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The Open Air Museum and its activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic (on the selected example of Łęczyca Farmstead in Kwiatkówek)

Abstract. This study is an attempt to present the impact of *SARS-CoV-2* coronavirus pandemic and the restrictions resulting from its development on the activity of Łęczyca Farmstead in Kwiatkówek. This facility is an open air museum/theme park and is part of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź. It was made available to visitors in 2013. As part of the study, efforts were made to present new directions of the museum's activities shifted into the virtual space, as well as those that are a continuation of the previous activities related to the organization of traditional temporary exhibitions, outdoor activities and promotional events. This presentation is based on the activities undertaken in 2020–2021. While presenting the new directions of activities of Łęczyca Farmstead, particular attention was drawn to the virtual, temporary exhibitions and ethnographic materials published online, concerning e.g. some holidays, rituals or regional issues. Within the framework of this study, efforts were also made to present the fluctuation in the frequency of visitors to the open air museum in the discussed period of time, compared to the years 2013–2019.

Keywords: museum, open air museum, pandemic, activities online, Łęczyca Farmstead in Kwiatkówek, Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź.

Muzeum skansenowskie i kierunki jego działalności w czasie pandemii COVID-19 (na wybranym przykładzie Łęczyckiej Zagrody Chłopskiej w Kwiatkówku)

Streszczenie. Niniejsze opracowanie jest próbą prezentacji wpływu pandemii koronawirusa SARS-CoV-2 i wynikających z jej rozwoju ograniczeń na działalność Łęczyckiej Zagrody Chłopskiej w Kwiatkówku. Placówka ta stanowi muzeum na wolnym powietrzu typu parkowego i jest częścią Muzeum Archeologicznego i Etnograficznego w Łodzi. Została ona udostępniona dla zwiedzających w 2013 r. W ramach opracowania starano się zaprezentować nowe kierunki działalności placówki podejmowane w przestrzeni wirtualnej, jak również te, które stanowiły kontynuację dotychczasowych działań związanych z organizacją tradycyjnych wystaw czasowych, wydarzeń plenerowych i promocyjnych. Niniejszej prezentacji dokonano na podstawie działań podjętych w latach 2020–2021. Prezentując nowe kierunki działalności Łęczyckiej Zagrody Chłopskiej wskazano na wirtualne wystawy czasowe i publikowane on-line materiały o charakterze etnograficznym dotyczące np. świąt, obrzędów czy problematyki regionalnej. W ramach opracowania starano się również zaprezentować fluktuację frekwencji osób zwiedzających skansen w omawianym przedziale czasu w porównaniu z latami 2013–2019.

Słowa kluczowe: muzeum, skansen, pandemia, działalność on-line, Łęczycka Zagroda Chłopska w Kwiatkówku, Muzeum Archeologiczne i Etnograficzne w Łodzi.

The occurrence of a special circumstance, which is the ongoing *SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic*, announced at the beginning of 2020, has had an impact on the activities of museums. Let us recall that on 11 March 2020, the Government Crisis Management Team, with the participation of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, decided to temporarily close the cultural institutions, including museums. This move was aimed at preventing the spread of the coronavirus (see: <https://www.gov.pl/web/kulturaisport/zawieszenie-dzialalnosci-instytucji-kultury-i-placowek-szkolnictwa-artystycznego>). In this situation, museums had to struggle with many difficulties, manifesting itself in – for example – the lack of visitors and therefore they were made to work out new forms of action in the times of crisis (Olga Kosińska provided a synthetic overview of the actions taken in this respect by museums in Poland and in other countries. See: Kosińska, 2020). Shortly thereafter, this topic came up for discussion among scholars. It has been reflected in the recently published studies (see e.g. Kosińska, 2020; Marczak, 2020; Bąk, Wiśniewski, 2021; Bieczyński, 2021; Ciepłińska-Jaglarz, 2021; Górajec, Pasternak-Zabielska, 2021; Lipski, 2021).

In addition to contributing to the discussions, this article attempts to *answer* the following *question*: did the circumstances related to the outbreak of the

coronavirus pandemic affect the way Łęczyca Farmstead in Kwiatkówek operated? The time period in which the analysis of the functioning of the open air museum is made covers the years 2020–2021. A broader attempt to characterize Łęczyca Farmstead in Kwiatkówek would go beyond the scope of this study, as it was already provided in the print publications. For the purposes of this article, only a few of the considerations related to the establishment and characteristics of the facility are included.

