

The provision of poor relief in the Polish countryside during the preindustrial period.

A case study of Cracow and its surroundings.

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My presentation only introduces selected problems about the provision of poor relief in the rural parishes near Cracow. These problems demand a further detailed research. In the beginning I have to point out, that in Polish historical science there are few studies devoted to beggary and poverty in the countryside in early modern period.

This paper investigates these issues through a study of 25 parishes near Cracow, using parish registers, reports of episcopal visitations and the census of 1790-92 for the province of Cracow and the Roll of New Burghers Under the Charter of the City of Cracow.

My research focuses on the area encompassed by the local corn market, which was dominated by villages lying close to Cracow. It extended more or less up to 30 km from the city (especially in direction to North). This was the distance that one could cover in a single day. The soils in this part of the region of Małopolska (Lesser-Poland) were far better than elsewhere and therefore they were devoted to cereals. The city of Cracow and the surrounding area were well connected via transit routes as well as through the local 'poor peasant roads'.

Land ownership in the immediate environs of Cracow was dominated by the Church and the gentry. The close proximity of a large city was attractive for these old populous villages falling within its reach. Food and a variety of construction materials and craft products could be easily sold in the city of Cracow. It was also easier to find work there, which was tempting for those peasants' sons, who had no chance of taking over their parents' households. The influx of people, especially peasants into the Cracow urban area was a permanent phenomenon. Many homeless people, beggars, orphans, seasonal workers, pilgrims, the elderly and many others also migrated in big numbers to the city and its environs.

It must be remembered, that Polish peasants were obliged to pay a feudal rent to the owners of the villages in which they lived. They had no personal freedom in the light of the

law, which resulted in the fact that their mobility could be limited. That had lasted since the end of the Middle Ages until the middle of the 19th century. The situation, however, seemed better, especially in the surroundings of bigger towns, where peasants could run their own businesses, mainly in transport services or trade. But since the middle of the 17th century, the political and economic situation of Poland started to gradually collapse. However, the demand for Polish corn in Europe was still relatively big. Therefore, the gentry were extending their estates at the expense of peasants' farms. Moreover, wars, epidemics and natural disasters took place almost all the time, which was leading to the increase of the number of the poor. Therefore, it was necessary to tell real beggars from false beggars ('pauperes falsi et pauperes veri'). The most important criterion in doing so was the ability to work.

Because a lot of people simulated poverty and disability, vagrants fit to work were hunted down and used as unpaid workers by the gentry. In 1593, Polish Parliament established the act saying that captured vagrants became property of a landlord after one year. Only at the end of the eighteenth century, the state authorities tried to solve the issue of vagrancy, for instance, by reinforced police supervision, interference in the labour market, organization of forced labour. Many vagrants were employed in manufactures.

In the researched materials there was much information about so-called 'own poor', that is, a person who was born in the parish or had lived in the parish for a longer period of time (for example, in the village of Szyce one of the beggars was a German veteran, who had lived there for 2 years, and the parish committed itself to maintain him). It was connected with the fact, that only locals, that is, people with a documented place of residence, had civil rights and could be admitted to hospitals. The Polish authority claimed that stranger beggars should not be entitled to receiving poor relief (quotation: 'They should return, where they came from'). So, parishes generally refused to maintain outsiders. If there was no workhouse in a parish, beggars were located in the organist's house or in peasants' households. It was found, that the majority of the poor lived in the main village of a parish, close to the church.

Paupers in the Polish countryside could count on various forms of social welfare. In principle, it was the Church that took care of poor relief. The legal footing for this was the regulations of Council of Trent (1545-1563), which were implemented in Poland in the acts of the Polish Church Synods (1601-1607) and much later in the activity of the state just a few years before losing its statehood.

After the mentioned Council, hospitals were built in big numbers in towns and also in the countryside. The Catholic Church dominated in Poland, but the country was multinational

and multi-religion and different denominations (Protestants, Russian Orthodox, Muslims and Jews) ran their hospitals. So did municipal authorities. The city of Cracow is regarded as the biggest and the oldest centre of social welfare in the preindustrial Poland (the first hospital was founded in 1220). It should be noted, that some rural shelters in the area of Cracow were also founded in the medieval period.

