

Old age and death. The perception of old age in the context of death in the Polish countryside at the turn of 20th century and the interwar period (1918–1939)

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule stawiam sobie za cel przeanalizowanie odbioru, postrzegania osób starszych w obliczu śmierci (jak się zachowywali wobec nieuniknionego) na wsi polskiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku i w okresie międzywojennym (1918–1939). Opieram się na materiale etnograficznym, pamiętnikarstwie chłopskim, koresponduję z literaturą przedmiotu (głównie etnologiczną). Ukazano, że ludzie starsi przygotowywali się na śmierć a wspólnota wiejska uznawała, iż jako osoby bliskie zaświatom, tamtemu światu mogą pośredniczyć między sacrum a profanum, szczególnie podczas konania i w rytuale pogrzebowym. W społeczności wiejskiej dominował wariant śmierci oswojonej (w ujęciu Philippe Ariesa), był on żywotny nie tylko na przełomie XIX i XX wieku, ale także w dwudziestolecium międzywojennym. W kulturze tradycyjnej śmierć była zjawiskiem wszechobecnym spotykanym we wspólnocie wiejskiej, w rytmie pracy i odbiorze natury. Śmierć pozostawała przede wszystkim wydarzeniem wspólnotowym, wiązała się z konserwatywną kulturą ludową. Aczkolwiek już w dwudziestolecium międzywojennym rejestrowano stopniowy zanik tradycji, zatracanie niektórych ludowych sensów, uproszczanie ceremoniałów. Były to jednak zmiany postępujące bardzo wolno.

Hasła kluczowe:

historia starości, ludowa tanatologia, kultura ludowa

Abstract

The goal of the article is to analyze the attitude and perception of the old facing death (the way the old behaved towards the inevitable) in the Polish countryside at the turn of 20th century and in the interwar period (1918–1939). The analysis is based on ethnographic material and diaries of peasants, and corresponds to (mainly ethnological) literature on the subject. It is shown that the elderly were preparing themselves for death, and that the rural community believed that because of old people's proximity to death, they could mediate between the sacred and the profane, especially while dying and during the burial rite. In the rural community the idea of "tamed death" (as used by Phillippe Aries) was dominant. The idea was present not only at the turn of 20th century but also during the interwar period. In traditional culture, death was an omnipresent phenomenon encountered in rural communities, work rhythm and perception of nature. Death was, first and foremost, a communal event within conservative folk culture. However, during the interwar period a gradual decline could already be observed, with the disappearance of folk concepts and simplification of ceremonies. These changes happened very slowly, however.

Key words:

the history of old age, folk thanatology, folk culture

The phenomenon of death, as we all know, is the unfathomable mystery of human existence. To this day, it provokes thought and questions. However, the questions are now generally articulated in tears, fear and uncertainty, or are marked with a pessimistic tone. Even the development of modern medicine and longer life expectancy do not suppress people's fear of the end. What is more, some argue that this fear is even intensified. Vladimir Jankélévitch states it clearly: "It turns out that diseases which were believed to be incurable disappear like snow exposed to the sun. The only thing that will always remain incurable is death, the disease of diseases. Disease may be treated by definition. Death is the exception; the disease of those who feel perfectly well" (Jankélévitch 2005: 80). People die at different ages, so death concerns both young and old, but, as Pascal would say, a person always dies alone, for no one else can pass this threshold with them. The following statement from the book of Sirach in the Bible is still relevant: "All flesh grows old like a garment; the ancient decree is, «You will certainly die!»" (Sirach 14, 17). Old age is close to death (due to the fact that it is not followed by any other period of human life). On the other hand, can anything be close to this phenomenon? The knowledge of discursive thought surrenders here, or risks condemning itself to absurdity (Jankélévitch 2005: 85).

In the past, in traditional rural communities, the phenomenon of death was experienced by the entire community. Death in those days happened more often than today, and hence old people could get accustomed to it – many children died, epidemics killed entire families, and deaths were more frequent in the context of the multi-generation family. Moreover, in rural communities at the turn of 20th century, the symbolism of death appeared in ceremonies such as birth and marriage, accompanied farmers during agrarian rites, and was associated with one of the seasons of the year, namely winter (Simonides 2004: 285). Spring and autumn solstices, sunrise, midnight, New Year's Eve – all these important moments were treated as peculiar clashes of night and day; death and life (Pawluczuk 1978: 58). Death and life informed several customs. Rituals, initiations and all sanctioned changes of social status reflected, and existed in relation to, the difference between the sacred and the profane (the other world and this world) (Tokarska et al. 1982: 79–84). It was believed that death, as radically different from life, frees people from the destructive influence of time and the limitations of the human condition, by transporting them to the land free of disease, transition, and death itself (Kowalski 2007: 551). Death was omnipresent, observed both directly in the rhythm and transformations of nature – in the seasons and changing vegetation – and in the contemporary social order: old people were mediators of important values and examples to follow, since they had spent their entire lives preparing to die and thus knew how to face the end of life in dignity; it was expected of them and they did not want to disappoint the other members of the community. Death was also visible through the influence of the Catholic faith (especially in the doc-

trine of the afterlife, but also in its symbolism; especially the symbolism of the cross) (Jackowski 1986: 4).