Łęczyca Farmstead is located in Kwiatkówek near Łęczyca in Łódź Voivodeship. This facility is part of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź. It is an open air museum/theme park with an area of 0.2 hectares, consisting of two parts. The first one is a three-building homestead consisting of a one-bay, two-room (kitchen and room separated by a *pass-through hallway*) residential house, a three-room stock building and a peat shed arranged under one roof, a barn with two grain bins and a threshing-floor. The homestead is accompanied by some street architecture – a picket fence and a hazel fence, a well with a crane, an earth cellar and a manure pit. The other part of the homestead consists of craft and industrial facilities, i.e. a post windmill, an oil mill and a smithy. A component of the open air museum is also sacred architecture, i.e. two chapels. The entirety of the open air museum is complemented with the following structures: an exhibition and administrative building as well as a pottery kiln and bread baking oven, which were built for educational purposes. Łęczyca Farmstead makes an example of traditional peasant architecture from the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, i.e. the time when the common building material was clay and wood. It exemplifies the living and working conditions of a middle-income peasant family in the village of Łęczyca in the 1930s. Moreover, it shows the directions in which small industrial activities related to millery and oil production developed, as well as the craft of blacksmithing – which was crucial for the life of the village. Łęczyca Farmstead was opened to the public on 13 July 2013 (for more about Łęczyca Farmstead, the work on its creation and the objects that make it up, see: Chlebowska 2013a, 2013b; Chlebowska, Czepas, 2015; Czepas, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2018a, 2018b).

The first issue raised in this study is the time frame of the activity of Łęczyca Farmstead. In the years 2013–2019, the inauguration of the tourist season usually took place in the first days of April. The exception in this regard (as was already mentioned) was 2013. Also in 2015–2016, it took place a bit earlier i.e. on the first day of spring (see: Czepas, 2018b: 257, Tabl. 1). As a result of the pandemic restrictions introduced in 2020–2021, the forced change was the delay in the seasonal opening of the open-air museum to visitors. In 2020, it took place only on May 20, while in the following year it was done not much earlier i.e. on May 7. However, the pandemic circumstances mentioned here did not result in an early end to the tourist seasons in 2020 and 2021 – the facility was normally open till the last day of October.

In order to present the changes of the activities in Łęczycza Farmstead in the years 2020–2021, it is necessary to refer to the initiatives undertaken in the previous seasons. Every year in the period from 2013 to 2019, a May Day picnic, a Children's Day, Midsummer Night celebrations or wedding re-enactments were organised on the grounds of Łęczycza Farmstead. The facility also hosted the European Heritage Days and the 'Games of Yesteryear' Festival. As part of the open air museum's activities, numerous attractions such as temporary exhibitions were made available to the public. There were also open air sculpting and painting workshops, demonstrations of craft skills and workshop activities related to the use of historic equipment displayed in the smithy or the oil mill. All the events were documented and reported on an ongoing basis in a website tab and on the Facebook account of Łęczycza Farmstead (see: <https://www.maie.lodz.pl/pl/skansen>; <https://www.facebook.com/LeczyckaZagrodaChlopska?ref=ts&fref=ts>). These pages were also informative, as they included event calendars and their announcements.

The situation related to the development of the pandemic was the reason why in 2020–2021 the majority of the events that could attract large audiences were not organised at Łęczycza Farmstead. For this reason, no events related to the Children's Day or Midsummer Night celebrations were organised.

During the crisis of 2020, efforts were made to shift the centre of gravity of the open air museum's activities into the virtual space. In place of the formerly organized live events, e.g. the already mentioned Midsummer Night celebrations, the website of the open air museum featured the illustrated texts related to Corpus Christi, Sobótko, Feast of the Blessed *Mother* of the *Herbs* or the Harvest Festival arranged by Barbara Chlebowska and Aldona Plucińska, prepared in cooperation with Michał Świercz and Ewa Kurylak, who then headed the Academic and Educational Department of the Archaeological and Ethnographic Museum in Łódź.

