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Ownership Changes Through the Eyes of Workers on Large Farms

Abstract: The paper offers an assessment of ownership changes on a large farm from the point of view of the employees. Such farms, some of them operating as companies, are important workplaces for the rural population today. The paper presents the results of a qualitative research (ten free-form interviews) involving people who managed such a farm located in this case in the village of Paów (Opolskie province, Namysów county), as well as the farm's employees. The aim of the study was: 1) to reconstruct the employees' work biographies, 2) to evaluate the extent to which they were active participants of the changes or objects of those changes when ownership transformations were carried out without their knowledge, despite affecting them directly, 3) to determine what impact the ownership changes had on the employees' work situation and how they were treated by the owners and managerial staff.

Keywords: large-scale farm, state-owned farm, państwowe gospodarstwo rolne, Opolskie province, ownership changes.

1. Introduction

The state-owned farms, *państwowe gospodarstwo rolne* (PGR), have long been of scientific interest for researchers dealing with the life course of individuals somewhat associated to the state farms through the occupational linkage, as well as with the economic and social consequences of closing down such entities. However, the picture of state farms themselves in the socialist era and the subsequent transition period is yet not complete, since there has not been a broader analysis of the attitudes of the state owned farms' employees towards the ownership changes in PGRs. In the studies conducted so far, employees of state farms have been considered as

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the object rather than the subject of ownership and structural changes. In fact, they were actively involved in this process, while the agricultural holdings established during and after the transition period on the basis and assets of the former state-owned farms, for example in the form of share-holding companies, have so far been an important labour market for the rural population. The paper aims to fill this cognitive gap. To this end, some research questions dedicated to the reconstruction of professional biographies of employees of one of the state farms, assessment of their activity (the extent to which they were active participants of changes or the objects of such changes, when the ownership transformations occurred without their knowledge and/or influence, though they directly impacted on them), and determining how the transformations influenced their situation in the labour market and the way they were approached by the farm's owners and managers. The case-study area was the former state-owned farm in the village of Pągów in the Opolskie province in southern Poland.

2. A Brief History of State-owned Farms in Poland

The state-owned farms, a form of managing state land, were established in 1949. They were founded on the basis of the State Land Properties (PNZ), State Horse Breeding Facility (PZHK) and State Plant Cultivation Facility (PZHR) institutions. Most PGRs were formed in the "Regained Territories" of what had become western Poland after the war.

As the literature underlines, PGRs fulfilled political, economic and social functions. "In the years 1986–1990, i.e. on the eve of the [political] changes, they accounted for about 19% of arable land nationwide, and the sector yielded 18% of overall agricultural production, over 18% of gross final production, and 21% of commercial production" (Suliborski and Kulawiak 2017, p. 6). In county units where PGRs operated, they formed the axis around which social life was organised. A closed community formed within them, often isolated from its surroundings, the reasons for this including the concentration of employees and management in closed residential estates (territory) and the formation of social, educational and cultural institutions (community centres, schools, health centres) within the farms, which made PGRs in a way self-sufficient:

in fact, PGR workers usually constituted [...] a closed community, which actually functioned according to different rules than the surrounding traditional rural areas. The sources of this difference had several aspects: (a) the standard of living (PGR blocks of flats represented a much higher standard of fittings than the average surrounding homes); (b) the block of flats itself was a new

trend: single-family houses predominated in the countryside; the residential blocks redefined neighbourly relations and introduced new architectural forms into the rural landscape; (c) a completely different – compared to the neighbouring farms of private farmers – mode of economic functioning (welfare benefits, hired labour); (d) in an ideological aspect, PGRs were symbols of “communism” (Giza-Poleszczuk and Kościeszka-Jaworski 2008).

The claim of the PGR communities’ isolation should probably be supplemented with an outline of the relationships in many villages in which PGR residents coexisted with those who owned various-sized farms. From the 1960s, only one peasant child could inherit the family farm (Dziennik Ustaw 1963) while the rest had to seek a different living: they found jobs in the countryside that were not necessarily connected with agriculture, e.g. in a shop, or they married into a farm. They could choose to emigrate to the city or take a job at a PGR.

Another argument that PGRs were not such isolated worlds as may appear is the fact that private farmers took advantage – officially and unofficially – of PGR services (crop spraying, harvesting, using machinery etc.). Complete isolation was only present in strictly PGR villages at a significant distance from other villages or towns.

In the initial years of the state farm, PGR workers (agricultural labourers) came from among people with less than a primary education. According to I. Bukraba-Rylska (2008, p. 352), 64.1% of PGR employees had an incomplete primary education; in 1980 it was just 9.8%. During the same period, the proportion of agricultural workers with a complete primary education grew from 30.3% to 56.3%, while those with a basic vocational education increased from 2.1% to 15.9%. Those with a general or vocational secondary education accounted for 1.2% in 1958 and 15.9% in 1980, and those with a higher education for 0.8% and 3.1%, respectively. As time went by, the managerial staff of PGRs were also better educated: in 1956, 4.5% of managers had a university education, while in 1988 it was 66%.

