

## Traditional Cheese-Making in Poland

**D**URING THE PAST DOZEN years there has been a noted increase in Poland of the interest taken in questions concerning food, its production and consumption. There have been published monographs on rural food used in some regions of our country — these were the work of ethnographers; while historians have been mostly concerned with the food used by the population of Poland as a whole during definite periods of history (for instance, in the Middle Ages). On the other hand, there are no monographs on one separate branch of food production in its historic evolution and on an all-Polish scale. The present paper is just a first attempt at an analysis of a single subject: Polish traditional cheese-making, in its evolution since the time of the first source references to the subject, i.e. since the fourteenth century till the present day. The author has tried also to bring to light the question, now much discussed in East Europe, of the specificity of Carpathian folk culture in general, and that of the Polish Carpathians in particular, as well as its associations with the breeding and pastoralist cultures of the Balkan Peninsula.

If we were to define Polish traditional cheese-making (figs. 1–7) as it was at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the task would prove comparatively simple. At that time Poland was divided distinctly into two different cultural provinces, Lowland Poland and the Carpathians. On the lowlands sheep were not milked: the only kind of milk used for food was cow's milk, out of which cottage cheese was made. This was squeezed under press in bags, or less frequently wrapped up in a piece of linen, or it was shaped in the hands, as, for instance, in the case of small round cheeses known as *gomolka*<sup>1</sup>. The second cultural province was the area of the Carpathian Mountains, where sheep milking has been always in common use and where, moreover, at that time goats were bred on a large scale. In that area cheese was made of sheep's curdled milk, or mixed sheep's, goat's and cow's milk, the production being destined mainly to cover local demands in the villages. This curdled-milk (rennet) cheese was then made into *bryndza* (salt-tasting milk cheese) or into boiled cheese shaped in ornamental wooden forms<sup>2</sup>. Incidentally it must be added that apart from a small area directly adjoining the Tatra Mountains, where during the 19th century the population did not produce cottage cheese (curds), beside the rennet kind of cheese another also was known, made of sour cow's milk.

As a result of a situation whose origins reach back to the second half of the last century it has been almost universally assumed that apart from the Carpathians rennet cheese was unknown in other Polish territories, and that the art of Carpathian cheese-making was brought to Poland from the Balkans by migrating shepherds known as Walachians, who since the 14th century had been intermittently appearing on Polish territory, migrating westwards with their flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cattle. If, however, we were to go back to the 18th century, we would see a quite different picture of cheese-making production. At the time from which there have written reports concerning milk husbandry, from the 16th to the 18th century sheep

1. The *gomolka* is a small hand-shaped sort of cheese, usually of a hen's egg size, salted and flavoured with aromatic cumin-seed, and finally dried.

2. This kind of cheese known as the *oszczypek*, is spindle-shaped; it is pressed out in ornamental forms. It is made of cheese pulp boiled in hot water, salted and smoked.

had been milked all over Poland, and goat-breeding had been more extensive than in the later years. At that time rennet cheese from curdled milk was made from the Baltic coast up to the Carpathians. The sources mention only rennet cheese made of sheep's milk, which were called *maldrzyk*. Beside them in still more common use were curds or cottage cheese made of cow's milk. The production of the latter was strictly linked with butter-production; cream was first skimmed from milk, and turned by churning into butter, whereas the skimmed milk served to produce cheese. Beside these skimmed cheeses also round cottage cheeses from unskimmed milk were made in all Poland; they were known as *gomolka*. These were just the popular commonly known cheeses for daily use and for winter storage, made both in the peasant's cottage and in the country squire's manor. On the other hand, rennet cheeses, which, being made of fresh milk, were fattier and finer, were produced not so often and considered a special delicacy. While cottage cheese was used to produce dishes and as an addition to bread — rennet cheese — as appears from the sources, was eaten without further transformation, or a great delicacy named like the cheese itself, *maldrzyk*, was sometimes prepared from it.

