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## THE KURPIE PHENOMENON

### FENOMEN KURPIOWSKI

Kurpie are often written about, with pleasure, as numerous cultural events take place, the most significant of which include Palm Sunday in Łyse (one week before Easter, involving a competition and television coverage), Wesele Kurpiowskie (Kurpian Wedding) in Kadzidło, Miodobranie Kurpiowskie (Kurpian Honey Harvest) in Myszyniec. It is also nice to look at other Kurpian presentations, including hunting (Czarnia), instruments and music (Lelis), customs (Museum of Kurpie in Wach), the beauty of the Kurpie Forest (rallies and tourist excursions), souvenirs, buildings and traditions (Kurpie Open Air Museum in Nowogród and North-Eastern Museum in Łomża with an exhibition of Kurpian amber), exhibitions, scientific sessions, promotions of new releases, occasional meetings (mainly Ostrołęka with the Museum of Kurpie Culture and Adam Chętnik Scientific Society in Ostrołęka, but also other towns in Mazovian and Podlaskie voivodeships). Those are just selected undertakings, held more or less regularly, anticipated, with many participants. The Kurpian calendar is much richer thanks to some of the already mentioned institutions, as well as local governments and parishes, engaged social workers, including those gathered around the Union of Kurpie. There is no doubt that the fashion for Kurpie is continuing, which is a very good thing.

A native-born Kurpian woman – Maria Samsel, the current director of the Museum of Kurpie Culture, when asked whether Kurpie exist today, responded in 2001 as follows: “For some it may only be an open-air museum and already dead traditional folk culture, for others it is their «little homeland» and for yet others Kurpie are a product which can be sold. For many folk artists the word Kurpie, the Kurpie region, is a timeless value, the tradition of their fathers which is still alive”<sup>1</sup>.

The question about the present of Kurpie, but with a strong reference to the past and the changes which took place over decades, accompanied me as I wrote these reflections. I do not feel prepared to make authoritative assessments, but it is also not possible to agree with some of the commonly held opinions which are historically inaccurate and not in accordance with the actual situation. There is no doubt that – as I have already written – we like participating directly or indirectly

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<sup>1</sup> M. Samsel, *Kurpie, Kurpiowszczyzna czy Puszcza Zielona? Pracowania (Ostrołęka) 2001*, Vol. IV, p. 106.

(with the help of the media) in Kurpian events, we enjoy watching the re-enactments of folk traditions from the Green Forest, the scenes from the life of the generations of Kurpians, the preserved original monuments of material culture and the treasures of spiritual culture presented by artists (folk and professional). We accept Kurpian myths without protest, and even with pleasure, we often do not distinguish the stark truth from a beautiful legend. That is all together fascinating, it should last. And what was the genesis of the Kurpie phenomenon, what revelations, and does the present state fully satisfy us? Does it bode well for the future?

I would also like to refer to the term – the Kurpie region. The region of Kurpie fulfilled almost all the basic criteria contained in the definitions of a region. The area was geographically homogeneous, the forest forced the same type of economy, facilitated the acquisition of ethnographic identity and social awareness by the inhabitants, and there must also be added the community of history, national and religious community, the distinct difference from neighbours. Observers from the outside easily noticed the same or similar personality traits of the inhabitants and their behaviour, similar every-day life reality and celebrations, and above all the distinguishing features of Kurpians: dialect, costumes, architecture, songs. Other components of the Kurpian ethos can be mentioned, but the region had neither a developed road network, which is easy to explain, nor a strong centre. Myszyniec can be regarded as the first informal capital of Kurpie. The town still distinguishes itself in many aspects until the present day, although with the strong competition of other centres of cultural life, especially Kadzidło. Administratively, most of Zagajnica (the Kurpie Forest) was in the old Polish Łomża Land, and during the partitions it was still in Łomża Land (a department in the Duchy of Warsaw, after 1866 – Łomża Governorate). Łomża, however, did not take on the role of the authentic centre of Kurpie, and the town which took advantage of it was Ostrołęka, in 1815–1865 excluded from Łomża Land and subordinated to Płock. Nonetheless, Ostrołęka was not too eager to take care of Kurpie, it benefited much more from the Narew river and the richer southern (noble) communes than from the Kurpie Forest. It was used by Adam Chętnik, who made Nowogród the main centre promoting the community of Kurpie in the interwar period. The transformation after World War II is well remembered and well known. Ostrołęka received two chances for rapid development: industrial and administrative after 1975. I leave an open question as to how far the inhabitants of the Green Forest benefited from them, and I will return to the administrative thread. The dreams of Chętnik and Kurpian leaders supporting the idea that all lands inhabited by Kurpie should be in one voivodeship, or at least in one large county, alternatively in two smaller ones, did not come true. The partition of Kurpie continues, the opinion, the

