

Embodied Labour

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Work's
Cultural Heritage in Modern Europe

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Chapter 10

Dwelling through labour

Contribution to the embodied history
of state farms in socialist Poland

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10 Dwelling through labour

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Introduction¹

“Through their organisations, PGR employees actively participate in the work of creating a better tomorrow” reported the main organ of the Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe [Polish People’s Party], the weekly *Chłopi i Państwo* [Peasants and the State], in 1949.² Established in the same year, State Farms (Polish: Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne, in brief PGR) – organised along the lines of Soviet sovkhozes – were based on state land ownership.³ The aim of these large farms was to develop innovations that would improve the efficiency of the entire agricultural economy in socialist Poland.⁴ Throughout this period, they accounted for no more than 20% of all farms. Most of PGRs were located in the so-called Recovered Territories, where the administration easily took over former German estates and established state farms on them.⁵ Employees of PGRs worked on state-owned land in exchange for wages, housing, and access to public services (health care, education, culture); this removed the sharp boundary between the former village and the town.⁶ On a symbolic level, State Farms testified to the ongoing class revolution, in which palaces and manor houses – nationalised and annexed for schools, kindergartens, workers’ housing, and cultural centres – would serve workers from peasant families.

Importantly, throughout the socialist period, State Farms were negatively perceived by the general public as poorly managed and extremely unprofitable places. Studies at the time show that the vast majority of PGRs were medium-income farms; the extreme unprofitability of some farms was due to their location, which included very low-quality land and a lack of both infrastructure and people willing to work. The ethnographer Dorota Mycielska noted in 1965 that some of the PGRs she studies should never have been built in this location, if one were to think in terms of economic profit.⁷ The establishment of State Farms in such places was originally motivated by strategy and, in later years, mainly by the propaganda imperative of “land development” and the cultivation of fallow land.⁸ It should also be noted that the organisation of PGRs changed more or less every decade, which makes it very difficult to speak of State Farms as such.⁹ This is also true of state

socialism itself, which was “an extremely variable experience, both across the society and over time, and that these difference variegated the legacy of socialism as well,” as Gerald W. Creed noted in relation to socialist Bulgaria.¹⁰ In retrospect, however, it can be seen that after the difficult 1950s, from the 1960s onwards, there was a progressive modernisation of agricultural production in Poland, which was reflected in an improvement in the quality of life of PGR workers, while at the same time, the situation of non-human actors deteriorated, as Gabriela Jarzębowska has pointed out.¹¹ Due to the choice of source material, that is the competition memoirs written between 1969 and 1970, I am interested in the moment of the organisation of work in PGRs and their gradual professionalisation. The bad reputation of the state farms also affected the PGR workers. In the memoirs I have examined, the authors refer to their public perception and try to respond with agency in the act of writing. The current negative stereotype of State Farms and PGR workers is also closely linked to the 1989 transition and the final liquidation of PGRs, as Katarzyna Maniak details in her chapter.

For at least a decade, one can observe the so-called plebeian turn in Polish humanities and culture.¹² The People’s history, which is intended to describe and incorporate the experience of the peasantry into history, overwhelmingly omits the period of socialism in Poland.¹³ With few exceptions, PGRs have not been the subject of extensive research. It is worth mentioning the ethnographic works cited above by Dorota Mycielska¹⁴ and Anna Zadrożyńska,¹⁵ who studied State Farms in terms of work and leisure, and historian Ewelina Szpak,¹⁶ who in the title of her study interestingly refers to the character of the PGR as a space between a settlement and a homestead. The diagnosis of researchers of the socialist rural legacy in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Gerald W. Creed¹⁷ and Peter D. Bell,¹⁸ and in the Polish context, Piotr Binder,¹⁹ Magda Szcześniak,²⁰ Anna Wylegała,²¹ and especially Agata Zborowska,²² is an important point of reference in the study of State Farms through the lens of the body and embodied labour.

The aim of this chapter is to describe and analyse the bodily dimensions of work and work after work in State Farms, based on selected competition memoirs written by PGR workers. I understand work after work as both unpaid reproductive and caring work, work on one’s own farm (employees were allocated small plots of land) and work on the cultural landscape. Following Michel de Certeau’s recognition that “spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life,”²³ I have taken practices of dwelling as the central research category in this chapter. I understand the practices themselves, following the French researcher, as activities that are “multiform, resistance, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude the discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised.”²⁴ I supplement this category with dwelling, defined according to Tim Ingold as being in the landscape, dwelling in the landscape through bodily practices such as walking, trampling and working the land.²⁵ Practices of dwelling are thus, in the context of PGR-adapted palaces, actions of workers that go

against the official scripts for the use of this space (both manorial and socialist), strategies of resistance, tactics in de Certeau's terms. This kind of activity leaves a trace in both the landscape and the body. In the competition memoirs I am studying, I will also be looking for what Kirsten Hastrup calls "muscular consciousness."²⁶ In the context of the memoirs examined in this chapter, these activities were practised at two symbolic levels: the post-German cultural landscape ("Recovered Territories") and dismantling the legacy of serfdom (PGR palace).

