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As the Years Passed, With the Flow of Events.

A review of *Glimpses of the Countryside: One Hundred Years of Polish Countryside*

by Andrzej Rosner, Ruta Śpiewak, Edyta Kozdroń¹

A book has recently been published in Poland the social importance of which may be as significant as the famous picture by Chris Niedental titled *Apocalypse Now*, which was taken on the first day of martial law – December 13, 1981. The book – a photo album *Glimpses of the Countryside: One Hundred Years of Polish Countryside*, issued by Polish Academy of Sciences' Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development (IRWiR PAN) is a valuable contribution to Polish culture and science.

Authentic photographs found in the archives and other sources, also private ones, show the life of rural inhabitants in 20th-century Poland. The picture we see is true and genuine: everyday toil, happiness and sadness of life of not only peasant families, but also whole rural communities, captured during big historic events – wars, resettlements, land reforms, as well as the evolution of farming structures, production and technology. Nearly every picture in the album is a document, i.e. it has a cognitive value, it develops the knowledge of the past, of the time of which little is known to us today, or which we interpret wrongly.

Moreover, the emotional aspect of these photographs is what counts. For example, one old and technically poor picture shows a cottage burnt down in the Great War (p. 46). Beside it there is another picture – clouds of smoke over a village after the 1939 shelling. A picture from 1943 Galicia showing rural poverty and the difficult situation of rural community (p. 60). On page 62 we see peasant wagons sinking into mud, their wooden spoked wheels with metal rims (1939), and in the next picture – the wheels already have rubber tyres – a symbol of progress post

¹ Andrzej Rosner, Ruta Śpiewak, Edyta Kozdroń, *Patrząc na wieś. Sto lat rozwoju polskiej wsi*, Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw 2018, pp. 275.

WWII. After our easternmost lands had been taken over by the USSR, resettlement started. The atmosphere of those times is captured by a picture of a family coming from across the River Bug (p. 103). Their future is unknown, but the nightmare of war is already behind them.

The chapter on everyday life shows moving pictures of the past taken i.a. in Galicia (pp. 98 and 99) and pictures showing peasants at work. Children slaved away from the time they learned to walk properly (this is shown e.g. in a picture of potato harvest, p. 117).

A picture of a modern cowshed in Juchowo near Borne Sulinowo (USSR secret military base set up after the end of WWII), taken in 2016 may be a symbol of post 1989 changes. The rural population was fighting for the changes. The year 1981 – the famous period of workers' strikes – was also a period of farmers' strikes (p. 208) – they wanted their own trade unions and they succeeded! Nevertheless, they went on strike many times later (in 2015 – a strike in front of the Ministry of Agriculture, p. 211).

Looking at the pictures in the album we can see what the countryside looked like and what it is like now – poor and rich, happy and tragic, satisfied and protesting, but what is the most important – first of all what we can see is all truth.

It makes me wonder that a top politician (Mateusz Morawiecki) has just recently uttered the following words in public, during a meeting with Łódź inhabitants: “Do you remember those pictures of dirty yards and wagons? I truly love peasant wagons. Theoretically we could boast with them. But throughout the 25 years of the Third Polish Republic everything was shown in such a way so as to make us be ashamed of it.” Who is the true addressee of those words? Who was the one humiliating rural dwellers in the time when, thanks to regime transformation and after Poland's joining the EU, the countryside was experiencing the best period in its entire history? A journalist who cites this statement (Krzysztof Varga in *Duży Format*, July 30, 2018) writes that it shows Mazowiecki's longing for the period of Poland under communism and for the reality of the Polish Peoples' Republic. All the more that, as they say, the post 1990 regime transformation resulted in the fall of PGRs (state farms). This is a proof that a massive educational effort is necessary for society to become aware of a true image of rural transformation and for history not to be used for ad hoc propaganda purposes.

The recent 100 years of the history of Polish countryside have been different than it may seem from today's perception. The previous reality abounded in beautiful and solemn moments, but everyday life was marked by a hard work for survival, combined with a fear for the future, which did not look rosy at all. Such a countryside is shown in the majority of photographs in the album. We should never allow them to be forgotten.

The authors of the Introduction – Professor Andrzej Rosner and Dr Ruta Śpiwak – write that: “A brief scientific account of the changes that have taken place in the Polish countryside over the last hundred years can be very accurate and more or less comprehensive. Nonetheless, speaks less than an image. Yet images in turn, although very meaningful, are not able to present or explain all the aspects of the changes Poland has undergone. Therefore the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences made an attempt at filling that gap and providing readers with the missing images. Thus scientific publications related to the most significant processes that have taken place in the Polish countryside are to be additionally documented with illustrations. That is why the project ‘One hundred years of the Polish countryside. Continuity and change’ is illustrated with archival photographs” (pp. 23–24).

Having seen the impressive contents of the album I would also like to point out a marvellous *Introduction* which provides readers with very clear and comprehensive information about the events which have been shaping the Polish countryside for the recent one hundred years. Without the *Introduction* the album would be a mere collection of pictures from the past, which would certainly not lower their artistic and journalistic value. However, only in combination with historical knowledge contained in the introduction can the pictures acquire a deeper meaning. Let me underline that this is very important from the point of view of social awareness and for contemporary school curricula.

Pictures in the album may be viewed as a documentation of past events. The second approach proposed by the authors aims to make readers see the evolution of the most important economic, social and cultural features and changes, including family and social events, as a process documented by pictures. According to this idea the material presented has been divided into three parts:

- 1) Rural landscape, views of villages and outbuildings,
- 2) Peasants’ work and daily life,
- 3) Family events, holidays and customs.

“Each part consists”, write the authors, „of several more detailed elements where the photographs have been presented chronologically” (p. 37).

All the pictures show the territories of Poland, but during all that time Poland’s borders kept changing. This is why, according to the authors, the pictures taken before WWII show the territory of Poland as it was in the interwar period. Post WWII pictures include both the Kresy (Eastern Borderlands) and the Recovered Territories. Pictures from the WWII period were taken chiefly in the general government zone, some of them on territories incorporated in the Third Reich in 1939. The authors also explain that they deliberately refrained from going into

the problem of regional differentiation, which, in their opinion, is a visible weakness of the album, especially that the territories of the former partitions differed greatly from one another. However, the strength of the album is that all the pictures, old as well as contemporary ones, are black and white, in order to avoid supporting the interpretation of the contemporary pictures with colour.

It must also be pointed out that of the hundreds of pictures made available by museums, scientific institutions, commercial agencies and private collectors, the authors selected “dozens of pictures that reflect not only the changes that the Polish countryside witnessed in the last one hundred years, but also a certain continuity of patterns and problems. Our intention was to present transformation processes that affected social and economic areas of life, lifestyle standards, and rural areas development. Naturally, this choice has been very subjective and the authors hereby take full responsibility for the final selection of materials” (p. 36).

The authors admit that there are many gaps in the collection, which can be explained i.a. by limitations related to copyright, the insufficient technical quality of some pictures or for example difficulties in showing certain phenomena in the form of preserved photographs. This relates for example to strikes by peasants in 1937, pressure exerted on peasants during post WWII collectivisation and other events which marked the development of the Polish rural areas. Also, there are hardly any pictures of the life of Jewish inhabitants of villages and small towns, or of the life of rural communities in the eastern Kresy, landholders as well as peasants who contributed to the history of the Second Polish Republic. There may have been no appropriate pictures to fill the gaps.

The editorial concept of the album chosen by the authors does not exclude a historical approach in the reception of the pictures – as the years passed and with the flow of events. The complementarity of both these concepts results from the contents of the *Introduction* and the chronology of historical events included in it.