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Overlooked Rural Architectural Heritage of the Second Polish Republic

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Abstract. In the Interbellum, in farms emerging on government lands for subdivision, there were erected within 1-2 construction seasons, according to typical projects, new farmhouses. It was one of the elements of the agricultural policy of the then Minister of Agriculture, Juliusz Poniatowski, hence the farm buildings, which were raised in the 30s of the twentieth century, primarily in Pomerania and Greater Poland, were commonly called "Poniatówki". The construction and farmhouse lending system were scheduled for the parcelants, flood victims from southern Poland, highlanders from the overpopulated areas and other smallholders and landless farmers. Wooden objects erected with prefabricated elements can be considered as the first prefabricated buildings on Polish lands. "Poniatówki" are an overlooked and wasted certificate of a successfully prognosticating settlement action for impecunious people, based on a system of construction, lending and enfranchisement never used before. The endorsed by Juliusz Poniatowski process of transformation of Polish agriculture from peasant and landlord model to the farm model, inter alia, by subdivisioning landlord's estates, introducing merging of lands and enlarging the peasant farms, was a task for at least one generation period. “Poniatówki” are still present in the landscape of the Polish countryside, but if real emergency actions are not taken, in a few years, they may remain only in photographs, names, places and... marketing activities of design and construction companies offering new "Poniatówka" cottages.

1. Introduction

Assuming post of the Minister of Agriculture in 1934, for the sixth time in the Interbellum, Juliusz Poniatowski took actions aimed at speeding up the implementation of the land reform. He was a supporter of state intervention in agriculture. On his behalf, a research on the transformation of the agrarian structure in Poland was conducted by the Agricultural Research Institute in Puławy since 1935. The basis for the research were the principles of the law of the land reform of 1925, assuming an annual subdivision of not less than 200,000 ha, nevertheless, after 1928, this amount was never reached, and in spite of the increase in the subdivision in 1935-1939, it did not exceed 100,000 ha per year [1]. For the subdivision, there were intended state properties and lands in private estates above 180 ha, in the Borderlands over 300 ha, in industrial estates above 700 ha, and in suburban districts over 60 hectares. Poniatowski supported the creation of "rational peasant farms", of which acreage was to depend primarily on the quality of the soil, region and natural local conditions. Based on research conducted in Switzerland and Germany, he showed that the optimal size of a rational peasant family farm is 3-10 ha, and replacing farms over 100 hectares with small family farms will allow the 3-5-fold increase in productive employment in agriculture. It should be noted that Juliusz Poniatowski was not a strong opponent of large farms and believed that there should be a number of specialized large industrial farms.

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In his opinion, during the initial stage of industrialization, the employment in peasant farms could be increased, because it would enhance their productivity through the development of livestock farming and increase in the production of industrial plants. After enlarging, the farms could reasonably employ 60% of the agricultural population. The remaining 40%, i.e. about 7 million rural inhabitants were a redundant population for agriculture, and they should find employment somewhere else. The redundant population in agriculture were defined as those who did not had an impact on agricultural production and could be purged without any risk of a collapse of agricultural production. According to the Juliusz Poniatowski's own estimates, the number of such people amounted to 1/3 of the total agricultural population [2]. Minister Poniatowski detected the latent unemployment mainly in dwarf farms; he believed that they would gradually disappear, and the redundant population will go to the industry [3].

In the conditions of the mid 30s of the twentieth century, these were highly prospective plans. With the enormous sub divisional needs, neither the state, nor the State Agricultural Bank had adequate funds for the purchase of the land. According to conservative estimates made on the basis of the census of 1931, at least 7% of the total rural population in Poland needed new farms, whose number could be estimated at approx. 220,000-270,000. A further 30,000 farms was expected to occur annually due to the then population growth. Assuming the size of each farm is only 5 ha, it became necessary to collect approx. 1250-1500 ha of land. At the same time, while approx. 30-40% of the existing farms, or approx. 1 million, were dwarf farms, enlarging them to the size of 4-5 ha required 2,500 ha of land [4]. Although in 1936 the economic situation in agriculture began to improve and the increase in prices of grains on the world markets enhanced the income of Polish farmers, there were no perspectives for a rapid creation of millions of jobs outside agriculture, regardless of the Fifteen-Year Plan for the years 1939-1954 proposed by the Treasury Minister Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski and instituting Central Industrial District (COP) in the years 1936-1939, which were aimed at this purpose. There was also calculated that in order to absorb redundant rural residents, Polish cities should grow at 6% per year, when in fact, even in times of business prosperity, the growth rate was only 2%. Other indicators suggested that the Polish industry should grow at least at the same pace as the US industry in the late nineteenth century to solve the problem of overpopulation, which was totally unrealistic in the then Polish conditions [5].

