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Using ecclesiastical narrative sources for the research on the history of peasant emigration at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Peasant mass emigration to North America from the territories then subordinate to Poland began roughly from the second half of the 19th century. The pioneers of the overseas emigration were inhabitants living within the Prussian Partition areas who decided to leave their lives and try their hands in another part of the world. With the passage of the following years, the emigration wave was increasing. Inhabitants of Galicia¹ and later, at the end of the 19th century, peasants from the Vistula Land² joined the Polish speaking residents of Prussia who were going abroad.

Majority of the economic migration were the residents of the countryside. It is them who out of various reasons, mostly economic, tried to help themselves and their relatives by leaving their family homes. However, after reaching their destination, they did not always take up farming. Each emigration, either continental or overseas, has its own specifics, so insofar as in Brazil the peasants engaged in wilderness clearing and farming, they had to be more flexible when it came to a given job in the USA³. After arriving to the big cities of North America, such as Chicago or New York, some people of peasant origin had to join the ranks of the growing population of the working class⁴.

The characteristic trait of Polish peasantry, not only the emigrational one, but also the one staying in the country, was above all widespread illiteracy. It was not clearly proportionate for all occupied areas, and as long as in Prussia the knowledge of reading and writing seemed to be good; In Galicia and Vistula Land people were facing advanced illiteracy. A number of figures given by Eugeniusz Rómer portray only a part of the truth because the data provided by him concern the whole population, with city and town residents

¹ D. Prasałowicz, K. A. Makowski, A.A. Zięba, *Mechanizmy zamorskich migracji łańcuchowych w XIX wieku: Polacy, Żydzi, Rusini*, Cracow 2004, p. 123-124.

² J. Mazurek, *Kraj a emigracja*, Warsaw 2006, p. 27-30.

³ Mostly young men who later gathered their families or started them after arrival were going to the USA. T. Wiliam, F. Znaniński, *Chłop polski w Europie i Ameryce*, v. I, Warsaw 1976, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 14.

raising the percentage of literate people for the benefit of people from the countryside. Thus, if there is given information, such as: in 1897 in Guberna Lubelska the number of illiterate people amounted to 690 people of 1000 inhabitants, it is advisable to assume that the percentage was even greater in the countryside⁵. The mentioned statistics show that the worst situation dominated eastern borderlands of the former Poland. The interesting fact is that even that they were regarded as the most ignorant Galician governorates they had a greater percentage of the literate populace than the Russian occupation areas⁶. As Antoni Lange, who studied the problem of illiteracy in Galicia and Vistula Land, estimated at the beginning of the 20th century, there were 3 million illiterate residents out of 7 million, in areas occupied by Russians there were 8 million illiterate people out of 10 million (!)⁷.

Narrative sources by peasants

Having such knowledge, it is difficult to expect a significant number of written sources created by the emigrating peasants themselves. It is remarkably painful for a historian, because narrative sources, diaries or letters⁸ constitute a unique evidence of the past times. Even though the narrative sources were treated dismissively by them (Handelsmann⁹), when submitted for more profound critic, they constitute source material that is equivalent¹⁰.

Initially, not much narrative material created by the emigrants constituted the research object for sociologists. It is not the time and place to study the issue, so I am going to mention only the monumental work of Florian Zaniecki and William I. Thomas which is largely based on the letters and diaries made by peasant emigrants¹¹. The work edited by Witold Kula *Listy Emigrantów z Brazylii i Stanów Zjednoczonych 1890-1891*¹², which contained almost 400 letters by peasant, authors caused a considerable revolution in the research on peasant emigration. It is the biggest collection of peasant letters known to

⁵ E. Römer, *Rocznik Polski. Tablice statystyczne*, Cracow 1917, p. 56.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ A. Lange, *Analfabetyzm i walka z ciemnotą w Królestwie Polskim*, Warsaw 1906, p. 12.

⁸ Stanisław Kościałkowski, who proposed that the letters should be classified as entirely separate kind of epistolary sources. S. Kościałkowski, *Historyka – wstęp do studiów historycznych*, London 1954, p. 54.

⁹ M. Handelsman, *Historyka*, Warsaw 2010, p. 49-50. Presently, it is thought that letters are a kind of narrative sources, for which I tend to agree, M. Pawlak, J. Serczyk, *Podstawy badań historycznych*, Bydgoszcz 2008, p. 37-38.

¹⁰ Z. Wojtkowiak, *Źródła narracyjne, pamiętnik, tekst literacki*, Poznań 2001, p. 48-55.

¹¹ see *Chłop polski w Europie i Ameryce*, v. I – V, Warsaw 1976.