The chapter is written from anthropological and historical-cultural positions; both research perspectives seem to fit into what Hastrup calls the purpose of anthropology: "tracing the salient connections between the relevant actors, human and non-human, as they emerge in actual life."²⁷ Earlier, the researcher noted: "The anthropologist's work reflects such a process, where close attention to persons, footprints, dog sledges, weather events, stories etc., lay the solid ground for inferring a reasonable explanation of particular actions."²⁸ The dwelling in the State Farms took place through practices such as: working the land and landscape, leisure activities and inhabiting a PGR palace. However, before analysing selected fragments from the memoirs of PGR workers, I will briefly describe the Polish phenomenon of memoir writing competitions and recall the circumstances surrounding the "Moje życie w PGR" [My Life in a PGR] competition, which is my main source.²⁹

Polish memoir writing competitions

As Paweł Rodak notes:

Nowhere else in the world has there been a writing phenomenon of such scale. It can be estimated that over a period of seven decades (from 1921 to 1989/1990) 1,300 to 1,400 competitions were held in Poland, and probably more than 1,500 by the end of the 20th century. Several hundred volumes have been published as a result. After 1989, further competitions were held and are still being held (most recently for pandemic memoirs). This is undoubtedly an absolute phenomenon on a global scale, the uniqueness, size and significance of which we are only now beginning to realise.³⁰

The memoirs for the competition were written by peasants, workers, migrants, miners and the unemployed, including women from the outset, although it was not until recently that they were written on a large scale.

Research institutions, in collaboration with journals dedicated to particular groups, published competition announcements outlining the range of topics to be covered in the memoir.³¹ The juries awarded prizes to the authors of the memoirs that most closely met the organisers' expectations by fitting into the socialist story of progress. Selected testimonies were published as a post-competition collection, but even in these publications there were some

memoirs that did not match with the propaganda message. Although one of the motivations for entering the competition was to win a prize, as the researchers note, writing a diary by a person from a marginalised group was a chance to give their fate the status of a story and a narrative.³² This set of competition memoirs can be seen as a diverse record of the emergence of new social subjects and emancipation. Rodak calls this collection of texts a forgotten epic.

The competition “Moje życie w PGR” was a rare example of a project exclusively dedicated to people associated with state farms. This is not to say that PGR workers have not participated in competitions aimed at rural residents, but they are in the minority in this collection. The competition under study was launched in 1969, organised by the Zarząd Główny Młodzieży Wiejskiej [Board of Rural Youth] and the editors of the weekly *Nowa Wieś* [New Village], and submissions were accepted until mid-1970.³³ The readers were mainly young people, and its pages promoted a modern lifestyle: farmers and PGR workers were encouraged to spend their leisure time in the village café, at the cinema, theatre, museum or opera, to take photographs and to own modern objects such as radios and televisions. In this way, the *Nowa Wieś* awakened the villagers’ aspirations, which, as curator Ewa Tatar aptly sums up, had little chance of being realised: “At a time when in some parts of Poland more than half the houses were still covered with straw, modern Frankfurt cuisine was being promoted in the countryside.”³⁴ This incompatibility between reality and the postulated lifestyle led to frustration and disillusionment, as can be seen in the competition memoirs.

The State Farm Workers’ Epic consisted of 503 submitted diaries. However, only 15 memoirs from this collection were published, in a highly shortened, edited form, in a small print run (by the standards of socialist Poland) and under a rather unfortunate title, which condemned the book to oblivion.³⁵ Due to the editor’s extensive inference with the text of the diaries, I decided to work with the originals. The question then becomes what remains of this collection in the archives. With the transformation of 1989 and the paradigm shift to neoliberalism, the Towarzystwo Pamiętnikarstwa Polskiego [Polish Memoir Association], which had been responsible for maintaining the diary archives since the 1960s, lost its state funding. It further contributed to the destruction or loss of the vast majority of works, what some researchers call the symbolic “erasure” of people’s histories.³⁶ From a collection of 900,000 manuscripts, only about a several thousand have survived.³⁷ Twenty-eight diaries have been preserved from the “Moje życie w PGR” competition, mostly in the form of unprotected manuscripts. Several of these have been included in the above publication. What we have here is a lost epic.

A 1987 study by Marek Ignar – who was also a member of the competition committee – found that the collection of memoirs was dominated by works by directors, accountants and field workers, and a quarter of submissions were written by women.³⁸ By coincidence, the same percentage of memoirs written by women has remained in the group of surviving works.

The activity of describing one's whole life involves the physical practice of writing, in poorly lit rooms, after labouring and when tired. The work of remembering is accompanied by the physical effort of writing dozens of pages by hand. This effort can be seen in the manuscripts, in which the writing becomes less legible in the later passages. For many memoirists, writing was not an everyday practice, which is linked to the cultural and linguistic capital of the authors, which also influenced the way in which the narrative was conducted. On the other hand, it is related to a very tangible physical disposition to write (or lack thereof). Finding their communicative strategies inadequate, the diarists ended their work with words: "I apologise for the defects," "I apologise for the mistakes," and "Please forgive me for any mistakes or inaccuracies, as I am a simple woman from the village, like many others, and cannot describe everything so accurately, as this is the first work I have undertaken [...]"³⁹

The materiality of the memoirs is also a reminder of the divisions within the PGR communities. Directors and accountants submitted typewritten diaries, while workers and, in the collection under discussion, mostly female workers, submitted handwritten manuscripts. Most of the memoirs were written on application paper, while some were delivered in school notebooks with covers containing elements of social campaigns (e.g. "Bathing in guarded areas ensures safety"); women were more likely to write in notebooks.

I don't know the motivation behind the choice of school notebooks (perhaps the simplest option due to availability in a PGR store), but the object refers to the memoirists' work of caring for their children and grandchildren, which is confirmed by the content of the works submitted. A notebook is also easier to hide from relatives and allows writing away from the table. This, in turn, is a reminder that some memoirists wrote their biographies in secret, looking for a convenient place and time, and in fragments. Following Antonina Tosiek, I understand this kind of action as a counter-hegemonic practice and an expression of disobedience to intersectional forms of oppression.⁴⁰ Some of the memoirists requested anonymity from the editors of *Nowa Wieś*; I will respect this. In the following paragraphs, I will focus primarily on memoirs written by women. This choice is due to the poetics of their works, which are much more saturated with details, images of everyday life and the presence of a body that hurts.