Employment at a PGR was not a particularly desirable career path in the 1950s and 1960s, which meant labour was in short supply. Despite noticeable improvement, there was a shortage of workers even in the 1970s, and it “was not until the 1980s that an in-house reproduction effect was achieved, which might be proof of growing social approval of this type of employment” (Bukraba-Rylska 2008, p. 352).

There were about 435,000 people working on PGRs in 1989, including 188,000 directly in agricultural production, the rest being employed in non-agricultural segments. This translated into 13 people per 100 hectares of arable land; by comparison, the figure for private farms was 27 people (Parlińska 2000, p. 25).

Unprofitable almost from the moment they were formed, over time PGRs improved their efficiency; the average pace of this improvement was 4% in the years 1981–1988 and was higher than that of private farms, which reached 1%.

Another indicator of improved effectiveness of operation was increased work productivity, especially when counted in net production. In the five-year period 1986–1990, it was almost double that from the five-year period 1976–1980. The comparison with peasant farms also improved significantly. Whereas work productivity at PGRs was over a quarter lower than in the peasant agricultural sector in the period 1976–1980, it was higher by about a half in the years 1986–1990. This means that PGRs surpassed the peasant sector in terms of net production per employee, while being behind in terms of net production per hectare of arable land (Zgliński 1997, p. 7).

The political transformation and reforms implemented at that time led to the dissolution of PGRs in 1991. Based on a law from 1991 (Dziennik Ustaw 1991) their assets were taken over, partially distributed and partially developed by the State Treasury Agricultural Property Agency (AWRSP) (Zgliński 1997, p. 5). The dissolution of PGRs was completed in 1994. About 3.75 million hectares of former PGR land had been taken over by the State Treasury Agricultural Property Reserve by the end of 1996 (Dzun 2015, p. 51). However, this meant not just simple ownership changes, but also the dismantling of a type of order that had existed in rural Poland for 40 years. “As PGRs were closed down, it was not only workplaces that ceased to exist, but the entire social and living environment of the post-PGR community [...] as well as the provision of numerous services related to education and culture” (Gajowiak 2013, p. 72). With the closing of PGRs, 327,000 people lost their jobs (Dzun 2015, p. 308) and were then left to their own devices.

As researchers underline, both the formation and the closure of PGRs were based on political considerations, which were coupled to varying degrees with economic and social ones. Disputes over the reasons behind the decision, the methods of its implementation and its effects still continue today (Niedzielski 2017, p. 129). However, it is often believed that the reform “was not based on rational premises, it did not take into account the economic and social consequences, the territorial distribution of PGRs, demand for land etc.” (Zgliński 1997, p. 8). Simply put, there was no room for state ownership in the newly drafted transformation reforms, and any manifestations of such ownership were treated as a communist thing, even though state ownership had already existed in agriculture in inter-war Poland.

This sudden change led to “a drastic deterioration of residents’ standard of living caused by a lack of income due to job loss as well as diminished accessibility of basic goods and services” (Suliborski and Kulawiak 2017, p. 7), affecting their daily

functioning, but also their perception by other participants of social life. In practice, the closure of PGRs meant the destruction of an existing social order as well as disrupting the functioning of local communities built on the basis of these farms (Binder 2014, p. 97), while the situation and social position of (former) PGR workers changed radically when their jobs were wiped out (Giza-Poleszczuk and Kościeszajaworski 2008). The ownership changes in state-owned (nationalised) agriculture and their social effects have been studied by researchers from different disciplines.¹ They underline the varied fortunes of people connected with PGRs (e.g. Hałamska 2001; Psyk-Piotrowska 2004), and also the diversity of consequences of PGR closure from an economic (Dzun 2005; Guzewicz et al. 2005; Ziętara 2000) as well as a social (Psyk-Piotrowska 1998; Zgliński 1997) point of view, but the image of the state farms themselves and the process of their transformation does not reflect the complexity of the situation. There is a lack of broader analyses related to the PGR workforces' attitude to the ownership transformation; in existing research, they are the objects rather than active subjects of the changes.

3. The Image of the PGR Community

In the political transformation period a particular labelling of the former state-farm workers was intensified. PGRs employed the former manor-farm worker population, people devoid of any tradition of owning a farm and being responsible for the effects of their own farm management. The workers were characterised by a very low level of education and qualifications, or none at all. When state farms were being set up, Polish farmers also had low cultural capital (number of years of education), and in this respect were no different from PGR workers. Their expertise came from the training they obtained through working on the family farm. In later years (especially the 1970s and 1980s), due to their privileged position in terms of access to machinery, PGRs attracted workers with relatively higher skill levels. Up to the 1970s, the great majority of Polish peasants did their ploughing with horses, and second-hand tractors from PGRs appearing on the market were often coveted by private farmers. The problem was thus not so much the level of education and skills of PGR workers as the type of skills: they had specialist training that suddenly ceased to be needed (animal husbandry specialist, cowherd, crop production foreman etc.).