During the time of the Second Polish Republic the attitude of peasants towards death did not change significantly. It was a “tamed” death (as understood by Philippe Ariès), which people constantly faced. Bishop Józef Zawitkowski wrote about his homeland in Mazovia, “People in the countryside / were accustomed to death, / because the mortality rate was high. / Children died, young people died, / middle-aged and older people died. / Diseases were not diagnosed, / and medical assistance was rare. / People died from shortness of breath, / from consumption, from colic or paralysis. / Older people were expecting death” (*A letter from Bishop...*, (2011)). It is not surprising that in the face of harsh living conditions, the elderly saw salvation in death after a long and tiring life. Old people facing bad living conditions used to say: “Please God, take me to you” (*A letter from Bishop...*, (2011)).

Death was discussed on a daily basis. People believed in the constant presence of the souls of the dead among the living (especially during crucial holidays) (Kowalska-Lewicka 1995: 43). People, especially old people, believed that they had received their life from God, and that the Creator of life himself would judge their lives. However, that thought did not fill them with fear and it did not result in rebellion (Simonides 1988: 125–126). All people were aware of their own death, of which they were reminded since their youth by means of family rituals such as the custom of receiving a piece of white cloth several meters long from one’s godmother at baptism. The cloth was used for diapers, but also served during one’s wedding ceremony and burial.

Religion gave hope in the face of death and presented an eschatological vision, which was particularly strong in religiosity after of the Council of Trent, and was dominant in the Polish countryside at the turn of 20th century. People were constantly interested in their fate after death.

Old people played an important role in people’s thanatology. In proverbs there was certain determinism which associated death with the natural culmination of an old person’s life. It was said: “Old age brings the grave closer” (Julian Krzyżanowski, *Nowa Księga Przysłów*, v. 1–4, PIW, Warszawa 1969–1978, OLD AGE 28) and “death looks into an old person’s eyes.” (Oskar Kolberg, *Przysłowia*, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1977, OLD 3) Or more brutally: “when you are met by skinny Death with its scythe, it says: go back where you, old geezer, came from.” (O. Kolberg, *Przysłowia...*, DEATH 5.) In reports from Zaborowo by Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska in the late 1930s, she speaks of a 90-year-old man, whose neighbours and relatives reminded him about the inevitability of death in everyday situations. They used to say: “Oh, grandpa, grandpa, how old you are! Soon you will face the divine court” or “So many years you have lived, grandpa! It’s your time, even though you are still vigorous” (Zawistowicz-Adamska 1948: 71).

Dying people were able to remain calm until the last moments of their lives. They did not rebel and saw death as a withdrawal from worldly troubles, passing to the land of the dead while hoping for God's grace. More often than not, they showed no fear of the inevitable. In their daily prayers, older people also prayed for a happy death for their loved relatives and friends, before mentioning their own death in the near future. Villagers were not afraid of death (except for sudden death). Jan Słomka wrote: "People were dying without fear and being extraordinarily calm. A peasant, for example, when he felt close to death, called for his wife, children, servants, relatives and neighbours to tell them that he would die soon. He said goodbye to them, apologized for his wrongdoings and asked his neighbours and close friends to help his wife transport his dead body to the cemetery. In other words, he was preparing to pass to the next world as calmly as if he were soon to return home" (Słomka 2008: 116). Dying "well" became a part of people's behavior: they thanked the gathered for coming, apologized, blessed, gave last orders as far as their property was considered and even planned their own funerals (Kowalska-Lewicka 1995: 45). Besides, dying people collected funds in advance for their last moments (especially for the wake and the funeral banquet). Familiarity with death was so commonplace that coffins were made for seriously ill people. When old people had not yet prepared their last will, younger people would remind them to do so (Szczypka 1984: 275). Dying old people gathered all their strength to prepare their last will, out of an eschatological conviction, like the one recorded in Galicia, that people "who died without settling matters with their children would not have any peace in the grave" (Kowalski K. 1928: 29). A dying person was saying goodbye to this world. As related from the village of Studzianki near Lublin at the beginning of the 20th century, a dying old person would effectively say to loved ones gathered around: "Stay healthy! Time for me to go to the holy land; time to rest. One has worked hard, so one demands some rest from God. Oh, demands, demands. Good God!" The old person cries, reaching out with pleading hands. A genuine desire to rest after a life of hard work is, indeed, present in this request" (Staniszewska 1902: 604).

After death, the deceased was dressed in a white shirt and laid on a wooden board in the center of the house, surrounded by rows of burning candles. Then, the deceased was visited by all the villagers who wanted to say goodbye. Relatives came from distant areas. It is noteworthy that, in some regions of Poland, beggars called „proszalni dziedowię” were the ones who said prayers and sang mournful songs until the body was taken outside the house. Prayers usually lasted for three days, and the nights were so-called "empty nights".

