

# Natural Born Farmer. Rural childhood and farm work in eastern Poland

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## Abstract

The goal of the article is to analyze the attitude of parents towards their children's work in one of the contemporary Podlasie voivodeship villages. Presenting the context of anthropological study of kinship allows to see that rural families, especially those who undertook farming, are subject to numerous cultural and economic influences, the most important of which is the problem of inheriting the farm. Despite the expectations of the parents, in recent years a falling number of children (sons) wish to remain in the countryside. Women, who participate less and less in the lives of the farms, are encouraged to get higher education. Based on ethnographic research conducted in the Sokoły commune in 2016-2017, the author looks at the current situation influencing the upbringing of children in rural families. She takes into account the changing emotional conditions of the family, specific treating of boys (between giving them free reign of choosing the profession and the expectation that they would stay on the farm), methods of arousing farming interest in children, and the contemporary attitude towards farming education. The result of the analysis is the description of the differences between the cultivated traditional family model and the upbringing, as well as the resultant incompatibility of masculine and feminine models. Additionally, contemporary rural parents increasingly often take the choices of their children seriously.

**Key words:** rural childhood, kinship, child labour in farming, rural upbringing.

## Introduction

The interest in the role of children in contemporary agriculture is the result of my observations of the daily life of the inhabitants of one of east Poland's communes during an ethnographic project I conducted as part of my student's practice.<sup>1</sup> One of the most remarkable features of the community is its aging, caused primarily by the emigration of the younger generations and their reluctance to work the field. Many of my interviewees feel the threat of

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<sup>1</sup> I undertook 4 research fieldtrips, each lasting from 7 to 10 days. I conducted deep interviews as well as participant observation. I spent some time living with the area's farming families.

the land not being taken over by their descendants, so that in consequence the owners will need to sell or rent it. Farming is still the most important part of the region's economy and is the central hub for the region's tradition and identity. Working the land was, and still is, mostly a family endeavor, despite numerous transformations. From the point of view of an anthropologist, it seemed extremely important to research what the upbringing of children looks like in such uneasy times, in the face of deeply-set customs and identities.

During my interviews, a recurrent subject of the children's activities was, as the interviewees worded it, "help" on the farms. The issue seemed interesting to me because of the prevailing journalistic discourse on children's labor as a decidedly morally negative situation associated with social underdevelopment (J. 2017; Józefiak 2017). Field experience made me realize that such children's activity in family practices is a complex and ambiguous phenomenon.

The main subject of my interviews was the upbringing of children in the agricultural families with special attention paid to the upbringing of boys. This is the result of my observation from my interviewees' opinion that actually working the field, physical activity on the farm, has become more of a masculine feature than in the past. Women's participation in farm work is on the fall; they rather turn to bookkeeping and the bureaucracy of farming efforts. They may even be totally disengaged from the daily life of their farms in favor of their professional development, although the situation depends to a large degree on intra-family relations. Because of this, the attitude of parents towards the upbringing of children in relation to work, something that still dictates the daily rhythm and duties of a farming family, was of special interest to me.

In order to understand the importance of non-adults' work in the countryside, an anthropological analysis of the phenomena which form Sokoły's current situation, is necessary. Child labor in contemporary Polish farming is a subject which is not easily found in subject literature. Maybe one of the reasons behind this gap is the complexity of the issue. Detailed description of the subject area requires a combination of a few sub-areas which are the topic of interest of contemporary ethnology: anthropology of labor, countryside, family, gender, childhood. This article is therefore initiated by a methodological part that brings forth the most important concepts related to those notions. The second part is related directly to the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Sokoły commune in 2016 and 2017.

## Rural family – anthropological reflections and the perspectives of Sokoły

In my research, it was important to separate a group of farming families from the wider community of rural families. The first group is characterized with strong mutual dependence of family members / people from one another, a specific micro-economy, and the permeating of professional and family roles with one another (cf.. King Elder Jr. 1995, 165). During the research, the priority was to study the relations within farming families and so they constitute the research group. However, I am also quoting from the rural people who do not take care of a farm in their everyday role. Their testimonies are a supplement of the researched phenomenon.

