communities in the past lacked the possibility of receiving aid from outsiders – with the exception of the inhabitants of neighbouring villages who often belonged to the same parish or were related to the affected community in some other way. The relation could also be based on the fact that all the communities in the vicinity sold their produce at the same market (fair) or attended local religious celebrations such as kermesses or pilgrimages. Aid always came from groups that had a mutual connection, or – as it was in the case of the mentioned inhabitants of the villages in Spisz – on the one hand perceived themselves as an autonomous group and, on the other, separated themselves from other rural communities.

As noted, the traditional forms of aid based on the principle of reciprocity, or perhaps of granting mutual security in case of misfortune, have recently been complemented by new types of help popular during the recent wave of natural disaster. These new measures include charity campaigns organised by outsiders willing to provide aid to the communities that suffered due to a flood, a landslide or a tornado. It should be emphasised that this type of aid is most often anonymous, yet it inspires similar feelings and instil the same obligations in the people who received it. The fact that the village communities under consideration received these new types of aid in their time of need and the scale of such actions not only constitutes a proof of the full integration of these communities into the national society, but also testifies that the phenomenon is mutual.

Index of abbreviations of the villages under consideration:

- J – Jaworzynka – administrative district Istebna, Cieszyn County  
 K – Kamesznica – administrative district Milówka, Żywiec County  
 B – Budzów – administrative district Budzów, Sucha County (Sucha Beskidzka)  
 Kr – Krempachy – rural administrative district Nowy Targ, Nowy Targ County  
 L – Lachowice – administrative district Stryszawa, Sucha County (Sucha Beskidzka)  
 M – Morawczyzna – rural administrative district Nowy Targ, Nowy Targ County

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Author's address:

Ewa Baniowska-Kopacz, Ph.D.

Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cracow, Polish Academy of Sciences

ul. Sławkowska 17

31-016 Kraków, POLAND

e-mail: ewa.baniowska@vp.pl

