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## Post-war Agriculture in Żuławy versus Changes in the Region's Cultural and Social Landscape in Source Materials, Diaries and Farmers' Narratives

**Abstract:** On the example of Żuławy, the paper discusses questions connected with post-war migrations to the Polish Western and Northern Territories, and their consequences for agriculture. It focuses on issues related to the development of the region by new settlers and the changes taking place in the cultural and social landscape. The text highlights the region's character and its economic conditions before 1945, and considers agricultural settlement and the agrarian and social structure after 1945. Post-war agriculture in the region is presented in the light of the cultural heritage described in scientific literature, the first settlers' recollections written in the form of diaries in the early 1970s, and biographical accounts that the author recorded in Żuławy in 2018.

**Keywords:** Polish Western and Northern Territories, Żuławy, cultural landscape, cultural heritage, migrations after World War II, agriculture.

### 1. Introduction

Located in and around the Vistula river delta, the Żuławy region is characterised by the high utility value of its soil, which defines the area's agricultural character. Grassland is prevalent here, while orchards and forests are scarce. Nevertheless, there is also a substantial proportion of other usable land and wasteland, including polder-system components (Matusik and Szczyński 1976, p. 458). However, the anthropogenic landscape of Żuławy is linked to centuries-long human

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activity in dealing with water in depression areas. Transformations of the natural landscape and the incorporation of new cultural contexts and meanings, in the form of a planned hydrological and reclamation system or distinctive regional architecture, have influenced the development of a unique social ecosystem accounting for that landscape's natural, economic and cultural resources (cf. Kowalik 2006, p. 24). Żuławy's landscape has been jointly created by the region's residents representing various local ethnicities, religions and cultures, thus forming the multicultural society of Żuławy until 1945. The situation in the region changed in the wake of World War II and the subsequent great migrations, when the Western and Northern Territories together with the Free City of Danzig were incorporated into Poland and new – mainly Polish – settlers were moved there, thus forcing the previous residents of German descent to leave Żuławy.

The issue of post-war migrations to the Western and Northern Territories was subject of research conducted by the Polish ethnologists and sociologists as early as in the 1950s. It presented village and rural community in the context of studies on folk culture (Jasiewicz 2004, p. 43) as well as the mechanisms of cultural changes and creating of culture in the countryside from the moment of its settlement by new settlers (Burszta 1964, p. 9). At that time, for example, in Western Pomerania, attention was paid to tradition and progress in agricultural culture including cooperation between settlers. Moreover the researchers' interest was focused primarily on the clash of cultures of many regional groups (Burszta and Jasiewicz 1962, p. 199), but in the following decades scope of interest moved towards analysis and description of social integration and the issues of small towns (Burszta 1987). Contemporary village in the Polish Western and Northern Territories is considered especially in the context of cultural heritage and issues related to the identity and collective memory of its inhabitants (Kluba et al. 2020).

The researchers did not study the cultural heritage of the Żuławy region until 2008, when e.g. ethnologists from the University of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznań, conducted over 400 questionnaire interviews with the native population and post-war settlers living mainly in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> Their analysis has been presented in several publications which constitute a significant contribution to the knowledge of the situation after World War II in the region (Brzezińska 2011). In addition to scientific research that consists of collecting narratives in the form of memories of settlers and biographical narratives, one can point out the amateur activities of history enthusiasts who collect such stories in Żuławy. They refer to the oral history method and constitute a valuable documentary base, especially for those dealing with the history of agriculture and everyday agricultural practices. It is best to look

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<sup>1</sup> The author of the text was also a member of the research team.

for testimonies of such practices in local sources (Grele 2006, p. 51). Many local cultural institutions also encourage the oldest settlers and their families to write down their memories of their arrival in Żuławy as a result of which diaries are created. It is also a kind of reference to the tradition of diaries competitions in Poland directed, among others, to the villagers. They were organized in the interwar period and were used by sociologists to obtain research materials. However, after World War II, there was a development of diaries competitions, which also documented the experiences of the rural population (see Michalska 2018). Among them, there are contests for the diaries of the settlers of the Polish Western and Northern Territories in 1956, 1966 and 1970, organized e.g. by the Institute for Western Affairs in Poznań.<sup>2</sup> However, there are no scientific studies of personal stories and narratives of the settlers who settled in Żuławy and began to work in agriculture.

The aim of the paper is to look at post-war agriculture in Żuławy in the context of heritage, including the region's social and cultural landscape, and also to consider the changes that have taken place as a result. Therefore heritage can be defined as the tangible and intangible cultural products of individual communities (together with the historical context), which are transmitted, adopted and evaluated in a specific way by successive generations, and thus can undergo changes under the influence of people's different traditions and experiences (Jasiewicz 1987; Szacki 2011). The cultural landscape, meanwhile, comprises all human activity in transforming the natural environment. It includes natural elements as well as civilisational ones linked to human activity in a given geographic space (Brzezińska 2008, p. 46). These concepts are applied in the paper to the context of the Western and Northern Territories (including the broken cultural continuity). There is also assumed that Żuławy is a region that requires farmers who farm the land there to have skills in draining depression areas, whereas immediately after the war the communist authorities presented the migrants with a vision in which Żuławy was shown as a fertile region where the settlers could make a lot of money at a low cost, while the large amount of labour they would have to put in would quickly be recompensed by good crops.

The above issues will be analysed through nine accounts of witnesses to history, namely post-war settlers who took up agriculture after arriving in Żuławy, whom text author recorded in 2018 using the oral history method.<sup>3</sup> This will enable

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<sup>2</sup> *Konkursy pamiętnikarskie w Instytucie Zachodnim*, <https://www.iz.poznan.pl/azzip/konkursy-pamiętnikarskie/> [access: 29th January 2021].

