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**HOUSEHOLD AS A BATTLEGROUND OF MODERNITY:  
ACTIVITIES OF THE HOME ECONOMICS COMMITTEE  
AFFILIATED TO THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN  
(1957–80)\***

**Abstract**

This essay seeks to show the Polish household in the communist time as a space of modernity and modernisation activities. The chronological framework is set between 1957 – the date the Home Economics Committee affiliated to the League of Women was set up to contribute to, and be a mouthpiece of, the everyday life modernisation policy – and 1980, being the symbolic borderline between the modernity discourse and the Polish 1980–1 crisis discourse about household. In this context, the article reconstructs both the activities of social actors who created the ‘scenarios of modernity’ for the household and the reception of the messages in question in the village of Bogate in the District (*powiat*) of Przasnysz.

**Keywords:** modernity, modernisation (upgrade), household, League of Women, Home Economics Committee

An image of a modern and rationally managed household, endorsed since the post-Stalinist Thaw in Poland as well as in most of the Socialist Bloc countries, contributed to the Cold War competition, and at the same time was communicated to citizens, thus being part of projecting, or designing, their future.<sup>1</sup> This essay investigates the position of home and household in the official discourses on Polish post-war modernity. Against general background, it aims to show what

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Reid, ‘This is Tomorrow! Becoming Consumer in the Soviet Sixties’, in Annie E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (eds.), *The Socialist Sixties. Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Indiana, 2013), 44.

was specific to Poland, and who were the social actors responsible for developing the ‘scenarios of modernity’ for use in the household. The chronology begins with the year 1957, the year the Home Economics Committee (*Komitet do spraw Gospodarstwa Domowego*, KGD) affiliated to the League of Women (*Liga Kobiet*) was established to become a contributor and mouthpiece of the policy of modernisation of everyday life, and ends with 1980, marking the outset of a severe social, political and economic crisis: the year that can be regarded as a symbolic cut-off point between what is describable as a modernity discourse and a crisis discourse with respect to household.

Since the modernisation policy encountered a variety of hindrances, whether intentionally provoked or so-called ‘objective’, the metaphor of ‘battleground’, or ‘contest area’, seems to be adequate in terms of describing Polish households in the period from 1957 to 1989. It is worth considering to what extent or degree the ‘modern’ needs were successfully created for the households; and, why some of the proposed solutions proved to be apt whilst some others appeared misbegotten and ineffectual. The article develops as follows. First, relations between household as a space of women’s activity and modernity as a dominant discursive concept are reinterpreted. Second, the activities of Home Economic Committee with the special emphasis to its actions aimed at implementing modernity into Polish households are presented. Next, the altering meanings of modernisation are identified. All these considerations are supported by analysis of archival records of the Committee and a variety of texts representing expert discourse, as well as its popularisation.<sup>2</sup> Finally, a case study related to the village of Bogate, District (*powiat*) of Przasnysz<sup>3</sup> is presented to show the ‘modernity in action’ – some attempts at practical implementation

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<sup>2</sup> The expert discourse is represented by industry literature, mainly the Committee’s official bulletin *Gospodarstwo Domowe* [Home Economics]. Analysis of the contents of women’s and family magazines as well as guidebooks publications is essential due to their significant role in the building of their readers’ identity of a modern housewife (see: Hermes Joke, *Reading Women’s Magazines. An Analysis of Everyday Media Use* [Cambridge, 1997]; Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman. Women’s Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–1953* [New York, 1999]).

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Anna Nowakowska-Wierzchoś of the Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw (*Archiwum Akt Nowych*, AAN) for helping me get access to the records related to Bogate village.

of the household modernisation project. Bogate was the place where experimental rural households were to be set up as a pioneering project, for the Committee's research purposes, it is an important example of the clash of interests of different entities proactively involved in the modernisation of rural households, with the resulting failure of a project delivered in a top-down manner.

## I

### HOUSEHOLD AND MODERNITY

The notion of 'household' [Pol.: *gospodarstwo domowe*] was used in post-war Poland in a dual sense: colloquial, on the one hand, and as used in statistics and scholarly discourse, on the other. Women's magazines extended the term, in its colloquial use, to the entirety of daily house-related practices such as eating, sleeping, hygiene and tidiness, as well as organisation of such activities, distribution of responsibilities within the family, management of time and use of household appliances – and, changes to the daily regularity and ideas of how to improve it.<sup>4</sup> Such a meaning was also referred to in the expert discourse, which from the middle of the 1950s onwards propagated the idea of modern keeping of the house, comfort, and rationality. Thus understood, household was present in the research on home budgets, women's professional careers and their spare time, conducted from the 1960s on. Scientific discourse referred to household as a separate budgetary unit whose members not necessarily shared a common residential space.<sup>5</sup> Censuses and, subsequently, Statistical Yearbooks used the term in the same sense.

In both the popular and expert discourse, household was treated as a space of female activity. Such a 'natural' association was not undermined by the communist emancipation project imposed after 1956. Earlier on, the discussions held in the latter half of the 1940s made references to the Soviet revolutionary models, based on which solutions were sought to release women from the burden of running

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<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: the Social Organization of Normality* (Oxford and New York, 2003), 2.

<sup>5</sup> See the comments in Adam Andrzejewski, *Sytuacja mieszkaniowa w Polsce w latach 1918–1974* (Warszawa, 1977), 422–4. Households outnumbered residential units; for instance, in 1974, 115 households corresponded with 100 flats; cf. Helena Gintelowa, 'Gospodarstwo domowe na tle statystyki', *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 1 (1977), 6.

the household. The other Eastern Bloc countries saw similar developments.<sup>6</sup> The actions constituting the work at home performed to satisfy the needs of the body were permanently regarded as ‘naturally’ female.<sup>7</sup>

From the standpoint of gender studies, identification of *family* and *household* with the private sphere and ‘natural’ activities has long had a negative overtone. Household would be comprehended as a sphere of the traditional gender-related allocation of work tasks, resistance against innovation, continuance rather than change. More recent literature tends to emphasise that although the household labour is most of the time ascribed to women, the extent to which this experience may be regarded as one of oppression varies extremely, conditional upon the circumstances. While the ‘set’ practices are strengthened and preserved in a household, they can as well be subject to modernisation there, including the division of roles within the family.<sup>8</sup> Hence, household may be perceived as the space where women experience modernity – a space offering a different vision of modernity than the career or public activity sphere.<sup>9</sup> Such vision can be complementary in case modernity at home corresponds with that of the outer world.

The studies in material culture of Europe and the United States in the years after the Second World War associate the idea of household modernisation with the birth of mass consumption and with the phenomena characteristic of the Western market economy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g.: for Yugoslavia – Wendy Bracewell, ‘Eating up Yugoslavia. Cookbooks and Consumption in Socialist Yugoslavia’, in Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger (eds.), *Communism Unwrapped* (New York, 2012), 169–96; for Romania – Katherine Verdery, ‘From Parent-State to Family Patriarchs: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Eastern Europe’, in *eadem* (ed.), *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next* (New York, 1996), 92–101; for Poland – Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz and Piotr Perkowski, ‘Zmiany w gospodarstwie domowym okresu PRL’, in Grażyna Wyder (ed.), *Kobieta w gospodarstwie domowym. Ziemie polskie na tle porównawczym* (Zielona Góra, 2012), 311–46.