protest of Ostrołęka Scientific Society from March 1993, was not taken into consideration<sup>2</sup>.

### The origin of Kurpie

As regards the origin of Kurpie, both intriguing and false assumptions persisted for a long time. Some people unleashed their imagination and wrote that Kurpie arrived to the Green Forest from the north (affinity with Yotvingians), from the mountains, the wild steppes. Adam Chętnik wrote in his first works (*O Kurpiach* – 1919, *Kurpie* – 1924, *Myszyniec...* – 1938) that as early as in the times of the Piasts “in the Forest near Myszyniec, the local people organized rallies, circulated information, lived commonly in forest shacks and made offerings to the gods they had carved themselves from oak logs”. The author claimed that Kurpie were Slavs who had moved from the Elbe river to escape Germanic pressure. Jerzy Kijowski assessed that Chętnik’s findings had been very subjective, the author showed strong local patriotism, strengthened the legend of Kurpie to uplift hearts<sup>3</sup>. Aleksander Połujański saw the similarity of Kurpie to Hutsuls and Carpathian highlanders, and their fate seemed to him to be similar to those of Zaporozhian Cossacks and to “Gypsy bands”<sup>4</sup>. There were also other hypotheses, it was only from Ludwik Krzywicki, the author of the work *Kurpie* (Biblioteka Warszawska 1892), when the chronology of settlement in the Green Forest based on sources began to be determined.

It can be assumed that the first settlers entered the Green Forest seasonally since the 15th/16th centuries and were mainly hunters and beekeepers. Small permanent settlements may have appeared since the end of the 16th century, they are confirmed in sources at the beginning of the 17th century. More intense escapes to the Forest took place since the mid-seventeenth century, at first due to the deteriorating situation in Poland, including serfs, and then due to dangers connected with wars, especially the “Deluge”. The king’s forest (formerly the Mazovian dukes’ forest) became an oasis of freedom for those persecuted for very different reasons, outlaws, deprived of the livelihood, perhaps also those looking for change, adventure. Masurians from Prussia, already evangelicals, also arrived there. It is necessary to refer to historical research to clarify the changes taking

<sup>2</sup> Zeszyty Naukowe Ostrołęckiego Towarzystwa Naukowego im. A. Chętnika (Zeszyty Naukowe OTN) 1993, Vol. VII, pp. 325–329. If counties – they should be Myszyniec and Ostrołęka, if a separate voivodeship, it should also include White Kurpie, alternatively also Czerwony Bór. Necessarily, in the case of a small region in Mazovian Voivodeship, not in Podlaskie Voivodeship.

<sup>3</sup> J. Kijowski, *Historia Puszczy Zielonej w pracach Adama Chętnika*. Zeszyty Naukowe OTN 1993, Vol. VII, pp. 16–17. Chętnik used, among others, the hypotheses of Karol Potkański.

<sup>4</sup> A. Połujański, *Wędrowki po guberni augustowskiej w celu naukowym odbyte*. Warszawa 1859, p. 46.

place in the emerging community, especially the transition from a sense of Forest distinctness to becoming a distinct Kurpie people.