<sup>3</sup> The recordings were part of a project entitled *The Cultural Landscape of Żuławy vs. the Work of Farmers in the Narratives of Post-War Settlers Living in Rural Areas*, financed by the Remembrance and Future Centre in Wrocław under the eighth edition of the Oral History Grant. For a report on the project and a characterisation of the group being studied (see Paprot-Wielopolska 2018).

the biographical experiences of farmers from the region to be presented in the context of their work on the land, the development of farms and emerging difficulties related to adapting to a foreign cultural space. The empirical material will be juxtaposed with: 1) selected recollections of post-war farmer settlers published in the book *Żuławiacy. Wspomnienia osadników żuławskich* [People of Żuławy: Recollections of Żuławy Settlers] (Pawlik 1973) in the spirit of communist People's Poland propaganda;<sup>4</sup> 2) scientific literature on farming and structural transformations in Żuławy immediately after the war and in People's Poland (mainly up to the end of the 1970s), i.e. the period when the witnesses of history were developing their farms in terms of crop growing and animal breeding.

There also will be drawn attention to the importance of the region's pre-war agriculture-based cultural heritage for the formation and legitimisation of the Żuławy farmers' work ethos in the context of the identity practices of the post-migration communities of rural Żuławy. The historical context presented in the first part of the paper is intended as a framework for the post-1945 narratives of the settlers presented in the early 1970s (written down in the form of a diary) and in 2018 (free-form biographical narratives) in the context of unfolding events and changes in the countryside and in the social structure. In this, the author analyses the period between 1945 and the early 1970s in rural Żuławy in detail because it is highlighted more strongly in both the narrative types.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The Cultural Heritage and Landscape of Rural Żuławy up to 1945

Żuławy is one of the youngest but also most fertile regions of Poland. It was "formed as a result of the delta-shaping process on the River Vistula" (Lipińska 2011, p. 10), i.e. the aggradation of mud at the river's outlet to Gdańsk Bay, which began about 5,000 years ago and continues to this day. On the one hand, the soils within the Vistula delta (mainly river and humus fen soils, clay soils, peat soils, but also lake silts, meadow lime and river sand) are fertile, which enabled agriculture to develop in the region (Szukalski 1966, p. 10, 28). On the other hand, the area was constantly in danger of flooding due to its location. Terrain lying below sea

<sup>4</sup> I mainly analyse nine recollections of peasant farmers. The publication also contains ten reminiscences written by state-farm directors, cooperative members, mechanics, an agronomist, a teacher and others who were distinctive for their high level of involvement in various kinds of institutions and organisations of the People's Poland period.

<sup>5</sup> The recorded witnesses of history were more forthcoming and detailed, and sometimes quite critical, when they described the time right after they settled in Żuławy. This might have been the effect of "unblocked memory", of traumas having been processed, and no longer concealing things that had had to be left unsaid due to the policies of People's Poland, i.e. now they could talk about previously disregarded issues (Ratkowska-Widlarz 2011, p. 46).

level, reaching down as far as 1.8 m below mean sea level (BMSL),<sup>6</sup> required new forms of settlement to be developed over the centuries, together with skills to deal with the element of water.

The Teutonic Order already carried out the first land reclamation projects in the Middle Ages, which facilitated the region's economic development. It was in the Teutonic period that the first dyke associations were formed, introducing a new model of water management and spatial planning in the polders; e.g. one was already set up in 1407 in Gdańsk Żuławy. This was a kind of "water constitution" creating the structure of water control in the dyke districts, which were managed by "dyke counts", "dyke sworn men" and stewards. The duty to protect the polders and the water-and-reclamation system also lay with the whole community inhabiting a given area (Cebulak 2010, pp. 19–20). This means that the main profile of agriculture had developed by the 15th century, and was characterised by permanent surpluses in grain production, high crop yields and progressive breeding of farm animals. The social structure was also consolidated; it was determined by social relations in rural areas as well as the tenant economy and peasants' personal freedom (Okoniewska 1986, p. 94).

The 16th century saw the arrival of settlers from the Netherlands – Mennonites,<sup>7</sup> who improved the hydrographic network and introduced their own land cultivation techniques in depression areas. In subsequent centuries, people living in the Vistula delta formed polders in the depressions, with an expertly organised network of drainage ditches, drainage windmills, sluices, weirs and pumping stations separated by strips of dykes preventing them from being flooded completely or partially. Water was drained from the polders via ditches and canals to higher-lying areas, thus reducing the risk of flooding (Szukalski 1966, p. 21). Furthermore, the planting of willows was widespread, e.g. along transport routes, tracks between fields and ditches, as "natural pumps" that evaporated excess water from the area.

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<sup>6</sup> Today the lowest point in Poland is considered to be located in the village of Raczki Elbląskie, in Elbląg Żuławy. Specialists have indicated for several years that there is an even lower point near the village of Marzęcino, at 2.07 m BMSL. The highest hill, at 14.6 m AMSL, lies in the village of Grabiny Zameczek in Gdańsk Żuławy (Lipińska 2011, p. 10).

<sup>7</sup> Mennonites were Anabaptists from the Netherlands, where they were persecuted. This religious movement was founded by Menno Simons, a former Roman Catholic priest. He propagated the introduction of reforms that would be based on the teachings of Christ and the New Testament. The movement was characterised by the baptism of adults, supporting those in need and the poor, renouncing any violence, war or military service, and also any secular offices. Mennonites were brought to Poland, including Żuławy, in the 16th century, when the country was pursuing a policy of religious tolerance towards people of different religions. For more, see: Kizik 1994; Klassen 2016, pp. 25–54.

Another anthropogenic element of the Żuławy landscape is the distinctive type of settlement and architecture. Settlers from the Netherlands often worked the land in dispersed villages or in linear marsh villages, e.g. in Elbląg Żuławy (Lipińska 2011, p. 24). Moreover, the region's inhabitants started building their houses and homesteads on terps (artificial dwelling mounds), the reason also being the risk of floods. To this aim, a system of local embankments around homes, settlements or villages was developed. The "Hollander" type of homestead was very popular (in oblong, corner or cross form), as was the construction of arcaded homes. The region's cultural landscape was also dominated by rotatable windmills for pumping water (paltrok mills and post mills) and smock mills for milling grain (Koperska-Kośmicka 2014, pp. 95–97).