<sup>7</sup> Olivia Harris, ‘Households as Natural Units’, in Kate Young, Carol Wolkowitz, and Roslyn McCullagh (eds.), *Of Marriage and the Market: Women’s Subordination Internationally and its Lessons* (London, 1984), 149.

<sup>8</sup> David Morgan, ‘Gendering the Household: Some Theoretical Considerations’, in Linda McKie, Sophie Bowlby, and Susan Gregory (eds.), *Gender, Power and the Household* (London, 1999), 31–2; Harris, ‘Households’, 149.

<sup>9</sup> Lesley Johnson, ‘“As housewives we are worms”: Women, modernity and the home question’, *Cultural Studies*, x, 3 (1996), 449–63.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., e.g.: Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (eds.), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford, 2004); Susan

For former Eastern-Bloc countries, the points-of-reference in the studies in 'home' upgrade include the policies of industrialisation and women's vocational mobilisation, in combination with the emancipation trend as an ideological project, and the utopian Soviet concepts of communisation of the domestic sphere (and attempts at putting them into practice). In both cases, women were the targets and the instruments of the modernisation policy,<sup>11</sup> whilst remaining 'social actresses' contributing to it. Household remained an important aspect in the post-war modernity discourses: after all, the post-war reconstruction project implied technical innovations launched into the house sphere.<sup>12</sup> New buildings were usually equipped with running water, gas supply and sewerage facilities, some had a central heating installed. Albeit not commonly available at all, such amenities were shown by women's magazines as achievements of socialist modernity that facilitated the housewife's daily effort. In the official discourse of the Stalinist and Six-Year Plan (1950–5) time, upgrading of the household was meant to help reconcile the role of the house-lady with the woman's professional career and social or societal activity. Modern household equipment, from the gas cooker down to petty household appliances, and reasonable organisation of work within the house collective were all meant to be a token of progress. The other extreme, defined in terms of backwardness or obscurantism featured households run with the use of old methods by overworked women none of whom "ever sees a piece of the world as she is cluttered with all these domestic activities".<sup>13</sup> This is how modernity in the household was made part of the post-war emancipation project. As was the case with the Soviet Union, it was expected to offer liberation from (as in Lenin's words, which were readily quoted) the overpowering, infatuating

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Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt (eds.), *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> M. Jane Slaughter, "'What's New?' And is it Good for You? Gender and Consumerism in Post-war Europe', in Joanna Regulska and Bonnie Smith (eds.), *Women and Gender in Post-war Europe. From Cold War to European Union* (London and New York, 2012), 105.

<sup>12</sup> For more about the housing standards in post-war Poland, see Dariusz Jarosz, *Mieszkanie się należy ... Studium z peerelowskich praktyk społecznych* (Warszawa, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Zofia Wardęska, 'Osiedlaczowa chce pracować (Radości i smutki)', *Przyjaciółka*, 48 (1951), 3.

and humiliating ‘petty household’.<sup>14</sup> The modern household was not a value in itself: in the official Stalinist discourse, which placed an emphasis on production, it was to be a space ensuring relaxation and ‘handling’ of those members of the family who worked outside. Since the idea of communisation of its functions turned out to be a hard-to-implement project in the specific Polish conditions, the household was still pictured as important. Therefore, two adversative but accordant visions of household functioned: according to the terms proposed by Natalia Jarska,<sup>15</sup> one was based on communisation and the other, on rationalisation and modernisation.

The post-Stalinist Thaw brought about a turn in the approach to the household across the Eastern Bloc. With a modern, moderate consumption working as a tool with which to legitimise the ‘Communist-Party and State authorities’,<sup>16</sup> the household became a self-existent object of the socialist modernisation policy. It became even more appreciated as a sphere of privacy, relaxation, comfort, and not just a place where one’s forces were mobilised toward the production effort. On the other hand, the expert and, thereafter, popular discourse made the household professional: the housewife’s work was to be subject to the principles of rationalisation, and be planned and performed in a modern fashion. Consequently, the problem of equipping households with mechanised and electric equipment helping keep the house clean, tidy and comfortable gained in importance. Household was to be a space of modernity – both in the sphere of production, when it helped ‘handle’ the family and satisfy its members’ needs such as food, clothing, hygiene, and in the sphere of consumption – when household was to facilitate respite and repose while encouraging the comfort of privateness. Since the ‘kitchen debate’ (held in 1959 in Moscow on the occasion of the American National Exhibition and described many a time in literature),<sup>17</sup> a modernised individual

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Reid, ‘The Khrushchev Kitchen: Domesticating the Scientific-Technological Revolution’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, xl, 2 (2005), 291.

<sup>15</sup> Natalia Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru. Robotnice w Polsce w latach 1945–1969* (Warszawa, 2015), 89.

<sup>16</sup> David Crowley and Susan Reid, ‘Introduction: Pleasures in Socialism?’, in David Crowley and Susan Reid (eds.), *Pleasures in Socialism. Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Block* (Evanston, 2010), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Reid, ‘Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev’, *Slavic Review*, lxi, 2 (2002), 221–52.

household, equipped with dedicated appliances, became an epitome of a new type of rivalry against the West: it was meant to prove that the socialist state was ready to ensure adequate levels or standards of consumption to its citizens. The inward discourse, targeted at the country's citizens, praised the household as a promise of progress and incessant improvement of the living conditions.<sup>18</sup> As was the case with the German Democratic Republic (GDR)<sup>19</sup> and other Bloc countries, the promise was made, mainly, to women.

Modest but modern, well managed and – with use of household equipment – easy-to-handle household became part of the moderate consumption model propagated in the sixties. The following decade saw new meanings gained by the notion of 'modernity'. Basically associated with technological progress, *household* implied encouragement of new, or novel, consumption opportunities and daily-life comfort following the idealised Western standards. Household became a constituent of the promise of higher living standards, where progress and individual prosperity were elements of a vision of socialist citizenship.<sup>20</sup> Semantically ambiguous, the notions of modernity, progress, and modernisation remained among the constant aspects of discourses on household – along with struggle against 'backwardness' and 'unmodern' practices or established customs – well until the crisis decade of the 1980s.

## II

### HOME ECONOMICS COMMITTEE

As emphasised by Krisztina Fehérváry, the socialist state was co-formed by individuals and organisations driven by diverse interests and pursuing their own objectives, particularly as regards the sphere of consumption.<sup>21</sup> Not only the modern household was an element of the State's policy since the Thaw in Poland, but also various social

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<sup>18</sup> Reid, 'This is Tomorrow!', 44.

<sup>19</sup> Karin Zachmann, 'Managing Choice: Constructing the Socialist Consumption Junction in the German Democratic Republic', in Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (eds.), *Cold War Kitchen. Americanization, Technology, and European Users* (London, 2009), 262.

<sup>20</sup> Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, 'Introduction', in *idem* (eds.), *Socialist Modern. East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Michigan, 2008), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Krisztina Fehérváry, 'Goods and States: The Political Logic of State-Socialist Material Culture', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, ci, 2 (2009), 428.

actors produced discourses on the topic. The League of Women and its section named the Home Economics Committee were the most prominent among them. Leaving aside the discussion, ongoing since 1989, on the League as a façade organisation subordinate to the party/state authorities, I shall assume the concept of its limited agency. Within the limited agency, the League created modernity scenarios for households and subsequently took actions aimed at their implementation.