A SEPARATE QUESTION IS PRESENTED by the *tworzydło* or special cheese forms mentioned by the sources since the 16th century. Apparently, they were not in common use, since there is no mention of them in a number of surveys of milk containers and dairy equipment. But, on the other hand, other sources contemporary with the former mention them recurrently. If we accept upon assessing these reports that the *tworzydło* were used exclusively to produce rennet cheese, the fact of their occurrence in the sources will be another proof testifying to the popularity of this particular kind of cheese in ancient Poland. In all probability it was in these forms that the fresh coagulate was first filtered and then shaped — presumably hand-shaped — into small *maldrzyks* (like the *gomolkas* made of cow's curds previously filtered in bags). Beside the forms another way of rennet cheese filtering was also applied, probably in a piece of linen: the forms were, above all, important as cheese measures, facilitating control in farmstead dairies.

The *tworzydło* forms, as reported by Haur<sup>3</sup>, were linked with the question of the knowledge of the so-called Dutch cheese in former Poland. This type of cheese, made of rennet applied to fresh cow's milk and shaped in the forms in a circular shape, was in all probability known to Dutch settlers in Poland<sup>4</sup>. The making of that particular kind of cheese was part of the whole system of husbandry where the main emphasis was laid upon cattle breeding: and its knowledge must have been brought to Poland by the Dutch from their country. A recipe for making that kind of cheese is to be

3. J. K. Haur, *Oekonomika ziemiańska generalna* [General Land-owning Economy]. Kraków, 1675 — one of the most popular in the 17th and early 18th century handbooks of rural husbandry.

4. Between the 16th and 18th century there were numerous Dutch families coming to settle in Poland who belonged to the Mennonite sect and were thus escaping persecution in their native country. Their system of husbandry laid the main stress on breeding, and cattle breeding in particular, while rural husbandry in Poland was above all, from the 16th to the 18th century, centred on land cultivating.

found in Haur <sup>5</sup>: which leads us to assume that they might have occasionally been produced on Polish farmsteads. Nevertheless, they were probably not too widely popular, since there is no mention of them in any of the later works.

The difference between the genuinely Polish and the Dutch rennet-made cheese consisted, among others, in the fact that the Polish kind was made of sheep's milk, less frequently of goat's milk, while the Dutch kind was made exclusively of cow's milk.

One is bound to wonder why the skill of rennet cheese-making, so widely popular in 16th to 18th century Poland, was forgotten so utterly that during the second half of the 19th century no trace was to be found of their production. Neither are there to be found any traces of sheep milking, or of the cheese *tworzydło* forms. To find an answer to that question, we must, in my opinion, look into the history of sheep breeding. Rennet cheese production was connected in lowland Poland — as there are good grounds to suppose — exclusively with sheep's milk. As long as sheep were milked, rennet cheeses were made. When in the first quarter of the 19th century sheep milking was finally stopped <sup>6</sup>, the production of rennet cheese made of sheep's milk was as a result discontinued. This was also probably the reason why the use of *tworzydło* forms in which rennet cheese was shaped was equally forgotten.

Cheese-making production in Poland, if we consider only rennet cheese, while omitting curd cheese, can be divided into three distinct groups:

1. Cheese made in lowland Poland of sheep's milk (including the *maldrzyk* type of cheese)
2. Carpathian cheese, made also of sheep's milk.
3. Dutch cheese made of cow's milk.

The production of that latter kind, as a result of cultural levelling and assimilation of the Dutch settlers to the Polish population (and a certain lowering of living standard in the course of the 18th and 19th century, noted in the "Dutch" villages), was discontinued in peasant cottages, whereas production of that kind of cheese was started on an industrial scale in the dairies of big land properties in Northern Poland.