Working in the soil

Working in the ground means interacting with concrete matter. Tim Ingold, in the essay on dwelling within a weather-world, lists:

[...] the 'ground' is not really a coherent surface at all but a more or less impenetrable mass of tangled undergrowth, leaf litter and detritus, mosses and lichens, stones and boulders, split by cracks and crevasses, threaded by tree roots, and interspersed with swamps and marshes overgrown with rafts of vegetation that are liable to give way underfoot.⁴¹

In the memoirs analysed, there is a description of a landscape dominated by stones that prevent the potato harvester from working efficiently. At the end of the day, workers separate the potatoes from the stones by hand.

Lifting the potatoes was the closest work to the ground: hours spent bending over, on hands and knees, with soil under fingernails. Unlike cereal, which was harvested by placing the ears in a bag slung over the shoulder or transferring them to the other hand, potatoes were thrown into a bucket and the contents dumped into a larger mound.⁴² Janina Rusakiewicz, an employee of PGR Kursko (Germ. Kurzig, Międzyrzecz County), remembers covering a mound of potatoes with soil:

Come late autumn, we covered the mound with potatoes. We had to pour tonnes of soil onto the mound, but here I did not give in even to the men. Some people said maliciously that I would grow a 'hump' [...], but so far I haven't got one. I don't know how I got so much strength. The truth is that when I came home after such a long day's work, I couldn't move an arm or a leg.⁴³

By building a mountain out of potatoes with other people, Rusakiewicz worked both for a wage and for the landscape, changing its shape and structure, imprinting the traces of her activity on it. The PGR Kursko worker goes on to describe the support she received from her husband, who helped her with reproductive labour – cooking and cleaning. This was a special situation. The other women memoirists refer to their double work and lack of time to relax after a hard day's paid work.

Working in the field

Janina Rusakiewicz wrote the following about her first job on the farm:

And so it was the spring of 1956. We had to sow fertiliser after the harvest. You carried these trays by hand, 10–15 kg each. The ground was waterlogged; shoes got stuck in the mud. But the worst thing was that none of us knew how to sow well. We just threw the fertiliser in any way we could, just to get on with sowing. [...] No one was following the health and safety regulations. Maybe they didn't exist then. Later, when the rye grew, we saw the result of our work. It was embarrassing to look at, the different strips, across and along, and there were 40 hectares of it. Later we tried to sow a little better.⁴⁴

Based on the landscaping, it would be possible to reconstruct the movement of state farm workers in this area. Considering the uneven growth of the fertilised grain, sometimes the gestures were sweeping, sometimes short and abrupt, perhaps the workers were fertilising the already fertilised soil. Rusakiewicz's description suggests a lack of skill and attention. This, in turn,

refers back to what might be called the disposition of the body or the embodiment of labour, which allows it to be performed in a habitual and smooth manner. It is also a direct transposition of the movement of the hand into the form of the landscape. Each handful of fertiliser is a trace left in this space.

While working in the fields, PGR workers were radically exposed to the weather. They wrote about experiencing extreme cold and heat: “[...] we threshed clover from a heap in the field. It was very cold, even though you sweated when you worked. But if you stood still for a while, your hair would freeze”; “People would freeze when threshing grain”; “The sun burned relentlessly in the open fields. It did not take much physical exertion to get wet with sweat.”⁴⁵ Bolesław Damszel, writing about the disproportionately low wages of PGR workers, calculates: “he buries himself in this soil, dirty, in the mud, wet from the rain, and produces bread.”⁴⁶

And then there’s the wind, which has room to roam in the open countryside, stabbing in winter, spreading dust in summer. As French historian Alain Corbin notes: “The wind is often a guide. It determines fishing, harvesting and hunting strategies.”⁴⁷ During my field research in Masuria, it turned out that one of the former employees of PGR Jegławki (Germ. Jäglack, Kętrzyn County), Bogdan Staruch, had set up an apiary on the site of a windmill built by the East Prussian owner of the estate before the war. The air currents that meet here are supposed to be particularly favourable for bees. What we have here is a far-reaching ability to read the cultural landscape in which one lives and the circulation of knowledge embedded in it.

These examples of descriptions of bodies exposed to the sun, wind or rain, and also the attempt to collaborate with these causal forces, bring us back to what I call practices of dwelling. In the case of working with and in the ground, these take on a particularly profound dimension. After all, as Ingold writes: “[...] to inhabit the open is to dwell within a weather-world in which every being is destined to combine wind, rain, sunshine and earth in the continuation of its own existence.”⁴⁸

Then there is the audiosphere of the work that is brought home, as Jan Goyer so evocatively described:

After work, I come home hungry and tired, and as soon as I reach the cottage, my wife gives me something to eat. I went to bed to sleep, but I couldn’t because the tractor was ringing in my ears, as if it was working somewhere nearby all the time. I get up in the morning, I’m so sick that I don’t want to eat anything, but it’s hard, the hour comes and you have to go back to work on that tractor.⁴⁹