The Home Economics Committee was established at the Second National Convention of the League of Women in 1957. It was formed in the climate of the Thaw, a time for the League to pass “from propaganda to activism that focused on women’s actual needs”.<sup>22</sup> The Committee was obviously not a first institution to deal with modernisation of households.<sup>23</sup> Apart from the initiatives of the pre-war time, there was a Home Economics Institute (dissolved in 1950) which in the mid-1940s dealt with projects of communisation and rationalisation of housework.<sup>24</sup> In the countryside, Circles of Rural Housewives (*Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich*), reactivated right after the war and remaining apolitical till 1949, continued their educational activity by running cooking and sewing courses;<sup>25</sup> these bodies were associated with peasant associations, on the one hand, and with the League of Women, on the other. However, the emergence of the KGD had to do with an official turn in the attitude towards consumption and the sphere of domestic activities. As the Six-Year Plan of 1950–5 was nearing its end, at the moment when professional mobilisation of women ceased to be a crying need in economic terms, the press started publishing texts showing appreciation and respect for the housewife and for the household as her only workplace. Appeals to

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara A. Nowak, *Serving Women and the State: the League of Women in Communist Poland*, Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2004 <[https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send\\_file?accession=osu1091553624&disposition=inline](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file?accession=osu1091553624&disposition=inline)> [Accessed: 20 Jan. 2017], 130.

<sup>23</sup> A history of the initiatives preceding the Committee, beginning with the interwar period, *ibidem*, 165–6.

<sup>24</sup> Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 90.

<sup>25</sup> *Eadem*, ‘Between the Rural Household and Political Mobilization – The Circles of Rural Housewives in Poland 1946-1989’, in Cosmin Budeanca and Sorin Radu (eds.), *Countryside and Communism in Eastern Europe. Perceptions, Attitudes, Propaganda* (Zurich, 2016), 534–5.



'return home' and, possibly, to some cottage-industry work were added since 1956.<sup>26</sup> With a relative liberalisation of the government's policies, various social actors proposed their demands related to consumption. In June 1955, on initiative of the Central Board of the League of Women, a National Conference for Mothers was convened in Warsaw. Apart from its propagandistic purport, in line with the phraseology of official ruling-party documents, the event enabled articulation of the consumption postulates. Among these, the delegates demanded that the needs of households be taken into consideration in the subsequent production plans, services redeveloped, and the quality of life generally improved.<sup>27</sup> They also pointed out to the problems of the Circles of Rural Housewives which, due to their double connection (to the League of Women and to the Peasant Self-Help Association [*Związek Samopomocy Chłopskiej*, ZSch]), struggled with an organisational chaos and difficulties with allocation of funding.<sup>28</sup> The newly-established Committee was expected to act as an exponent of the women's consumption-related interests. In such a way, the female domain of household management became a public affair that called for codification, education, and even professionalisation.<sup>29</sup> What is more, modernisation of this sphere, was expected to become part of the state's interest so that individual household could evolve into a "unit of a genuinely rational economy that would enhance the family's health and cultural standards".<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Piotr Perkowski, 'Aktywność zawodowa gospodyń domowych na łamach prasy kobiecej Polski Ludowej', in Lucyna Kopciewicz and Edyta Zierkiewicz (eds.), *Koniec mitu niewinności. Płeć i seksualność w socjalizacji i edukacji* (Warszawa, 2009), 300–4.

<sup>27</sup> Alicja Musiałowa, 'Roztoczenie bardziej starannej opieki nad dziećmi winno być sprawą całego społeczeństwa', *Słowo Ludu*, vi, 134 (1955), 2; 'W imię szczęścia naszych dzieci. W imię radosnej przyszłości dzieci wszystkich matek budujemy socjalizm – walczmy o pokój. Apel Krajowej Narady Matek', *Słowo Ludu*, vi, 134 (1955), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Dariusz Jarosz, 'Idee, programy i realia: funkcje Ligi Kobiet w porządku instytucjonalnym Polski Ludowej (1945–1957)', in Agnieszka Janiak-Jasińska, Katarzyna Sierakowska, and Andrzej Szwarz (eds.), *Działaczki społeczne, feministki, obywatelki ... Samoorganizowanie się kobiet na ziemiach polskich po 1918 roku (na tle porównawczym)* (Warszawa, 2009), 324.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Reid, 'Gender and the De-Stalinisation of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev', in Emma Casey and Lydia Martens (eds.), *Gender and Consumption. Domestic Cultures and Commercialisation of Everyday Life* (London, 2007), 68.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. 'Uchwała II Krajowego Zjazdu Ligi Kobiet', in *Statut Ligi Kobiet wraz z Uchwałą* (Warszawa, 1959), 14.

The establishment of the KGD meant a participation in the worldwide surging tide of interest in individual consumption and household affairs. In the Socialist Bloc countries, institutions of the like sort operated under the patronage of women's organisations and party/state authorities. In East Germany, the *Zentrales Aktiv für Haushaltstechnik* (ZAHHT), established in 1956, was tasked with coordinating the scientific research and the manufacture of household appliances. The organisation ran no courses or trainings, though; instead, it placed an emphasis on the development of the services that were taking over certain household functions.<sup>31</sup> Institutes specialising in domestic economic(s) issues functioned in the Western countries as well. Beginning with the early 1960s, KGD was establishing cooperation with Swedish, West German and French organisations, and had their research studies translated for its own purposes.<sup>32</sup> In France, professionalisation and modernisation of household labour was dealt with by units of the *Union fédérale des consommateurs* (UFC; est. 1951), which has often been perceived as a female rather than consumer organisation. Its founders made the postulate to modernise the household part of an extensive programme for the country's productivisation, in connection with female careering and civic rights for women.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, since the late fifties, in mining regions, big enterprises operating locally have been interested, in the formation of adequate consumptive habits of their employees and their families, and thence they patronised a variety of household-oriented courses and trainings.<sup>34</sup>

The Polish organisation was associated with the women's movement stronger than similar structures functioning in the Western countries were. Moreover, KGD was probably the most popular and best perceptible division of the League of Women. Its actions, including presentations of modern appliances, rational alimentation or cutting-and-sewing courses were often presented, on a *pars pro toto* basis, as

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<sup>31</sup> Zachmann, 'Managing Choice', 260.

<sup>32</sup> For the translations of the articles from Swedish, German, and French, see AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/53, Translations of foreign materials re. household, npag.

<sup>33</sup> Rebecca J. Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (Cambridge, 2011), 63.