For the purpose of this text, a few issues related to the contemporary rural family need to be noted. We need to draw the attention to the associations of economy and family. In accordance with the majority of current concepts, I am abandoning the definition of a family (cf. Rappaport, Overing 2000, 217-229) in favor of the situation and relations within the family. In the words of Frances Pine, the family, once treated as a natural being, is increasingly often seen as the effect of symbolic or ideological actions (Pine 2002, 340). Gerald W. Creed describes the modern form of the family as the mutual relations of economic and cultural conditions (Creed 2000, 333). The late 20th-century research shows that homesteads appear in varying versions, depending on the social and economic situation. The previously promoted model of a nuclear family as a model social unit in the industrial era was undermined by researchers who show varied relations within the closest kin (Pine 2002, 344).

Therefore, in this text I am assuming a family to be a social group based on different ties across generations, partners, cooperating individuals (Winthrop 1991). Contemporary rural family, as well as the community of Polish farmers as a whole, is considered a heterogenous group, therefore some similarities can be pointed out, but no common features. For decades, anthropological subject literature analyzed the issues of the family, blood kinship, habitation, and homestead as interconnected. As Frances Pine says, people have been using the notions of “family” and “home” for centuries, with intuitive understanding thereof, so they find it problematic to actually define the notions when pressed (Pine 2002, 340). Therefore, during the study I did not attempt asking questions related to meanings, although we jointly recognized some characteristic features of rural communities. Among others, as indicated by other researchers of contemporary countryside, the inhabitants of Sokoły indicated important and close relations between community members even when there were no blood relations between them to speak of (cf. Krzyworzeka 2013, 2014, Yanagisako 1979).

A contemporary Sokoły family is undergoing economic and cultural changes. The tension is perfectly reflected in Gerald W. Creed's quote: "the concept of the family farm, with the emotions it evokes and the policies it has provoked, constitutes definitive proof of the relationship between family culture and economy" (Creed 2000, 336). Currently, family farmsteads are an area filled with uncertainty as to the future of Polish countryside, an unbreakable negotiation of the conditions of the group members participation. According to Danuta Markowska, the author of *Rodzina wiejska na Podlasiu 1864-1964* [*A Podlasie rural family, 1864-1964*], establishing a family in a rural area is an economical and social necessity. Markowska writes that the offspring serves to legitimize the marriage and to introduce actual joint property (Markowska 1970, 189-191). This is a symbolic consent for the younger generation to take over the farmstead. Even though these words were written almost half a century ago, in many aspects they are related to contemporary Sokoły. A family, understood as at least two generations living under a single roof, is first and foremost the guarantee of the farm surviving in the nearest future. Fears of lack of family and the resultant uncertainty as to the future of the farm are embodied by the figure of a "confirmed bachelor", an antithesis of a rural family and the hope of the future of farms.

The improvement of economic situation in the recent decades and the pressure of gaining education changed the approach of the young generation towards duties and work itself. My interview participants see the lower interest in work, furthering the farm, and they grieve the changed perspective of the young. At the same time they see the growing autonomy of their children's will. The cure for the possible unruliness of the offspring, in their opinion, lies in gaining respect to farm work. However, it is often remarked how unstable contemporary life of a farmer is. For this reason, many interviewees declare their support of their children getting into careers.

## Work and gender – masculinization of farming

Anthropological research of gender in the context of farming is underlined, in a cultural way, by the masculine character of the profession. In the last few decades, however, researchers show that the current face of farming is more complex than previously described, and the role of women is not that obvious<sup>2</sup> (cf. Brandth 2002, 182). A farmstead is associated with a masculine domain, although, naturally, in practice it is often ran commonly, by a married

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<sup>2</sup> The role of women in the contemporary rural areas is described also by the second participant of my research group, Joanna Dąbrowska.

couple or another extended group. However, the binding with the cultural patterns is translated to legal and institutional activity – the legal owners and inheritors of farms are men.