Nor do the discussions on the lives of former PGR workers take sufficient account of situations in which they had to cope with the loss of practically everything they had, especially since the hardships caused by the political transformation affected

¹ Listed in detail by, among others, Suliborski and Kulawiak 2017, pp. 7–8.

not just agriculture but also the non-agricultural labour market, which was unable to absorb this sudden surplus workforce. Furthermore, state enterprises undergoing restructuring added further groups of unemployed to the supply side of the labour market. This also affected the limited geographical mobility of former PGR workers, an issue often mentioned in this context. PGR villages, which had been formed as separate, isolated units, functioned in a space where the network of towns was not (and is still not) particularly dense, which made it very difficult to seek jobs outside the area because of problems with commuting. At the same time, renting accommodation in a larger urban centre made working there unprofitable due to high rents; at best, it guaranteed a living for the employees but not their families, who were left behind in the countryside without enough to live on. These factors definitely determined the low level of geographical mobility shown by former PGR workers.

Another theory from the transformation period spoke of the self-reproduction of this social category, and even of the emergence of an underclass. “Learned helplessness, PGR worker syndrome, anti-enterprise ‘cages,’ ‘black holes’ on the map of Poland, the underclass, a culture of poverty, are just some of the many terms used to describe the situation of former PGR residents” (Gajowiak 2013, p. 71; see also: Jabłoński 2017; *Regionalny Program Operacyjny...*, p. 27). However, the research by P. Binder suggests that “the young generation growing up on post-PGR housing estates did not ‘inherit’ ‘learned helplessness’ from their parents and do not wait idly for government aid” (*Ludzie bez głosu...*). A more appropriate term in relation to former PGR workers might be J. Grzelak’s (1993) concept of “social helplessness”, referring to an entire social category existing in detrimental external conditions. Before 1989, it was not uncommon for PGR households to be financially better off than the average peasant family. The main reason behind this advantage in the standard of living was the mostly regular payment of monthly wages. The similarity between the peasant and PGR way of life was that, in both cases, whole families worked on the farm. This was especially true wherever entire villages were isolated.

Another reason why PGR workers had an advantage was that they received an allowance in kind, or *deputat*. Originally this was an actual in-kind payment (milk, meat, free use of PGR machinery on the PGR worker’s private plot), which later changed to a cash benefit. The naturalisation of consumption would become one of the ways of surviving the most difficult period of the political transformation and high unemployment. The differentiation between private and cooperative or state property was not clear-cut. Possibilities for the informal flow of goods from state farms to the private farms of their employees were enormous. As this was such a widespread occurrence, it was hard to control. The income situation of the state-farm employees, regardless of their cultural resources, was a consequence of the economic condition of a state farm. The better managed and the higher

the efficiency by factors of production, the better the income in the households of PGR wage workers. An ideological myth is the claim about the low economic efficiency of state farms, for instance, in the Opolskie province their economic performance measured by effectiveness was high (Prof. Jerzy Wilkin..., p. 1).

Work on a state farm was hard, but whether it brought results or not was largely determined by the way the PGR was managed, not by the actual work of its employees. The more centralised the management, the less effective was its operation. It may be assumed that the more freedom a well-educated PGR manager had, the greater the farm's efficiency, including in terms of labour management in changing economic conditions. The analyses by agricultural economists show that in from 1990 to 1996, legal farms established on the basis of former state farms were increasing their advantage over individual/family farms mainly in terms of yields, livestock productivity and labour productivity (Dzun 2014, p. 35).

4. State Farms in the Opolskie Province

In the Opolskie province, PGRs had mainly been formed in areas where the population immediately after World War II was mostly composed of new settlers (Brzeg, Kluczbork, Namysłów and Nysa counties).

No state farms went bankrupt during the transformation. The State Treasury Agricultural Property Reserve took over 95 agricultural enterprises in Opolskie province, with a total area of approx. 140,000 hectares² [...] Each PGR was taken over by a new owner, who signed a 'social pact' with the employees. The region includes examples of very good management of former PGR estates. Local communities often become integrated, taking over assets and carrying out joint projects, for example. One such example is the village of Frączków, which won a competition in the Rural Renewal Programme. Another example of best practice in this area might be the Kietrz Agricultural Complex – a State Treasury joint-stock company formed from a former PGR. This company is in very good financial condition (*Regionalny Program Operacyjny...*, p. 27).

Among other post-PGR farms in the region that found a place for themselves in the new economic circumstances was Pagro in Pągów (*Gospodarstwo Pagro z Pągowa...*).

From 1889 until the end of World War II the farm properties in Pągów belonged to Paul Scholz. In 1954, Pągów was included in the Bukowie Commune National

² The total area of agricultural land in the Opolskie province in 1989 accounted for 540,000 ha (Opole Statistical Office 1990).

Council. At that time, the Pągów PGR employed over 130 people. In 1993, the Pagro limited liability company was established on the basis of the former state-owned farm. Pagro was founded by employees of the former PGR and for its own purposes leased the property of the already closed PGR Pągów from the Agricultural Property of the State Treasury Agency (AWRSP). In 1993, the company employed 51 people. On 8 July 2009, Alku – a Danish commercial company – became the shareholder of Pagro. In 2012, it employed 25 people, while in 2020 there were only ten. On 8 June 2020, there was another change in ownership, when German capital was invested.