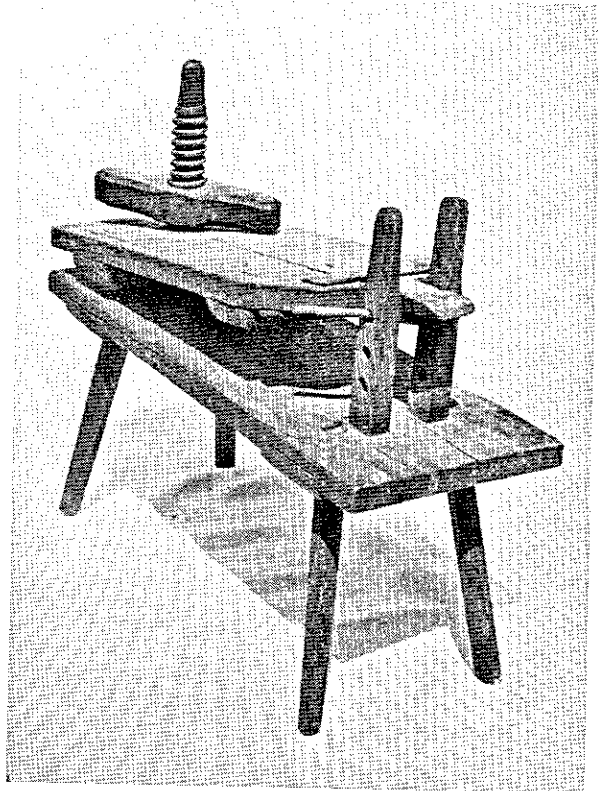
Of the two related groups of Polish cheese made of rennet, namely the lowland kind and the Carpathian kind, the former became extinct at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, while the latter is known and popular till the present day.

We must still consider whether in view of so many convergences in the two types of cheese-making we are further entitled to distinguish between lowland and Carpathian cheese-making. Both were based on sheep's milk, both used the same kind of rennet taken from calf's rumen, finally both used wooden cheese forms. Upon closer analysis we will see, however, that Carpathian cheese-making was different in several important points, the differences consisting in the very organization of cheese-making, in the Carpathian highlanders' skill in *bryndza*-producing and in the production of hard boiled cheese, in the traditional ornamental form the cheeses were shaped in, as well as in the specific cheese-making vocabulary used by their highland producers.

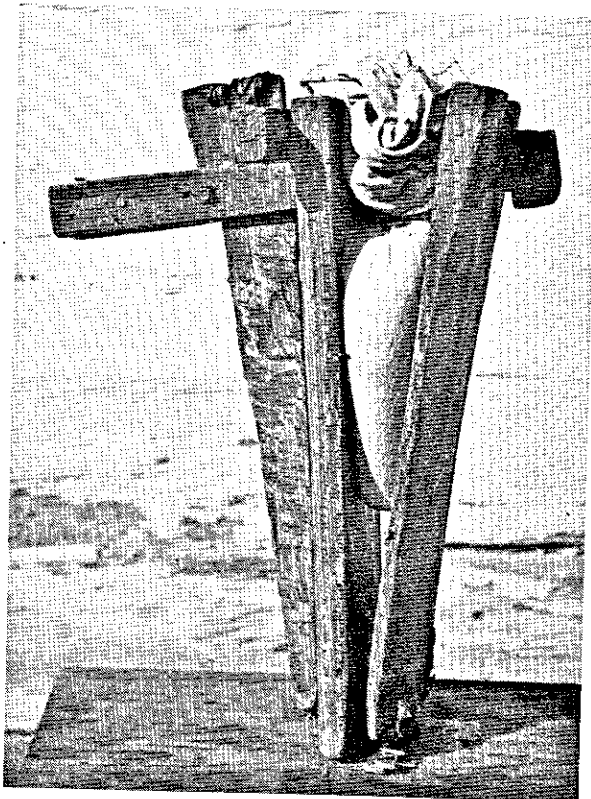
5. J. K. Haur, *Oekonomika ziemiańska generalna*. 2nd printing, p. 178.