The noise is compounded by strong vibrations and the tractor driver’s exposure to wind and rain (tractors in the 1950s did not have cabs). “So the poor tractor drivers got cold and wet on cold autumn days. The more clever ones made a sort of roof over their heads, but it didn’t provide much protection.”⁵⁰ It is important to note that in the early years, the state farms did not

provide any hearing, respiratory or skin protection. There is also the other side of the audiosphere of working at the State Farm – being immersed in the rural landscape, as Janina Rusakiewicz sensitively noted: “The year is 1963, it’s spring, there’s a lot of work to be done in the fields, but if you’re at all musical, it’s really like a concert. It makes the heart glad with the chirping of the birds.”⁵¹

And the smell, which must have been very strong in the big farms that were about to go into industrial production. The unpleasant odour was mainly experienced by workers in the cowsheds, pigsties and stables, who repeatedly wrote about this unpleasant dimension of their labour. The dumping of manure was carried out by all manual workers, who compared it with other jobs: “[...] I couldn’t eat for a whole day after we dumped the manure from the cowsheds.”⁵² The field workers also mentioned the unpleasant smell of the fertilisers they had to spread by hand on the fields. Smell is distinctive, as Katarzyna Maniak reminds readers of this in her chapter on shame.

Regardless of the weather conditions, working on the state farm was hard work in itself, as the authors repeatedly point out in their memoirs. This is particularly evident in the texts written by those who had not previously worked in agriculture; those who were forced to learn the profession describe their first day at work in extraordinary detail.

I was walking behind the seed drill that my legs were fainting, but somehow I tried to do this job,” “The first marks from the rough handle of the sweeping three-pronged pitchfork were painfully apparent. I experienced a great tragedy in the field, a crisis of strength.

The worst part was afterwards, I mean after work. When we got home, my hands were full of corns and my whole sweater was full of barley bones. I thought I was going to go mad, it all burned so much.⁵³

Descriptions of bruised, strained and swollen hands appear in most of the memoirs studied; in the early days, sore hands disturbed sleep. Female milkers, who milked dozens of cows a day by hand until the 1970s, were particularly vulnerable to hand pain. According to several diaries, worn-out hands were seen as an attribute of a hard-working agricultural worker.⁵⁴ The long-term PGR workers I interviewed had rheumatic pains in their joints and sensory problems, among other issues. There was also a high frequency of finger amputations following labour accidents.⁵⁵

Describing the work of digging and picking potatoes in a hurry (because it was piecework), a crowd of tired bodies appears: “My back was terribly sore from bending over all day. My eyes were puffy from staring down at the ground.”⁵⁶ The memoirist goes on to complain about her increasingly poor eyesight, which prevents her from reading. In the texts written by seasonal workers, the team dimension of work is what they remember best. For the permanent workers, the harvest festival was the moment when they became part of a working community. Teresa Włodarczyk remarked: “After a hard

but enjoyable labour we have finished the harvest.”⁵⁷ At the end of the season, the memoirists point to the routine of their work and the fact that they are used to it.

In the context of the complex efforts that accompanied work on state farms, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the motivations for undertaking this type of job. In addition to those identified by researchers, such as the allocation of housing, regulated working hours (at least formally),⁵⁸ access to public services (such as health care), in the source material analysed, work on PGR appears as an escape from a violent father.⁵⁹ This refers to the wider phenomenon of the emancipation of the younger generation with the emergence of new forms of land management, as Agata Zborowska signalled.⁶⁰ For others, like the memoirist born in 1943, State Farm meant the end of his education and the great sadness of not being able to continue:

[...] To work a whole month at the threshing machine, where your whole body is black with dust and your shirt is wet with sweat, and the dust that comes out of the threshing machine clouds your eyes and makes it hard to breathe. God, how hard this money is earned. [...] And now I began to regret more and more that I had not gone to school. My colleagues are studying at vocational schools, they will work in factories, everyone will have their own profession. And I will have to work with pitchforks all the time, walk around with my hands black with mud and my clothes soiled with manure.⁶¹

In addition to the grief of leaving school early, the author of the memoirs also faced the shame of working at PGR.

For the milkmaid from PGR Goświnowice (Germ. Friedenthal-Giesmannsdorf, Nysa County), working on the farm offered the hope of higher agricultural education, but she had to abandon her studies when her health deteriorated dramatically after contracting brucellosis from cows. Shattering in form and content, the memoir is a testimony to interrupted emancipation and upward mobility and, at a deeper level, to a broken life story. In the concluding paragraph, the author writes:

If I had heard, this memoir [...] would have come out quite differently. If I had been healthy, I would have graduated from the agricultural college by now, and the memoirs would have come out differently. So you'll have to forgive me, but I can't help it, because I'm sick, weak and grey as a pigeon, although I'm only 50 years old and tired of writing. [...] Forgive my handwriting, but my eyes are also very weak.⁶²

It is worth noting that milkmaids on the PGRs worked more than a dozen hours a day in toxic conditions, usually without a day off. Their working day began at four in the morning, and this group was the lowest paid on the state farms. The milkmaids' bodies were constantly exposed to disease.

Dwelling in the palace

In the first two decades of their existence (1950s and 1960s), the manor houses and palaces of PGRs served as local centres: offices, staff accommodation, medical clinics and cultural centres. Sources from this period contain many descriptions of communal film screenings in the palace ballrooms or of harvest celebrations that were usually held in front of the palace. In the socialist period, however, the celebration at the end of the harvest was characterised by the fact that instead of the heir, the director of PGR received the arriving villagers on the steps of the palace. There are many examples of the long duration of the manor complex in socialist Poland; one is expressed in the language of the source material examined, when Zofia Stelmaszyk, born in 1914, writes of “manorial fields.”⁶³ Some of the memoir writers were also children of farm servants and, like them, worked in the area around the palace, which may have initiated the pre-war script of using the lord’s house. In the analysed diaries, there is evidence of both occasional dwelling in the palace and its neighbourhood, which was mainly the case for seasonal workers, and of many years of growing into the space, as experienced by the pensioner Zofia Stelmaszyk. This dwelling took place in two layers: the post-noble and the post-German.