¹² S. Kieniewicz, *Listy, które nie doszły do celu*, „Nowe Książki”, No 24, (1974), p. 31.

historians. The paradox of the history consists in the fact that the letters were made by the emigrant authors who came from the Vistula Land where, as it was mentioned before, the percentage of the illiterate was the biggest. The sources were kept only because of the tsarist censorship that did not allow for the letters to be received to their addressees and instead confiscated them¹³. Beside letters, also souvenirs are important. The recollections of the emigrants were the topic of interest as early as in '30s when Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego organized a competition for the souvenirs of emigrants. A part of the submitted works was destroyed during the war and the other was published only after 1945¹⁴.

In principle, narrative sources of peasant origins constitute rarity for historians. Several factors have the influence on this. As I already mentioned, the problem is the sole fact that those people did not possess the tools to create such kind of a narrative source. Lack of the knowledge to read and write made writing letters impossible (although, some of them were sometimes dictated to more educated friends), not to mention diaries. The second crucial issue of a certain value for us is the condition of these types of material. Aristocracy, intelligentsia, and even the middle class cared for the legacy from their ancestors, so letters as well as private notes of their fathers and grandfathers were preserved in a disproportionately larger number than in the case of peasantry. Not only the state of awareness of peasants has the influence on this, but also their living conditions which did not prove to be well for the easily deteriorating pieces of paper. Moreover, as long as in the case of the abovementioned social groups, the narrative sources had greater or smaller meaning, not only sentimental, but also political or scientific, in the case of peasants the discussed documents were solely of sentimental character from the perspective of present people. Thus, there was no need to preserve them for future generations.

Ecclesiastical sources

A historian dealing with the problem of peasant emigration has proportionally a scarce number of sources to use, taking into consideration how common the described phenomena was. Thus, I dispose of statistical material, which in fact reflects a general insight either into the economic situation of the emigrants or their development in a new reality. However, describing the emigration solely by looking from the angle of statistics seems to be a highly

¹³ W. Kula, N. Assorodobraj-Kula, M. Kula, *Listów emigrantów z Brazylii i Stanów Zjednoczonych 1890-1891*, Warsaw 1973, p. 5-7.

¹⁴ T. Szturm de Sztrem, *Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego 1920-1944*, Warsaw 1959, p. 135.

unprofessional procedure because by doing it, the author deprives the reader the ability to look into the crux of the problem, leaving him or her too much space for contemplation. What then can a given person do in order to bring closer the every-day life of an emigrant if the emigrant himself did not leave any traces beside a number in the register?

In such a situation, a historian who notices the inability to use the source directly created by the interested party, he or she has to reach for the sources created indirectly, by the people not being the emigrants themselves, but remaining in the close circle of emigrants. Therefore, we have either a scarce number of journalistic texts, appearing sporadically in press, or reports written by different officials, or at last by the numerous groups of clergymen.

The first Jesuits coming to the USA from the territories of the former Poland, arrived as early as at the beginning of the 19th century, when the American Catholic Church was gaining followers. Their task was to help bishop Jan Carroll in his pastoral activity¹⁵. However, they were not missionaries working among the Polish diaspora, but only the clergymen engaged in the activity of American Church.

The first Polish missionaries in the USA appeared together with the emigrational wave from the territories of the former Poland, which started to fill the whole American continent from more or less 1850. They accompanied the Christians since leaving the harbors in Bremen, Hamburg or Trieste until their destination, which was one of the American harbors. The presence of a priest was greatly needed especially at the time of the storm¹⁶.

Each priest who was obliged by his community, or a bishop, to undertake a mission amongst the Polish diaspora maintained a connection via letters with his superior. He had not only a responsibility, but also oftentimes a real need to contact his homeland and confreres. Even though, he was directly subordinate to a local superordinate clergyman, who had to agree for his presence¹⁷, he often exchanged letters with his 'monastic' superior out of friendship. While analyzing the missionary letters regarding missions not only in the USA, but also in other countries (such as Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Brazil), I came to a conclusion that the sources are subject to a certain scheme.

¹⁵ L. Grzebień, *Burzliwe lata Polonii Amerykańskiej*, Cracow 1983, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Missye polskie w Ameryce*, „Missye Katolickie”, annual 2, no 9, (1883), p. 237.

¹⁷ *Studia Zmartwychwstańcze*, v. 13, father Piotr Semenka's letters, [editing: J.Drożdż], Rome 2008, p. 159.

The first letter or letters sent by a missionary describe the journey and first impressions¹⁸, which are usually fairly extreme, from the paeans of praise¹⁹ to absolute criticism²⁰. If a missionary appears at a place inhabited by Polish diaspora, where there had not been any Polish priests yet, they are usually heartily welcomed²¹. In addition, if they come with their fellow clergymen or in case of female missionaries - nuns, then they have to inform of their health and impressions.