“Family farming is patriarchal; the male farmer is head of the farm family and the family farm and makes the relevant decisions. He is the farm’s public face, and he participates in agricultural organisations and forums. Family farming is based on the labour force of family members with the allocation of tasks being fundamentally gendered. Women are responsible for care and household tasks and this task allocation has been regarded as a ‘natural’ distribution of work on the basis of certain gender specific attributes.” (Brandth 2002, 184).

Women are responsible for the home sphere but they also perform major work on the farm. “(...) are adaptable and flexible as work force and for this reason are often regarded as the farmer’s helper or assistant. Women on farms have a great workload, a ‘double burden’, with little return” (Brandth 2002, 184). Sometimes the activity of mothers, grandmothers, and daughters is identified as altruism (cf. Stanis 2013, 255). What is important, and is the consequence of my research in Sokoły, is that women often find it problematic to describe their role (cf. Brandth 2002, 184). A lot of research stemming from the feminist paradigm shows a patriarchal character of farming. According to this research, it serves as a tool for women’s oppression. As Jo Little indicates, contemporary role of women in rural areas is definitely more discursive, therefore it is also subject to larger negotiations (Little, 2002, 667). I have the impression that such rhetorics is also present in Polish rural areas, where women stress the heaviness of their work on the farm; however, it also serves to underline the changes, thanks to which women are increasingly often free to choose their profession. It definitely does not perceive women as the “victims of the system”, though, as it used to be stated before (cf. Brandth 2002, 186). It needs to be stressed that the strategy of women, and all farming family members, is loyalty (Brandth 2002, 186).

An extremely important term for the approached perspective lies in the phenomenon of masculinization of farming and the related analysis of the contemporary role of men in the rural areas. Technology is commonly associated with the masculine sphere, and the dominant stereotypes of a rural man are based on physical (or, as in this case, technological) control of the nature (cf. Little 2002, 666). With the progressing mechanization of farming, even tasks that used to be performed by women were taken over by men. Thus, mechanization allows women to gradually retreat from farming (Brandth 2002, 188). As a consequence, women turn gradually from farm workers into housewives or, as I was able to observe in Sokoły, they enter the job market, become increasingly independent economic entities (Brandth 2002, 189-190).

From a spatial-social perspective, women, specifically wives and daughters of farmers, are becoming much more dynamic in comparison to static men-farmers, who in turn are closely bound to a place that they can leave only for a few hours at one time. Brandth (in perhaps somewhat defeatist words) diagnoses: “not only has farming turned into a male occupation, but connected to the ‘crisis in masculinity’, remote rural areas are turning into male bastions with recruitment- and bachelor problems” (Brandth 2002, 191). Granted, in Sokoły one can also see divergence in roles and expectations, with the majority of heteronormative relationships, however, models of masculinity and femininity seem incompatible.

When taking into account the division of labor at the farmstead, the described area is no different from the majority of other Polish rural areas. The role of the main caretaker and boss is reserved to a man, while women are assigned the areas of the house, the garden, food, and bringing up children, even if women go outside of the farm to do paid work. Tasks are assigned based on age. If the custodians of the farm do not live in a multi-generation house, but e.g. in two houses on the same lot, division of tasks may still apply and e.g. grandmothers are tasked with taking care of children. It seemed to me that the division of “masculine” tasks in Sokoły was not that diversified, but the distribution of feminine tasks depends on a number of economic, class, etc. factors. My interview participants perceive a major change in the tasks of women in a farmstead, which is confirmed by e.g. by the abovementioned and recurring statement of “women used to have a harder time in the countryside.” My interviewees tended to stress that the clear division of tasks in their families is the result of tradition only. Repeatedly, the anachronous character of sorts of the assigned roles was brought up – a man taking care of the farm and a woman taking care of the house and putting food on the table.

## Children and labor: analyses and consequences

Children’s labor is a subject undertaken by social sciences mostly in the context of historical division of labor and in the area of anthropology of development. Subject literature hosts the dominant voice of condemning child labor, interpreting it as the effect of poverty, low education levels, and social inequalities. When reading the literature, a dose of criticism is required, though. Child labor needs to be interpreted from the socio-economic perspective but also in the wide context of contemporary family studies.