The transfer of the institution's activities into virtual space was also reflected in the texts published in the specially created tab on the website of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź, entitled 'Virtual Open Air Museum' (also available from the website of Łęczycza Farmstead). Numerous, richly illustrated studies were the work of Alicja Woźniak, Aldona Plucińska, Barbara Chlebowska, Piotr Czepas and Wojciech Bernasiak. They are included in the following thematic sections: 'Easter', 'Łęczycza district – region situated in the heart of Poland' and 'From the diary of an open air museum'. The last section of the 'Virtual Open Air Museum' tab was an online exhibition entitled 'Design/Passion/Implementation – 'Painted with needles/Paintings by Zofia Kryškowiak', to which the authors return when discussing the temporary exhibitions.

It is worth noting that users of the open air museum's website have also an opportunity to use the tab 'For young explorers'. Within it, materials representing knowledge in the field of, among other things, archaeology, ethnography, numismatics and puppet theatre were published in the following sections: 'Colouring', 'Workshop – an accordion puppet', 'Workshop – 2 frame animation' and 'Quizzes'.

What is more, Łęczyca Farmstead has its own account on Facebook. Information related to the open air museum is also published on the photo social networking site – Instagram.

Further, the form of the presented exhibitions has also changed. In April 2020, the public was offered a virtual exhibition entitled ‘Design/Passion/Implementation – ‘Painted with needles/Paintings by Zofia Kryśkowiak’, arranged thanks to Wojciech Bernasiak and realised in cooperation with Alicja Woźniak and Anna Smolińska.

Another exhibition, also presented entirely online, was the one entitled ‘Once upon a time, there was a child and toys’ by Barbara Chlebowska.

It was not until the inauguration of the 2020 season that the traditional exhibition ‘Strong in Faith’ by Aldona Plucińska was made available. The art event was prepared on the basis of the ethnographic collection of the Folk Art Department of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź, but for obvious reasons, an idea of the otherwise customary vernissage was *abandoned*. The exhibition was open to visitors of the open air museum until the end of the season.

From that moment, i.e. May 20, 2020, until the end of the tourist season, the open air museum became accessible to the visitors. However, due to the still existing numerous pandemic restrictions, it consisted in individual acquaintance with the exhibitions based on a prepared guide in the form of an illustrated commentary to individual parts of the exhibition in the open air museum. In this way, efforts were made to limit interpersonal contacts between the employees of the facility and its visitors.

Despite the difficulties, some promotional initiatives were undertaken in their traditional form. Anna Smolińska was a particularly involved person in these activities. Łęczyca Farmstead was also promoted during the Harvest Festival of the Łódź Region organized in Uniejów on September 20, 2020, as part of the stand prepared by the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź.

The prolonged situation of pandemic in 2021 again triggered the need to transfer actions to the virtual space. Thus, it was the place where illustrated texts were published, e.g. about Palm Sunday. Also, the Łęczyca Farmstead account on Facebook was systematically supplemented, presenting the recipients with a series of posts reminiscent of the events that took place in the open air museum in previous years.

Only after the pandemic situation had improved did it become possible to organize the first outdoor event on June 20, 2021. It was the celebration of Midsummer Night, during which the group cultivating the cultural and historical heritage, ‘Chojne’, presented the audience with the Midsummer ritual. The programme of the celebrations included performance of the Folk Group ‘Marysie i Jaśki z Łyncyckiego’ from the St John Paul II Primary School in Wilczkowice Górne. Another attraction was showing the visitors how the post mill is turned into the wind.

One more event, jointly organized by the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź, the Parish of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Aleksy in Tum,

Góra Świętej Małgorzaty commune, the Museum in Łęczycza and the Foundation for Support and Development of Culture, *Via Culturae*, was the Festival of Benedict of Poland, which took place on June 27, 2021. The open air museum was also one of the places where a part of the program was carried out under the slogan 'We unfreeze colourful Kwiatkówek' (which was significant for the time of the pandemic). The attractions included a walk around Łęczycza Farmstead. During the Festival, guests could see two temporary exhibitions. One of them, untitled 'Once upon a time, there was a child and toys', was arranged on the basis of some old artefacts and some presentation boards provided by the Division of Beliefs, *Rites and Folklore*. The event was created by Joanna Łuczywek and Wojciech Bernasiak on the basis of the texts by Barbara Chlebowska. The other exhibition, made by Joanna Łuczywek and Wojciech Bernasiak, was untitled 'In the dim and distant past, on the threshold of Łęczycza'. The presentation of the post mill turning to the wind complemented the event.