Ryszard Latkowski, director of PGR in the province of Szczecin, writes about his first days on the state farm in Koszewo (Germ. Groß Küssow, Stargard County) in the tone of a holiday adventure:

Here I saw what was then a huge state farm and was told by the locals that it was the private residence of the former Field Marshal, the former junker von Paulus, who took a huge army prisoner at Stalingrad in 1943. I look around. The courtyards are beautiful, the buildings, the rubble is not visible, as it was in Szczecin at that time.⁶⁴

Latkowski thus points out from the beginning that the PGR community had knowledge of the history of the place where they lived. He began his work at the harvest of 1949 with a day of adaptation:

[...] We were taken to the palace and given a large room, hay was brought, we put it on the floor and each of us was given two blankets and a sheet. We arranged to sleep together, i.e. whoever lay down would sleep there.⁶⁵

The palace – written in capital letters in the manuscript – like many such buildings, was stripped of its palatial furnishings in 1945 as part of institutionalised (Red Army) and grassroots looting. The furnishings, like the palace itself, began to exist in other contexts.⁶⁶ Based on the previous extract, the building must have been in good condition; Latkowski must have walked on the wooden floors, used the original doors and windows and there may

have been tiled stoves and wall decorations in the palace. According to the documentation prepared by conservator Małgorzata Talarczyk-Andrałojć in 1989, the original composition of the palace complex in Koszewo has been completely preserved.⁶⁷ The large palace had a terrace and a tower that served as viewpoints.⁶⁸ Latkowski, like the other seasonal workers, slept in the palace on a hay, but with an access to a unique and privileged view. This image relates the experience of a certain simultaneity at the time: elements of peasant and noble culture, the manorial and post-German materiality.

Latkowski and his group went to a nearby lake after eating bread and lard in the palace hall:

After a bath we went to bed. This is where the marriages took place. For many it was an unforgettable night. As I found out later, there were young people there from different parts of Poland and with different experiences (harbour caves and adventures). One of the workers later needed to see a doctor.⁶⁹

There is a rather unexpected passage in which the palace becomes the site of sexual relations between newly arrived workers, mostly of peasant origin. Latkowski writes about this freely, without considering the significance of the space in which the events described take place. One may wonder to what extent the Koszewo palace was put in quotation marks because of its location (former German territory), the lack of palatial furnishings (but the substance was still a reminder of its origins) and the familiarity created by sharing a bedroom and hay. In this interpretation, the writing in capital of the name of the palace is based on past practice and habit. However, Latkowski's actions suggest that he is not a person who fearfully enters the heir's house.

Zofia Stelmaszyk, who stayed at PGR Komorzno (Germ. Reinersdorf, Kluczbork County) for 24 years, had a different perspective on the palace's surroundings. In her memoirs, written in large letters in a chequered notebook, she praised the renovation of the palace, initiated by the PGR director, which had been "in a miserable condition, without windows, abandoned, ruined just after the war."⁷⁰ Nevertheless, she writes about the palace from a distance. She is pleased that there is a cultural centre in one of the rooms used by the young people. Stelmaszyk also praises the director's appreciation of the farm's long-time accountant, who was allowed to continue living in the palace after his retirement. The palace, however, is not a space used by the memoirist. Rather, it is the park that she dwells in. Detailed descriptions of plant species reveal the joy and pleasure of walking through the alleys of the park:

I can't describe how beautiful it is in the spring. It is full of snowdrops and various flowering shrubs whose names I do not know. After these pleasant harbingers of spring have bloomed, the meadow in front of the castle [sic!] blooms again like a single fashionable flower. These are

rare bulbous flowers. They grow in huge numbers. It looks beautiful. The magnolias are already in bloom. There are five or six of them. They look like huge pink bouquets that the gardener has arranged in different parts of the park. And what a smell from these different bushes, flowers, lime trees, in the summer you can breathe this healthy fresh air and relax on a colourful bench, as these stand in the shade of the trees.⁷¹

So here we have a description of the leisure time of a 55-year-old widow whose husband was a field foreman. The park in Zofia Stelmaszyk's memoir is a place of rest, of aesthetic and sensual pleasure and a place excluded from everyday struggle.

In her memoir, she also explores the past of this space and sees the opening of the park to all residents as an example of the class revolution that is taking place:

[...] There was no use for people. Now it is different. Everyone has free access to the park, as long as they behave culturally, do not destroy or litter. [...] No one will expel anyone. Gone are the days of the landlords.⁷²

Stelmaszyk also writes about the practices of caring towards the park on the initiative of the PGR community: cutting bushes, raking leaves, and cleaning the pond in front of the palace.⁷³ It is worth noting that in socialist Poland, a lot of building or renovation work was carried out as part of a "czyn społeczny" [voluntary community work], that is working time organised from the top down and not paid for. The "czyn społeczny" included building pavements, playgrounds and planting trees, which the memoirists remember well. The activities Stelmaszyk writes about came from the community.