2. „Poniatówki” - newly created peasant farms

According to Minister Poniatowski, rational farms should be created with public funds in newly established agricultural colonies. Due to the fact that until 1934, the subdivided lands came mostly from the provinces of Volyn, Wilno, Lublin and Polesie, and, to a lesser extent, from the provinces of Krakow and Silesia, after taking the office by Juliusz Poniatowski, the attention of the Ministry in this regard directed towards sites which were subdivided to a small extent. Pointing to its desired direction, the minister said that: “The state, implementing its agricultural policy, aims to ensure that areas which have the lowest agricultural population density become gradually populated, bringing relief to the overcrowded lands. In this respect, the province of Poznan and Pomerania are a unique district, for their overpopulation is the lowest and the land resources of great estates are the largest. Therefore, the intensity of the agrarian policy in these two provinces has both economic and social premises" [6]. There can be no doubt that one of the conditions to intensify the subdivision and settlement in Wielkopolska and Pomerania after 1935, which resulted in the increase of the share of Poles in the total rural population of the village were political objectives, besides the economy. The Poles had 65% of lands in the province of Poznan, and 39.5% in Pomerania [7]. And the newly created after 1935 in these two provinces, as a result of the land reform, peasant farms came to be called, "Poniatówki" from the name of the Minister of Agriculture and Land Reform.

From the very beginning the land reform was accompanied by erecting new farms for settlers in the subdivided areas (Figure 1). The implementation of restructuring the Polish countryside was not limited solely to the issue of subdivision of the land, to which it was reduced especially by the opponents of the land reform, but it was a multi-faceted process whose components were to create a new agricultural workshop, including its buildings and equipment. Until the taking of the office of the Minister of Agriculture by Poniatowski in 1934, there were erected brick homesteads with residential buildings

interconnected with farm buildings. This type of development was relatively expensive, and the pace of erecting new farms did not meet the contemporary needs. According to Poniatowski, equipping settlers with brick buildings disproportionately expensive in relation to the land value was wrong. The development should be limited to a minimum, assuming the later expansion, along with the growth in production and farming income. The construction should be cheaper and faster, only in a way that is necessary to run a newly established farm. Based on this point of view, it was found that the solution that is not the best possible, but under those circumstances, de facto the only possible, is the wooden construction [8]. The Poniatowski's opinion was that: "(...) undoubtedly a good residential house is an affluently constructed brick building, but there is no doubt that the brick building, made with an extreme economy, is a residential building that is worse from the point of view of hygiene than the wooden building (...) And since we cannot afford these affluent brick buildings, we ought to keep the wood. In wooden buildings we cause that the new acquirer is introduced before the equipment and make the equipment, and so, at this time, he should have the barn erected, where he lives with his family during the harvest time, and shortly, in the next weeks or few months he has also farm and residential buildings. So, in the same autumn, during which he took the farm, he has buildings that are prepared for living in the winter" [9]. The adoption of the rule to erect a farm building, a barn, in the first place is noteworthy. It was a kind of workshop, which gave the opportunity to immediately proceed to the work and, if necessary, sometimes the remaining buildings were not erected during one construction season, even for wintering the family of the settler. The use of wood significantly increased the number of settlements created annually. Only in 1935, there were created more of them than in the previous eight years [8].