Old people stayed near the dying person, led the prayers during the empty nights, washed the dead body and cleaned the house. The moments connected with death and the rituals celebrated at the funeral and during the mourning period were religious and magical. They were led by a so-called „odpraszacz”, who was almost irreplaceable dur-

ing the funeral ceremony. Jan Marcinek, a peasant and a documenter of folk culture from Bierkowice in the Myślenice district, wrote just after World War II (although his words apply equally well to the turn of 20th century) about the importance of the *odpraszcacz*: “The *odpraszcacz* was an important figure in the village of the past. During funerals people could not manage without him, unless the deceased left a considerable fortune and his family could afford to bring a priest to the house. But even in this case an *odpraszcacz* was needed, as after the ceremonial prayers in the house, the priest would leave, especially when the village was far away from the church. So there had to be someone who would lead the mourning procession and sing during the transportation of the deceased to the church” (Marcinek 1947: 189). The *odpraszcacz* was usually an old man, often “one of the senior peasants” who was believed to be approaching his own death and hence close to the afterworld (and who could, due to his age, mediate between the world of the living and the world of death). The *odpraszcacz* was usually an old, exceptionally pious and respected person. Stanisław Pigoń wrote about the function of the *odpraszcacz* during a funeral ceremony: “There used to be a tradition that before the coffin was taken to the cemetery, the relatives, friends and neighbours of the deceased would gather in the house, where, after a short funeral banquet with beer, they took part in the preliminary burial rite. One of the oldest and most pious farmers would lead the rite. He would recite penitential psalms, chant funeral songs, deliver a speech on the virtues and merits of the deceased, and finally apologise on behalf of the deceased to all the people gathered for all the evil that the deceased had ever committed. This «evil» was divided into individual apologies:

– Forgive me if I was ... etc.

A certain kind of dialogue was created because the crowd would answer in a chorus:

– We forgive you!

It was called «*wypraszenie*» (imploring) on behalf of the dead person.

Well, for a long time my grandfather was such a «*wyprasznik*» (implorer) in his village. After performing this ceremony, he would lead the coffin to the cemetery” (Pigoń 1946: 77). Sometimes the oldest relative of the dead person also participated in the farewell. He would say goodbye to the dead person on behalf of the family (Kwaśniewicz 1981: 112). On the way to the cemetery the crowd sang funeral songs, some of which were a particular farewell to the dead.

Old people helped place the body in the grave, and sometimes an old man (one of the local beggars) would throw a clod of earth on the coffin. The funeral banquet constituted a return to the profane; to ordinary life. That breakthrough happened immediately after the end of the funeral banquet. (Brenz 1987: 227, Kowalska-Lewicka 1995: 47). Just like with wedding ceremonies, an old village beggar had to be invited to each funeral, as a representative of the other world. He also had to be invited to the funeral banquet.

The above-mentioned relationship between old age and death, and the funeral ceremonies as described above, mainly refer to the turn of 20th century, but the traditional model of folk thanatology was also visible in the interwar period (1918–1939). Death was still identified as a community event the whole village had to face. People supported one another following the death of someone from the rural community. Longina Gabryszak of Vilnius recalls: “During funerals, when someone among us had died, nothing else mattered ... if it happened during harvest time, nobody went to the fields. People visited day and night, so the corpse would not be alone in the house. [...] Well, the whole village came in turns. When a husband and children visited to the dead, his wife would stay at home, and when the wife came to visit, they would leave. Then they would be at home to take care of the house. People would sit and sing all these songs to the deceased, who was there for three days until the burial” (Gabryszak 2010). All the villagers focused their attention on mourning and on the funeral ceremony. Neighbours felt obliged to be at the funeral (Szewieliński 2008)¹ In the interwar period, funeral ceremonies changed somewhat. In Dobrinland, for instance, the duration of empty nights shortened, while in other regions people ceased to sing the songs traditionally associated with funerals. All rites concerning the dead were performed mechanically. People knew less and less about folk thanatology.

To recapitulate, old people in rural communities were prepared to die, and many speculated about it and contemplated its inevitable approach while praying. The other members of the community were convinced that the elderly, in being close to the afterworld (insofar as they were expected to die soon), would direct death to the other world, so that it no longer marauded among the living. Ideas concerning old age in the face of death were extremely conservative and constant. The folk idea of death has not changed.

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A letter from Bishop Józef Zawitkowski to the author – Bartłomiej Gapiński. Childhood memories. [2011]

¹ Vaclav Szewieliński recalls: “The priest had to be brought to the dead person’s house and accompanied the corpse to the cemetery. When it was far, like in our case 5 kilometers, the priest and all of us would ride carts or sledges. But when the funerals took place not only that village but also all the friends ... to tell you the truth not many people stayed at home because all of them were saying goodbye to their neighbour.[...]” b. 1920 (2008).

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