The special qualities of local soils and the dairy cattle pastures that grew on them had a positive impact on milk quality, which in turn led to the development of cheesemaking traditions in Żuławy. Cheese was made on farms at first, and later at dairies, whose number grew steadily. This occurred in the second half of the 19th century and was connected with the development of dairy-beef cattle breeding, especially of the lowland black-and-white breed, but also with Swiss families specialising in cheesemaking being brought to the region (Opitz 2015).

Żuławy was considered an extremely fertile region, which also had an impact on the high level of wealth of landed-estate owners. Arable land accounted for a very high percentage of the area in individual subregions of Żuławy; e.g. in Gdańsk Żuławy the land cultivated by peasant and smallholder (*zagrodnik*) farms in feudal villages and peasant farms in free villages totalled more than 18,000 hectares. On the other hand, the social structure of the rural communities in this part of the region comprised large-scale farming peasants, smallholders (*zagrodniks*), landless peasants (tenants and craftsmen), hired servants and seasonal labourers (Szafran 2017, pp. 48–49, Tables 1–4; cf. Mączak 1962).

A watershed for agriculture in Żuławy came in the 19th century when the drainage system was improved, among other things, which had a positive impact on the regulation of the hydrographic network and thus improved the soil quality. Wheat, barley and oil-producing plant growing became widespread during this period. In addition, "the global demand for sugar combined with the raw material-orientated development of sugar factories means that in the late 19th century numerous new sugar factories were set up in the Vistula delta and along its fringes" (Bebenow and Strzyżewski 2018, p. 15). Several sugar factories were established in Żuławy and its environs, and they bought up sugar beets. This also resulted in the construction and expansion of a narrow-gauge railway network leading to the factories that processed this raw material. From then onwards, large peasant farms and small manor farms developed in the region:

In the agrarian structure of Żuławy [...] small farms (2–5 ha) occupied just 2.8% of arable land. They were mainly concentrated in the coastal zone. Farms between 5 and 20 ha occupied 22.4% of arable land. These were farms based largely on family labour. The strength of Żuławy's economy was created by large peasant (*gebur*) farms of 20–50 ha, which occupied 28.4%, and manor farms (50–100 ha), which controlled 22.6% of Żuławy's arable land. There were not many estates of over 100 ha in Żuławy, and they took up 23.8% of arable land. Before 1945, large peasant and manor farms accounted for about 75% of Żuławy's area, while some 25% was occupied by small and medium-sized farms (Matusik and Szczęśny 1976, p. 459).<sup>8</sup>

In administrative terms, on the eve of World War II Żuławy lay within the Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk Żuławy, Great Żuławy), while a smaller part (Elbląg Żuławy) lays in the western part of the province of East Prussia. The region's population was mainly of German origin and, to a lesser extent, Dutch, Jewish and Polish. Żuławy's pre-war rural residents were mainly involved in agriculture, which focused on crop farming and animal breeding. However, the high development level of this segment of the economy was halted by the outbreak of World War II and then its consequences. Due to the treaties ending the war, the people living in the region around and within the Vistula delta, who were mainly of German descent, were forced to leave.

### 3. Changes in Rural Żuławy after 1945

#### 3.1. Restoring the Region to Use

As World War II drew to a close, the German forces withdrawing from Żuławy in the face of the advancing Red Army blew up the flood banks in 16 places along the Vistula, Nogat, Stara Radunia and Tuga rivers and Młyński Canal, as well as the polder embankments (Zieliński 1966, p. 36). More than 130 pumping stations as well as drainage and irrigation equipment were destroyed, and sluice gates were left open. These actions led to damage on 120,000 hectares, including 50,000 hectares of polder depression area that was completely flooded (Cebulak 2010, p. 24). Many rural residential and farm buildings were destroyed, while fields, meadows and pastures turned into swamps, which quickly became overgrown with reeds and wicker. A plague of mice appeared around this time, destroying the crops. The first settlers described these events in detail and commented on them in their diaries; anti-German sentiments can be heard in these narratives:

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<sup>8</sup> See also data on arable land and agricultural production in Żuławy up to 1939 (Okoniewska 1992, pp. 19–20, Tables 3, 4).

Jan Arbasz: The land in our area was partly flooded. The Germans had dug through the protective embankment so the water would flood in and prevent the enemy forces' pursuit. The water stayed a long time. Even tree roots rotted and withered. Where it wasn't flooded, enormous thistles grew, up to two metres high (Pawlik 1973, p. 116).

The ethnically German population still living in Żuławy<sup>9</sup> as an area of the "Recovered Territories" (Western and Northern Territories) were forced to leave their homes and farms. These were taken over by new settlers from central and south-eastern regions of Poland and the (former) Eastern Borderland, Ukrainians forcibly resettled as part of Operation Vistula, and also re-emigrants and people returning from forced labour, who were relocated to Żuławy – some voluntarily, some not – between 1945 and the turn of the 1950s and 1960s<sup>10</sup> (Brzezińska 2011). Substantial wartime destruction, poor living conditions and a small volume of land for cultivation in their place of origin were often important factors inclining people to resettle. Farmers justified their move as follows:

Jan Arbasz: In 1945, as soon as the war was over the Polish government issued an appeal for anyone wanting more land to leave for the Western Territories. Very many people left, the greatest number from destroyed areas (Pawlik 1973, p. 115).

Marcin Kostuś: When I heard about settling in Żuławy, I decided to settle there because I'd heard a lot about the fertile Żuławy soil [...] I had two hectares of land scattered across six plots, and my family comprised ten people. The village was poor [Czątkowice, Jarosław *powiat/county*]. Ninety per cent of its residents had farms of around two hectares, and you wouldn't find a five-hectare farm if you tried (Pawlik 1973, p. 219).

Wanda Dolecka: We lived there in the Lublin region [...] It was tough living there because we had one cottage for two families and there were only two rooms [...] and we had little land there. It was two or maybe three morgs [1 morg, a historical unit of land area, equalled approximately 0.56 ha] (OPiP AHM-752<sup>11</sup>).