Another event arranged in the open air museum was a meeting dedicated to the beatification of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, the Primate of the Millennium. It took place on September 5, 2021. As part of it, a temporary exhibition by Aldona Plucińska, entitled 'I put everything on St Mary', was opened. A concert of Marian songs by Stanisław Moniuszko was performed by Aleksandra Orczykowska, Tomasz Piotrowski and other artists. Moreover, a show of old children's games was presented to the audience by the 'Chojne' ceremonial group.

In addition to the enumerated, organized events, several traditional temporary exhibitions were made available in Łęczycza's Farmstead. One of them, created by Joanna Łuczywek, was entitled 'Do you know the Bzura valley? Grzegorz Sawicki's Photographic Reflection'. The exhibition was graced by a meeting with the author of the exhibited photos on August 8, 2021. In addition, the guests were given an *opportunity to contemplate* the exhibition entitled 'Sobótka – Midsummer wreaths' by Joanna Łuczywek and another one, entitled 'In the joinery workshop' which was organised by Andrzej Tratkiewicz.

In order to promote Łęczycza Farmstead, several interviews were conducted in cooperation with, among other things, the Red Sat Cable Television from Łódź (Retkinia).

Throughout the whole tourist season, just like in the previous year, it was possible for tourists to visit the open-air museum without any major obstacles arising from pandemic restrictions. However, it still consisted of getting acquainted with the exhibitions individually, based on a guide prepared in the form of an illustrated commentary on individual parts of the exhibition in the open air museum.

In the period of time that interests us, i.e. in the years 2020–2021, Wojciech Bernasiak, who is the coordinator of the open air museum, was supported in his work by two guides: Iwona Lisewska and Andrzej Tratkiewicz. The occurrence of the pandemic did not negatively affect the employment level in Łęczycza Farmstead, which was comparable to previous years (however, this does not change the

fact that the problem of staff reduction due to the pandemic took place in many other museums and galleries around the world, which problem was raised in the literature. See: Bieczyński, 2021: 13; Cieplińska, Jaglarz, 2021: 233).

One more issue that deserves *a closer look* is a visitor turnout in Łęczyca Farmstead. In the 2020 tourist season it was 5,852 people, while in the following season it amounted to 8,005 people. Data published for the previous years reveals that in the period 2013–2019, Łęczyca Farmstead was visited annually by a minimum of more than 6,000 visitors, and at the maximum (just like in 2018), the numbers exceeded 11,000 (Czepias 2018b: 257, Tabl. 1; Czepas, 2021, 179). Therefore, it can be concluded that in the first year of the pandemic and its associated restrictions, there was a significant decrease in the frequency of visitors to the open air museum. This fact draws attention to the depth of the phenomenon, as in 2020 there was a decrease in the number of visitors to Polish museums by almost 59% (see: Bąk, Wiśniewski, 2021: 20). In 2021, the open air museum recorded a renewed, significant increase in the number of visitors, though.

In conclusion, these considerations suggest that the circumstances related to the development of the *SARS-CoV-2* coronavirus pandemic affected to a significant degree the activity of Łęczyca Farmstead in Kwiatkówek. These resulted in the suspension of a large number of outdoor events (especially in 2020), as well as it stimulated the development of online activities. It is worth noting, however, that the situation in which the open air museum found itself in connection with the development of the pandemic was not unique compared to other museums. As Mateusz Bieczyński states, quoting data from the UNESCO report entitled ‘Museums Around the World in the Face of COVID-19’ – ‘90% of all museums in the world were affected by the pandemic’. The report, which included a survey of 95,000 institutions, identified over 800 different types of initiatives taken in response to the crisis of the epidemic. ‘It stated (i.e. the UNESCO report – author’s note) an importance of digitisation in the museum sector, which had been reinforced in the past (i.e. 2020 – author’s note) by the conversion of many previously planned cultural events into their virtual versions (Bieczyński, 2021: 13).

In the context of these considerations, the issue of the possible profile of activity of Łęczyca Farmstead in the next years seems to be an open question and it still depends on the direction of the possible development of the pandemic or its end.

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