5. The Village of Pągów

The locality is peripheral in relation to the nearest provincial capitals, 55 km from Wrocław and 70 km from Opole. The value of the agricultural production area in the Wilków municipality is highly favourable. The agricultural area quality index, amounting to 90.8 points, is one of the highest in Opolskie province. Agricultural land covers 90%, and forest land 2% of the total area of Wilków municipality, in which Pągów village is located. The Wilków municipality is characterised by a predominance of large-scale farms and a low synthetic indicator of the local community's cohesion and affluence as adopted in the Rural Development Monitoring project (Stanny et al. 2018, pp. 230, 196).

Pągów is a village dating back to the Middle Ages. Alongside peasant farms, there was a landed estate here before the war, providing employment for residents who did not have their own farms or whose farms were too small. In the inter-war period, Pągów was part of Germany; it has been under Polish administration since 1945.

The economic structure of the rural part of the Namysłów county, within which Pągów is located, is highly-dependent upon agriculture (Halamska, Hoffmann and Stanny 2017, p. 63). The 2009 Pągów Revival Plan reported that of the total of 144 households, 82 pursued agricultural activity (*Plan Odnowy...* 2009, p. 5). Depopulation processes are also noted, i.e. a tendency for people from the municipality to migrate to big cities in Poland and to other countries in search of work. Pągów had 559 residents in 1978, 502 in 1988, 470 in 1998, 468 in 2011, and 415 in 2019.

A SWOT analysis of the village reported strengths such as the operations of the Pagro company, a large number of working-age residents, a high soil-quality index, and high farming productivity. Weaknesses included a low level of social integration, residents' low educational level, as well as the social and economic consequences of unemployment, e.g. households' difficult financial situation, worsening living standards and inefficiently used human resource). The major threats were young people's migration from the countryside, residents' emigration in search of a livelihood, and a lack of investment capital (*Plan Odnowy...*, pp. 20–22).

6. Methodology

Free-form interviews with ten former and current employees of the large farm in Pągów were conducted between March and June 2020. The people surveyed were all individuals who worked on the farm and agreed to participate. One of them was a former shareholder. The interviews involved the director (who was also the agronomist at the time), two office workers, a combine-harvester operator, two tractor drivers, a machine operator, a mechanic, a person responsible for the technical functioning of buildings, and a person responsible for the storehouses. Two of them were women.

Most of the respondents had spent their whole working lives on the farm and remembered the ownership changes very well, having been active participants in them, or at least observers. The youngest respondent was 44, the oldest 67. The respondents declared the following education: vocational – six people; secondary – three people; including two with a specialisation in agricultural economics; higher – one person.

At the time of the study, two people were retired but continued to stay in touch with the agronomist and the farm employees (for consultation, expert assistance).

Most of the respondents lived in Pągów or Pszeniczna; the majority of the farm's fields and meadows are on land within these two villages. Some of the employees lived on the farm, in buildings that were once part of the manor farm, others in a block of flats for new workers built in the 1970s, located some 150 metres from the palace in Pągów. Managerial-level employees lived in Namysłów (15 km) and Oleśnica (30 km).

The guidelines to the free-form interviews covered the following research questions: 1) reconstructing the work biographies of the PGR employees, 2) evaluating their level of activity, i.e. the extent to which they were active participants in the changes or objects of them when ownership transformations were carried out without their knowledge, despite affecting them directly, 3) determining what effect the ownership changes had on their work situation, how they were treated by the owners and managerial staff.

7. Pagro Gospodarstwo Rolno-Nasienne: From PGR to a Company under Danish Law

From 1889 until the end of World War II, the Pągów estate was the property of Paul Scholz's family. The estate was nationalised after 1945, and a PGR was set up on the basis of the former manor farm; the residence was turned into offices and accommodation for the workers. Pągów became part of the Bukowie *gromada/commune* unit (the smallest administrative unit at that time) in 1954.

In the Wilków municipality, the PGR accounted for about 3,000 hectares of arable land. The individual state farms were components of the Namysłów Complex. In the early stage of the PGR's existence, the separate units were: Pągów, Pszeniczna, Bukowie, Barski Dwór, Idzikowice, Jakubowice, Młokicie, Krzyków. The farms were later merged: Pszeniczna with Pągów, Bukowie with Barski Dwór, Idzikowice with Jakubowice, Młokicie with Przeczów. These were high-productivity farms with high quality soil. On 1 September 1959, *Trybuna Opolska* newspaper reported that

a meeting of party activists, worker self-government and self-regulatory organisations from the PGRs of Namysłów county was held on 1 September. The meeting summarised the PGRs' achievements in the year 1958/1959. It shows that PGR Pągów increased its income by 1 million compared to the previous year. Yield per hectare grew by 1.5 quintals. The leader in milk production is PGR Pszeniczna, achieving an average of 3,883 litres per cow (Maliński 2012, pp. 96–97).

A “dormitory” for the agricultural complex was built at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s; these were residential blocks comprising over 140 flats. Their standard was no worse than that of housing being built in cities. The block of flats in Pągów was built during the same period.