<sup>9</sup> According to Ludwik Zieliński (1966, p. 38), in spring 1945 Żuławy was inhabited by about 26,000 ethnic Germans, about 2,800 people who can be considered the Polish autochthonous population, and over 3,000 Polish people from other parts of Poland.

<sup>10</sup> Up to 1950, the greatest number of people came to Żuławy's Elbląg, Gdańsk and Malbork counties from Soviet territories, Bydgoskie and Warszawskie provinces, and neighbouring regions (Kosiński 1960, Tables 1 and 2). In subsequent years, it is possible to show that the settlers migrating to Żuławy considered their stay to be temporary and wanted to get rich quickly. A second resettlement of Polish people from the Soviet Union was carried out in the latter half of the 1950s.

<sup>11</sup> OPiP AHM – Ośrodek "Pamięć i Przyszłość" Archiwum Historii Mówionej (Oral History Archive of the Remembrance and Future Centre in Wrocław).



Maria Mazurek: I was glad [...] because we came here from such poverty [...] At home we had lived under a straw roof (OPiP AHM-750).

However, most of the immigrants did not have the knowledge and skills needed for farming in terrain lying below sea level. As Józef Liguz remarked:

I have to admit I didn't know how to farm on this land. That's why I watched those who had come earlier, and especially those who had worked here for Germans. They knew the soil and its fertility best (Pawlik 1973, p. 259).

The settlers thus had to learn to "read" the landscape and shape their new identity. The myth of Żuławy pioneers, who could get rich quickly on the region's land, was also promoted in the first years after the war. However, some people tried to find out how to cultivate the soil from the few Germans who still remained:

Marcin Kostuś: I asked what the soil required. They all said the soil needed fertilisers, and manure most of all. If there wasn't enough, the land had to be fallowed, used for grazing cattle, and ploughed after two years and sown with sugar beets. After that, you could grow wheat and other crops (Pawlik 1973, p. 221).

Leokadia Bieńka: And there were still Germans around [...] One of them lived there [...] and taught us how to work with beets [...] and there were lots of tools for the beets, all of them, because they sowed beets. But we were still ignorant, the Poles [...] they were still in the dark (AHM-900).

Shortly after the war ended, measures were undertaken to drain Żuławy as part of hydrotechnical and drainage/irrigation projects, and to restore the region to its former economic glory. This is why a Regional Management for Land Reclamation was formed in Gdańsk as well as Elbląg. As regards local traditions, initially there were plans to re-establish the old dyke associations, but the new authorities did not accept the idea of polder cooperative associations.<sup>12</sup> "Operation Żuławy", aimed at restoring the polder depression areas in the Vistula delta, was planned for the years 1945–1949. Its key element involved identifying and locating the main damage, filling in excavations and breaks in flood banks, repairing pumping stations and clearing drainage ditches (Cebulak 2010, pp. 24–25). The flooding and draining of Żuławy is described in detail in the settlers' diaries and in a few of the farmers' biographical accounts, the latter being more general in character:

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<sup>12</sup> The traditions of dyke associations in Żuławy were not restored until a new water resources law was passed on 18 July 2001, whose section VII described the aim and scope of operation of water companies and dyke associations (Cebulak 2010, p. 21).

Lucjan Nagrodzki: here in [19]45 [...] as far as the eye can see, from just behind that home, the water stretched all the way to Nowy Dwór [Gdański] and to Elbląg (OPIP AHM-749).

Kazimierz Papiewski: The Germans had this land drained [...] there was a drainage system here, but the war [happened] and [...] it all became overgrown [...] those pumps [...] for draining [...] this was also damaged, stolen, so they got it working some time later, but it took almost two years before they started the drainage system [...] [when] there was heavier rainfall, there was flooding (OPIP AHM-884).

Western media argued that the scale of wartime damage was so great that the Poles would be unable to cultivate the region for the next hundred years. Echoes of this can be found in the diaries of settlers, who repeatedly underlined how People's Poland had contributed to overcoming the problems. In the case of the biographical interviews, only Franciszek Komasa conceded that:

These were the Recovered Territories and they had to be cultivated, because the United Nations claimed that the Poles would not cultivate this land for a hundred years. But it turned out that everything was functioning within ten years (OPIP AHM-805).

Restoring Żuławy to economic use was such a priority for the national authorities that they even appointed a Minister of Agriculture Special Representative for Żuławy, a move that also aimed to strengthen Poland's image. A new wave of settlement occurred after part of Żuławy had been drained. Importantly, efforts were made to provide farmers with knowledge on how to cultivate and take care of the soil in the region. To this aim, the *Żuławy* monthly was published for a short period, presenting charters of rights and obligations related to agricultural use of polders, while relevant announcements were put up at *gmina*/municipal offices and read out during the smaller *gromada* units' meetings (Cebulak 2010, p. 26).

### 3.2. Settlement of Żuławy

In the first years after the war, mass-scale resettlement to the "Recovered Territories" was organised by the State Repatriation Office, which existed from 1944 to 1951. County and stopover centres were set up alongside its provincial divisions (Dziurzyński 1983, pp. 41–45). In Żuławy itself, an important role in developing the region's rural areas was played by settlement committees, which were appointed in May 1945 and whose tasks included informing settlers about the local economic and climate conditions and controlling how the settlers were

allocated in the area. Farms of up to 100 ha and homes with gardens and plots up to 0.5 ha were assigned for settlement. This was the kind of large farm taken over by Franciszek Miller:

I took over a farm that used to belong to a German, Rembagel, who did not emigrate and lived in a different building in the village. The farm comprised 81 hectares and large buildings [...] There was a lot of machinery, but nothing to haul it. Anyone who had a horse was a happy man (Pawlik 1973, p. 279).

It was assumed that it would be possible to settle some 25,000 people in Żuławy. A little later, the settlement operation and the management of former German assets was also supported by the Ministry of the Recovered Territories. Circulars were issued, e.g. one such document from 1946 gave precedence of settlement to farmers from areas that had suffered serious wartime damage (Zieliński 1966, pp. 41–43).