Figure 1. Poniatówka from Lipiec (Pomeranian Voivodeship) built about 1937, condition in 2009 (photo: S. Czachorowski)

3. Form of new homesteads

Until the turn of 1935/1936, the new homesteads in the settlements resulting from the subdivision were built largely by a system of lending, and the settler constructed buildings by himself under the supervision of the state. In subsequent years, there were built farms according to the "own development system" and the works were carried out by companies contracted by the relevant state institutions, mainly by the lending Agricultural Bank, giving the settler finished buildings. Due to the wholesale nature of the development and the need for its swift execution, since 1935 in the provinces of Poznan and Pomerania, there was introduced a standardization of designs and prefabrication of the building elements. On the building site, there were supplied ready components produced at the place of logging. Mostly, the spruce wood was used. The buildings were often erected within 1-2 months according to

typical projects performed by professional architects. The form and details of the planned farms were designed to be identified with Polish folk architecture. The type, amount and function of buildings depended on the size of the farm. The proletarian-agricultural farms of 2-5 ha received two buildings: residential and stock. In the farms of 8-12 ha, there were erected three buildings: residential, livestock and barn, and in the farms above 12 ha, there were also three buildings but with a larger usable space. Due to the different interpretation of the rules of subdivision by governors or prefects, as well as an original approach of Juliusz Poniatowski to the rules for implementation of the land reform, there are deviations from these sizes of farms.



Figure 2. Poniatówka from Krajna (historical land between Wielkopolska and Kashubia) built in 1935, condition in 2013, [10]

The residential building was erected on the brick foundation of the vertical-post log construction and decoratively wood paneled from the outside. Occasionally, in erecting the walls, there were used a mixed design: vertical-post log and timber constructions. The building was covered by a symmetric gable roof – sometimes with ends of rafters, gable roof with przyzba roofs, hipped roof without przyzba roofs or hipped roof with przyzba roofs. The roofing was made of asbestos, rarely of shingle. One type of cottages had a corner arcade of the entrance (Figure 2, Figure 3). In other types, the entrance led from the porch located on the front wall. Paneling's of the peaks, wind brace, structural components of the arcades and porches and railings were decoratively profiled. The facilities were one-storey with usable attic. In one of the typical residential building versions, the residential building housed a hallway available from the porch located on the front wall, a kitchen with pantry and one room. In another version, the corner porch led to a hallway with stairs to the attic. Behind the hallway, there was a kitchen with an islanded pantry and two rooms.

The wooden livestock buildings with a stock loft placed on a brick foundation in the vast majority were also built used the vertical-post log construction and panelling. They had gable roofs, sometimes with przyzba roofs and ends of rafters, covered with asbestos or shingle. In later years, they were often plastered from the outside and inside. On a few parcels, even after 1935, there were erected brick livestock's. In the largest, there were two doors leading to rooms for different species of livestock. The stock buildings were erected entirely of wood or with a brick part of the livestock. There was also a type of a stock building with a higher stock loft.



Figure 3. Poniatówka from Rusiec (Wielkopolska Voivodeship) built about 1935, condition in 1959 photo: J. Burszta, [11]

The free-standing wide-front barns had vertically panelled wood walls of the post and beam construction and covered with asbestos or shingle symmetrical gable roofs. The construction included also a pitch and two storing spaces. In one type of farms, the roof over the storing spaces was elongated in the direction of the farmyard forming two arcades supported by pillars on both sides of the gate. They served as the coach house and often were built around in the following years.

4. Principles of investment financing

The rules of lending of subdivision, whose main financial burden was borne by the State, were very beneficial for the settlers. The method of lending of the state subdividing was presented by Minister Poniatowski at a press conference in 1936: "(...) it is conducted with the principle that the acquirer pays 10%, and the privileged, farmhands, pay 5%. Further repayments are spread over several dozen years at an interest rate of 3% and are based on a profitability of the normal farm" [9]. The descendants of the first owners of Poniatowki in Kociewie remember the amount of payments for the first inhabited farms: for 5 hectares, the payment amounted to approx. PLN 1,000, and for the farm of the area of 10 ha – PLN 2,200. In addition, the acquirer had to pay cash for the well and orchard. For an 8-12-hectare farm in Kocborow the total value of the house was PLN 3,500, of the barn – PLN 1500, and pigsty – PLN 2500. For three years, the settler had a suspended payment of the credit instalments, and after this period, the payments were spread over 50 years. After 1945, the payments were spread over 20 years [12]. Among the few surviving documents relating to the rules of lending of Poniatowki, in the collections of the National Archives in Torun, there is a notification of 1936 on calculation of the amount of payment for the parcel with Poniatowki (land, buildings, orchard, harvest, development) in the village of Bartoszewice in the former province of Pomerania of PLN 2,375. The notification includes an annotation which shows that the calculated amount of PLN 1,000 for the development was a kind of a deposit and had to be repaid to the settlers from the county of Bochnia, after taking possession of the parcel. Despite such good conditions for the acquisition of a farm with Poniatowki, they were not cheap for the settlers, especially since they were intended for the poorest rural groups: agricultural workers and farmhands with priority to get a loan and choose the parcel for employees of the subdivided estates who have lost their jobs and small peasants from overpopulated Polish southern areas with priority to obtain credit and assignment of the parcel for victims of the flood in 1934. A preferential loan for the purchase of the farm and the subdivided land was inaccessible for peasants and the farm labourers who, in 1918, participated in plundering estates.

