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The Phenomenon of a Burgher Family in the Early Modern Period

Fenomen rodziny mieszczańskiej we wczesnych wiekach nowożytnych

Abstract: The function of a burgher family passed through changes depending upon historical conditions and power relations. Every family member had its social role within the family framework. Family members followed stabilised pattern of behaviour influenced by personal motivation. In the era of the early modern period the original forms of social life of the burghers passed through weakening and a polarisation of the male and female role was strengthening. That was the beginning of a gradual division process of home and public sphere leading to a formation of a burgher model of traditional roles of husband and wife. These changes were being reflected in gradual transferring of productive earning activities from the home sphere to the public sphere. In the pre-industrial phase of early modern period the burgher women, particularly those that took part in productive and economic entrepreneurial activities with their husbands, were relatively more independent and free than the women in industrial period when the role of women was understood as a guardian of the family hearth. With the modernisation and democratisation of the society a burgher model of a good wife and a polarisation of both genders were gradually pushing ahead. The dependence of the wife on the husband was not economic only. The wife had to subordinate her life plans to the career of her husband in public sphere and concentrate to the home sphere.

Keywords: family, the position of woman and man.

Questions given to sources broadened the research to the issues of social models and mentalities, in other words, to the private life, morals and sensibility. In the early modern period the town environment was decisive for the modernisation of the social life. The burgher culture, the life style and its public manifestation was predominantly influenced by tradesmen, entrepreneurs and town intelligentsia, which all formed a non-noble burgher elite

and in the daily town life course were mostly on the sight. In spite of the differences in wealth and position they were taken as respectable burghers with considerable immovable properties with both direct and indirect linking onto political power in the frame of both town and state.

This class of tradesmen and town intelligentsia lived in a relative security of property owners and of people of a wider political influence, which could be applied to one tenth or one fifth of the really rich ones. They were creators and in the same time eager consumers of material and spiritual goods and values. In town archives they left numerous direct and indirect testimonies of their activities and mentality¹.

The burgher elite gradually created the burgher culture of the early modern period. They did not prefer a manufacturing capitalist undertaking but they invested in immovable assets with a guarantee of return. Besides a conservative tendency to limit risky entrepreneurship and to live as a respected annuitant, the wealthy burghers were stricken by consumer mentality.

In addition to luxurious habitation, food and clothing, they concentrated predominantly on cultural consumption, which due to them became a part of their daily life and served as a model of a social and moral behaviour of an educated and accomplished person².

Wealthy burghers had the decisive influence in public affairs and in civic attitude formation. They were aware of social and political limitations of the municipal status and their belonging to it. Even common inhabitants of towns appreciated their privileges, fulfilled various civic duties with pride and observed generally requested rational and moral behaviour, devotion, economy, responsibility and respect for work, all of that as a precondition for a successful life and post-mortal salvation³.

The development of non-agricultural production in central Europe and incorporation into broader market structures provided nutrition for a higher number of population of both towns and countryside who before that growth had to give up a foundation of their families. The families of industrial, home and agriculture workers had to reduce their households

¹M. Marečkowa, *Společenská struktura Bardějova v první polovině 17. Století*, Brno 1978, s. 227; M. Marečkowa, *Společenská struktura Presova v 17. Století*, Brno 1984, s. 160; M. Marečkowa, *Východoslovenská města a měšťanstvo na prahu novověku*, Brno 1995, s. 191.

²G. Duby, *Rytíř, žena a kněz. Manželství ve Francii v době feudalismu*, Praha 2003, s. 22.

³R. Pernoudova, *Žena v době katedrál*, Praha 2002, s. 151; A. Śpiesz, *Slobodné kráľovské mesta na Slovensku v rokoch 1680-1780*, Košice 1983, s. 83-86.

to nuclear families, but from different reasons than the burghers. These poor parts of population did not often own houses or flats and lived on hire. The situation both in towns and in villages was so hard that in one room had to live even several families. Unless poor workers and hired labourers in productive age were able to support their families by their own work, they did not get permission to contract marriage⁴.

The function of a burgher family passed through changes depending upon historical conditions and power relations. Every family member had its social role within the family framework. Family members followed stabilised pattern of behaviour influenced by personal motivation.

In the era of the early modern period, the original forms of social life of the burghers/bourgeoisie passed through weakening and a polarisation of the male and female role was strengthening. That was the beginning of a gradual division process of home and public sphere leading to a formation of a burgher model of traditional roles of husband and wife. These changes were being reflected in gradual transferring of productive earning activities from the home sphere to the public sphere.

The position of women, particularly of middle burgher classes and patriciate, turned looser also due to civilisation changes and due to growing intimacy of family life in early modern period when a burgher patrician family was gradually changed into a smaller nuclear family associating two or three generations of direct blood relatives (parents, children, eventually one of the grandparents). Direct relations with further relatives had a limited importance. The family became the shelter protecting from the outer world and a certain emotional centre because the emotional bindings to the partner and children were getting deeper. Together with the growing role of the family, the importance of moral virtue was growing, too. Virtue became the basis of the value system, which should differentiate the burgher from the profligate aristocracy and from promiscuous plebeian class⁵.

By preferring the necessity of education and the possibility of finding jobs for qualified plebeian intellectuals in municipal, noble or state bureaucratic services, the number of families of intelligentsia and clerks/civil servants who left their families to perform their jobs was gradually growing. That way the women from these classes found space

⁴J. Klabouch, *Manželství a rodina v minulosti*, Praha 1962, s. 80.

⁵L. Otis-Coursova, *Rozkos a láska. Dějiny partnerských vztahů ve středověku*, Praha 2002, s. 112-114, 138-139.

for self-sustaining exploitation of time, while before that change in numerous homes of handicraftsmen they took direct part in this work⁶.

The burghers' wives were supposed to create a cosy place for rest and reproduction of the work force. They were expected to represent their husbands in public in a decent way. One of important roles of burgher wives was cultivating private family and friendly contacts with so-called gent/monsieur friends, the range of which was chosen by godfathers, witnesses, trustees of children, or their future possible partners for matrimony, etc.

There is no doubt that the influence of burgher women on the education of children and grandchildren on their mentality and respecting moral principles was great, mainly by exemplar⁷.

In this context it is evident that in the pre-industrial phase of early modern period the burgher women, particularly those that took part in productive and economic entrepreneurial activities with their husbands, were relatively more independent and free than the women in industrial period when the role of women was understood as a guardian of the family hearth. With the modernisation and démocratisation of the society a burgher model of a good wife and a polarisation of both genders were gradually pushing ahead. The dependence of the wife on the husband was not economic only. The wife had to subordinate her life plans to the career of her husband in public sphere and concentrate to the home sphere.

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⁶ A. Kozakova, *Právní postavení ženy v českém právu zemském*, Praha 1926, s. 14.

⁷ M. Lenderova, *Eva nejen v raji. Žena v Čechách od středověku do 19. Století*, Praha 2002, s. 15.