<sup>34</sup> Marion Fontaine, 'Le paternalisme est-il soluble dans la consommation? L'encadrement des mineurs consommateurs en question', *Histoire, économie & société*, 3 (2013), 75.

the only form of the League's activity.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, educational courses of varied types were an important part of KGD's activities, perhaps the most spectacular one. According to its initial declaration, the Committee's work was to be much broader; emphasised was the scientific foundation of its activity. Maria Jaszczukowa, the first chairwoman,<sup>36</sup> declared that KGD was "a research and services-oriented division, operating on the basis of scientific achievements", tasked with "dissemination of learning and propaganda" regarding the rational and modern methods of how to run a household.<sup>37</sup> Testing and issuing expert opinions on prototypes of household products was meant to advocate the development of individual consumerism in the socialist economic environment – an action that formed part of the modernity model that was promoted particularly in the 1970s.<sup>38</sup>

An expert discourse on household developed by KGD was popularised by using the mass media – initially, the bimonthly *Gospodarstwo Domowe* targeted at (female) instructors, then through the radio (broadcast *Postęp w gospodarstwie domowym* [Progress in the Household], aimed at the general public) and popular women's magazines, like *Przyjaciółka*, *Kobieta i Życie*, and *Zwierciadło*. In practice, modernisation of the household was to be supported through practical classes for (female) instructors and, subsequently, for adult women and girls, run as side activities within home economics centres and clinics or information bureaus affiliated with KGD. This was not the only opportunity to receive advice on household issues: the 1960s saw the emergence of 'Praktyczna Pani' [Practical Lady] network managed by PSS 'Społem' consumer cooperative,<sup>39</sup> whereas Modern Housewife

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<sup>35</sup> This is true particularly with regard to the situation after 1989; see, for instance, Sławomira Walczewska, 'Liga Kobiet – jedyna organizacja kobieca w PRL, *Pełnym Głosem*, 1 (1993).

<sup>36</sup> Maria Jaszczukowa (1915–2007) was a lawyer and social activist, member of the Democratic Party [SD], an MP with the Polish Sejm in 1947–56; she was an activist with the League of Women and the World Democratic Federation of Women. She co-founded and made contributions to the *Przyjaciółka* weekly. She is best known for her activity as a deputy rapporteur for the 1956 Bill on the conditions for admissibility of abortion, arguing in favour of liberalisation of the regulations.

<sup>37</sup> Maria Jaszczukowa, [untitled], *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 1 (1958), 2.

<sup>38</sup> Nowak, *Serving Women and the State*, 167.

<sup>39</sup> PSS 'Społem', or Common Consumers' Cooperative [*Powszechna Spółdzielnia Spożywców*] 'Społem', was established in 1868; after 1945, the Cooperative had a number of modernistic department stores built in larger cities of Poland.

Centres functioned in the countryside, collaborating with local Circles of Rural Housewives and Communal Cooperatives ‘Peasant Self-Help’ (*Gminna Spółdzielnia ‘Samopomoc Chłopska’*).<sup>40</sup> Apart from courses and demonstrations, the clinics ran rental offices of home equipment, organised household lessons at schools; to the extent possible, instructors were put on duty, ready to answer the enquirers’ questions. KGD collaborated with selected ‘Praktyczna Pani’ clinics and Modern Housewife Centres, supplying them with pamphlets and study aids, and providing additional training to the staff.<sup>41</sup> The Household Commissions affiliated to the provincial (i.e. voivodeship-level) and district (*powiat*-level) Boards of the League of Women, were supposed to be the ‘platform of understanding’ between the Committee and other actors involved in the household modernisation policy.<sup>42</sup> The Commissions were tasked with implementing the idea of modernised housekeeping.

### III

#### BATTLEFIELDS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR MODERNITY

The notions of modernity and modernisation,<sup>43</sup> both used – with their varying semantics – in the expert discourse formulated by the Committee, altered their meanings between 1957 and 1980. The propaganda of new solutions and struggle against the old established habits was the only fixed element throughout the experiment. There was virtually no positive valuing of tradition or references to the ‘domestic’ knowledge of the preceding generations – a motif that appears, at last, in the crisis-stricken eighties’ decade. The old-style furnishings and arrangement of household was identified with backwardness, obscurantism, if not merely primitivism.

<sup>40</sup> The Peasant Self-Help Union (ZSch) was set up in December 1944 to take over control of the earlier-existing farmer’s associations and farming cooperatives; a Central Board of the ‘Peasant Self-Help’ Cooperative was established pursuant to a law of May 1948. The Communal Cooperatives (*Gminne spółdzielnie*, GSs) established themselves as the factual monopoly-holder in the rural trade.

<sup>41</sup> Krystyna Biernacka, “‘Praktyczna Pani’”, *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 1 (1964), 65.

<sup>42</sup> Józefa Adamusowa, ‘O niektórych zadaniach placówek terenowych i instruktorach gospodarstwa domowego w 1964 roku’, *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 1 (1964), 2.

<sup>43</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. and introduction by Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA, 1985 / Columbia, 2005), 231–66.

“We are aware that, compared to a number of other countries, households are run in this country still under difficult and rather primitive conditions”, thus Helena Spalona, then-newly elected Director of the KGD, defined the situation in 1959. Among the errors made in the then-bygone Stalinist period she enumerated disregard toward the importance of the home sphere and announced a struggle for improvement of the previously prevalent primitive conditions of housework, development of the indispensable services, and controls of household equipment quality.<sup>44</sup> On the fifth anniversary of the Committee, continued struggle with the progress-hindering old habits of housewives was announced.<sup>45</sup> The burden of responsibility for the backwardness was no more placed solely on the foregone political system but instead, on individuals – namely, the women responsible for their households and homes. In early 1971, Teresa Pałaszewska-Reindl found that the traditional household running methods no more corresponded with “the current or the future needs of the society” and complained that characteristic of contemporary Polish households was, “continually, a remarkable backwardness and traditional approach towards many an issue”.<sup>46</sup> Critiques of the ‘irrational’ house management model and aspects of backwardness reappeared in *Gospodarstwo Domowe* until the decade’s end.<sup>47</sup> Phrases such as ‘struggle against backwardness’, or the like, became obligatory in the discourses on household and, more broadly, family life. For example, declaration of “struggle against the evil and backwardness” in the name of “increased wealth and beauty of the Homeland and a better life for Polish families” appeared in the chronicle of the League of Women club of the Voivodeship of Ciechanów before the Seventh Convention of the ruling Polish United Workers’ Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, PZPR) in 1975.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Helena Spalona, ‘Rozwój działalności w zakresie gospodarstwa domowego w Polsce (skrót referatu wygłoszonego na krajowej konferencji w sprawie gospodarstwa domowego w Warszawie, w październiku 1959’, *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 11 (1959), 3.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Nasze zadania w 1963 r. O działalności Komitetu do spraw Gospodarstwa Domowego’, *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 1 (1963), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Teresa Pałaszewska-Reindl, ‘O dalszy postęp i racjonalizację w gospodarstwie domowym’, *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 6 (1971), 1.

<sup>47</sup> Alicja Zdybel, ‘Postęp w gospodarstwie domowym (Zagadnienia społeczno-ekonomiczne)’, *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 5 (1973), 2.

<sup>48</sup> State Archives of Warsaw, Branch of Mława, Polish League of Women – Voivodeship Board of Ciechanów, fond 497/0, no ref. no., League of Women – the Ciechanów Organisation (*Ciechanowska Organizacja Ligi Kobiet*), Chronicle, npag.

The contrasting of the comfort of modernity and the retarded, traditional methods of managing a household was a frequent thread in household equipment advertisements published by popular magazines for women.<sup>49</sup> Journalistic articles condemned excessive attachment to traditional methods of housekeeping, identifying them with the elder generation of females.

The struggle for modernity began with determining the sphere of backwardness. In terms of an initial declaration in the first issue of *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, backwardness or retardation extended to a whole number of aspects: organisation of household, irrational nutrition, deficiencies in the areas of hygiene, aesthetics of the living space, clothing, and more.<sup>50</sup> The call to enhance the 'culture of everyday life', as the reverse of backwardness, referred to the (factually Stalinist) notion of *kulturnost'*.<sup>51</sup> Research and analytical work pursued under the auspices of the KGD led to a narrowing of the battleground and formulation of detailed purposes and objectives.