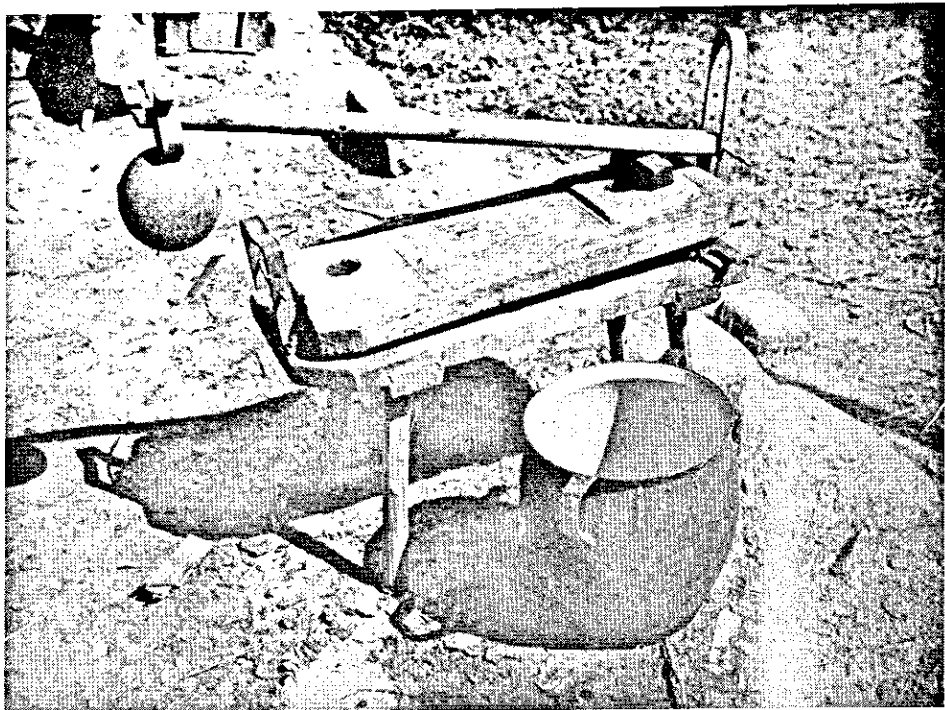
6. Sheep-milking was discontinued in Poland as a result of a change in the very character of sheep breeding: from the early nineteenth century sheep were primarily to produce high-quality wool. New breeds were introduced, and breeding methods were considerably improved at that time.