Zbigniew Maliński, the author of a monograph on Wilków municipality, writes that in its first dozen or so years of existence, the PGR was not always fortunate to have good management. Only the second-to-last manager of the Pągów farm, JS, is considered to have run the PGR well: “a specialist taking good care of the farm and the people, he was respected as a person, not just in the workplace” (Maliński 2012, p. 97).

The political transformation also initiated changes at PGR Pągów. The main legislation regulating ownership changes in agriculture included the following acts:

- on state enterprises and on the self-government of state enterprise staff, 25 September 1981 (Dziennik Ustaw 1981),
- on the privatisation of state enterprises, 13 July 1990 (Dziennik Ustaw 1990),
- on the management of State Treasury agricultural real estate and on amendments to some acts, 19 October 1991, as amended (Dziennik Ustaw 1991).

The key law in this regard was the act on the privatisation of state enterprises, which provided for direct and indirect privatisation.

Indirect privatisation consisted in transforming [an enterprise] into a joint-stock company wholly owned by the Treasury and then putting the shares on the market. Direct privatisation involved liquidating an enterprise and then selling it as a whole or in parts, contributing it to a company, or leasing it out.

The law did not fulfil its purpose, because its provisions did not account for the uniqueness of agriculture. Privatisation via the capital-based method was made impossible by the low profitability of capital invested in agriculture. Direct privatisation imposed terms that prospective lessees were unable to meet (Kraciński 2013, p. 55).

Consequently, the road to privatisation in agriculture was only opened by the act on the management of State Treasury agricultural real estate, which provided for four modes of handling PGR assets, including privatisation through employee shareholding, which was the path followed in Pağów.

In 1993 the newly formed Pagro company, founded by former PGR Pağów employees, leased the assets of the closed PGR from the AWRSP. The company was set up by 14 people, 12 of whom had been the former PGR's employees. Such a small number of shareholders may indicate three interrelated issues. First, the lack of capital necessary to run the company; second, the fear of economic risk, and thirdly the reluctance combined with a lack of knowledge about new market realities. This company could be described as an employee-owned company, although such a legal form did not exist; only a limited-liability company could be set up, which was what happened in this case. The farm's operations within the new company were the responsibility of the CEO – the PGR's last director, AP – who decided on the type of production, among other things. Experimental fields continued to function on the farm. PGR Pağów had been a producer of certified seed, which suggests a high standard of agriculture, and this activity was continued after 1993. The company was successful, accumulating a lot of financial capital over the years, which enabled it to purchase a sizable amount of land (602 hectares). The main product was seed grain; at the start of the 21st century, 80% of the farm area was used to produce seed of all types of grain. Grain and seed production was based on cooperation with the best growers in Poland (i.e. Hodowla Roślin Kobierzyce, Hodowla Roślin Strzelce) and abroad.

Company operation and management was largely controlled by the CEO, who enjoyed a very high level of trust. After a time, he decided that this form of business was no longer viable, which resulted in a decision to sell the company. Alku spółka z o.o., a limited-liability company based in Pağów, became the Pagro shareholder on 8 July 2009. It was owned by a company under Danish law. The management board comprised two Poles and two Danish citizens. The total area of the farm, including the fields leased from the AWRSP, was 1,026 hectares, including 995 hectares of grassland.

In 2012 the company employed 25 people. Alongside seed production, the farm also had some livestock: calves, heifers and young beef cattle. The new owners

focused on the company's financial results (profitability). This was approached in many different ways. The workforce was further reduced and the new management invested in new machinery, among other things taking advantage of farm modernisation programmes financed from the 2013–2020 Rural Development Programme. This is when the decision was reached to abandon animal breeding and focus exclusively on crop production.

In recent years, the post of director was filled by a former agronomist, KB, who was responsible for the company's operations under especially difficult conditions. For a few years, the Danish owners declared their willingness to allocate capital, then the farm was put up for sale, which meant the company was in a state of limbo to some extent. On 8 June 2020, the farm changed owners again (German capital).

7.1. Motives for Taking a Job at the Farm

As a biographical theme discussed extensively by the respondents, the motivation to take a job at the farm varied. There were two variables involved. One was family background, as some of the workers had grown up in a PGR family. In some cases, a person had worked "outside" the PGR and then their biographical trajectory brought them back to work on the large farm years later. The other variable was working on the PGR: some respondents had tied their entire working lives to the PGR and to the entities that emerged as a result of ownership changes, within which the farm continued to operate.

One of the most frequent reasons for taking a job on the farm was a desire to improve one's financial situation (see Szpak 2005, p. 64). "After military service, Mr JS hired me at Pańków. They provided housing on the PGR, it was a better start in life" (R_8). Benefits connected with the chance to become independent and to obtain housing were not specific to this type of community alone. There was a very large housing deficit in Poland throughout the communist period.