However, initially the settlement operation was rather unstructured and spontaneous; settlers took over the best and largest farms where former German equipment could still be found or which had food supplies, and where surrounding fields included crops such as grain, potatoes and rapeseed. The settlers and farmers recalled:

Stanisław Kowalczyk: And spring moves forward quickly, as if nature wanted to make up for lost time and heal its war wounds. The winter crops have sprouted into stalks. These are still the few crops sown by the Germans in autumn 1944. The meadows are covered with luscious green growth, while weeds thick as a forest grow in the unsown fields (Pawlik 1973, p. 241).

Lucjan Nagrodzki: There were some crops, too. There were some potatoes left, because we dug there, because [...] those Russians wouldn't let us at first, [for] they were guarding it all [...] [There was] former German wheat, we had the German variety for a long time afterwards (OPiP AHM-749).

Piotr Przedcieczyński: in [19]45 we took over the wheat left by the Germans, the cornfields were lovely, beautiful. And there was rapeseed (OPiP AHM-748).

A short time after military activity had ceased, Soviet soldiers were still stationed in Żuławy, occupying farms of under 100 ha. At this time the Red Army troops were transporting former German property, such as farm machinery and livestock, to the Soviet Union. The presence of troops on many estates undermined agricultural production and the supply of food to the Polish market (Golon 2014, pp. 147–149, 160–161).

Despite widespread looting, there was still a lot of agricultural machinery left in Żuławy. The reminiscing settlers and farmers mention tractors, reapers, binders, threshers, carts and corn crushers. They served the farms for many more years, often being a godsend because the equipment the settlers had brought with them to Żuławy was not suited to cultivating the heavy soils there, as indicated by Andrzej Głowacki: “The period of work in the field threatened to be terrible [...] the plough we had brought was no good for ploughing this soil” (Pawlik 1973, p. 167).

Furthermore, the new settlers often had just a few heads of livestock, which they had brought with them. There was an acute shortage of horses for work in the field. This deficit was only filled by animals provided by UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), although, as Piotr Przedcieczyński remarked: “I collected the horse, signed the pledge. We had to pay off that horse later” (OPiP AHM-748). In addition, tractors were imported from the United States in 1947.

The idea was that farms in particular villages would be taken over collectively by a population who had already worked in agriculture (Zieliński 1966, p. 46). Meanwhile, people who had nothing in common with agriculture were still moving here, from the Lublin region for example, as reported by Antoni Banaszekiewicz:

I called a meeting of residents in my village, with the participation of the county authorities. At this meeting, in January 1947, I called for the resettlement of landless [peasants] and smallholders to the recovered territories. The idea caught on. From my village alone, [...] twenty families relocated (Pawlik 1973, p. 133).

The limited number of farms in Żuławy meant that new families started being moved into buildings already occupied. This caused conflicts among the settlers, many of whom treated their stay in the “Recovered Territories” as temporary. Many believed they would be able to move back to their native parts after a few years.

### 3.3. The Post-war Agrarian Structure

The agrarian structure of peasant farms in the Western and Northern Territories, including Żuławy, stabilised in the years 1946–1949. A decree dated 6 September 1946 stipulated that a private farm could measure between 7 ha and 15 ha, while a breeding farm could have up to 20 ha. At a later stage, this enabled farmers to be granted property rights, although the distribution of land was re-examined in 1948 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Agricultural Reforms and the Ministry of the Recovered Territories; the latter distinguished two economic districts in the rural areas that had been incorporated into Poland. In this structure, Żuławy became part of a district with favourable conditions, where the farm area was allowed

to reach 7 ha, and 9 ha in exceptional cases. As a result, the agrarian structure of peasant farms was dominated by medium-sized farms (Matusik and Szczęsny 1976, p. 463; Zieliński 1966, pp. 49–52). All this caused a lot of frustration among the settlers; so soon after the war, and having worked to prepare fallow land for use, they were forced to move again, to a different area. As Józef Liguz recalled:

Spring 1949 came. The hard work started again. We sowed all the land, and with the wife we started cutting out the rest of the wicker. We did it! Then the surveyor came and there was a new directive: farms couldn't have more than 10 hectares. Again, I was given a plot in a completely different place, and our work went to waste. The cleared plot went to someone else, while I had wicker all over again (Pawlik 1973, p. 259).

The new settlers represented different levels of farming culture as well, and different farming methods, which often resulted in lower productivity, poorer organisation and fewer economic resources. Farmers also had an insufficient amount of farming machinery, and what they had was of poor quality. At first the settler population drew on their own traditions and farming habits from their native parts, because they did not have the knowledge needed for the special kind of farming that Żuławy required.

This is why it was a widespread practice to plough grassland and introduce cereal cultivation, mainly rye and oats, but also potatoes, which do not fare well in heavy fen soils, which meant that crop yields were low (Matusik and Szczęsny 1976, p. 479). Lucjan Nagrodzki recalls: “Even here, that neighbour of mine [...] brought buckwheat with him. But the buckwheat wouldn't grow here. My grandpa brought millet, and he couldn't drive off the sparrows” (OPiP AHM-749). Franciszek Komasa admitted: “I cultivated caraway, poppies, as a kind of experiment” (OPiP AHM-805). This kind of approach was widespread among farmers who came from elsewhere in (pre-war) Poland, e.g. the Lublin, Kielce or Podlasie regions, where the soils were light. As Piotr Przedcieczyński remarked: “The soil there, it [was light] [...] for rye and potatoes [...] because here in Żuławy the soil is heavy, loamy” (OPiP AHM-748). The settlers thus had to develop new ways of cultivating the land, adjusted to the climate and economic conditions but also to local industry; e.g. they started growing hemp, which was contracted for the MAKOP Linen Industry Factory in Malbork.

The area of arable land grew significantly in the years 1949–1956: “Socialist [i.e. communist] forms of agriculture predominated in Żuławy in 1955. State farms used 52.1% [of the land] and production cooperatives used 21.3%”<sup>13</sup> (Laskowski 1966,

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<sup>13</sup> According to other sources, it was a little less, i.e. 20.2% of farmland (Matusik and Szczęsny 1976, p. 466).

p. 77). About 43% of previously peasant-held land was taken over by production cooperatives. Under the Six-Year Plan, the number of dairy cattle was increased substantially in state- and cooperative-run farms, which resulted in increased milk production (Laskowski 1966, p. 92).