1. Press to make cottage  
(curds) cheese from cow's milk.  
Photo: J. Swiderski

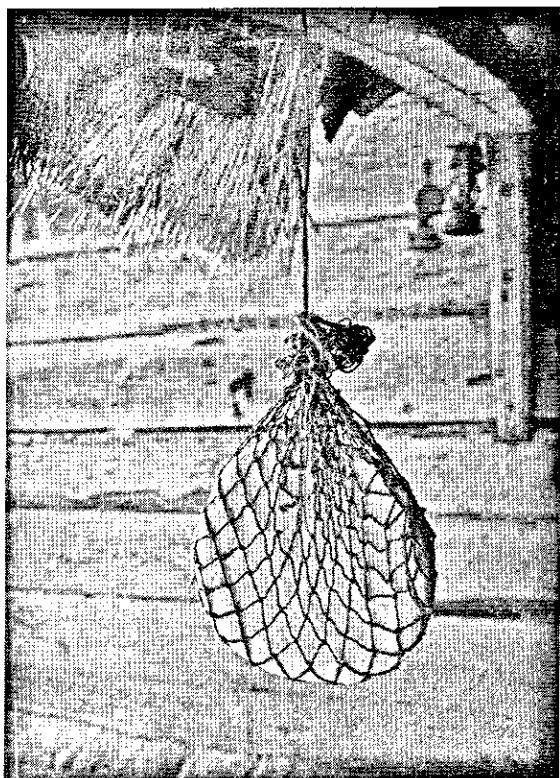


2. Press to make cottage  
(curds) cheese from cow's milk.  
Photo: K. Wecl



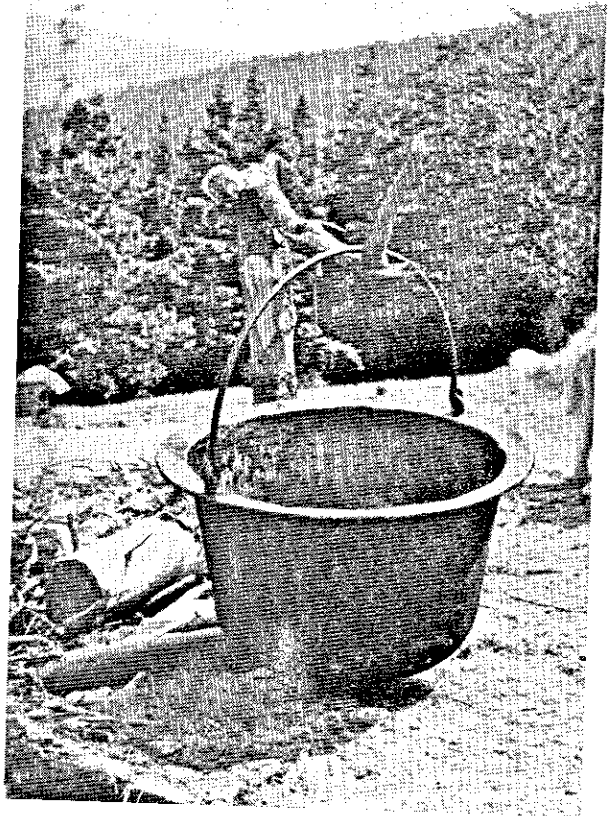


3. Press to make cottage  
(curds) cheese from cow's milk.  
Photo: K. Weceł

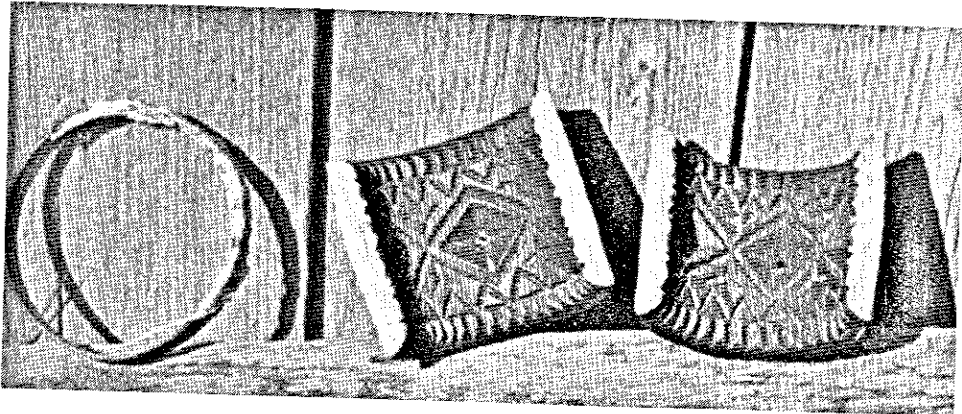


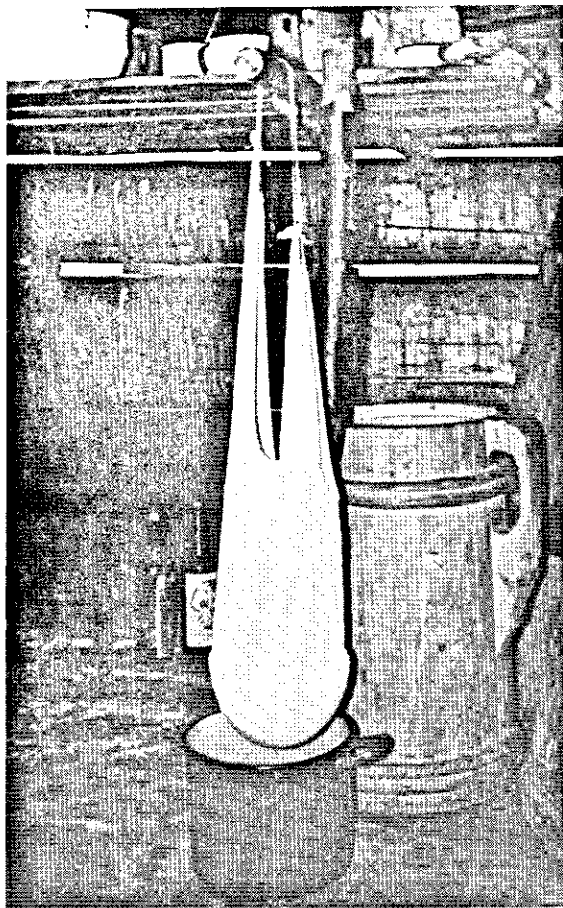
4. Cottage cheese made of  
cow's milk drying in the shelter  
of the roof (Central Poland).  
Photo: K. Weceł