The park in the sources examined is also a place extensively used by the youngest. It was used by the children of PGR workers, who were looked after during the harvest and used the Jordan garden created there, and on other occasions by the children of Silesian miners, who came every year for summer camps: "Often at harvest time, I have seen our estate children sitting on benches with a sitter reading them an interesting book. The mothers don't have to worry about their children. They have good care, healthy air and tasty breakfasts."⁷⁴ To this should be added the informal play that the children enjoyed after leaving school and kindergarten, playing hide and seek, ball games and treasure hunts⁷⁵ in the summer and skating on the palace pond in the winter. During the fieldwork, former employees who were reminiscing about their childhood at the State Farm mentioned the park in the context of picking mushrooms, snails and flowers, hiding behind overgrown burdocks and fishing. As workers, they took shortcuts through the palace park, spent their leisure time there and trampled their own paths.⁷⁶

Conclusions

The history of State Farms is a history of dwelling and rooting through embodied labour. The memoirs of Henryk Świętojański, director of PGR Skarżyn, provide some commemorative photographs⁷⁷; two of them show a field of maize stretching to the horizon. From this sea of green leaves, the head of Świętojański's son emerges, then the head and torso of the memoirist. Both are part of this landscape, dwelling in and shaping it. After all, maize entered Polish agriculture through PGRs.

The range of bodily practices – which consisted of walking, tramping, viewing, hide-and-seek in the park and finally the land and landscape work that was so important to PGR workers – served, on a broader level, to ground them in a previously unfamiliar space (because they were dealing with “Recovered Territories” and socialist State Farm at the same time). The PGR worker's relaxation in the park in the neighbourhood of the palace is an emanation of this, a sign of leisure spent in a place that was not accessible to her a few years ago.

In this sense, the history of the PGR palaces would tell the story of the dismantling of previous hierarchies, the democratisation and commodification of palace spaces and finally the dismantling of property (and only in later years its distribution). And even if all this happened only in the field of potentiality,⁷⁸ it is in these micro-practices and gestures that the fundamental transgressions should be found from the perspective of groups and individuals.

Notes

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2 Franciszek Tlaga, “Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne,” *Chłopi i Państwo. Naczelny Organ Polskiego Stronnictwa Ludowego*, 19 June, 1949, 2.

3 See: Mart Kalm, “Is Urban Life in the Countryside Good? The Central Settlements of Collective Farms in the Estonian SSR,” *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 17, no. 4 (2018), 84–87; Piotr Binder, *Młodzi a bieda. Strategie radzenia sobie w doświadczeniu młodego pokolenia wsi pokoleńchozowych i popegeerowskich* [Youth and Poverty. Coping Strategy in Experience of the Young Generation of post-kolkhoz and post-PGR villages] (Warsaw: IFiS PAN, 2014), 64–67.

4 *Dziennik Ustaw, Dekret Polskiego Komitetu Wyzwolenia Narodowego z dnia 6 września 1944 r. o przeprowadzeniu reformy rolnej* [Decree of the Polish Committee of National Liberation of 6 September 1944 on conducting the Land Reform] (Warsaw: no. 4, 1944), 18; Włodzimierz Dzun, *Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne w rolnictwie polskim w latach 1944–1990* [State Farms in Polish agriculture in 1944–1990] (Warsaw: PAN, IRWiR, 1991), 5–12; Bolesław Pilarek, *Doradztwo rolnicze na Warmii, Mazurach i Powiślu* [Agricultural consulting in Warmia, Masuria and Powiśle] (Olsztyn: Warmińsko-Mazurski Ośrodek Doradztwa Rolniczego z siedzibą w Olsztynie, 2016).

- 5 Andrzej Korbonski, *Politics of Socialist Agriculture in Poland: 1945–1960* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), 88.
- 6 Ewelina Szpak, *Między osadą a zagrodą. Życie codzienne mieszkańców PGR-ów* [Between Settlement and Homestead. The Daily Life of State Farm Residents] (Warsaw: TRIO, 2005); Anna Zadrożyńska, *Homo faber i homo ludens. Etnologiczny szkic o pracy w kulturach tradycyjnych i współczesnych* [Homo Faber and Homo Ludens. An Ethnological Sketch on Work in Traditional and Contemporary Cultures] (Warsaw: PWN, 1983).
- 7 Dorota Mycielska, *Problemy życia w PGR-ach* [Problems of life in the State Farms] (Warsaw: Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej i Studiów Programowych, 1965), 8.
- 8 Tadeusz Rychlik, *Problemy rozwoju PGR* [Problems of PGR Development] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1961), 173–174.
- 9 Włodzimierz Dzun, *Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne*, 7–20.
- 10 Gerald W. Creed, *Domesticating revolution: From Socialist Reform to Ambivalent Transition in a Bulgarian Village* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 2.
- 11 Gabriela Jarzębowska, “State Capitalism as a Crisis of Imagination. Factory Farms in the Polish People’s Republic in the 1970s”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, no. 1 (2024): 51–72; Gabriela Jarzębowska, “Dobrostan zwierząt gospodarskich w PRL” [The Wellbeing of Farm Animals in the Polish People’s Republic]. *Zoophilologica. Polish Journal of Animal Studies*, no. 1 (2023), 1–22.
- 12 Among others: Andrzej Leder, *Prześlągnięta rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* [Sleepwalking the Revolution. Exercise in Historical Logics] (Warsaw: Krytyka Polityczna, 2014); Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski. Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania* [People’s History of Poland. A History of Exploitation and Resistance. The Mythology of Domination] (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2020); Kacper Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* [Rudeness] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2021); Michał Rauszer, *Siła podporządkowanych* [Power of the Subjugated] (Warsaw: WUW, 2021); Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* [Peasant Women. The Story of Our Grandmothers] (Warsaw: Marginesy, 2023). See also: Małgorzata Litwinowicz-Drożdźiel, “Wyprawa po skrzynię posażną. Po lekturze *Toastu na progu* Andrzeja Mencwela” [A Quest of the Trousseau: After Reading Andrzej Mencwel’s *Toast on the Threshold*], *Teksty Drugie*, no. 6 (2017), 265–277; Katarzyna Chmielewska, “Lud w perspektywie, perspektywa ludu” [The People in Perspective, the Perspective of the People], *Teksty Drugie*, no. 5 (2021), 293–309.
- 13 Agnieszka Mrozik, “‘Historia jakby nas pominęła’. O powojennych praktykach konkursowych i współczesnych projektach pisania ludowej historii Polski” [‘History Seems to Have Left Us Out’. On Post-war Competition Diaries and Contemporary Projects for Writing a People’s History of Poland], *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, no. 2 (2022), 39–69.
- 14 Dorota Mycielska, *Problemy życia w PGR-ach*.
- 15 Anna Zadrożyńska, *Homo faber*.
- 16 Ewelina Szpak, *Między osadą a zagrodą*.
- 17 Gerald W. Creed, *Domesticating revolution*.
- 18 Peter D. Bell, *Peasants in Socialist Transition: Life in a Collectivized Hungarian Village* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984).
- 19 Piotr Binder, *Młodzi a bieda*.
- 20 Magda Szczęśniak, “Feeling Moved: Upward Mobility Stories in Socialism”, *New Literary History*, Volume 55, no. 1 (2024), 73–97. See also: Magda Szczęśniak, *Poruszeni. Awans i emocje w socjalistycznej Polsce* [Feeling Moved: Upward Mobility Stories in socialist Poland] (Warsaw: Krytyka Polityczna, 2023).