As far as the provision of poor relief in the surroundings of Cracow is concerned most sources, on which this paper is based, mention rural, parish shelters. It is known considerably less about the functioning of the provision of poor relief in the peasants' households, although it made a significant part of the social welfare in the countryside. Next, the poor were also supported by church confraternities and the gentry, but in the surroundings of Cracow its extent was relatively small. There was only one parish, in which there was a special confraternity of the poor.

In the Polish countryside, the parishes were institutions providing only primary welfare, that is they guaranteed their elderly parishioners a place where to live out their days. So-called hospitals were in fact small, local shelters. The shelters were actually asylums for people who needed assistance: the poor, the elderly, the sick, the disabled, sometimes pilgrims, single mothers with children, pregnant women or abandoned children. Until the end of the 18th century the main goal of workhouses was to provide accommodation rather than medical treatment. Unlike hospitals functioning in towns, treating lepers, the mentally ill, and so on, rural shelters were of no specialized character and they gave asylum to all people in need.

It was usually the parish priest who managed the provision of poor relief in his parish. Among other things, he was in charge of simple accounting, that is registering the cash and natural goods, such as food or cows. The latter were donated to the shelter by peasants in their wills. The parish priest, however, was subservient to the founder of the workhouse or the bishop. It is worth saying, that a typical parish near Cracow had an area of 50 sq km, included about 10 villages, and had a population of an average of 2000 residents.

Because rural shelters had very limited space, they could admit only a few individuals. They were always either so-called the parish's 'own poor' or tragedy-stricken people. There were only 14 workhouses in 25 parishes in the area in consideration. Its population, however, was 40.000 thousand inhabitants at the end of the 18th century. It is known, that only 71 needy people lived in the workhouses and 152 ones lived in the peasants' households. The

majority of the shelter residents were women, mainly widows. Their average age was 61 years. The other workhouse dwellers were 10 married couples of younger people with their children, abandoned children and disabled people at different ages. This is why the average age of the residents of shelters was 46 years. It is supposed, the mentioned families were located in the workhouse when a tragedy-stricken, like in today's social housing.

Rural shelters were founded by bishops, land owners and, occasionally, by local priests. In one case, a workhouse was built by Jan Sroczyński, a peasant from the royal village of Jerzmanowice. He succeeded as a tradesman in Cracow, where he eventually became a member of the city council. He supported his place of birth and the poor there until the end of his life.

Typical workhouses were generally small, wooden buildings with a limited number of windows and a dirt floor, which were usually neglected, because there was no permanent financing of them. They were constructed near the church, the presbytery, the organist's house, on the cemetery, on the landed estate, close to the village, or the main road. The layout of those buildings was similar. There was one big room with a stove, where the residents cooked, ate and prayed together. Next, there were a few small bedrooms; usually as many as there were paupers (5-7 people), which was determined by the foundation act. Sometimes, the elderly themselves added annexes to the building of the shelter. For instance, Katarzyna Markowa, a widow of 70, founded such an extension to the workhouse in the parish of Ruszcza in 1783.

The situation of the provision of poor relief was dependent on local conditions. It is assumed that charity and almsgiving were the only steady forms of support. Only five workhouses on the mentioned area were maintained from a special fund, which came from village owners' bequests of rental income. Thanks to this, the poor were periodically provided with clothes, victuals: groats, flour, pea and one loaf of bread a week. If the shelter had a garden, the poor cultivated it to have their own vegetables and fruit.

The poor begged within limits of their parish, because they were not allowed to go any farther. They collected donations to the so-called 'charity boxes' and later a priest divided them equally. Occasionally, the poor could count on local landowners' charity. It is known, that the parishioners fed and gave asylum only to those poor, for whom there was no room in the hospital.

The poor living in shelters in turn helped in the church. They were regarded as part of the church-service. Their basic duties were specified in the act of the foundation of the shelter. The poor were obliged to taking part in everyday holy mass and praying for their endowers, givers and parish priests. Apart from this, they had to clean the church, guard it and other things. Women participated in funerals as weepers and were probably engaged in washing the bodies of the dead and men worked as gravediggers. The poor of the shelter were sometimes obliged to work in the estate. Paradoxically, those living in small, local hospitals were presumed incapable of working. Delivering letters to other parishes was another common duty. It is known, that poor craftsmen lived in hospitals too. Apart from begging, they tried to earn some extras, using their qualifications as shoemakers or tailors.