Consecutive letters, depending on the relationship of a missionary and their superior, constitute development of issues brought up in the first letters. So, there is more about the spiritual state of the Christians and their religious fervor²². We can also find much information about their financial and economic situation. It is related to the situation of the country in which the mission is run and to the village where the missionary works²³. It has a direct impact on the commencement or continuation of construction of the church or parish buildings²⁴. The topic of funding is raised when it concerns missions lasting a couple of days as well as those lasting many years.

The clergyman informs about the arising problems, which occur on the mission only after some time has passed (provided they did not appear as soon as at the beginning of the mission – the part when I wrote about the extreme approach to the described reality). The problems can be diversified in nature. However, the following ones are the most frequent: lack of financial means²⁵, conflicts with parishioners²⁶, or when there are more than one

¹⁸ South province archives of the Society of Jesus in Cracow [Archiwum Prowincji Południowej Towarzystwa Jezusowego, later referred to as ATJKr], manusc. Missionary letters from the years 1880-1914, father Antoni Boca's letters, March 30th 1907, p. 26-27. Sign. 1316.

¹⁹ The general archives of the Felician sisters in Rome [Archiwum Generalne Sióstr Felicjanek w Rzymie, later referred to as AGSF], sister Leonarda Odrzywolska's letters, May 24th 1903, sign. 2173/903, p. 3-4.

²⁰ ATJKr, manusc. Missionary letters from the years 1880-1914, father J. Belglert's letter, October 22nd 1904, p. 4, sign. 1316.

²¹ AGSF, sister Leonarda Odrzywolska's letters, May 24th 1903, sign. 2173/903, p. 3-5.

²² ATJKr, manusc. Missionary letters from the years 1880-1914, father Antoni Boca's letter, November 30th 1907, p. 76-78. Sign. 1316.

²³ ATJKr, manusc. Missionary letters from the years 1880-1914, father Antoni Boca's letter, March 30th 1907, p. 31-33. Sign. 1316.

²⁴ L. Grzebień, op. cit., p. 218.

²⁵ *Studia Zmartwychwstańcze*, v. 12, father Piotr Semenka's letters, [editing: J.Drożdż], Rome 2007, p. 78.

²⁶ Archivio Congregazione della Risurrezione in Rome, S. Skwierawski's letter, April 26th 1915, sign. 29681.

missionary – internal clash between the clergymen²⁷. Seldom, the cause of the complaints submitted to the superiors was the problem with local church leaders²⁸, or even less often, with secular authorities.

The missionaries' activity in the field of evangelicalism is also worth mentioning. Neither of the clergymen forgot about making themselves 'hunters of lost souls'²⁹ by creating colored descriptions or statistics. Thus, the letters are a kind of an auto creation or report of a priest's or a nun's activity at the mission outpost. In the first case, we deal with precise confession statistics, delivered sermons, or sometimes given sacraments³⁰. When it comes to nuns, the case is narrowed down to their pedagogical successes, because sisters either worked in hospitals or engaged in schooling.

The information provided above constitutes the basis of information appearing in the clergymen's letters, which is distinctive and can be categorized due to the frequency of its occurrence. However, it does not mean that it always appears, and in the given order.

Missionary letters became a popular means of communication not only with the superiors, but also with a wider circle of addressees – believers. Such means of communication was popular then, because magazines were the only windows on the world beside books. The magazine 'Missye Katolickie' which published the missionary letters took on a particular role. This form of communication between the Catholics was in particular popularized by the editor of this magazine – father Marcin Czermiński to whom we can attribute, among others, reports of father Jan Beyzyma's work on Madagascar³¹.

Thus, with time the missionary letters began to be divided into the official and unofficial ones. Therefore, looking for reprints of the letters, which might be about some important problems, in press reports is very often pointless. Because of the censorship they are a less credible source than letters that are not allotted for publication. Therefore, the original copies that can be found in archives are more credible than letters reprinted in press.

²⁷ ATJKr, manusc. Missionary letters from the years 1880-1914, father J. Belglert's letter, July 2nd 1899, p. 2, sign. 1316.

²⁸ Sometimes these types of conflicts were of national character. Cf. T. J. Lis, *Polskie osadnictwo i duchowieństwo w Bośni i Hercegowinie od 1894 do 1920 roku*, Toruń 2014, p. 129-131.

²⁹ ATJKr, manusc. Missionary letters from the years 1880-1914, father Aleksander Mateuchek's letter, March 26th 1901, p. 260, sign. 1316.

³⁰ ATJKr, manusc. Missionary letters from the years 1880-1914, listing enclosed to father Antoni Boca's letter, January 2nd 1913, p. 194, sign. 1316.