- 21 Anna Wylegała, “Beyond the Victimhood Narrative: A Case Study of Unexpectedly Successful Collectivization in Communist Poland”, *Journal of Social History* 56, no. 4 (2023): 1–23; Anna Wylegała, *Był dwór, nie ma dworu. Reforma rolna w Polsce* [There was a manor, there is no manor: Land Reform in Poland] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2021). In both cases, I find the fieldwork material collected by the author particularly interesting.
- 22 Agata Zborowska, “‘It Belongs to Us!’ Narratives of Property Relations at a Time of Post-war Land Reform in Poland”, *Teksty Drugie*, no. 1 (2025): 159–176; Agata Zborowska, “Do spółdzielni produkcyjnej i z powrotem. Przemiany własności w powojennych narracjach pamiętnikarskich” [To the Production Cooperative and Back Again. Ownership Transformations in Post-war Diary Narratives], *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, no. 2 (2022), 71–98.
- 23 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), 96.
- 24 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.
- 25 Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 153–287.
- 26 Kirsten Hastrup, “Muscular consciousness. Knowledge-making in an Arctic environment”, in *Pre-textual Ethnographies. Challenging the phenomenological level of anthropological knowledge-making*, eds. Tomasz Rakowski and Helena Patzer (Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2018), 116–137.
- 27 Kirsten Hastrup, “Muscular consciousness. Knowledge-making in an Arctic environment”, 133.
- 28 Kirsten Hastrup, “Muscular consciousness. Knowledge-making in an Arctic environment”, 131.
- 29 Archiwum Akt Nowych [Central Archives of Modern Records], signature 2/2617/0/4/10156–10171. All memoirs in this competition were written in Polish. I give fragments of the memoirs in my own translation.
- 30 Paweł Rodak, “Zapomniana epopeja. Polskie konkursy pamiętnikarskie i literatura” [Forgotten Epic: Polish Memoir Writing Competitions and Literature], *Teksty Drugie*, no. 2 (2024), 26. For more on the phenomenon of competition memoirs see: *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, no. 2 (2022); *Teksty Drugie*, no. 2 (2024).
- 31 For what the competition announcements included see: Anna Jaroszuk, “‘Więć piszcie i opowiadajcie!’ Analiza odezwy Konkursu na pamiętnik chłopa” [“So Write and Tell Stories!” An Analysis of the Peasant Memoir Competition Announcement], *Teksty Drugie*, no. 2 (2024), 101–110.
- 32 Magda Szcześniak, *Poruszeni...*, 109; Paweł Rodak, “Zapomniana epopeja”, 21; Antonina Tosiek, “Strategie przeciw ponizeniu. Pamiętniki mieszkanki wsi a wstyd klasowy” [Strategies Against Humiliation: Memoirs of Rural Women and Class Shame], *Teksty Drugie*, no. 2 (2024), 245.
- 33 “Konkurs ZG ZMW i Nowej Wsi: Moje życie w PGR” [ZGW ZMW and New Village Competition: My life in PGR], *Słowo Ludu*, no. 44 (1970), 3
- 34 Monika Stelmach, “Miejsce po jeleniu. Rozmowa z Ewą Tatar” [The Place After the Deer. Interview with Ewa Tatar], *Dwutygodnik*, no. 182 (2016), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/6477-miejsce-po-jeleniu.html>.
- 35 *Blisko ziemi, blisko ludzi* [Close to the Ground, Close to the People], ed. Bożena Wojciechowska-Kołątaj (Warsaw: Iskry, 1975).
- 36 Antonina Tosiek, “Strategie przeciw ponizeniu”, 246.
- 37 Zbigniewa Gluza, “Archiwa społeczne”, *Karta*, no. 36 (2022), 140–142.
- 38 Marek Ignar, *Warunki życia ludności wiejskiej* [Living Conditions of the Rural Population] (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1987), 130.