The major goal of the Committee's educational activities included promotion of the modern and rational nutrition, struggle against the traditional household model based entirely on women's work and the related popularisation of the trend of taking over certain household functions by communal services, such as mass caterers, laundry services, and child care. The educational effort was moreover focused on the use of modern household equipment. The different needs of households in the urban and rural areas were pointed out to, with the consequent legitimacy of taking a specified type of action there. Rural households became the target of an intense modernisation policy in the seventies; it was then that KGD's expert discourse began converging the contents addressed to the instructors operating in these two environments. In the earlier years, scarcity of gas or electricity network, sometimes of water-supply and sewerage grids too, implied, of necessity, a different practical concept of modernisation. All the same, rural households were continually approached as rather traditional or even retarded and thus posing difficulties to those operating on them, and calling for particularly intensive education

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<sup>49</sup> For instance, *Przyjaciółka*, 25 (1965), 14; 21 (1966), 14.

<sup>50</sup> Maria Jaszczukowa, [untitled], *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 1 (1958), 1.

<sup>51</sup> See Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s' (Oxford, 2000), 79–81.

action. Well into the middle of the 1970s, sociologists opined that rural families demonstrated a “conservative attitude toward innovation”, especially in respect of distribution of household roles.<sup>52</sup> However, sensible nutrition was the first and the most important focus of the Committee’s actions, the one that involved most of the resources and measures: “This is a country where people normally eat a lot but they eat irrationally”, Maria Jaszczukowa complained in 1958.<sup>53</sup> Hence, in the very first months of its activity the Committee prepared brochures on modernity in the kitchen advocating increasing consumption rates of vegetables, fruit and meat. Interestingly, whilst in the late fifties increased consumption of meat was regarded as attesting to a modern management of the kitchen, two decades later the KGD experts encouraged to restrict this consumption. This did not ensue from supply problems. It was the National Food and Nutrition Institute whose experts criticised the consumption model based on animal fats.<sup>54</sup> In the KGD experts’ opinion, the modernisation of nutrition patterns was to consist in a change in the structure of consumption and an altered model of meal preparation. KGD’s role was, therefore, to “counteract the patterns of consumption being detrimental from a societal standpoint” whilst also promulgating “the behavioural patterns accepted by science which determines the objective needs of humans”.<sup>55</sup> Being of utmost authority, science was meant to replace the established habit and tradition.

For urban households, the practice of eating at home and preparing traditional time-consuming meals was heavily criticised. In the early 1970s, the fact that “the dining out population rate” was a mere 4 per cent apparently testified to a Polish backwardness,<sup>56</sup> since this implied overburdening of women with the kitchen effort. Modernity and

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<sup>52</sup> Henryk Bednarski, ‘Struktura, funkcje i świadomość współczesnych rodzin chłopskich’, in *idem*, Waldemar Nowak, and Ryszard Ziętek (eds.), *Współczesne rodziny wiejskie. Studia do syntezy* (Warszawa, 1988), 131.

<sup>53</sup> Maria Jaszczukowa, ‘W trosce o podniesienie kultury naszego gospodarstwa’, *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 9 (1958), 4.

<sup>54</sup> Bożena Gulbicka, Waldemar Michna, and Barbara Chmielewska, *Raport o zmianach i stanie wyżywienia oraz bezpieczeństwie żywnościowym Polski. Lata 1980–1992* (Warszawa, 1993), 15–16.

<sup>55</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. B/VII-16, Danuta Zarzycka, *Edukacja rodziny w zakresie racjonalizacji spożycia* (Educating the family for rationalisation of consumption, 4 Apr. 1977), npag.

<sup>56</sup> Zdybel, ‘Postęp’, 2.

progress were meant to consist in employing time-saving practices and outsourcing of some of the housework. However, as staff canteens or the other forms of communal or institutional feeding never gained a popularity comparable to that of the other Bloc countries, such as the Soviet Union or the GDR, the conception of communisation of feeding remained part of a utopian vision of the future. Joint action taken by the Committee and the Food and Nutrition Institute to prepare dietary recommendations for school canteens and staff cafeterias did not yield the expected result. Consequently, KGD focused in its modernisation efforts on individual domestic kitchen. The Committee held courses and presentations of rational nutrition for families, often crowned with a common tasting of the prepared meals. Such events occupied the forefront place in the annual plans and guidelines for local home economics clinics.<sup>57</sup> For example, the Central Board of KGD proposed in 1978 that six conspectuses of presentations, including three on food and nutrition, be prepared, and compiled 'A comprehensive scheme for the society's education in rational nutrition'.<sup>58</sup>

According to the reports of local Household Commissions, rational alimentation presentations and courses enjoyed quite considerable popularity; yet, the instructors themselves referred to numerous hindrances appearing due to the reasons beyond their control or owing to resistance from the delegates – particularly in the countryside. The involvement of rural women in their household and farmstead work prevented the option to conduct such courses on weekdays,<sup>59</sup> whereas (as may be guessed, though official documents would not mention it) holding such events on a Sunday could have caused objection as it distorted the customary rhythm of the festive time.

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<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Wrocław, State Archives (*Archiwum Państwowe we Wrocławiu*), ZG LK Wrocław (League of Women, Board of Wrocław Branch), ref. no. 143, *Wytuczne w sprawie zakresu działania, organizacji i wyposażenia poradni gospodarstwa domowego* (Guidelines for the scope of operation, organisation and equipment of home economic clinic), c. 9.

<sup>58</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. B/VII-16, Central Board of the KGD, *Wytuczne do prowadzenia pokazów i prelekcji z zakresu ekonomiki, kultury i higieny gospodarstwa domowego* (Guidelines for presentations and speeches on economics, culture and hygiene of household); *Kompleksowy program edukacji społeczeństwa w zakresie racjonalnego żywienia* (A comprehensive scheme for the society's education in rational nutrition), npag.

<sup>59</sup> For example, Zofia Różańska [Szczecznobrzyszyn-based household instructor], 'Kurs w Kole Gospodyń Wiejskich (Z terenu)', *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 2 (1964), 52.



The late fifties witnessed KGD instructors complaining about a “much diverse element [i.e., representation] of the delegates”, who were generally attached to their local culinary tradition and rather reluctant to innovations, regardless of their age.<sup>60</sup> Paradoxically enough, given the rural environment, scarcity of fresh vegetables or fruits was described as yet another obstacle. Moreover, rural households lacked pieces of equipment that were otherwise highly popular in the urban environment, electric baking-pans being an example. A modern kitchen appliances offer from the mid-1960s targeted at countryside housewives featured meat pounders and manual egg-whisks.<sup>61</sup> Blenders, centrifugal juicers, and other electricity-powered petty household appliances, similarly as refrigerators and deep-freezers first appeared in advertisements targeted at rural customers in the 1970s. Consequently, KGD’s course programme for the countryside areas extended to preparation of homemade fruit, vegetable and meat preserves – products that were durable and capable of being stored long-term. To give an example, a local Home Economics Clinic in Kutno (central Poland) held in 1976 one course and ten presentations of food processing techniques.<sup>62</sup>

Modernity in the kitchen was constantly about saving the housekeeper’s time and effort. Besides, the content of diet-related recommendations varied depending on the content of the expert discourse. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, courses and presentations held under KGD’s auspices focused around altering the consumption model from cereals/milk-based products into foods making use of dairies, meats, fruits and vegetables.<sup>63</sup> In the 1970s, the figured ‘Western’ modern living standard assumed the use of intermediate and concentrated products manufactured with use of new production lines that were put into operation one by one. The popularisation of the expert discourse proposed by the Committee was much supported by the magazines for women. A 1975 nationwide press reception survey showed that texts exploiting “options for practical use”, such as – primarily – culinary

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<sup>60</sup> Władysława Ciemniewska, ‘O kursach na wsi (Pomówmy o naszej pracy)’, *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 3 (1959), 16.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Warto kupić’, *Gospodyni Wiejska*, 17/18 (1963), 8.