Another major reason that all the respondents mentioned was the in-kind allowances that workers received, e.g. milk, coal or potatoes. The volume of these and their distribution was not always rational. "Whether you wanted it or not, you were entitled to the milk" (R_7). Besides material benefits, the respondents also listed cultural and tourist attractions that the PGR offered its workers' children and which were unavailable to the children of private farmers: "The PGR sent me to summer camp, to the circus, to fun fairs, to Chorzów every year, and I went to the seaside through the PGR some five times" (R_3). It can be assumed that the standard of living in this village, measured by the level of consumption in the respondents' families, was no worse than on the average farm.

The next reason for taking a job there was family tradition. “Right after school, at the age of 16, I was hired first as a manual labourer and then completed courses on the job. The times were tough, my brothers already worked here, I had to get a job” (R_6).

Another thing that made the PGR an attractive workplace was its location and the impossibility for people to travel any greater distance. “I was the eldest at home; right after school my first job was at the PGR in Bukowie, I had a friend there and it was close by. Later I got married in Pszeniczna and moved to a job here. I didn’t want to commute any more” (R_2).

7.2. Education and Acquisition of Qualifications

If one assumes that the PGRs showed a much greater take-up of agricultural progress than peasant farms, it is justified to hypothesise that this required production staff with higher qualifications. These were obtained in a number of ways. Firstly, the children of PGR farm labourers went to agricultural schools. Some of the respondents graduated from the agricultural technical college in Bierutów; the last two directors are Agricultural University graduates. A second option was to get a job at the PGR after leaving vocational school. The higher the level of mechanisation and adoption of technical progress, the greater the demand for mechanics, electricians and other workers with higher qualifications. Sometimes obtaining a specialist vocational education took a lot of determination. “For three years I went by bicycle from Bukowie to Bierutów to catch the train to the school in Oleśnica; autumn was the worst. A car was unheard of” (R_2). The third path to acquiring knowledge and practical skills was training by example, i.e. learning from those who had already mastered the skills. “I was always drawn to mechanical engineering, to repairing stuff. When I was 17, I made my first working vehicle, I designed it. As a kid, I’d go to the smithy; the blacksmith was from Idzikowice, I wanted him to teach me welding; he clobbered me over the head so many times. I kept coming back, I was stubborn. I still do welding today” (R_6). Sending a child off to residential secondary school often meant that sacrifices had to be made by the whole family. Sometimes chance or parents’ arbitrary decisions determined the career paths of siblings (consequently, one brother might become a white-collar worker and another a blue-collar one).

In the period when the oldest respondents were getting a job at the farm (the 1970s and 1980s), completed education played a significant role at the moment of hiring. “When I first started, most people had an elementary education, but I already had a vocational education, and thanks to this I was paid a tiny bit more” (R_8).

The employees’ qualifications improved with the time they spent on the farm. Their workplace offered participation in training courses (for operators of new

machinery and equipment, for plant production specialists etc.). A reconstruction of the workers' career paths very often produces an image of someone who first helped on the PGR farm (e.g. by helping their parents or as a seasonal worker) and later advanced to the rank of specialist and more prestigious posts (e.g. a combine-harvester operator running a piece of equipment worth two million zlotys).

The respondents willingly and in great detail outlined their reasons for getting a job on the farm, and also their process of upgrading their qualifications. On the other hand, they left out the pathologies that are widely discussed in the literature, i.e. theft or alcohol abuse – problems that are common both among private farmers and PGR workers. Successive ownership changes, which had enormous consequences for the farm workers and the whole village community, were a topic that the respondents brought up and elaborated upon much more readily.

7.3. Three Eras in the Farm's History: Acting Subjects or Objects of Change

The image emerging from the interviews conducted in the study is that of three leaders, each representing a different period and a different form of operation of the large farm under consideration.

The first stage was the PGR era, a time when the above-mentioned JS was at the helm. "He was a regular guy, he knew how to set up the work, a great bloke, I'll always praise him" (R_10). The great majority of the respondents thought very highly of him. He appears as a model example of a PGR director from the 1970s and 1980s. A symbolic ending to this period on the farm came with JS's death in 1992. Like the farm itself in his time and under his management, he was highly idealised. The relationships within the enterprise were described in terms of community and a sense of responsibility for one another. The employees' attachment to the PGR as a workplace was very strong (cf. Dzun 1991, pp. 166–172).

The next manager, AP, represented a different generation. He is an example of a PGR manager who felt very much at home in the new reality during and after the transformation, while not having the employees' best interests at heart. Former PGR workers: "did not form their own employee representation, they were dispersed, not organised. Their interests were represented neither by political parties nor by the managers of the enterprises where they worked. The truth is, PGR managers were searching for a place for themselves in the new socio-economic reality" (Marks-Bielska 2005, p. 9).

Becoming the CEO of a limited-liability company, the PGR's last director treated his role in very narrow terms, professionally; he saw himself as a true executive. His most important considerations were income, financial status and career opportunities. Focusing on such values enabled him to function extremely

well in the transformation reality of the 1990s, and was conducive to the farm's restructuring.

In the peak period of the PGR, the state farms in Pszeniczna and Pańków employed 130 people (more during the season; there were two worker hostels in Pańków and Barski Dwór; school pupils and youngsters from the Voluntary Labour Corps (OHP) helped out at grain and root-crop harvest time). The total area of arable land exceeded 1,000 hectares, and there were a few hundred head of cattle housed in several cowsheds. Thanks to the company being set up, not everyone lost their jobs in the 1990s. There were 51 employees in 1993.