Henryk Samsonowicz, and other historians as well, emphasized the influence of two different factors: “The first was the borderland location of those lands near the border of the Baltic people, and later – the Duchy of Prussia. The second factor was the natural selection of the people deciding to live in conditions that differed from those known throughout the country. Thus, like in the steppes of Ukraine, the Carpathian mountain pastures (and, on a larger scale, like in Siberia in the 18th century or the American Wild West in the 19th century) – also in the northern borderlands of the Republic a distinctive community with its own culture emerged”<sup>5</sup>. One cannot ignore the influence of the neighbours, especially small Mazovian gentry and tenant peasants, the effects of the changing borders of the Green Forest and the state border in the north, the effects of the inhabitants gradually undertaking agricultural and handicraft activities<sup>6</sup>. It is also necessary to follow the changes taking place in the White Forest of the Płock bishops, which became populated earlier and faster. We still do not know enough about the attempts of outside forces (subjects) at interfering with the life of the Forest inhabitants, it is more often elaborated on the role of the Jesuit mission in Myszyniec. Unfortunately, one has to reconcile with the fact that there is a severe lack of, above all, the sources created by Kurpie in the past.

The neglect of research makes the writers of the earliest history of the Forest inhabitants (Kurpie) and Zagajnica (the Green Forest) with a penchant refer to the texts from the 18th and 19th centuries, including novels. They choose from them the more colourful quotes – most willingly those praiseworthy for the Kurpie people – without any critical look at the stories and on that basis create their own visions, assessments. As a result, ahistoricisms appear, mental shortcuts, like: “the base of the formation of the ethnographic group called Kurpie was mass crime, because the first inhabitants of the forest were recruited from serfs fugitives prosecuted by law”<sup>7</sup>.

I would like to emphasize once again the merits of Ludwik Krzywicki, who defined the most important source of the distinctiveness of Kurpie. The researcher found that Kurpie “were not passive observers or better a passive source of historical struggle”, they demonstrated self-reliance and self-confidence<sup>8</sup>. That is undoubtedly a key finding and a fundamental value enabling the formation of the Kurpie identity, and more precisely the Green Kurpie, because also in this case the

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<sup>5</sup> H. Samsonowicz, *Kurpie na mapie Polski*. Zeszyty Naukowe OTN 1991, Vol. V, pp. 8–10.

<sup>6</sup> I wrote about it in the article *Kształtowanie się granic Puszczy Zielonej*. Zeszyty Naukowe OTN 1993, Vol. VII, pp. 78–85.

<sup>7</sup> M. Samsel, *Tożsamość i trwanie*. Teki Kociewskie (Tczew) 2014, Vol. VIII, p. 79. At the same time, the author provided many important observations and facts.

<sup>8</sup> L. Krzywicki, *Kurpie*. Biblioteka Warszawska 1892, Vol. 52, p. 558.

fate of the White Kurpie (Gots), inhabiting the White Forest, was different. Unfortunately, due to the reasons already mentioned by me, our knowledge of that process is scarce, there are neither the names of leaders nor the names of the leading centres (apart from Myszyniec), more precise time frames. Subsequent authors of the texts on the birth of the Kurpie phenomenon pass over in silence the transformation within the Forest community, as a rule they do not even try to ask questions, but they eagerly deal with the subsequent “waves” of “discovering Kurpie”.

The topic is more interesting, it is mainly realized by discussing the causes and ways of intensified informing at certain times the readers of the Polish press about the inhabitants of the Kurpie Forest and about the published novels on the subject, most often with a clear dash of sensation. That was not done, however, on the initiative of the Forest inhabitants, not on their request and with a thought to help them, or to stimulate historical, ethnographic, natural-geographic research. The fashion for Kurpie themes resulted from the need to promote the current examples of patriotism and interesting places in the Kingdom of Poland, finding attractive topics that would encourage reading. By the way, two stereotypes of a Kurpian were enriched. One of them was pushed by people from outside the background: legendary, even fabulous, generally positive. And the second one, promoted by the inhabitants of the Green Forest, unequivocally positive, with a dominating sense of injustice<sup>9</sup>.

The first publications, even those from the 18th century, can be understood as praise for the attitudes of brave people, indispensable to save the existence of the Republic. Other materials printed during the period of Congress Poland (for example the books by Kazimierz W. Wójcicki and the aforementioned A. Połujański) were embedded in the romanticism, and to my mind they were the result of the national trauma after the lost war with Russia in 1831. Since it was impossible to win with the invader’s army in a regular war, according to many, a liberation uprising involving the people was necessary. An excellent example of that were Kurpie: attached to life in freedom, brilliant riflemen, brave, with a sense of personal dignity. Another wave of increased interest in the inhabitants of the Green Forest was in the 1880s, which is at the end of the “post-January night”. Following the positivist ideas, it was necessary to take care of the weaker classes and, moreover, the Green Forest aroused the interest of sightseers. It is not very well remembered that it was in that very period when, due to great famine and epidemics, Kurpie set off to Poland to ask for help and it was their first self-presentation. Not as heroes, but as poor people, arousing compassion. They were