<sup>62</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. seg. 80, A plan for mass actions of Home Economics Clinic in Kutno, 1976, npag.

<sup>63</sup> Jaszczukowa, ‘W trosce o podniesienie kultury’, 4–5.

recipes, enjoyed the highest popularity.<sup>64</sup> Cuisine columns in the magazines *Przyjaciółka* and *Kobieta i Życie* offered their readers advice based on the KGD expert discourse, but the proposal of an attractive identity – the one of a modern housewife capable of preparing meals fast and efficiently with use of the modern foodstuffs appealed to them the strongest.<sup>65</sup> The traditional, onerous “dinner-cooking procedure running long hours” was now contrasted against the abundance of almost-ready-to-serve meals, including powdered coconut pound cake, buckwheat crumpets, or champignon soup.<sup>66</sup> The image of consumption following the idealised ‘West’ offered fertile soil for the advertising of frozen French fries – another newly-launched item.<sup>67</sup> A colour picture of a plate filled with fries, salad and a piece of meat, accompanied with a ‘Western’-made orange juice can suggested to the female readers a vision of decent life which was to finally become attainable to everybody in a socialist country.

Advertisements of modern household equipment, which began appearing since 1960s, and presentations of how to use such appliances, held by local household centres or clinics, had a similar function. In the late seventies, presentation of ‘home dishwashers’ as yet another step on the road toward the upgraded household<sup>68</sup> stimulated consumptive aspirations and projecting of the future. In reality, refrigerators, freezers or automatic washing machines, now much more in demand, were expensive and hard to get. In their letters to the editor women’s magazine readers complained that what the presentations of household appliances did was ‘spoil the blood’.<sup>69</sup> Much more useful were the courses instructing how to maintain and make small repairs to such equipment, organised in rural areas and small towns.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Anna Maliszewska and Henryk Siwek, ‘Przepisy kulinarne w prasie kobiecej (Sondaże OBP)’, *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze*, xvii, 4 (1976), 123.

<sup>65</sup> This particular aspect of the impact of women’s press is covered in Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman*, 14.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Błyskawiczny obiad (Na naszym stole)’, *Przyjaciółka*, 48 (1979), 14.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Frytki mrożone (Na naszym stole)’, *Przyjaciółka*, 36 (1979), 14.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Informacje rynkowe. Predom radzi – zmywarka do naczyń dalszym krokiem do unowocześnienia gospodarstwa domowego’, *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 4 (1979), 36–7.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Ewa’, ‘Jak nam ułatwiają życie’, *Kobieta i Życie*, 40 (1974), 5.

<sup>70</sup> Kazimiera Żelazkiewicz, ‘Ośrodki “Nowoczesna Gospodyni” na nowym etapie pracy’, *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 6 (1966), 70.

The popularisation of use of modern household equipment was an essential aspect of KGD's involvement in politics focused on individual consumption. Fridges, blenders, washing or sewing machines were 'objects of gender-related desire'; more importantly, though – to follow Susan Reid's thought – creating the need to possess them was devised to turn the females dealing with household into modern and efficient citizens.<sup>71</sup> KGD's modernisation effort was focused on such women, who, as a matter of fact, were subjected to permanent disciplining. This resulted from the gender dimension of the socialist post-Thaw modernity, with women being perceived as prone (to a higher degree than males) to irrational consumer behaviour and thus requiring pedagogical measures to be applied.<sup>72</sup> Irrespective of the fact that moderate consumption was valued positively, was an element of the new socialist morality,<sup>73</sup> whilst the household was officially the lookout of the party/state authorities, it was continuously perceived as a not fully rationally managed sphere that lagged behind the modern status of the external world.

#### IV HOUSEHOLD AS A SPACE OF EXPERIMENT: STRUGGLING FOR MODERNITY IN BOGATE

The research work undertaken by KGD was meant to elaborate an efficient scheme for upgrade of Polish households. The so-called 'experimental household' project, developed in 1959, was an innovative idea. It was devised to collect information on the practices actually applied at homes and, subsequently, prepare recommendations for trade and industry regarding the demand for equipment and appliances. The selected households were subject to a long (six or twelve-month) observation by KGD representatives. Their members were bound to fill in a series of questionnaires or surveys, give reliable information on their budgets, housework organisation, culinary habits, home furnishings and amenities. The first poll, which covered a total of 322 urban households, showed that the largest share of the budgets of the surveyed families was expended on food whereas

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<sup>71</sup> Reid, 'Gender and the Destalinisation', 57.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, 68.

<sup>73</sup> *Eadem*, 'Cold War in the Kitchen', 214.

dining-out services were used to an inappreciable extent; their expenditure on culture was “disconcertingly low”.<sup>74</sup> Detailed analysis of dietary habits led to the conclusion that they were irrational and contrary to the recommendations of modern dietetics.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the families under investigation found it awkward to deal with scarcity of modern household equipment at their homes and complained about supply shortages in this respect. The first experiment confirmed the need to modernise households but pointed out, in parallel, to ‘objective’ barriers to such modernisation. The participants made complaints about a ‘poor’ quality of products made of plastic, unavailability of electric equipment; with respect to services, they declared they did everything on their own (a reply stating that the standard of the services was satisfactory because “my husband can mend everything” sounded unintentionally humorous).<sup>76</sup>

Completed by the middle of the 1970s, the observation of the experimental households in large cities showed that many families aspired for the modern household model but were not successful, for a variety of reasons. What it more, the modernity pattern propagated by KGD, which used the assumptions of the party’s and state’s socio-economic policies, was falling short of the families’ actual expectations. The idea to communise selected functions of the household encountered resistance. For instance, in spite of a strong propaganda in favour of laundry services, including community (housing-estate-based) laundrettes, most users preferred to get their clothes washed at home: people preferred to keep control over their garments so that they would not get destroyed or get somehow fouled or tainted by contact with the other families’ clothes.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, most of the respondents were found attached to the tradition of having meals at home. Based on the observation and analyses of experimental households’ budgets, the Committee’s experts detected the sample families’ inclination for irrational spending of their disposable money,

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<sup>74</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/40, A note on the research study on the experimental households (1960?), npag.

<sup>75</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/40, Research studies on alimentation (1960?), npag.

<sup>76</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/40, Questionnaire re. field supplies of household equipment, npag.

<sup>77</sup> AAN, League of Women – Home Economics Committee, temp. ref. no. 13/79, Questionnaires re. the laundries: an analysis, npag.

as they generally preferred to buy a television set rather than a refrigerator or a washing machine (apparently, a much more purposeful choice). The Committee's task was to develop, in response to those observed trends, a model for 'legitimate and advisable' investing in the household<sup>78</sup> – a design which assumed an intervention in the consumer behaviours of individual households.