The company CEO's stance in the 1990s appears ambivalent: on the one hand, a "good crew" was an important factor in the farm's functioning, while on the other there were steady and consistent layoffs (cf. Fedyszak-Radziejowska 1997, p. 147).

According to the respondents, the biggest winners of the transformation process and changes at the start of the 21st century were those who had joined the company as shareholders and then, after some years, achieved significant financial success. The risk they had taken turned out to be worthwhile in the longer term. The necessary condition for joining the company was a certain level of financial capital. However, there is no common denominator among the shareholders, as they included both manual labourers and office workers.

Some of the respondents voiced the suspicion that it was AP who ultimately decided to sell the company to the Danes, as they had guaranteed that he would keep his position on the farm, something the other prospective buyers were not prepared to do. "AP was the main initiator of setting up the company and then selling it. AP claims that the company had to be sold; the only thing is, there were these brothers from Silesia who were interested, they wanted to buy it, but when the Danes bought it, AP got more money. The other thing is, those Poles didn't want AP to continue as manager, while with the Danes, he negotiated that he'd still be the CEO" (R_5).

The fact that the sale was made to this specific buyer needs underlining, because it indicates that the CEO was guided by his own interests, which would have been made possible by the fact that he had a substantial freedom of decision on management issues. If the company's management style had provided for greater control, the outcome might have been different or the sale might not have come about at all. In the situation at the time, the profits from the sale convinced the shareholders to make the decision. It is worth mentioning that this style of farm management was nothing unusual, as over 50% of new owners of former PGRs (irrespective of the form of management) did not allow staff to have a share in running the business (Fedyszak-Radziejowska 1997, p. 151). After the sale in 2009, some of the staff changed their position at the company from shareholders to Alku employees. For a long time,

former shareholders sometimes defined themselves as employees with a higher standing in the company, though this was not actually true. The former shareholders invested the money from the sale of their shares in real estate for themselves and their families; some used it for their children's education.

Production success was one aspect of the farm running as a company; the workers' situation was another. Employees had no influence over what happened to the assets that had been taken over; in addition, without any trade union in place, their interests were not the most important. There was no one to negotiate working conditions and wage issues. For many years, AP took shrewd advantage of the fact that for some people working on the farm was a functional necessity: unemployment being relatively high, they were not very attractive on the labour market. Even before Poland joined the European Union, Opolskie province's high unemployment had been alleviated by economic emigration, but this was not particularly significant in the area under consideration (it predominated in regions mainly inhabited by the indigenous population).

KB was the farm's last leader, employed there as an agronomist for many years and serving as the director for the last three years. Throughout this time, the company was up for sale. There were practically no decisions he could have made that would have affected the farm's future. Achieving the best production results in the province did not change the company owners' plans to sell. "The Danes wanted to withdraw, and they did; the only issue was when they would ultimately do it and on what terms" (R_5).

Employees remember the three different eras and compare them. The middle, theoretically participatory period (when the employees had a share in managing the business) comes out the worst in their opinions. This seems a paradox, as this stage should have been the best time, since it was when the shareholders had a say in management and the executive running the company was controlled by the shareholders.

7.4. Ownership Changes' Effect on the Work Situation and the Way the Owners Communicated with and Treated Employees

During the era of People's Poland, every PGR director was subordinate to a well-developed control system. "If anyone was oppressed, they could go to the conglomerate [higher up] and complain. It was worse later on; there was no one to complain to" (R_8). Conversations with the respondents show that in the PGR times, even someone without competence or financial means had not been completely helpless in the face of an in-house conflict and had someone to go to for help. Possible complaints and potential interventions resulting from them went through several channels:

political – complaints to the relevant instances of the PZPR or PSL (municipal committees, provincial committees had agricultural departments in their structure); state administration – municipality, county, if it existed at that time; and perhaps above all, to higher links in the management structure of state farms.

In a situation in which a director is running what is almost his own company or running a business on behalf of the owners who are thousands of kilometres away, and additionally show no interest in employee issues, it is very hard to get help in case of a conflict in the company. Two statements offer an excellent illustration of how the manager proceeded: “I had conflicts with AP, I disagreed with him, we both went to legal counsellors, only he had a [high] position and didn’t have to pay for this, while I did. [...] I wanted to leave because of it all, and so did another guy. But I wanted a transfer, which he wouldn’t give me, telling me to resign. But I wanted continuity of employment. In the end I stayed” (R_2). “There were situations when I wanted to find new work, AP’s approach to workers was iffy. You sort of stifled it in you. There were some job options, but with commutes. Here, you had blended into the community and in the end you couldn’t be bothered” (R_8).