Interdisciplinary childhood studies show that the current interpretations are based on beliefs and constructs which are culturally associated with childhood. Agency is often denied to the researched group, and a child is often perceived as abstracted from market mechanisms or introduced into the said mechanisms by force. Olga Nieuwenhuys, a Dutch anthropologist,

indicates that the contemporary approach to the activity which attempts to eliminate children's labor is the result of the social policies introduced in Europe, mainly in the then imperial states of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is above all related to the propagating of common education, with the shifting role of the child and the status of the family (Nieuwenhuys 1996, 238-239). The reform of law defined the acceptable duties: house chores, care of the older children over the younger, helping parents in a family business, etc. Unlike labor, the duties were to socialize children and prepare them for adult life (Nieuwenhuys 1996, 239). Western law defined what is considered labor and chores in administration but also in collective consciousness.

Anthropology described child labor in two contexts: its importance in family structures and the aspect of the relations between labor, socialization, and school (Nanjunda 2010, 46-47). Many researchers, however, focus on the meaning of the figure of a child and their activity in the context of the family, not on the economy (Nanjunda 2010, 47). From the perspective of the research of relations it shows that both paid and unpaid labor become forms of tightening the family bonds.

It could be an important goal of anthropology to show the role of children in the economic mechanisms. Because of the complicated symbolic connotations, their role is marginalized or not seen. The perception of the labor of poorer children as only socializing equals marginalizing its economic meaning (Nieuwenhuys 1996, 246). At the same time, as D. C. Nanjunda shows, child labor is always the result of some defined and hierarchical family structure. Child labor and the involvement of children in economy is proven by the dominant models of family and marriages (Nanjunda 2010, 55, 57). Rural child labor has long been an exception to the prohibition of the youngest people doing work (cf. Effland 2005, 281). For a long time this phenomenon was associated with the created image of the countryside, where farming life was to be a kind of ideal of pre-industrial community (Effland 2005, 285).

In most contemporary families, children do not accompany their elders at work until they say they want to join in. It may turn out to be never, as well. In this aspect, I see the similarity between Sokoły and Anne Solberg's description. The Norwegian researcher analyzed the involvement of rural children in their parents' activities. According to her, contemporary children are not pressed to act anymore, they are perceived, both by themselves and their parents, as aware social actors. Therefore, they decide whether they want to engage in an activity, what activity they want to engage in and for how long (in: Liebel 2004, 123). Also, the rural parenthood model is changed, with the new one considered middle-class (Brandth, Overrein 2012, 102). This means that children more rarely accompany their parents

at work, and that increasingly often rural parents spend their free time on pastimes chosen by their sons and daughters. Changes in agricultural production were supposed to bring changes in approach towards teaching labor, and thus the inheriting of farmsteads. Children hope for one of their offspring to be able to take over the farm but still they leave the freedom of choice to their children (Brandth, Overrein, 107). I was able to observe a similar attitude in the families of Sokoły.

Even though the Norwegian research was conducted in completely different conditions than mine, my observations are strikingly similar. If I was to define the general character of relations between generations in the researched villages, I would say it is characterized by cooperation and support. The latter is not understood here as an altruistic gesture but rather as an arbitrary cultural requirement. This may be the most perceptible change in a Sokoły family within the recent decades. It has become the compulsory duty of a parent to enable the development and education of their children. Relations of the parents with those children who chose to stay in the countryside are mostly based on cooperation on the farm. The character of such a relation is often more formal and associated with institutional and legal regulations. Older farmers tend to set up their offspring as farm owners – in almost all the cases those being sons.

### Child labor and child-parent relations

Household duties of the youngest are the result of the abovementioned rule of support. Almost all the interviewees from rural families state that children ought to help their parents with minor or major tasks. Whether a parent urges a child to work depends on the nature of their contact. The tasks performed by children also differ in reference to the internal family relations. I was able to observe that in contemporary villages, the main and fundamental activity of this type is keeping the house tidy (cf. Lachowski 2008/2009, 95). In some families, a division of tasks between children is apparent: one vacuums the floors, another uses the mop on the tiles. Even if the cleaning is not as effective as that done by their mother, this is a type of learning and discipline.