The newly erected wooden farms often met with hostility from existing residents of the subdivided areas. Mainly due to some differences in culture and wealth and presented different agricultural culture. Juliusz Poniatowski remarked that: "(...) a long-time farmer from the Poznan or Pomeranian province looks with a certain disdain at wooden buildings that are now introduced, because it does not correspond to the tradition of Gburs that is established there" [9]. This type of building was positively assessed by supporters of the reforms of the agricultural system introduced by the Minister. Among them was Maria Dąbrowska, who, after becoming familiarised with newly established settlements recorded in her diaries: "In the afternoon I visit (...) settlement over the Święto. Beautiful houses of the colonists. These are the famous "Poniatówki" that caused the landowners accused Poniatowski (believed to be a communist and enemy of Poland), that he creates very small farms of "rural poverty", unable to live off" [13].



Figure 4. Poniatówka from Rościszewo (Pomerania) built in 1937, condition in 2007, [14]

5. Conclusions

The endorsed by Juliusz Poniatowski process of transformation of Polish agriculture from peasant and landlord model to the farm model, inter alia, by sub-divisioning landlord's estates, introducing merging of lands and enlarging the peasant farms, was a task for at least one generation period. It can only be assumed that the agricultural policy implemented by the Polish government since the mid-30s of the twentieth century could have brought economically desired changes in the structure and nature of agricultural production. The agriculture minister himself had no illusions in this regard. In a speech at a Sejm hearing on 8 February 1935, where, among the issues raised, there was also addressed the need to speed up the process of subdivision and settlement, he stated: "Nor do I think that the next few years will give the State an opportunity to perform a great settlement action" [15]. But the volume of the settlement action conducted after 1935, crowned with erection of hundreds of Poniatowki, cannot be underestimated.

Some farm buildings of Poniatówki were razed to the ground as early as in 1939, but a significant number of them remained. Very sketchy estimates allow to conclude that there are still hundreds of them. Existing Poniatówki were covered by the process of the whole farmhousing. The changes in technology of agricultural production, defining of the countryside and its increasing adoption of non-agricultural functions caused the disappearance of the farm as a spatial solution that was specific for buildings of the countryside. As a result of reconstruction or modernization, a few Poniatówki survived

in their original condition. The least changed, but in the worst condition are those that was abandoned at the earliest. In the vast majority of the still existing Poniatówki, there only survived residential buildings used year-round or seasonally.

The task of preservation and protection of cultural heritage cannot be limited only to listing, filling the form of the Municipal Records of Monuments. It may be implemented through the introduction of a museum function. Two farms were covered by such action. A farm transferred to the Museum of Folk Culture in Osiek by the Notec River from Czajcze and a placed in the Wielkopolski Ethnographic Park in Dziekanowice incomplete Poniatówka from Fałkowo. Another two buildings: residential buildings of Poniatówki in Sławkowo and Czarlin, transferred to the Vistula River Museum in Tczew, are protected by intending them for public purposes and introducing the cultural and educational functions. And with these examples, the list ends.

Poniatówki are still present in the landscape of the Polish countryside, but if real emergency actions are not taken, in a few years, they may remain only in photographs, names, places and... marketing activities of design and construction companies offering new "Poniatówka" cottages. The problem is not the lack of resources, because there were some for erecting the copy of the Josephine colonists' sector in the Sądecki Ethnographic Park, presenting a fragment of a brick linear settlement, specific for the Galician Germans. The problem may be the ignorance and lack of desire, and it may be presumed that the still ongoing reluctance to subdivision conducted during the Interbellum and the stigma of a bad birth and continuous embarrassing incompatibility with the prevailing doctrines that accompanied Poniatówki since their creation. And maybe these are the reasons why the testimonies of a unique settlement action disappear and perish, often abandoned or unsettled (Figure 3, Figure 4).

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