The development of agriculture in Żuławy was also supported by the Scientific Research Unit in Stare Pole, formed in 1952 under affiliation with the Central Institute of Agriculture in Warsaw.<sup>14</sup> During this period, many private farmers also decided to bank on breeding lowland black-and-white cattle, which they continued to develop in subsequent decades. As Wanda Dolecka underlined: “there wasn’t a household that didn’t have a cow” (OPiP AHM-752). Kazimierz Papiewski added that “farmers here were mostly focused on cattle breeding [...] there was not a farmer who didn’t have [...] cattle. The first biggest income was in fact from cattle” (OPiP AHM-884). The dairy industry developed in Żuławy during this period, and farmers began working on the boards of district dairy cooperatives, e.g. in Nowy Dwór Gdański, Elbląg and Malbork, then and in successive years.

After the changes brought about in 1956, private farms accounted for 47.3% of the total farm area, state farms (PGRs) for 39.5%, production cooperatives for just 2%, while other users had 11.2% of farmland at their disposal. At this point, the cultivation of sugar beets, rapeseed and other crops for industrial purposes was increased, as being more high-yield and profitable in Żuławy. According to the data available, in the years 1957–1959 the average peasant farm in Żuławy grew from 7.4 ha to 9.1 ha (Matusik and Szczęśny 1976, p. 469).

However, sugar beets had already started being cultivated by the settlers shortly after they arrived in Żuławy, in connection with the launch of sugar factories, e.g. in Stare Pole. Only small areas of about 0.5 ha were sown with sugar beets at first, due to the lack of farming equipment and the need for a lot of manual labour, as recalled by Kazimierz Papiewski: “they started sowing beets here [...] Those beets were densely sown, so later this was all [dug up] by hand. You had to thin them, every blade, leaving some” (OPiP AHM-884). The farmers struggled with large amounts of mud, which also stuck to the beets, as described by Genowefa Szymańska: “When you [dug up] those beets in autumn, there was so much mud that you had to tread through” (OPiP AHM-928). The beets were most often transported to the sugar factories via the narrow-gauge railway, which was partially rebuilt after the war.

Efforts aimed at the technical improvement of drainage and irrigation systems were undertaken in the years 1956–1960. Economic self-government developed

<sup>14</sup> Dairy cattle breeding was important for the region during People’s Poland, and distinguished it from Poland’s other regions. To highlight its great productivity, in the late 1970s the village of Stare Pole decided to honour a cow with record-high milk production, erecting a statue of it.

more effectively after 1956 as well, which had an impact on the organisation of milk purchases in villages (collection points were set up) and the establishment of farmers' associations and water companies, among other things. Furthermore, starting in 1964, the development of climate-oriented afforestation was organised with the aim of protecting large spaces from winds and bringing diversity to the monotonous flat landscape (Majchrzak 1966, pp. 115–116, 126–128).

Migrations, the agrarian structure, ownership relations and the crop structure stabilised in the region in the early 1960s. In 1970, private farms occupied 45% of the total farmland area in Żuławy, state farms 44.7%, production cooperatives 1.2%, while other users accounted for just 9.1% of farmland. Employment in services for agriculture and production services grew significantly in this period, although Żuławy had one of the lowest employment rates compared with the rest of the country (Matusik and Szczęsny 1976, pp. 472, 478).

Stanisław Kowalczyk wrote in his diary that in 1970 he mainly based his agricultural production on wheat, sugar beets, rapeseed and cattle breeding. As for the structure of farms in the village of Stogi:

There are 37 of us farmers working on 569 hectares of land, of which almost a quarter is arable land. Among these there is also one farm two hectares in area, as a craftsman plot (Pawlik 1973, p. 249).

In addition, the turn of the 1960s and 1970s was a time of great prosperity for many farmers. They mention the wealth of rural Żuławy in their diaries and narratives, owing it to high yields from the fields and animal pens, which led to good economic results. Measures of the wealth and prestige of Żuławy farmers include the degree of mechanisation of agriculture (purchases of new farm machinery, especially tractors) as well as the appearance of new household appliances (TV sets, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators) and increased mobility thanks to the purchase of a car or motorcycle.

We can learn about the situation in subsequent decades from the narratives of private farmers recorded in 2018. Looking back, Kazimierz Papiewski noticed that “back then there were a great many farmers [...] now there are much fewer of them. For example [...] over here in the village we had over 30 farms, farmers. And right now [2018] there are two farms left” (OPiP AHM-884). It is possible to conclude from other statements that people who saw their future in agriculture increased the amount of land under cultivation and purchased agricultural machinery in successive decades of the 20th century, with the aim of developing their farm and leaving it to their children in future, e.g. as was the case with Genowefa Szymańska: “We had 9 ha, and later, when I was handing it over to my

son [in the 1980s], we had 35 [ha] [...] He himself bought, I don't know, 13 [ha]. Now he has almost 50 [ha]" (OPiP AHM-928).

Moreover, the witnesses of history who recounted their experiences in 2018 were more aware of the region's agricultural heritage, the uniqueness of its cultural landscape and the achievements of their predecessors – the Mennonites and wealthy German farmers (to whom they referred as "bauers"). This issue had been marginal in the settlers' diaries.

### 3.4. Żuławy's Post-war Social Structure

Immediately after the war the gender and age structure in Żuławy was distorted and included a high feminisation rate. There were still many women of German origin living there, and there had been losses of life among the men as a result of military operations. The influx of new, relatively young settlers evened out the initial disproportions in the 1950s; significant demographic growth and the fact that Żuławy was a "young region" was underlined in the 1960s. Men were reported to outnumber women in 1970, which was also connected with the migration of women to towns and cities to work in retail trade, catering or healthcare. Moreover, a high percentage of children aged up to 14 was maintained: 34.3% compared to 26.5% for the whole of Poland. That is why Żuławy, including its rural areas, was seen as having great demographic potential (Sobczak and Kaleńczyk 1976, pp. 439–449).