As KGD faced a serious challenge of diagnosing the condition of rural households and, consequently, recognising their needs, in spring 1961 a decision was made to launch the research work in the countryside. In June, the *gromada* [rural administrative unit (functioning 1954–72, in lieu of commune)] of Bogate in the District (*powiat*) of Przasnysz, within what was then the Voivodeship of Warsaw, was selected as an experimental object. The local Circle of Rural Housewives displayed commitment; the central village offered a room (though not renovated then yet) where a home economics clinic (*poradnia gospodarstwa domowego*) could be arranged. Preparations started in the latter half of 1961, the research activity as such was to be done in 1963–5. Meanwhile (in June 1962) a new person took charge of the local operations; as she reported to the Committee's Board, intensified activity was envisioned locally.<sup>79</sup> As part of the preparatory exercise, it was decided that six combined talk-and-presentation sessions would be carried out in 1962, with a focus on the rational alimentation principles. It was then that the households were to be chosen to participate in the experiment.<sup>80</sup>

The programme and the research purpose of the exercise done at Bogate were designed on a pretty large scale. The project was meant to provide knowledge regarding the living conditions of rural families and subsequently contribute to popularisation of the rules of reasonable management of the household whilst at the same time boosting "the social and economic mobilisation of the village ... in respect of providing women with help in home management". The actual field of research

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<sup>78</sup> Anna Biedrzycka, 'Gospodarstwa doświadczalne', *Gospodarstwo Domowe*, 4 (1965), 8.

<sup>79</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/41, Barbara Ciołkowska, Internal Memorandum to the Board of the KGD related to the takeover of the research work in the village of Bogate, 8 June 1962, npag.

<sup>80</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/41, Initial action plan re. educational and research work in the village of Bogate, *gromada* of Bogate, District of Przasnysz, Voiv[odeship] of Warsaw, npag.

would be the experimental households specially selected for the purpose; finally, ten of them were to be selected (the initial plan included twenty or even thirty). The research would be based on a far-reaching intervention in the lives of the selected families: 'experimental menus' were to be introduced, the kitchens filled with appliances and equipments deemed indispensable for 'improved organisation of the labour' and hygienic considerations; the households were moreover to participate in vegetable/fruit growing competitions. Numerous questionnaires were planned, along with interviews and individual as well as group observations. A Rural Housewives Home Economics Clinic (or, as a modest option, a like Corner) was effectively to be set up in Bogate.<sup>81</sup>

The preparations started with official visits to Bogate and the district town of Przasnysz, talks held with members of local authorities and social organisations as well as local field branches of the sanitary and educational authorities. It is reported that as of August 1962, everybody promised to offer their assistance, showing an 'extremely favourable' attitude toward the idea of educational action in the countryside. This enabled KGD to outline a pretty ambitious action plan for the second half of the year, which included a presentation of fruit processing techniques and of "how to rationally dress a pre-school child", presentations and talks on child nutrition, importance of vegetables and fruits in the daily menu, appropriate storage of meat, and organisation of festive days. The plan extended to projections of two or three educational footages supplementary to the lectures and presentations delivered. Another task was to find an appropriate facility where to design and arrange the clinic premises to meet the purpose.

As a result, 1962 saw a preschool and school-age children 'rational dressing' show delivered in Bogate, while the local Circle of Rural Housewives received from the Committee's Central Board a number of brochures or pamphlets and guidebooks. The plan to arrange a home economics clinic failed; yet, the utmost success was the allocation of a space for its future use within a local fire station, based on consent obtained from the district authorities. No experimental household was selected before the year's end. In a memo summarising the progress of the project, Barbara Ciołkowa, who had been in charge of the project locally since June 1962, described the proposed educational

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<sup>81</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/41, Action plan re. educational and research work in the rural environment, 1963 (Bogate), n.d., npag.

and research programme as “appearing excessively extensive and undeliverable based upon social [*resp.*, grassroots] involvement”. Hence, she requested that the operation be entrusted to Warsaw-based Provincial (Voivodeship) Board of the League of Women, which would follow up several selected threads of action; otherwise, the research scheme could be limited to one selected issue, with the subsequent stages of research being meticulously planned. Barbara Ciołkowa emphasised that without contribution of instructors hired officially on a fulltime basis the project would end in a failure.<sup>82</sup> As a result, the idea to carry out a research in Bogate was eventually quit at the end of 1962, due to ‘inconvenient transport access’.<sup>83</sup>

The struggle for modernity in the village of Bogate did not end in a success indeed, though there had already been a committed local Circle of Rural Housewives operating within the *gromada*, and the local authorities were initially favourable toward the research work project. Barbara Ciołkowa, who was in charge of the experiment on behalf of the Committee, was much involved in her work and encountered a generally welcome response in Bogate. Mrs. Ciołkowa’s correspondence with the KGD’s Central Board, with the cooperating institutions and representatives of the local Circle of Rural Housewives documents the difficulties that appeared beyond the intentions and control of all the involved social actors. The date of children’s dressing show was postponed several times due to the problems with reconciling the date with representatives of the Institute of Industrial Design, which co-organised the event. The Committee moreover had no transport facilities available, and the materials to be used in the presentations (including hangers) had to be carried by a public intercity bus. The presentation finally took place on the first Sunday of October, which turned out to be somewhat uncomfortable due to no heating provided in the room (the children participating in the event had to repeatedly change their clothes).<sup>84</sup> The event proved theoretically successful but

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<sup>82</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/41, Barbara Ciołkowa, Memorandum re. educational and experimental work in the *gromada* of Bogate, District of Przasnysz, n.d., npag.

<sup>83</sup> AAN, League of Women, Home Economics Committee, temp. ref. no. 13/79, KGD’s research in household equipment within the 10-year period, p. 4.

<sup>84</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/41, Barbara Ciołkowa, Letter to Col.[league] Buskowska, Chairwoman of the KGW [Circle of Rural Housewives], 3 Oct. 1962, npag.

the accompanying questionnaire investigating the clothing needs of rural families appeared wrongly constructed and too difficult to fill out; in effect, it produced not-too-contributive replies. Members of the local Circle of Rural Housewives did not get involved in the organisation of the event; the arrival of a television crew caused “shoving one another, hum-and-bluster”.<sup>85</sup> The subsequent planned item, a demonstration of vegetable and fruit processing, did not take place: the raw materials appeared deficient due to poor harvest; on top of all that, the retarded field works prevented the local community from attending the event. None of the other planned course, talk or presentation was ever held. Lastly, no premises were finally successfully allocated for a home economics clinic: the idea of arranging a youth club, meant to draw the young people off from drinking, appeared strongly competitive.

In addition, initiatives taken personally by Barbara Ciołkowa to strengthen the partnership with the local Circle of Rural Housewives ended in a failure as well. The Provincial Board of the League of Women refused to financially support the prolongation of the children’s stay at their kindergarten from five to seven hours per day when the field works were on,<sup>86</sup> which was what the Circle members particularly cared about. Although the quoted reason was the sanitary condition of the nursery-school building, this particular point was sensitive, as can be judged from Ciołkowa’s letters. What is more, no member of the KGD authorities appeared at the celebration of the tenth anniversary of Bogate’s Circle of Rural Housewives. On the other hand, members of the latter expressed no interest in the work pursued by the KGD instructors, whereas the village locals offered resistance against the idea to hold a ‘Glass of Milk’ action at the local school. By all indications, Bogate at that point lacked those who would volunteer to partake in the courses planned as part of the household modernisation scheme offered by the Committee. The reason for this might have been a subjective sense of overwork and actual scarcity of free time: “as regards the course, well, I don’t really know what me to say, for

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<sup>85</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/41, Barbara Ciołkowa, Report on the official trip to the village of Bogate on 7 Oct. 1962 re. presentation of the dressing of preschool children, 10 Oct. 1962, npag.