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to authors from the Kurpie region, it is worth recommending the article by Małgorzata Madej, *Obraz Kurpia na przestrzeni dziejów*. *Rocznik Mazurski (Szczytno)* 2007, Vol. XI, p. 132 (stereotypes, but simplified) and others.

also encountered on exile routes, among emigrants. And great poverty made itself felt again due to the damage done during the First World War<sup>10</sup>.

It is impossible to overrate Adam Chętnik's merits in "discovering Kurpie". He was an author of many publications, an editor of journals, but also a researcher, a museum worker, a social and political activist (MP), a person of great authority. It is a pity that the "well-educated Kurpian" had no pupils, did not raise his successor, and it must be remembered, besides, that Chętnik combined, however, the historical truth with the legend. Nonetheless, after World War II, at first Kurpie were liked by high authorities as an "anti-feudal element", poor peasants (they were forgiven even the strong attachment to the Catholic faith), and in the 1950s a Kurpian became a real treasure for ethnographers! (Jacek Żukowski). "Kurpiology" became present with a very good result at the University of Warsaw, under Anna Kutrzeba Pojnarowa's editorship the first and so far the only one three-volume monograph *Kurpie. Puszcza Zielona* was created (1962–1965). Those large programmes of ethnographic research with the participation of scholars (i.a. Jacek Ołędzki, Marian Pokropek) and students ended in the second half of the 1960s, but still in the 1970s individual research (i.a. Wanda Paprocka) was conducted.

The enthusiasm gradually disappeared, the Ostrołęka voivodeship established in 1975 did not manage to address the mission, although new institutions were created then and local researchers – popularisers (e.g. Jerzy Kijowski, Stanisław Pajka) worked in better conditions. The truth is, however, that Adam Chętnik Scientific Society in Ostrołęka was established as one of the last in the country. The neglect of staffing emerged, incompetent people who were neither attached to the region nor interested in its past, including the problems of Kurpie, took up important positions, which was observed with concern. The propaganda message – that the whole new voivodeship, including many former villages and small towns as well as larger towns of old metric, is wholly Kurpian – was a mistake<sup>11</sup>. The effect was definitely counter-productive, the image of a Kurpian suffered as a result, as they were perceived in the voivodeship as paupers with mediocre statistical indicators. Although a lot was written and spoken about Kurpie, the commonly used epithets were repeated, legends were referred to and too little was done to improve the condition of the authentic Kurpian communities, to strengthen – especially among the young generation – the regional identity. The voivodeship

<sup>10</sup> Also in that respect, a volume by A. Chętnik, *Mazurskim szlakiem. Opisy, obrazy, opowieści i gadki z pogranicza Prus Wschodnich*. Łomża 1939, remains definitely unappreciated.

<sup>11</sup> The Union of Kurpie in 1991 estimated that Kurpie inhabited compactly 8 communes (Baranowo, Czarnia, Kadzidło, Lelis, Łyse, Myszyniec, Turośl, Zbójnia), which cover 19% of the Ostrołęka voivodeship area with 11% of the population. Also S. Pajka, *Region kurpiowski – zarys problematyki*. Zeszyty Naukowe OTN 1991, Vol. V, p. 98 (examples of pejorative descriptions of Kurpie in the former White Kurpie, 103, Idem, *Kształtowanie się społecznego ruchu narodowego w regionie kurpiowskim Puszczy Zielonej*. Zeszyty Naukowe OTN 1992, Vol. VI, p. 121.

was liquidated in 1999, the problems remained, “so the challenge of the present is to maintain the regional identity by promoting the heritage”<sup>12</sup>. However, I suggest modifying the second part of the last sentence a bit: “by exploring and promoting the heritage”.