The social-occupational structure of rural Żuławy's population immediately after the war covered the native population as well as settlers who had previously worked in agriculture. One can also distinguish settlers who were only just starting to pursue farming or to work in this sector of the economy. Alongside them, there was also a small number of labourers employed on state-run agricultural estates managed by the State Land Properties organisation (Zieliński 166, p. 69). A much greater influx of people to rural Żuławy occurred after state farms were set up, including seasonal labourers from various regions around Poland who ultimately settled in Żuławy for good.

However, the farmers indicated that the non-agricultural immigrants to the region quickly gave up their private farms in Żuławy, even as soon as the late 1940s. As Franciszek Komasa recalled:

Warsaw had been [...] destroyed and Varsovians who [...] were a bit more resourceful started looking for somewhere to [...] get a start, where they could gain something. Here [...] they settled on the next-door farm: a father and three sons came there. And they farmed [...] but they didn't know much about farming and it didn't work out [...] they left that farm and went back to Warsaw (OPiP AHM-805).



Meanwhile, Henryk Szyszka's diary mentions specific occupations of the people leaving Żuławy: "Those who were leaving the farms mainly included people unused to working in agriculture: people like cobblers, tailors, watchmakers, traders. For them, this kind of work was too hard" (Pawlik 1973, p. 403).

People also found agricultural jobs in towns, thanks to the development of industry and services for agriculture, e.g. in Nowy Dwór Gdański and Nowy Staw. This is why the percentage of people making a living from agricultural occupations in towns grew in the years 1950–1970. On the other hand, the non-agricultural population accounted for 32% of employment in rural Żuławy on average. This concerned areas located along major transport routes and within the coastal belt (the Vistula Spit area). The percentage of professionally active people employed in agriculture was 62% in 1970 in the region, whereas a downward trend was already being observed in the country as a whole (Sobczak and Kaleńczyk 1976, p. 446).

This generally small population growth in rural areas in the 1970s after the high post-war wave was caused by migrations to urban areas, where there were more possibilities of finding employment (Rosner and Stanny 2019, p. 130). In this context, Żuławy should be viewed as a dynamic social system than underwent transformations. Some of the settlers' diaries already mentioned that farms were increasingly lacking successors to run them and that rural society was ageing. For example, Jan Pantuła wrote:

[The children] don't want to work on the farm. [...] I'm getting weaker, so is the wife. And there's a lot of work here [...] the process of farmers' ageing is quite rapid, because the children go away to school, to crafts, and at the age of around 65 the fathers hand over their farms to the State Treasury in exchange for pensions (Pawlik 1973, pp. 287, 297–298).

People pointed out that youngsters were migrating to big cities, obtaining an education there, training for an occupation and getting a job, for example in industry in Gdańsk and Elbląg, while a small number were going on to university to get a higher education. They also mentioned the emigration of post-war settlers from the countryside to urban areas in the 1960s, because "jobs were to be had in the city", even though they had been working in agriculture over the previous years.

Moreover, a few farmers mentioned that compulsory deliveries to the state in People's Poland had caused some farmers to go bankrupt and necessitated finding other work. However, this posed a serious problem due to the lack of vocational education among the oldest settlers, i.e. the generation whose education had been interrupted by World War II:

Genowefa Szymańska: everybody lived off the land back then. Well, the men could only go to work in the drainage system [...] So they dug those ditches with spades, they cut the grass in the ditches. That was the work to be had for men in those days, because the men of that generation most often had no training [...] Here [...] when the [farmers'] associations were set up, if someone had a driving licence they worked as a tractor driver or some other kind of driver somewhere (OPiP AHM-928).

One can see from the farmers' biographical narratives that at some point, running a farm on a small amount of cultivated land was not enough to keep a family. That is why some farmers did extra work in services for agriculture, e.g. at State Machinery Centres, production cooperatives, PGRs, milk depots, and later in farmers' associations. Three farmers also developed activity in beekeeping and poultry farming, others made extra money as artificial insemination technicians, carpenters and dressmakers. People often took seasonal jobs at sugar factories or sugar-beet collection points. Sometimes work in agriculture was combined with jobs in culture, cooperative banks, shipbuilding or retail trade, as Lucjan Nagrodzki described:

Later [...] I was the manager of the library in Lasowice Wielkie in [19]53 [...] and I got the youth club in Kmiecín. I didn't like it and we set off for Gdańsk, to the shipyard [...] I was the village leader here a few times, and later a councillor [...] in Nowy Staw [...] my [father] worked in the cooperative, and I did [too] and did the accounting [...] I ran a shop here, to supply goods [...] I worked at the sugar factory in Malbork [...] I did artificial insemination [of cows] (OPiP-AHM-749).

This shows that the rural population in Żuławy as a post-migration society slowly acquired new skills and qualifications, thus being open to changes resulting from the current economic situation. These factors may be considered conducive to "the bi-professionalism of the population involved in agriculture and the development of non-agricultural functions in rural areas, and thus the deagrarianisation of rural residents' sources of income" (Rosner and Stanny 2019, p. 142).

#### 4. Conclusions: Being a Farmer in Żuławy

In conclusion, on the basis of the analysis of the materials, it can be indicated that the narratives presented in the diaries as well as recorded accounts reveal both differences and similarities. The first ones were written down by people who stood out from other farmers and often performed important political or social functions in the communist period. Such a selection for the purposes of the publication

was deliberate and was to show the caring nature of the state, and therefore the progress in agriculture as one of the main branches of the national economy. These memories are often grandiloquent and take the form of a detailed report. Contemporary stories, on the other hand, were collected mainly among individual farmers, sometimes related to socialized agriculture for a short time. Their selection was therefore not dependent on the material or social position of the witness to history and allowed to receive a more free and personal narration about settling down and farming in Żuławy. The narratives are spontaneous and therefore less structured and schematic.