Even when children do not participate in the farm's activities, keeping the surroundings tidy is an unquestionable duty, because of its educational dimension. According to my interviewees, working for the household and lending a hand to the parents in daily chores are a kind of a lesson in life. It forms a foundation for future skills mostly related to living in a community and in a family. Work is a means to order coexistence with others, therefore it is of



socializing character. It is the most important value of children's work at times when a shift from "economically useful" towards "emotionally priceless" has occurred (cf. Blair 1992, 243).

The commune's inhabitants declare that it is therefore best to introduce a child to farming, even when the children's activities are supposed to be plays, and the effects are meager (or even become a burden to the custodian rather than actual help, cf. Blair 1992, 244). One of the older female farmers told me the story of her few-year-old grandson trying to help her with the animals. She said it openly that his help was tiring for her but such activity could not be overestimated.

When is the right time for the offspring to have their parents actually appreciate the effects of their efforts? Most parents indicated at the age of 14-15 (end of elementary school, beginning of secondary school) because of higher trust towards the children ("you need to keep an eye out for the small ones", I heard). Cases when children are involved in farm work at a younger age are usually caused by special situations of the families. For my interviewees, earlier taking up "serious" work is considered a burden and its difficult character is stressed. In such special circumstances, as the inhabitants of the village frequently say, even girls work the farms.

In his text on motivation to upbringing in the ethos of work, Sampson Lee Blair wrote that the socializing aspect always contains a safeguard for the parent in itself. Instilling altruism, willingness and eagerness to do work may "become activated" with a child exactly in critical family moments, when one of the family members is not capable of performing their duties (Blair 1992). We may set a hypothesis that the Sokoły inhabitants see the difficulty of such work precisely in its changed status. It is no longer a socializing element but rather real cooperation.

### Boys' upbringing to work

In farming families, division of work according to the gender of the offspring is especially visible. The differentiation comes at time when the child's activity starts bringing an economic result, (i.e. when the child is ready to perform major work with lower supervision of the parent). The children of the Sokoły farming families have traditionally designated duties, which are still realized in most of the families. The conclusion from my interviews was that tasks related specifically to the farmstead and helping at the farm were mostly assigned to boys, not girls.

Helping a mother or a grandmother with typically feminine tasks (gardening, daily animal care, cooking) are considered a fancy excess. According to the majority of my female

interviewees, true interests are gender-bound and boys are naturally inclined towards their fathers. As a mother of a preschool child and her mother-in-law told me, the boy was eager to follow his father at all times, so that he could ride the tractor with him, or his grandfather so that he could assist in heavier farming work. My interviewees point at the socialization of rural boys through mimicking their fathers. I have possibly not heard of such a relation between girls and their mothers – daughter-father relations were also rare.

The observations show that with no girls in a family, boys tend to help their mothers around the house more frequently, although relieving a mother from her house duties is generally desirable, regardless of the circumstances. The tasks assigned to gender roles are treated through priorities. One of my female interviewees, at the time graduating from secondary school, and living in a boarding house in a nearby town, returned home for the weekends to e.g. perform her assigned tasks, in this case cleaning the house. When I asked her if she did not have too many duties related to the upcoming exams, she said she did not consider cleaning the house a major duty. She explained that it was not about the willingness, but rather about the feel of needing to support her parents in their daily work, in her case related especially to her mother.

Nevertheless, in many cases where there is no daughter at home, mothers need to handle things on their own, as the major duty of the son is to support his father. One of the mothers of three adult sons told me, with regret in her voice, that her sons helped her with her duties, in this case milking the cows, until their father assigned them a different task.

### Interest in the farm

Parents declare that their children are free to choose their duties. Just like with every other childhood activity, first signs of fascination with farming are taken with a pinch of salt. I heard humorous stories of boys pretending to be their fathers when playing construction or machine repair.

My interviewees see the individual tastes of children. Not all children want to help their parents but each spark of interest they show in farming is accepted with enthusiasm. Apparent distance in these stories conceals large joy and hope. A good example is that of Zofia's family, where one of the school-aged sons shows no interest in helping out in the field, while the other, of similar age, is eager to work, including replacing his father completely at harvest time. I met the opinion that boys' fascination with the farm is the result of the "masculine" character and seeing their fathers as authority figures.