Another style of management and communication with employees is best illustrated by the following passages: “When KB was boss, that was my best time; he supported people, he didn’t just grab everything for himself like AP. He knew how to negotiate more money for us, he was on our side” (R_4). “In AP’s time, winter or no winter, we stood outside the office and waited. Now it’s all nice, in the canteen, everyone together” (R_8). “In the old CEO’s day there was assembly in front of the palace at 6:45 and everyone had to be at work at 7:00. But recently, assembly was in the canteen, it was like a hotel even, coffee being served and everyone sitting down at the table, at one table. The changes under KB were huge, but short-lived; good things never last. He wasn’t stuck up; he was demanding, but he understood everyone and you could come to an agreement with him. [It was] only three years. He was a director, manager, agronomist, sometimes even combine-harvester operator and tractor driver. He didn’t wear a white shirt or a tie. A regular guy, but with vast knowledge; lots of people came to him or called to ask for advice. Right now the new manager doesn’t even want to talk to people” (R_5). “It was best working under KB; everyone did what they were supposed to, no one moaned. The work was meant to get done and that was it” (R_6).

8. Conclusion

The paper has given a brief outline of the attitude of PGR staff towards ownership changes as well as showing how farm employees became the object of the changes in the long term. In the case of the Pańków farm considered here, an employee-owned

company was formed after the state-farm period; its successive transformations were not due to poor economic results, debts or a lack of development opportunities, but largely to the interests of the company's boss and the poor control the employee shareholders exercised over his activity. It is hard to say whether this was a matter of their excessive trust or their lack of competence; the fact remains that, in a way, they withdrew from co-managing their shared workplace. The conclusion could be that this may be the difference between private farmers, who control the present and future of their farm from the very beginning (as far as this is possible in specific economic conditions), and the employees considered here, who had the PGR experience in their own or their family's past and who were more inclined to hand over management matters to others, themselves concentrating on the immediate tasks and economic benefits (wages, in-kind allowances etc.) of the work they performed. It needs noting that given the economic and ownership situation of Pańków, neither qualifications nor length of work experience affected these people's place in the business's hierarchical structure; there were practically no opportunities for advancement. A real-term change in their situation was only possible if they left the farm and found employment elsewhere, which was difficult at least for some – those whose skills were closely tied to agriculture.

Most of the respondents have high qualifications and enormous work experience. They are aware of the limitations involved in going back on the labour market. These include limitations of a geographical nature: in theory, jobs are available in Namysłów 15 km away, but not everyone has a means of getting there. The other limitation, in a paradox, is the respondents' qualifications. Most of them are defined by being agricultural workers (office workers have slightly different identifications, but these are still occupations tied to agriculture: agronomist, specialist in farm accounting etc.).

Justification of their actions is a major theme in the respondents' statements. They explain their decisions to get a job and continue working in terms of strictly rational choices. A detailed analysis of outlays and incomes suggests that they could not have done any differently in the conditions in which they were functioning. At the same time, assessing the local labour market and the changing demand for desirable occupations, all of these people support their children in obtaining an education and finding jobs outside agriculture.

Evaluating the ownership changes, the respondents accurately indicate the main problems of the individual eras: the blurred boundary between private and state-owned property during the communist period, pursuing one's own interest instead of the group's in the first stage of functioning as a company (the 1990s), and the subsequent owners' focus on profit and their favourable opinion of the work of the (essentially dubious) director. An idealisation of the pre-transformation times is evident, both regarding the living conditions back then and the person who managed the farm.

The way this business was managed and how it functioned was largely the consequence of the professional and personal traits of the managers/owners of Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne. The respondents clearly point to differences between the various management styles, communication and the way the managers treated employees, at the same time indicating the influence that the individual interests of the person at the helm always had on the farm's management. When analysing ownership changes, attention should be paid to the role of structural conditions considered two-fold: first, as legal regulations changing over time and influencing the transformation of the entity; second, as factors influencing the production structure of a farm. The changes in the farm's production profile over time, complementing this profile of other production departments, influenced the structure of employees and their level of professional competence, especially of production employees.

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Pracownicy wielkoobszarowego gospodarstwa rolnego wobec zmian własnościowych

Streszczenie: W artykule dokonano oceny zmian własnościowych wielkoobszarowego gospodarstwa rolnego z perspektywy jego pracowników. Gospodarstwa te, funkcjonujące np. w formie spółek kapitałowych, są obecnie ważnym miejscem pracy dla ludności wiejskiej. W tekście przedstawiono wyniki badań jakościowych (10 wywiadów swobodnych) przeprowadzonych wśród osób zarządzających tego typu gospodarstwami zlokalizowanymi w miejscowości Pągów (województwo opolskie, powiat namysłowski), a także z osobami zatrudnionymi w takich gospodarstwach. Badania miały na celu: rekonstrukcję biografii zawodowych pracowników; próbę oceny ich aktywności – w jakim stopniu byli oni podmiotowymi uczestnikami zmian, a w jakim przedmiotowymi, gdy przekształcenia własnościowe następowały bez ich wiedzy, chociaż bezpośrednio ich dotyczyły; ustalenie, jak przekształcenia wpływały na sytuację pracowników, traktowanie ich przez właścicieli oraz kadrę zarządzającą.

Słowa kluczowe: wielkoobszarowe gospodarstwa rolne, państwowe gospodarstwa rolne, województwo opolskie, zmiany własnościowe.