Similarly, it can be noted that the settlers in their diaries and the witnesses of history in their narratives often referred to the transformation and changing work ethos in rural Poland. Many of them had grown up on farms that functioned within the peasant ethos. It was tied to the image of the peasant traditionalist (and the great importance of the family and religiousness), who was attached to his land but at the same time had a low sense of its ownership, whereas rural areas were characterised by stagnation. The period of People's Poland, and especially the subsequent period after 1989, is linked to the ethos of agricultural work. Farmers were identified with entrepreneurs and specialists who increasingly often had an agricultural education and introduced various innovations on their farms. Rural areas were characterised by development and progress, and farmers increasingly willingly invested in better farming equipment and increased the acreage of land they cultivated (Bukraba-Rylska 2008, pp. 362–381; cf. Fedyszak-Radziejowska 1992). This is noticeable in various fragments of the diaries:

Antoni Banaszekiewicz: I'm really happy with the current times [...] Today's farmer is not the same fearful peasant from before the war (Pawlik 1973, p. 138).

Marcin Koszuś: After several years' practice everyone achieved more or less the same crop yields, because the land taught us how it should be cultivated and what it needed (Pawlik 1973, p. 225).

Some of these people also suggested that 25 years after the end of World War II, a "Żuławy farmer" type had developed. According to Jan Pantuła, an accountant at a PGR, they "are promoters of progress in the farming culture" (Pawlik 1973, p. 297), while the farmer Henryk Szyszka underlined that "farmers now oriented their farms towards those segments of crop and animal production that guaranteed the largest income" (Pawlik 1973, p. 409). In the view of Franciszek Komasa, who had come from the Kielce region, agriculture in Żuławy had gained the aspect of an important tradition that he was continuing, which had become a kind of mission for him:

and already after two years here, farming, it turned out that I was the expert farmer. Initially I came here as a poor boy [...] I was a farmer, the son of a farmer, I knew about farming because I had taken it in with my mother's milk. I work, I worked in agriculture, I took over the farm. And I would never exchange it for any other (OPiP AHM-805).

These statements can also be applied to the contemporary understanding of being a farmer. It is most often identified with running a farm and being committed to agricultural work on many planes. In the context of the structure of contemporary societies, agriculture is considered an occupation because it affects the behaviours of individuals. As Maria Halamska (2016, p. 16) has pointed out, "Occupations are the foundation of social identity and of groups; groups of interests are formed around them, too". However, the image of a farmer from Żuławy seems more compatible with the concept of Amanda Krzyworzeka, according to which a farmer is anyone:

who is involved in crop cultivation and animal breeding and to whom this area of life is important: it consumes a large part of their time and energy, absorbs their attention, defines their areas of interest, engages their thoughts and emotions on a daily basis, is not just an occupation to be performed but also a way of life, although it is also increasingly a market venture requiring expertise (Krzyworzeka 2014, p. 61).

In this context and on the basis of the sources analysed in the present paper, we can accept that a Żuławy farmer is someone who, despite their migration experience, does their best to continue the region's pre-war agricultural traditions on their farm – traditions linked to crop growing (especially wheat and sugar beets) and, though increasingly rarely, to dairy cattle breeding. They have experienced the hard work of cultivating the region's heavy but fertile soils. Moreover, they are aware of the constant danger of partial and complete flooding in depression areas. The materials gathered suggest that initially it was only their persistence, determination and consistent effort that enabled the new settlers to become "real farmers", and to continue earning a living in this way over successive decades.

According to the post-war settlers, the profit from running a farm in the region seemed to compensate for the difficulties with which Żuławy's farmers had to contend on a daily basis. There are steadily fewer farmers with their own farms in the villages of Żuławy, and one can speak of the profitability of cultivated land with regard to farms larger than 100 ha. In addition, few farmers continue to specialise in dairy cattle breeding. At the same time, the Vistula river delta area is considered a typically agricultural region, and thus unique in Poland, which is cause for pride for many of the farmers.

With reference to the analysis discussed in the paper, it should be noted that the narratives presented here are linked to the history of rural Poland immediately after the war and in People's Poland, when agriculture and its practice in rural Żuławy was a necessity for the settlers coming there. Moving to Żuławy, particularly during the initial period of great migrations, they and their families most often had to take over former German farms and acquire completely new skills. The systemic and ideological organisation of agricultural and its various segments engaged most of the rural population in farming work, even though not all of them had been involved in agriculture before. Today the changes are obvious and illustrate the dynamic social system of Żuławy's villages. Agriculture can be described in terms of choice, and rural residents as individuals who make conscious decisions in connection with their professional specialisation. One can thus say that contemporary rural Żuławy comprises three social groups: 1) people unconnected with agriculture, who are employed in the countryside and in towns/cities in non-agricultural sectors; 2) people working in agriculture for financial reasons, but devoid of a farmer ethos, i.e. who have no previous connection to this sector of the economy but often work on nearby large-scale private farms or for producer group consortia that buy up land for cultivation – linked to intensive farming; 3) people tied to agriculture by choice: they practice the farmer's work ethos and continue local agricultural traditions in the context of the family and succession on private farms.

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## Powojenne rolnictwo na Żuławach a przeobrażenia krajobrazu kulturowego i społecznego regionu w świetle materiałów źródłowych, pamiętnikarskich i narracji rolników

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł dotyczy problematyki związanej z powojennymi migracjami na Ziemię Zachodnie i Północne na przykładzie Żuław, a także z ich konsekwencjami dla rolnictwa. Skupiono się w nim na kwestiach zagospodarowywania regionu przez nowych osadników oraz zmian zachodzących w krajobrazie kulturowym i społecznym. Zwrócono uwagę na specyfikę i uwarunkowania gospodarcze regionu przed 1945 r. oraz osadnictwo rolne, strukturę agrarną i społeczną po tej dacie. Powojenne rolnictwo w regionie przedstawiono w odniesieniu do dziedzictwa kulturowego prezentowanego w literaturze naukowej, wspomnień pierwszych osadników – spisanych w formie pamiętników na początku lat 70. XX w. – i relacji biograficznych nagranych przez autorkę na Żuławach w 2018 r.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Ziemia Zachodnie i Północne, Żuławy, krajobraz kulturowy, dziedzictwo kulturowe, migracje po II wojnie światowej, rolnictwo.