There are numerous methods for arousing farming interest in children. In the field, I was able to observe a few examples of socialization through play. During my visit to a Szepietowo pig show (June 2017) the largest attraction for children were cow- and tractor-shaped balloons, toy tractors, possibility to go onboard one of the presented machines. I see expediency in encouraging children to play which pretends to be work. In a few houses I saw building block barns (with both boys and girls), I heard preschool tales of digging up building-block potatoes. Such observations seem to confirm the theses from the research of farmer children play. Social researchers, including Hermann Bausinger, showed that because of the closeness of their parents' daily tasks and daily lives, rural children choose toys that resemble tools more often than city children pretending to be parents (in: Liebel 2004, 187).

My interviewees stress that mainly boys are interested in farming machines and farming in general. One of my female participants, a teacher, told me about gymnasium-level boy fascinations, who subscribe farming-related magazines and hold lively discussions about the published information. Their girl peers ought to "take care of themselves" to a larger degree.

My interviewees say, however, that for many young people the farm is a kind of hobby which may be only temporary. Early interest in farming work may change under the influence of the city, new media. Parents of five told me that each of their children knows how to sow and reap but not all do so with equal passion. These words confirm the testimony of a twenty-something farmer who has just received the deed to a farm: "Sometimes there are little kids that are interested in things, they walk all around the barns, play with toys, they have these little toy tractors. And then a few years go by, they grow up and they lose interest. They don't want to. Life has mysterious ways."

An interesting phenomenon which I was able to observe in the field is assigning a sort of mystical vocation to farm work. Tales of predestination and choosing the life of a farmer at a young age are full of tender emotions. I feel the distance of my interviewees towards childhood fascinations of the farm's affairs is but illusory. Some participants romanticize this lifestyle, and this is especially visible in those whose choice of this lifestyle was not that obvious at first. In one of the larger villages, I met Tomasz<sup>3</sup>, with a university diploma in social sciences, who became an owner of land only after his studies. He told me about the supernatural force of attraction of the field, if working it "is in the blood", as he feels. The farmer also explained that you cannot tell immediately if a child will become a farmer but you can search for specific character traits. The conversation with Tomasz had specific character, naturally, as

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<sup>3</sup> The real name of the interviewee was changed by the author.

his words did. However, I perceive in it the common idea of farmers which says the interest in farming is independent of the external factors and parent attempts. They may encourage their children, show them the most attractive sides of being a farmer, but they never know what the final decision of their offspring will be. The choice is the grand unknown, independent of knowledge and attempts. Maybe this is why it arouses so much fear in adults.

### Farming as a hobby – machines and animals

In the collected testimonies, there were numerous references to specific interest of the youngest in animals and machines. These two elements are also an attraction for the children that spend their daily lives in the city. It was a truism for my interviewees that children enjoy an almost supernatural empathy with animals. The youngest are said to be especially sensitive, patient and fond for livestock but also cats and dogs, equally in boys and girls. I heard stories of children who, for instance, were the only ones to correctly recognize individual cows, naming them. Some showed special relations with smaller animals, like cats or dogs.

A similar fascination, but reserved to boys, lies in the abovementioned machines: farming equipment and cars. I heard many humorous stories about getting your driver's license at the age of 18 in the city, and at the age of eight in the countryside. Moreover, some people perceive higher machine-handling predispositions in rural area boys – they handle well not only personal cars but also tractors.

Machines and animals are those elements of rural life that are especially fascinating for the youngest. The older see the attractiveness, so I would say that through reacting to this attractiveness they arouse the interest of the children in farming. As farms grow and become more mechanized, the most attractive elements become also threats.

### Children in the face of threats

The largest fears of rural parents are related to the security of their children and a sudden shift in their interest, resulting in abandoning the rural areas. The first fear is primarily associated with the age of their offspring. Children are encouraged to help as soon as possible. However, in the first years of their lives, parents need to divide their attention between doing their work properly and looking out for their children. In consequence, their work is less effective with a child in sight. This problem appeared in the interviews as early as my first field trip. Parents were afraid of a cow, being a wild animal, acting in an unpredicted way and doing harm to a child who is too small to be aware of the danger. The unpredictability is related to

both the livestock and child. Both sides are treated with mistrust and their uncontrollable urges are taken into account.