Provocative questions may also be asked. Should the current state be maintained, assessing it as satisfactory, or rather should we save all that can be saved, reverse at least some of the unfavourable trends? According to the wishes of Kurpie and under the leadership of their authentic leaders, or out of necessity mainly by means of state and local institutions, with the help of European funds? Which Kurpie: *pnioki* (Kurpians since time immemorial), *krzoki* (newcomers already well-acclimatized) or *ptoki* (temporary)? It is an old division, nowadays it is perhaps more important to distinguish between the falling number of Forest Kurpians and town Kurpians who are doing much better. It is known that the area and population of the Green Forest is decreasing and the demographic structure of the population is changing unfavourably. Can a miracle happen in this situation and will the success defined by L. Krzywicki be repeated? Are Kurpie able to work out and implement effective programs of processing (confirming) their identity in the time of complicated, violent transformations?

### Facts and legends

Prowess, the will to resist the invaders was considered the most important asset of the Forest inhabitants. Tadeusz Wiśniewski, in 2004, published a book about the involvement of Kurpie in insurrections and nineteenth-century wars. This publication can be regarded as apologia, a comprehensive review of battle events in 1794 (Kościuszko uprising, an incident with hiding a Prussian cannon), 1809 and 1812 (the 6th Regiment of Rifle Infantry, Napoleonic Wars), 1831 (the already mentioned Polish-Russian war, did the Forest inhabitants actually take part in the Battle of Ostrołęka on 26 May?), 1863–1864 (January Uprising with an indication of Zygmunt Padlewski and the Battle of Myszyniec). The author had no doubt that “the Kurpie people [...] brave and deeply patriotic with determination defended not only their own households and their region, but the whole homeland for which they were ready to give life”. In the final conclusions, T. Wiśniewski added the statement: “To be a good Kurpian, meant to be a good citizen” and he repeated after Józef Kazimierski the term the Republic of Kurpie<sup>13</sup>. All the three statements enrich the positive image of a Kurpian, they cannot be regarded as completely unfounded, but they require a more careful, critical analysis.

<sup>12</sup> *Kurpiologia. Dziedzictwo kurpiowskie w perspektywie antropologicznej...* Ed. J. Żukowski. Ostrołęka 2013, p. 8 (session materials). There is a term in this publication in the Kurpian context about the legendary pioneers of Warsaw ethnography.

<sup>13</sup> T. Wiśniewski, *Udział Kurpiów w walkach narodowowyzwoleńczych w XIX wieku*. Ostrołęka 2004; J. Kazimierski, *Dzieje północno-wschodniego Mazowsza 1525–1864*, [In:] *Dzieje ziem województwa ostrołęckiego*. Warszawa 1984, p. 108.

Stach Konwa was most popularized, mainly thanks to Adam Chętnik, Andrzej Zakrzewski, Wiktor Czajewski (Antoni Chleboradzki), Leszek Bakula. Konwa, as the only Kurpian, was honoured with monuments (it is time to commemorate Chętnik with a monument!) rhyming poems and other publications. In heroic descriptions, he “was a great patriot of the Łomża Land, the conqueror of Swedes, Saxons and Muscovites”<sup>14</sup>, a hero from Most Kopański, hanged after the battle of Jednaczewo. However, we are not certain of most of the facts given in Konwa’s biographies, according to the tradition of a Kurpian rifleman. Incidentally, during the so-called war of the Polish succession between the supporters of Augustus III Sas and Stanisław Leszczyński, some of the Kurpians betrayed Poland by going to the Russian troops’ side that supported Sas. Wiesław Majewski, when analysing the last phase of the fighting, did not mention Stach Konwa, but assessed that “Forests, numerous large and uncharted swamps made the Green Forest – the last bastion for Dzikowianie who were still fighting, a natural fortress”. Also, forest heaps and field fortifications (“szańczyki”) contributed to that. “Against the background of the general collapse of the Polish military in the years 1733–1735, activities in the area of the Green Forest represent its bright side”<sup>15</sup>.