This indicates that some people could afford to pay for a place in the workhouse where to live out their days. Some of the shelters' residents lived there for many years. Generally speaking, the poor from the workhouses had a better reputation among parishioners compared to paupers living in the peasants' households. They were described in the analyzed sources as the 'honorable elderly from the hospital' (latin: 'honestis seniculis de hospitali'). They often became godparents, because they usually lived close to the church. The poor became godparents mainly in case of the risk of an infant's life, which is so-called 'baptism by water' ('in periculo mortis'). For example in the Raciborowice parish the poor from the shelter were godparents in 10 per cent of baptisms of infants of the local gentry and of a great number of peasant infants. Some of them were godparents multiple times: e.g. Paweł Noga - 65 times in 20 years (1605-1625). Much more seldom were the poor men best men at weddings, in the mentioned parish only five times over two centuries (17th-18th centuries).

Now it is worth asking who decided about taking new residents into workhouses? By default it was a parish priest. The criteria of admission are well known: e.g. deafness, weakness, often and long illness. There was not enough room in shelters for all needing support. Therefore, priests allocated the rest of them also in the peasants' households, sometimes in the presbytery, the organist's house. Sometimes, however, parish priests treated the hospital as a place to live for his service (organist, teacher and so on). It can be said, that there were instances of abuses in the shelters. For example, the Jesuits, who ran the rich parish of Więclawice, converted the local hospital into an inn and relocated the poor to a hospital in the city of Cracow.

The poverty caused migrations. Many poor left their place of birth or habitation because of rejection, hunger or an old age. It seems that migrating to a town was a chance of a better life. The number of stranger paupers in parishes near Cracow escalated during natural disasters, epidemics, war and famine. Parish registers contain information about wandering children who died from exhaustion, or people seeking for food, who arrived in the environs of Cracow, sometimes from a long distance. Unknown, weak and sick beggars were found by peasants on busy roads to Cracow and sometimes taken to an inn, a brewery or a peasant's own house. So-called 'wanderers' were only occasionally located in rural shelters.

As it was said, it was illegal to place stranger beggars in the parish workhouse, but it was the parish priest who took the final decision. In case of death such people were buried in local cemeteries even if not identified. It was the most important for the priest that they confessed before death. It is not known who exactly paid for their burial. In many cases the priest made a note in the church register of burial saying: 'free of charge'.

It is known that many paupers, elderly and homeless villagers lived in peasant households as relatives or domestic servants. If they were able to work, they did lighter work on the farm. According to demographic studies (400 peasant families using Peter Laslett's method), the nuclear family type was dominant. The elderly made up 5-6 per cent of the population of the Polish countryside in the preindustrial period. Reaching an old age in the social sense (that is between 55 and 64 years of age) took place upon a handover of a household to the younger generation. However, about half of farmers after 65 years of age held the position of the head of the household, because they were afraid of pauperization. Those, who handed over their household to their children, often decided to move to other households (latin: 'in domo aliena'), because only 10 per cent of the former heads of households were granted the right to use one room in their own house.

Table 1: Structure of households in Cracow (St. Mary parish) and in Raciborowice parish in 1791.

Households types by Peter Laslett's methodology							
Number of households	%	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
St. Mary parish in Cracow (1159)	100	18,5	5,9	67	7,2	1,1	0,3
Rural parish in Raciborowice (394)	100	2	1,1	73,9	16,3	6,9	2

In summary, the main institution securing the provision of poor relief in the Polish countryside was the Catholic Church. The only established long-term form of poor relief were shelters. However, they provided accommodation only to a few people. The majority of the local poor lived in peasant households. However, they could be removed from there in the time of famine and other disasters. The supply of poor in the Polish countryside was based on almsgiving and living at the peasants' households. But it could probably function under normal conditions. Next, there is a lack of information on how many poor from the discussed areas left their place of residence for the city of Cracow, especially during disasters. Only a small portion of them were registered in Cracow hospitals. It can be said that the provision for the poor changed in time. In the Middle Ages charity institutions in cities were run by the Church. Next, many rural shelters were built after the Council of Trent. Public authorities took care of the poor only during great state reforms in the late eighteenth century.

The provision of poor relief in the preindustrial Poland countryside was rather temporary, although some historians claim that it had a long-term character. There were not enough legal and institutional frameworks to support it. Detailed deliberations on the topic and the comparison of the poor support in the countryside and in the city are limited by the lack of evidence.