Practically the same situation is visible with children's contact with machines. Many contemporary parents do not let children go near machines because with the progressing mechanization of farming, an increasing number of machines can drag or pin down the child. Some even go as far as to blame mechanization of farming for abandoning upbringing through labor. A parent cannot distinguish a shout of play from that of fear and harm, so they do not allow children to play in the field, let alone work independently there. As contemporary research of the European rural communities shows, technological development and improvement of farming efficiency caused the presence of the child not only to be unnecessary but also dangerous. Changed interest focus of the youngest can become a relief for their parents (Brandth, Overrein 2012, 105).

Rural children are considered more cautious than their city peers. Marta, a mother of three school- and preschool-aged children, told me about a situation when her children rode their bicycles near large machines borrowed from their neighbor. One of the family's older people cautioned her not to let the children so close to the machines. Marta replied: "they know they are not to go too close." "They're just kids" – her neighbor said. "But these kids know" – Marta returned.

The category of threats also contains all elements that distract the child from the matters of the farm. They are mainly computers and mobile phones, considered "city" amusements. According to some of my interviewees, it is popularly believed that work socializes and teaches life, but a computer distances one from the traditional rules and disturbs the functioning of the young in the society. A parent needs to introduce regime, as the interest in computers almost always wins against farm work.

Rural parents who are not farmers say it is more difficult to control the children without family work on the farm. The young are therefore faced with many more threats: not only computers but also "bad company" of the visiting children who introduce non-internalized (but not necessarily absent from the communities) threats of alcohol, cigarettes, and possibly even drugs.

The above factors cause a neverending fear in the rural parents. It is caused by the daily lack of trust, a care in the parent-child relationship. What is typical of the rural areas is on one hand fear of the dangerous character of farm work and on the other, of each stimulus that can

divert the attention of the child. Agency, the responsibility of the child for their own actions, changes depending on the situation.

### Helping versus education

Getting good education is treated as a priority in the life of the young inhabitants of the rural areas. Daughters are especially encouraged to take up general education. Learning in a city is more important than daily assistance to their parents, so children living in dormitories and boarding houses, as the abovementioned secondary school graduate, are relieved from most duties. The situation of the youth, primarily boys, who decide to stay in the village, is becoming increasingly complicated. Parents often feel torn between encouraging children to get into careers outside farming and encouraging them to take over the farms. Currently, however, taking over a farm is complicated by the need to get farming education.

I have repeatedly heard that small boys do not like to go to school and are instead interested in the daily life of the farm. Despite this, getting at least secondary education at a decent level has become the main task of a child. Education is needed to reach for the desired future: taking over the farm or finding a well-paid job outside the rural areas. Parents sometimes willingly give up encouraging children to help, especially if they have problems at school or many extra-curricular activities. Some children, in terms of a sort of compromise, help on the farm only in the summer when they are free from the primary obligation: school.

Parents care about additional education for their children. In response to the interest in extra activities, the local culture center offers a wide range of activities for the younger and older generations. Some parents drive their children to villages located several kilometers from the commune's center for extra activities. English is especially popular. Learning languages is considered especially important; parents repeatedly said knowing English makes it easier to find a job and possibly stay abroad.

A different approach is offered in reference to farming education. According to the law, a farm can be signed over to anyone. Financing, however, can be obtained only by a person with education in farming. Young people who consider staying on the farm need to graduate at least from secondary school with a farming profile.

Until recently, many farmers in Sokoły graduated from the area's main technical secondary school in Krzyżewo, currently named after Stefania Karpowicz and established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The locals are eager to tell stories of the place's finest times, high level of education in the past. Currently the school hosts classes in a few majors but that of the farming technologist remains the main one. Almost all students are young men from the area's

villages: “some come and you see they are really into it, they are farmers who have been in the flow since they were kids” (Interview 2.8). Also, increasingly often, courses are joined by teenagers who, as the teacher interviewees suggested, do not have a vision of the future for themselves or were encouraged to enroll by their parents. Girls are still a rarity. Even after graduating, their social status as female farmers is uncertain. They do not work but merely “help”. In the recent years, the school has been in serious financial and attendance problems.