The myth of a Kurpian – a free Forest inhabitant, was passed on from folk tradition to literature, underwent patriotic sublimation. Wojciech Woźniak connected it “with the process of transforming the ethnic awareness of the people into the national awareness, that is the awareness of history” The participation of the Green Forest inhabitants in great historic events was emphasized and their role was exaggerated. What is more, “the patriotic idealization of the myth of a free Kurpian made his less appealing characteristics remain hidden and therefore, for example, “Kurpian robberies await their explorer”<sup>16</sup>. Let me add that the problem of completing a set of research threads can be related to different periods of time. Marek Nowotka, when writing about a new look at the reality created on the Kurpian-Mazurian borderland after 1945, pointed out the malevolent role of looters. Those from the Green Forest “ruled” against the law in the southern areas of the Szczytno county. “No wonder that a Kurpian has become synonymous with brutality and primitivism for Mazurians”. The people who returned to their homes after their escape from the approaching Red Army, mainly women, children and the elderly, were ruthlessly robbed by their “neighbours” from across the former

<sup>14</sup> This is what A. Chętnik wrote in *Gość Puszczański* on the occasion of the unveiling of the monument of Stach Konwa in June 1922. None of the given statements is completely true, the most surprising is the patriotism of the Łomża Land.

<sup>15</sup> W. Majewski, *Puszcza Zielona ostatnią ostoją Dzikowian (maj–grudzień 1735 r.)*. Zeszyty Naukowe OTN, 1987, Vol. I, p. 13, 25. Dzikowianie, the army of the confederation formed in Dzików near Tarnobrzeg, supporting S. Leszczyński to take the Polish throne.

<sup>16</sup> W. Woźniak, *Mit wolnego Kurpia w literaturze*. Ostrołęka 1984, pp. 9–10, 14 (with reference to the book by H. Syska, *Scalone pogranicze*. Warszawa 1975, p. 136). Zagajnica was perceived as a place full of thieves and all kinds of crooks.



border. Can such behaviour be justified as revenge for what they suffered themselves during the war?<sup>17</sup>

The differences in the judgment of Kurpie are more understandable due to the fact that “a Kurpian – was not a peasant because a peasant was a serf. He was not a nobleman, but many noblemen carried out the duties typical of a peasant. He was not a Jew, he was not a German colonist”. He was free, stubborn, obstinate, hard-working and inventive, with a patriotic attitude, and fought with “feudal oppression”, cared for honour<sup>18</sup>. Hipolit Gawarecki noticed before 1830 the contrast between the sad neighborhood (sand dunes, swamps, “wicked woods”) and the condition of the inhabitants, whom he considered as wealthier in the Kingdom of Poland. “So despite the miserable state of the land they inhabit, they are doing quite well and are so attached to their family land that there is no way for a Kurpian to leave the Forest and settle in the fields, and meanwhile many people from fertile lands keep coming to the Forest”. The author regarded the men of Zagajnica as vain, but the women as hardworking, he praised the condition of Kurpian houses, appreciated amber digging and bee-keeping. Another eyewitness, Kazimierz Wójcicki, in 1843 pointed out that in the Green Forest “animals were emaciated, bee-keeping destroyed and the Forest, their homeland lost its former dignity”. A. Połujański, when praising the riflemen for bravery, added that “for them a human life means as much as «saliva». A Kurpian, excellent at bee-keeping, potash production and ore mining, was able to hunt a bison, a bear and a boar just for the joy of it [...] he could shoot a flying hazel grouse or some other bird as easily as we eat roast from the plate”. At the same time, they are revengeful, savage, not very willing to work, but theft and drunkenness have become their innate defects; moreover, the women have no modesty or bashfulness, they consider lust as everyday fun and bad language as casual conversation”<sup>19</sup>.

Surprising discrepancies in the three above-mentioned texts resulted – as may be reckoned – from a rather superficial research on the Green Forest and its villages conducted by the authors. It is very likely that those areas differed considerably from one another, and we are making the mistake of referring the partial comments of the contemporary observers to the whole of Zagajnica. Therefore, we are not able to fully present the phenomenon of Kurpie. Barely had it been born, when there was observed the disappearance of old habits, especially

<sup>17</sup> M. Nowotka, *Trudna powojenna rzeczywistość, Z problematyki badawczej pogranicza kurpiowsko-mazurskiego po 1945 roku – nowe spojrzenie*. Rocznik Mazurski (Szczytno) 2014, Vol. XVIII, pp. 93–100. By the same author: *Z problemów badawczych pogranicza kurpiowsko-mazurskiego po 1945 r.* Mrągowskie Studia Humanistyczne. Nowa Seria 2014, Vol. 1(10), i.a., p. 51 (the policy of Ostrołęka voivodeship government towards Masurian people emigrating to FRG in the seventies of 20th c.).