5. Brass kettle where sheep's-milk rennet cheese is made in a shepherd's hut (Polish West Carpathians). Photo: K. M. Ziolkowscy



6. Form where boiled sheep's milk cheese known as "oszczypek" is produced (Tatra Mountains). Photo: W. Tomasziewicz





*7. Rennet-made sheep's-milk  
cheese filtered in a shepherd's  
hut (Polish West Carpathians).  
Photo: K. M. Ziolkowscy*

ANOTHER IMPORTANT POINT distinguishing Carpathian cheese-making is its entirely peasant origin. In the manors either there was nobody who knew how to produce this kind of cheese, or, if the Carpathian-type cheese-making production was started, there were special cheese-makers employed to carry out this production, chosen among the local population. Moreover, Carpathian cheese-making production, although known to country housewives, is cultivated mainly by professional cheese-makers, men only, who at the same time are professional pastoralists. This is again connected with the specific Carpathian way of organizing the tending of sheep which for the Summer period (averaging about five months, which covers almost the whole milking period) are led away from the village, to graze on mountain pastures. Thus the head shepherd-cheese maker, known in the highland dialect as *baca*, has access to a large amount of milk and is able to carry out a sort of cheese-making production of his own, even on a comparatively large scale, though in quite primitive conditions. Almost in the whole Polish Carpathian territory shepherds tending their flocks on Summer pastures make these curdled-milk types of cheese, unknown to the inhabitants of other parts of the country. They are quite significantly interrelated with the most primitive and oldest cheese kinds from the Mediterranean cultural centre: a relation of the production of that kind of cheese is to be found in classic sources as early as in the 1st century A.D.<sup>7</sup> Specifically Carpathian is the custom of abundant ornamentation of the curdled-milk cheese, known as the *oszczypek*, as well as the production of cheese in the shape of animals, birds or hearts. There is no mention of this kind of cheese in territories other than the Carpathians. Finally, the cheese-making vocabulary in the Carpathians is essentially different from the former lowland vocabulary referring to the production of rennet-made cheese. Above all, it is much richer than the latter, and comprises a number of words of foreign, Balkan origin.

Traditional Polish cheese-making from its very beginning had no possibility for further development. Curds (cottage) cheese, so widely popular in Poland, offer no opportunity for further processing or perfecting of its quality and taste, since these are not cheeses of the ripening kind, and it is only through various measures undertaken during the ripening process that the taste and kind of cheese can be differentiated. Further, the rennet-made cheese in Poland was produced mainly from sheep's or mixed with goat's or cow's milk, a fact relating them to the archaic group of Mediterranean-type cheese. The high per cent of fat in sheep's milk, milking admixtures and the relatively small amount of material (there is not much milk to be obtained from sheep) did not permit the production of any superior kind of cheese. Finally it must be borne in mind that Poland had no high standard of breeding at the time, the big landowners showing much more understanding for agricultural production than for the breeding of cattle or sheep. Hence the small amount of milk, the home system of the dairy- and cheese-making production which was simply part of kitchen activities; finally, milk products were usually not taken into account as a homestead article destined for sale. Besides, there were too few markets where these products could be actually sold. Towns in Poland were neither numerous enough, nor sufficiently densely populated or rich to constitute an adequate inland market; on the other hand,

7. L. J. M. Columella, *De re rustica*. Cambridge (Mass.), 1948-1955.



export was possible only through the intermediary of distant and not easily accessible Baltic ports. It is a feature characteristic of the milk production that it was best developed just in the provinces on the Baltic Sea, near the international markets in harbour towns.

It is quite probable that before the 16th century<sup>8</sup> the situation was different, at least as far as the amount of cheese-making production was concerned. On examining the sources we find that between the 14th and 16th century there was a well developed cheese trade in Cracow<sup>9</sup>. In the sources of that time there are several mentions of well-to-do townsmen cheese-makers<sup>10</sup>: in fact, in 1542 Cracow had as many as thirty-nine booths offering cheese for sale<sup>11</sup>.