Teachers told me the technical school fights for every student – even those with unsatisfactory marks are promoted to higher grades. The local inhabitants consider the future of the school to look bad. In their opinion, the school, while getting poorer, cannot provide practical knowledge to students. As one of the teachers told me, school used to be a model which was carried over to homes. Currently, also because of mechanization, anachronous methods are taught using old machines – the ones actually used on farms are too expensive for the school to purchase. The words are confirmed by the school’s graduates who mostly value the education from their parents. They stress, however, that theory, especially at times of unified laws, differs from daily practice. As a consequence, school holds no authority among the students. This is not improved by the fact that practical subjects are mainly taught by women, whose competences in this area are not respected as a rule. People who want to become farmers are determined, they possess knowledge they have been collecting for years of practice while working since their early years, or they gain education through the experience of their parents.

I see a striking difference in the attitude of parents towards elementary education, secondary education, and farming education. Getting good education is an unquestioned priority which currently cannot be replaced by education through work or family socialization. The former two types of education have a leading role: they allow to get prestige and a pass to future career outside the rural area. The farming technical school is treated not as a seat of knowledge and broadening of the competences, but rather as an institution that allows for formal privileges to be gained after an at least initial decision regarding one’s future has been taken.

## Summary

Sokoły is full of contrasts between traditional division of roles and the contemporary approach to upbringing. As I showed in individual sections, most young women are relieved from their parents expecting them to take over the farms. Young sons are an uncertain figure,

though – on one hand, according to the contemporary approach, they are free to choose their life path, on the other – it is expected they will show interest in the farm. The attitude translates to the way Sokoły children are brought up towards work. Parents' attitudes shift between encouraging and persuasion on one side and giving total freedom of choice on the other.

Within the commune, we see fewer and fewer families with an authoritarian (cf. Lindberg, Nyberg 2006, 1475) approach that bears no resistance. Parents' attitudes change: within farming families, the attitude of being close replaces the approach of only physical closeness (Brandth, Overrein 2012, 102). Work is still an important element of upbringing. It is, however, less often mirrored in teaching how to become a better farmer. Practical work, the basis of farming, should be, according to the parents, knowledge in itself, making it easier to live in the world. Berit Brandth's and Grete Overrein's words seem apt here: "Manual work is seen as indispensable knowledge for later (work) life, which connects to rural masculine values. Working hard and a lot, to be able to do almost everything themselves – such as repairing tools and machinery, carpentry and building – and to be self-sufficient is honourable and the sign of a good farmer/man" (Brandth, Overrein 2012, 102).

If sons, or sporadically husbands of daughters, do not want to take over the farm, it needs to be sold. Children have the right to their own informed decision, they are not forced towards anything, even if their decisions result in their parent's living circumstances to deteriorate. Earnings of children are most important and they determine their actions. Parents understand or at least declare their understanding of their children's motives, explaining that the life of a farmer is not easy (cf. Brandth, Overrein 2012, 107).

Understanding does not, naturally, mean lack of emotional reaction to abandoning of the countryside. I have heard numerous parents voice the sentiment "there is no one left, time to get going ourselves." Free choice also means lack of certainty, even at the time of taking over the farm. I have heard a few "warning" tales of a farmer abandoning the land, with a woman usually being the motive of such decision. Modernization of the rural areas has been progressing for decades, also on the level of changed lifestyles and behaviors. Dynamics of inheriting and freedom of choice remains in close relation with the way children are brought up. From the necessary individuals of family farm support, the young become, as the Norwegian researchers would put it, children in themselves, an intended point of pride for reasons different from all the previous ones (Brandth, Overrein 2012, 107). The changing dynamics of farming and major breakthroughs in the recent 30 years also make it difficult to



predict the future of the rural areas (cf. Brandth 2012, 108). It is therefore no wonder parents are not that highly motivated to encourage their children to stay in the countryside.

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