<sup>18</sup> H. Samsonowicz, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> H. Gawarecki, *Pamiętnik historyczny płocki*, Vol. II. Warszawa 1830, pp. 56–57; K. Wójcicki, *Kurpie: powieść historyczna*, Vol. 1. Lwów 1834, p. 243; A. Połujański, op. cit., pp. 63, 65.

those related to bee-keeping and hunting. The already mentioned authors of novels and sketches from the past wrote about it. The process intensified with the passing of decades, especially as a result of repressive rights (for example the prohibition to carry weapons issued in 1816), after the enfranchisement of peasants in 1864 (the emergence of a group of people called “luźniacza”, the landless settled on a few acres of forest wasteland<sup>20</sup>), as a result of mass emigration starting from the last dozen or so years of the nineteenth century. It is possible to show the differences in judgment using the last example, because according to some, seasonal earnings in East Prussia and longer journeys over the ocean saved Kurpian village from falling, made it possible to buy more land and construct new buildings. According to others, however, they led to the deterioration of morality, the spread of drunkenness and smoking cigarettes in the Forest, the loss of faith<sup>21</sup>. In the interwar period, A. Chętnik published a volume: *Jak ginie Kurpiowszczyzna* (1935), and Fr. Władysław Skierkowski in his immortal *Wesele...* added the statement: “Old customs and rituals are disappearing, ridiculed by modern generations”. The lack of Kurpian intelligentsia accelerated that process<sup>22</sup>.

### Eventually the Kurpie phenomenon

I focused on the doubts, gaps in the research, I asked questions. And yet – I will emphasize it – I am most deeply convinced of the values which constitute the Kurpie phenomenon and, therefore, concerned about the future of this small region. It awaits a new, full monograph, a more effective promotion which would involve not only the institutions and great personalities of Ostrołęka. I have dreamed for a long time about a scientific expedition following the example of the one about Yotvingians (Jaćwingowie) and by the already mentioned ethnographers of the Warsaw University. Funds, high protectorates, young forces are necessary.

Kurpie is not only amber (dowry, currency, church, from Kadzidło, funeral, medical, witch doctor...<sup>23</sup>), the remaining huts (A. Chętnik wrote touchingly about old Kurpians’ attachment to their huts; at least several pieces of wood from the

<sup>20</sup> M. Grzywa, *Mieszkańcy Puszczy Zielonej wobec upadku powstania styczniowego i represji*. Rocznik Mazowiecki (Warszawa) 2010, Vol. XXII, p. 75. The author did not consider the possibility of the Forest inhabitants informing on insurgents and joining the ranks of the “peasant guard”.

<sup>21</sup> The praise of exile and emigration can be found in the memoirs of the Forest inhabitants and the condemnation of it in the contemporary press. A good example of that is a series of articles by D. Staszewski published in 1903 in “Echa Płockie i Łomżyńskie” entitled *Moralność i umoralnianie Kurpiów. Studium obyczajowe*.

<sup>22</sup> W. Skierkowski, *Wesele na Kurpiach*. Płock 1933, p. 18; S. Pajka, *Regionalizm kurpiowski w latach międzywojennych*. Zeszyty Naukowe OTN 1992, Vol. VI, pp. 29–30.

<sup>23</sup> J. Jastrzębski, *Bursztyniarstwo na Kurpiach*. Płock 1999, p. 25 and Rother, numerous publications.

previous hut were put into the wall of a new hut<sup>24</sup>, folk customs (also related to the sacraments<sup>25</sup>), songs and dances, Kurpian tales (there have recently appeared numerous reprints and even a dictionary of selected names and Kurpian expressions, 2013), sculptures and paintings, blacksmithing and cutouts, food (without extraneous inspirations, though modest<sup>26</sup>). If industry, it had to be local (canvas weaving<sup>27</sup>), if agriculture, it had to be ecological, if hotel business, then with agri-tourism.

We need to summarize the events on the routes of Kurpie and, avoiding cheap, banal admiration, discuss the programs of preserving the phenomenon of Kurpie.