<sup>86</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/41, Letter from the KGW [Circle of Rural Housewives] and the Parents’ Council of the Kindergarten in Bogate to the ZW LK [Provincial Board of the League of Women] in Warsaw, 1 Aug. 1962, npag.



really, everyone's so overworked and you'll barely bring home anything but a skin [i.e. bag] of bones", a Bogate-based newsstand keeper wrote to Barbara Ciołkowa.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the involvement of the local Circle of Rural Housewives, which seemed to be an advantage when the research work was planned, could have turned out to be the weak point of the project. The Circle had had courses and demonstrations in nutrition and food processing to its credit before the Committee's delegates first visited the area; in parallel, the organisation was getting prepared for its tenth anniversary. In this situation, the KGD action could be perceived as competitive. This might have been the actual reason behind the (already repeatedly mentioned) reserve of the Circle members in response to the idea to organise more courses or presentations. It is also possible that the topics to be dealt with did not sufficiently fit the local needs or expectations.

As Natalia Jarska demonstrates,<sup>88</sup> Circles of Rural Housewives positioned themselves aside of the mainstream women's movement; their 'double identity', peasant-and-female, was and remained problematic, but their relationship with the peasant movement were of larger significance. When in Bogate, KGD activists represented the League of Women and, on top of that, arrived from Warsaw. This might have aroused various expectations on the part of the local authorities and local Circle of Rural Housewives members. The fact that these were not met (refusal to finance the kindergarten's extended duty hours; no KGD authority representative attending the Association's tenth anniversary celebration) affected the cooperation adversely. Although Barbara Ciołkowa tried to weave between the League's board and the Committee directors, on the one hand, and the local entities – the Circle, the Communal and District National Council and the Volunteer Fire Department – on the other,<sup>89</sup> her endeavours eventually proved insufficient.

In Bogate, a village situated 10 km off the district town of Przasnysz and less than 100 km away of the capital city of Warsaw, a scenario failed which otherwise could have been successfully implemented in

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<sup>87</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/41, letter (untitled), Bogate, 17 Oct. 1962, npag.

<sup>88</sup> Jarska, 'Between the Rural Household', 532.

<sup>89</sup> AAN, League of Women, temp. ref. no. 13/41, Barbara Ciołkowa, A report on the official trip to Przasnysz and the village of Bogate, related to the educational and research job, 1–2 Oct. 1962, npag.

an urban environment of a larger or smaller population. The space and geographical distance to an urban hub posed an objective obstacle. Yet, time was another hindrance. The rhythm of the field works, as coupled with the overall lack of free time among rural females,<sup>90</sup> prevented their participation in courses or presentations. The failed attempt to select the experimental households might have been owing to the barriers posed by the mentality of the locals. Mistrust towards the central institutions and home perceived as a sphere of privacy made it impossible to incite the people to consent to accept interventions in their own homes. Furthermore, the KGD mission failed also because of the activities of the local Circle of Rural Housewives which organised courses and presentations as well. It might be presumed that the female dwellers of Bogate simply had no time to participate in more training or lecture sessions, or perhaps they did not find KGD's offer sufficiently attractive whilst the Circle enjoyed more trust among them. Certainly, the case of failed modernisation action in question demonstrates that there appeared tensions between the urban and the rural milieus, against the general modernisation trend experienced by the society of the communist Poland – with the resulting competition between the various community or social actors.

## V CONCLUSIONS

The actions taken by the Home Economics Committee were set within the model of a 'socialist education' that taught the rules of appropriate consumption. This pattern was implemented since the middle of the 1950s in the other Socialist Bloc countries as well. In the Western countries, apart from the dedicated institutions, popular magazines with their extensive guidance or advisory sections fulfilled a corresponding role. Compared against the other communist countries, the case of Poland's Home Economics Committee excelled in that its actions were primarily targeted at individual household; the communisation of its functions did not count as much. The Committee started off from the assumption that the average Polish household was imperfect and called for rationalisation and modernisation. It was

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<sup>90</sup> For more on this subject, see Ewelina Szpak, *Mentalność ludności wiejskiej w okresie PRL. Studium zmian* (Warszawa, 2013), 122–33.

primarily women – those responsible for the house(hold) sphere – who were suspected of irrational behaviour and burdensome traditionalism. So, women were subjected to disciplining with use of compendia, guidebooks and popular magazines; it was women that the proposition of a new identity – the one of a modern housewife who cares about correct alimentation, hygiene, and comfort of the family – was targeted. The modernisation of the household sphere was designed as a means of emancipation for them; yet, there was an underlying peculiarly patronising approach. The KGD experts refused women (and not only them) the right to make an unrestrained consumptive choice, and condemned the buy of a TV set ‘instead of’ a vacuum-cleaner as an irrational decision. The modernisation of households as proposed by the Committee was an element of the utopian vision of a better, more modern future. Being an idealistic project, it assumed an option to interfere in the individual decisions the families made with respect to consumption. This idealistic project succeeded only partly.

Some of the propositions and educational actions carried a potential of change indeed. For instance, between the late 1950s and the early 1980s the menus and culinary habits of Polish families changed. In the rural areas, a consumption model based on meat and dairy-produce, appreciating also vegetables and fruits, was gradually gaining a foothold.<sup>91</sup> Food concentrates and intermediates enjoyed genuine popularity, though there were problems with their availability. Besides, the 1960s and, especially, the 1970s saw a promulgation of household appliances and equipment used as a daily routine. As regards the equipment installed at the household, Poland performed average compared to the other Socialist Bloc countries. The sewing courses run by the Committee were pretty successful: the skills they taught were treated as a hobby-pastime and as a means of getting prepared for performing a cottage job. On the other hand, attempts at communising certain functions of the households eventually failed.

The actual impact of the Home Economics Committee upon the functioning of Polish households in the country’s communist period is hard to precisely evaluate. All in all, the KGD was certainly an important social actor that shaped the policy of modernisation of

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<sup>91</sup> Bożena Gulbicka (ed.), *Denaturalizacja spożycia żywności w indywidualnych gospodarstwach chłopskich w Polsce* (Warszawa, 1987), 7.

everyday life. Through its educational and propagandist actions, the KGD helped give shape to aspirations: the modernly equipped and rationally managed household was much in demand as a model. Obviously, the organisation under discussion implemented the assumptions of the state's social and economic policy, and responded to the ongoing challenges. This is why from the mid-1970s onwards, with the problems with availability of household equipment and its spare-parts getting ever severer, the Committee's experts began warning against 'collecting' the appliances and fetishising the homeware.<sup>92</sup>

trans. Tristan Korecki

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<sup>92</sup> Hanna Lipska, *Dom i my* (a special issue of *Zwierciadło* weekly, Warszawa, 1980), 11; Zdybel, 'Postępy', 2.