³¹ see J. Beyzyma, *Listy o. J. Beyzyma T. J. Apostoła trędowatych na Madagaskarze*, Cracow 1927.

Emigration in ecclesiastical sources

In view of the abovementioned information, it is advisable to come to the conclusion regarding the usage of the ecclesiastical sources in research on emigration. Above all, one should notice the person who is the observer. Whether he or she is experienced and educated, or maybe he is a young inexperienced priest or a monk? How did it happen that he or she happens to be on a mission? Did they volunteer to participate in it or were they allocated to a given outpost without asking for their opinion on the matter? Each, even the least important, piece of information can be a key issue when it comes to the interpretation of the sources made by it.

Having at last certain knowledge about the creator of the source, it is time to move to the sole source. In case of letters, what is crucial is the number of the letters and their state (whether we have all of the letters, together with the replies, or just a part of it). In order to establish whether a source exists, firstly we should make a query at the archives of a given congregation (if a missionary is a monk), and then at the general house of the order where he belonged. The most suitable situation arises when we have to do with all letters, both incoming and outgoing. Then, when the number of missionary letters is several or several hundreds of letters together with replies, we can reinstate the precise course of it, also by helping ourselves with the possibly biggest number of other material, which would allow for verification of the information given by the author.

A significant number of letters concerns the believers and their problems, not only the spiritual ones, but also economic ones³². Some missionary letters bring very detailed information on the missionaries' activities. For instance, the letters between the Felician sisters, Leonarda Odrzywolska and superior general mother Magdalena Borowska, which amounted to several hundreds of letters, constitute the main source of knowledge about living and customs of the generation of Polish settlers residing in Bosnia and Herzegovina³³.

Beside the abovementioned advantages, the narrative sources created by the clergymen are also extraordinary in respect of the role that their writer – the missionary – fulfilled among the believers. Priests (slightly less – nuns) were often not only spiritual guides, but also true guides of local communities. They were also political and national leaders because internal

³² ATJKr, manusc. Missionary letters from the years 1880-1914, father Aleksander Mateuschek's letter, September 22nd 1880, p. 225-226, sign. 1316.

³³ T. J. Lis, op. cit., p. 182-183.

clashes between Polish emigrational communities were not a rarity³⁴. As the best educated people who possessed a widespread authority, they took part in the life of the whole community. While traveling in America, Henryk Sienkiewicz mentioned that in Polish settlements: *secular authority lay in the hands of the clergy*³⁵. The clergy were the main figures thus their observations concern the point of view not only of a single person, as it usually is in few peasant sources, but the whole local community. Therefore, it is obvious that one should always have in mind that as any other narrative source, the one described here is characterized by far reaching subjectivism.

The problems that fairly often appeared in letters and diaries of the missionaries working among the Polish diaspora were conflicts between the clergy and the Catholics that arouse after several months of the clergyman's stay at a given outpost. These types of clashes usually ended with the conflicted priest's departure from the parish. Then, the new clergy was summoned whose task was to organize and reinstate the harmony³⁶ in the parish, because lack of a sufficiently fast reaction could bring unpleasant consequences for the whole community.

A significant problem in the USA was the spreading schism among the Polish clergy. The activity of the priest Franciszek Hodur³⁷ and other clergymen from the Polish National Catholic Church brought a prominent confusion not only at the place of worship, but also among the members of the Church. In the letters from missions in the United States, I encountered numerous opinions that the clergymen gave their superiors³⁸. They paid attention to the repulsion that was created in a conflicted parish where a part of the inhabitants divided into supporters and adversaries of a mutinous priest³⁹.

In conclusion, ecclesiastical narrative sources constitute an integral part of material that should be used in work on the history of peasant emigration. It pertains to overseas emigration as well as continental emigration. Owing to their state of preservation, and wealth of information, it proves to be material that can often be the sole and only narrative source that can be identified in order to use it for the study of history of a specific event. Studying peasant emigration, it is worth then to check the church archives. A visit in such a place will

³⁴ L. Grzebień, op. cit., p. 122.

³⁵ H. Sienkiewicz, *Osady polskie w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Listy z podróży do Ameryki*, v. II, Warsaw 1950, p. 274-275.

³⁶ L. Grzebień, op. cit., p. 30.

³⁷ See J. Swastek, T. R. Majewski, *Ks. Franciszek Hodur: Biskup, Polak, Reformator*, Warsaw 1966.

³⁸ L. Grzebień, op. cit., p. 60.

³⁹ Ibid.

certainly prove to be fruitful and allow the researcher to establish more than one extra detail, not necessarily connected to religious or church issues, but oftentimes matters entirely secular.