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<sup>24</sup> A. Chętnik, *Chata*. Warszawa 1915, p. 108. The legendary Bachmura did not want to move from an “old, shabby hut” to the colony, he died in his old household, in the granary. Works by M. Pokropek, F. Piaścik.

<sup>25</sup> Vide: *Kultura religijna Kurpiowszczyzny*. Ed. F.M. Ozorowski. Olecko 2004, p. 40 (some have survived, but “the circle of participants has decreased significantly, limited to the closest family and chosen friends”)

<sup>26</sup> A. Chętnik, *Pożywienie Kurpiów, Jadło i napoje zwykłe, obrzędowe i głodowe*. Kraków 1936 (*grycana kasa, to radość nasa!*); C. Orłowski, M. Woźniczko, *Kuchnia kurpiowska i jej wpływ na atrakcyjność turystyczną regionu*. Warszawa 2008.

<sup>27</sup> W. Paprocka, *Przemysł domowy, rzemiosło i chałupnictwo wsi kurpiowskiej Puszczy Zielonej*. Wrocław 1967.

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## SUMMARY

We rave about Kurpie, which is not in line with learning about their history, distinguishing between legends and facts. Research is hindered by the lack of old written sources from the region, the late “discovery of Kurpie”, the weakness of local urban centers. Adam Chętnik contributed the most to documenting the past and promoting his countrymen. However, he did not leave any disciples, and he willingly interwoven the truth with legends. That mixture was most strongly manifested in the descriptions of the stages of settlement in the Kurpian Zagajnica, also in the attempts at creating the image of a Kurpian, the juxtaposition of their personality traits, the assessment of the role they played in history. At the base of the Kurpie phenomenon lies, as Ludwik Krzywicki found, the activity of the Forest inhabitants, who proved themselves independent, managed to form their ethnic awareness. “The discovery of Kurpie” accelerated the process of giving them place in the national history during the period of Partitions. In independent Poland, the fashion for Kurpie increased, as well as the admiration for their bravery, loyalty to tradition, original manifestations of material and spiritual culture. The question arises as to whether the Kurpie phenomenon has the chance to continue in a situation when the area of settlement in the Green Forest is shrinking, unfavorable demographic changes are taking place, and the entire region still has unsatisfactory economic potential.

## STRESZCZENIE

Zachwycamy się Kurpiami, co nie idzie w parze z poznawaniem ich dziejów, odróżnianiem legendy od faktów. Badania utrudnia brak dawnych źródeł pisanych z tego regionu, późne „odkrywanie Kurpiów”, słabość lokalnych ośrodków miejskich. Największe zasługi w dokumentowaniu przeszłości i promowaniu swych ziomeków miał Adam Chętnik, który jednak nie zostawił uczniów, a sam chętnie przeplatał prawdę z legendami. Najmocniej to przemieszanie uwidoczniło się w opisach etapów osadnictwa w Zagajnicy Kurpiowskiej, także w próbach tworzenia portretu Kurpia, zestawianiu cech jego charakteru, ocenie roli dziejowej. U podstaw fenomenu kurpiowskiego leży – jak ustalił Ludwik Krzywicki – aktywność Puszczaków, którzy wykazali się samodzielnością, doprowadzili do ukształtowania się świadomości etnicznej. „Odkrywanie Kurpiów” przyspieszyło ich wpisywanie w historię narodową w dobie zaborów. W Polsce niepodległej nasilała się moda na Kurpiów, podziw dla ich dzielności, wierności tradycji, oryginalnych przejawów kultury materialnej i duchowej. Powstaje pytanie, czy fenomen kurpiowski ma szansę na kontynuację w sytuacji, gdy kurczy się zasięg osadnictwa w Puszczy Zielonej, zachodzą niekorzystne zmiany demograficzne, a cały region ma wciąż niezadawalający potencjał ekonomiczny.

**Key words:** Green Kurpie and White Kurpie, the Green Forest (Zagajnica), settlement in the Mazovian-Masurian borderland, regional identity, facts and legends, ethnography, folk culture, Adam Chętnik

**Słowa kluczowe:** Kurpie Zielone i Kurpie Białe, Puszcza (Zagajnica) Zielona, osadnictwo na pograniczu mazowiecko-mazurskim, tożsamość regionalna, fakty i legendy, etnografia, kultura ludowa, Adam Chętnik