- 39 In turn: Zofia Stelmaszyk, born 1914, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10170; Teresa Włodarczyk, born 1934, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10168; Maria Popławska, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10165.
- 40 Antonina Tosiek, “Strategie przeciw ponizeniu”: 252.
- 41 Tim Ingold, *Being Alive. Essays on movement, knowledge and description* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011), 119.
- 42 This move of gathering the ears is well reflected in the opening scenes of Agnès Varda’s documentary film “The Gleaners and I” (2000). “G as in glean. A gleaner is one who glean. The glean is to gather after the harvest. [...] In time past only women gleaned.” – reads Varda from the dictionary. In the next shot, a female farmer recounts the traditional practice of gleaning:
- Gleaning, that’s the old way. My mother would say: Pick everything up so nothing gets wasted. But sadly we no longer do because machines are so efficient nowadays. But before, I used to glean together with my neighbours for wheat, and rice too. I would put my big apron on and we’d go gleaning ears of wheat, lovely ears we would find. A whole day in the sun, with gnats and mosquitoes biting, it wasn’t too nice, but we liked it. Evenings we were exhausted. Once home with our bags and our aprons we’d have a good time laughing and drinking coffee together.
- 43 Janina Rusakiewicz, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10165.
- 44 Janina Rusakiewicz, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10165.
- 45 In turn: Janina Rusakiewicz, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10165; Zofia Stelmaszyk, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10170.; Zbigniew Hołodiuk, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10157. The memoir is not visible in the ANN documentation.
- 46 Bolesław Damszel, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10157.
- 47 Alain Corbin, *Wichura i wietrzyk. Historia sposobów doświadczenia i wyobrażania wiatru* [Gale and Breeze. A history of how wind is experienced and imagined], trans. Wanda Klenczon (Warsaw: Aletheia, 2021), 30.
- 48 Tim Ingold, *Being Alive*, 115.
- 49 Jan Gober, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10157.
- 50 Zofia Stelmaszyk, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10170.
- 51 Janina Rusakiewicz, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10165.
- 52 Stanisław Rębacz, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10165.
- 53 In turn: Teresa Włodarczyk, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10168; Zbigniew Hołodiuk, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10157; Janina Rusakiewicz, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10165.
- 54 This is confirmed in the memoirs of Zbigniew Hołodiuk, who wrote about the foreman with respect: “Unlike the director, he wore work clothes, a faded hat and muddy rubber boots on his feet. He held a pencil and a sheet of paper in his thick, overworked fingers.” ANN/2/2617/0/4/10157.
- 55 On skin as a medium of memory, including in relation to labour and class, see: Jay Prosser, “Skin memories”, in *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (Routledge: London and New York, 2004), 52–68.
- 56 Janina Rusakiewicz, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10165.
- 57 Teresa Włodarczyk, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10168.
- 58 In practice, the eight-hour working day was introduced in 1957. However, it still did not apply to employees working with animals. Izabella Bukraba-Rylska, *Socjologia wsi polskiej* (Warsaw: PWN, 2008), 349.
- 59 Brygadziстка, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10158.
- 60 Agata Zborowska, “Do spółdzielni produkcyjnej”, 89.

- 61 ANN/2/2617/0/4/10157.
 62 ANN/2/2617/0/4/10156.
 63 An interesting example of a cultural text that takes a critical look at the figure of the PGR director dressed as a pre-war count is Jarosław Abramow-Newerly's 1966 drama *Derby w pałacu* [Derby at the Palace]. Jarosław Abramow-Newerly, "Derby w pałacu", *Dialog* 120, no. 4 (1966), 5–37. See also: Izabela Bukraba-Rylska, *Socjologia wsi polskiej...*, 349.
 64 Ryszard Latkowski, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10161.
 65 Ryszard Latkowski, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10161.
 66 Agata Zborowska, "Between Hospitality and Hostility: The Experience of Migration Through Things", *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 43, no. 5 (2022), 573–588.
 67 Ewidencja zabytków nieruchomości, *Zespół folwarczny* [Manor complex]. ed. Małgorzata Talarczyk-Andrałojć, 1989, https://zabytek.pl/pl/obiekty/g-221172/dokumenty/PL.1.9.ZIPOZ.NID_N_32_EN.519797/1
 68 Palace tower as a playground for PGR workers' children see: Justyna Szklarczyk, "Pegeer i eksces. O zamieszkiwaniu wschodniopruskich pałaców" [Pegeer and excess. On the Dwelling in East Prussian Palaces], *Dialog Puzyny. Rzyko* 2023, 104–116.
 69 Ryszard Latkowski, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10161.
 70 Zofia Stelmaszyk, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10170.
 71 Zofia Stelmaszyk, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10170.
 72 Zofia Stelmaszyk, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10170.
 73 In his memoirs, Józef Szremer also mentions the voluntary work done by PGR workers for the community: "[...] they volunteered to build access roads to State Farm buildings and none of them asked for money for their work." ANN/2/2617/0/4/10167.
 74 Zofia Stelmaszyk, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10170.
 75 Digging in the ground in search of buried objects by Germans escaping from the Red Army.
 76 On the dwelling in the palace by PGR workers by taking photographs against its background see: Justyna Szklarczyk, "Mikropraktyki i historie potencjalne. Pałac-pegeer w Bęsi" [Microgestures and Potential Histories. Palace-State Farm in Bęsia], *Czas Kultury*, no. 2 (2024), 201–213.
 77 Henryk Świętojański, ANN/2/2617/0/4/10166.
 78 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential history: Unlearning Imperialism* (London, New York: Verso, 2019). For another attempt to apply of Azoulay's tools to research on the cultural history of East-Central Europe see: Aleksandra Szczepan, "'You Will Never Walk Alone': Potential Histories of Polish Literature", *Teksty Drugie*, no. 2 (2024), 144–161.

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