APART FROM PROFESSIONAL CHEESE-MAKERS among the townspeople and peasants from villages (there is no mention of the latter in sources between the 14th and 16th centuries), dairy products were supplied to the markets by the homesteads at the manors of the gentry: although it is true that a large part of these supplies was derived from the peasants tenancing their land and in this manner partly paying for it. In the 16th century Gostomski recorded that the dairy products collected during Spring and Summer ought to be put on sale between St. Martin's Day and the Carnival and, in case of abundant provisions, the rest had to be sold between Easter and Whitsuntide<sup>12</sup>. As we see, there was no great demand for cheese during Lent. Special estate surveyors on Byelorussian and Lithuanian territories in the eighteenth century explicitly instructed the population to sell butter and cheese to Riga, mentioning long-term contracts providing for the supply of dairy products to merchants trading in Riga<sup>13</sup>.

On examining the sources of that time we find that although cheese-making production was of no importance when regarded from the standpoint of the system of economy as a whole, yet in some cases cheese was actually produced for sale. Nevertheless it seems that cheese-making production as well as dairy production in general, destined for sale, deteriorated in Poland as a result of the decline of towns and cities, formerly the natural selling markets for that product.

We must now consider the part Polish cheese-making played in the fare of the population of towns and villages. As most of the material at my disposal on that subject refers to more recent times, starting somewhere in the middle of the 19th century, I am able to examine the situation only as it used to be during that century. At that time villagers ate but a relatively small amount of cheese. Actually, it was considered to be a sort of luxury dish, and as such it could be served in peasant

8. In the 16th century Poland was the field of vital and lasting economic changes. There was a marked decline in the towns and in the living conditions of the peasant population, whereas the landed gentry gained both in political status and in riches.

9. Cracow was at that time Poland's capital city and the residence of the royal court.

10. *Księgi ławnicze krakowskie* [Cracow Benchers' Registers], edited by S. Krzyżanowski. Kraków, 1904.

11. Quoted after M. Plezia, *Słownik łaciny średniowiecznej* [Mediaeval Latin Dictionary], 2, fasc. 2 (10), column 219.

12. A. Gostomski, *Gospodarstwo* [Husbandry]. Ed. by Ingot. Wrocław, 1951. p. 62.

13. S. Pawlik, *Polskie instruktarze ekonomiczne z końca XVII i z XVIII wieku* [Polish Economic Instructions Books from the late 17th and 18th Centuries]. 1 Kraków, 1915, pp. 217 and 218.

cottages only occasionally, on important holidays, whether of ecclesiastical or family character; another occasion when it was served was when work in the fields was most intense, especially at harvest time. Moreover, cheese was stored for Winter; dried cottage cheese offered, in fact, a unique opportunity to preserve milk for later use. Cheese as a luxury dish, part of the rich and abundant holiday food, was very strictly forbidden during Lent, as was also the case with milk and butter.

It must be added, incidentally, that on ethnically Polish territories, cheese at that time had no ritual meaning associated with it (as it was on Ruthenian territory), and if it was served at a wedding or a funeral feast it was only because a feast of this type, in the popular conviction, should be particularly showy, and, as we know, cheese was regarded an eminently luxury dish in the peasant diet.

In the manors of the gentry, as in the larger towns, i.e. where the standard of living considerably exceeded that of the peasants — cheese, except the *maldrzyk* kind, was considered a dish of inferior quality. It was served within the everyday fare, but not on festive or solemn occasions (where if cheese was served at all, it was the kind imported from West Europe). In the manors, contrary to what was thought in peasant cottages, cheese was considered a typical fasting meal<sup>14</sup>.

Generally speaking, in the second half of the 19th century there was no cheese-eating culture developed on Polish territories, and it seems equally that in former times the situation had not been much better in this field, whether among the gentry or among the well-to-do townspeople.

The above outline is the first attempt at reconstructing the history of Polish cheese-making. Further source research, particularly in unpublished archival records, can supply other interesting information to supplement our material and elucidate some of our doubts: it is possible that some of our hypotheses will have to be revised in the light of newly revealed data.

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14. A. Gostomski, *ibidem*.