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## PROSPECTS FOR THE POLISH ETHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY AT THE THRESHOLD OF ITS SECOND CENTENNIAL

In the present considerations we will make an attempt to answer three fundamental questions:

1. What should the Society be for its members?
2. What role should the Society play in Polish science?
3. What social challenges should it respond to?

### 1. The Society and its Members

Answering the first question we would like to refer to the opinion of Aleksander Kamiński, the most outstanding theoretician of the idea of societies, *nota bene* a member of our Society at the time when he worked in the Łódź University. According to Kamiński, in the modern civilization which witnesses the loosening and disappearance of traditional communities, the idea which lies behind founding societies is to establish "a neighborhood of your choice", an affiliation that meets the need of being a member of a certain group. Moreover, a society should also help to satisfy the need of expression, provide its members with possibilities of expressing their thoughts, judgments, and opinions, and, last but not least, play an integrating role of an institution that bridges the gap between the family and the local community on the one hand and the nation and the human community in general on the other. The last function should make it easier to overcome the barrier between the small and the great world.

How has our Society fulfilled, both in the past and in the present, the above expectations? What mistakes did it make and what should be changed?

It seems that the Ethnological Society, as many other organizations of this kind, has experienced the results of its expansion which Kamiński described as a phenomenon of "enlargement" whose major consequence is the weakening of the ties binding the rank and file members and sections of the Society with the society as a whole.

Most often the inspirations came from the top; there were few grass-roots

initiatives, or in other words, the neighborhood of choice ceased to play an important role. The Society came back to life only for a while during the annual meetings which with time were convened less and less often due to financial problems and misunderstanding of the role of the delegate (the regular members often believed that the meeting was exclusively for the delegates!). Because of the lack of both time and interesting initiatives, members of local Sections met less frequently too. Also, since many profound changes took place in our discipline which tended to develop very rapidly, its members time and again had no common interests. This was related to a growing differentiation of the members of our Society, where beside professional practitioners and theoreticians there were many “fans” – amateurs or representatives of other disciplines.

Another important factor that contributed to the above was a sudden generation change among the nominal members of the Society. On the one hand, some of the old faculty members of universities and the Academy of Sciences stopped to participate in the activities of the Society, and on the other, the involvement of young scholars was moderate.

Accepting the diversity of members of the Society and treating it as an asset, we are trying to pay more attention to the specific needs of its particular groups. In line with this trend has been the development of “circles of interests”. It seems, however, that the Society should provide a wider range of possibilities of acting not only to the “circles of interests” but also to sections or specialist groups of other kinds. In this way our Society might become a confederation of smaller groups and follow the path already taken by some academic societies in the world. We are strongly convinced that the Polish Ethnological Society which has an established tradition of attracting people with different interests may guarantee understanding for individual needs as well as for research specializations and as such constitute an attractive platform for a discussion and integration above the level of particular institutions and local groups.

## **2. The Scientific Role of the Society**

Before considering the scientific role of the Society, we must concentrate for a while on the general problems of our discipline. At present the situation of the humanities is rather difficult. Discussing the problem in depth would reach beyond the limits of this address, especially that recently many papers have appeared which stress the breakthrough that took place in science in general and in the humanities in particular, and as a consequence also in Polish ethnology.

The expansion of methodological reflection and the discovery of new cognitive possibilities in our discipline provoke us to raise a question about

the role that in this specific intellectual revival should be played by our Society. How to reconcile the research tradition of our Society some members of which from the beginning of its existence have been collecting many interesting and valuable observations even though they had no academic background but only the desire to adhere to observation in a positivistic sense of the word, with the contemporary methodological challenges? These transformation are taking place with different intensity in different centers (regardless of the type of organization and age limitations), thus generating different needs and possibilities for particular individuals and groups even when nominally they represent the same level of fundamental professional expertise.

It seems, therefore, that our Society should make a specific attempt at developing modern ethnological ideas within the range of its statutory activities, and – let us not be afraid the word – disseminate these ideas among Polish ethnographers no matter where they work. After all, it is the responsibility of our Society to create conditions conducive to both comprehensive academic criticism and development of new ideas, and thus reject the often heard opinions that it is the stronghold of scientific traditionalism or even conservatism!

The Society should become an ethnological forum for the discussions that are held – as it is commonly known – in informal groups or in other collective bodies such as the Section of Social Anthropologists at the Polish Sociological Society or in the editorial boards of such journal as “*Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty*” [“Polish Folk Art. Contexts”]. The publishers affiliated at our Society are also undertaking some efforts to the same effect (it is worth mentioning some of the volumes of the series “*Prace Etnologiczne*” [“Ethnological Papers”], the recent issues of our journal “*Lud*” [“Folk”] or numerous articles which have been published already for many years in the “*Literatura Ludowa*” [“Folk Literature”]), yet irrespective of these initiatives we see the need to develop new organizational forms for scientific discussions. These discussions should be initiated by Sections interested in particular subjects and prepared by them, also in cooperation with the above mentioned organizations and in collaboration with the Committee of Ethnological Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences, always open to diverse needs of scholars, yet because of its statutory regulations accepting only senior faculty members and at present even not all of them. One of the possible initiatives might be the foundation of sections – and here we are referring to the previously expressed thoughts that are in line with the interests of particular groups of members and needs of our discipline – gathering people from different departments of the Society. The objective of these sections would be to discuss essential questions, either methodological or related to important scientific problems, e.g. regionalism, the question of ethnicity or folk art and

handiwork, or the wide field bordering on religious studies and the study of rites and customs.

We personally think that such an ambitious plan would attract more of our colleagues who at present do not see any field for their activity in the Polish Ethnological Society.

### **3. The Society and its Role in Public Life**

Considering the role of our Society in the social and cultural life of our country, we may notice that one of the fields of activity of our Society that has been developing all the time, despite many financial problems and with much success, is publishing of the achievements of Polish ethnologists and presenting the Society to the outside world.

The publishers of our Society take into account different educational backgrounds and different interests of our readers, publishing documentary materials (beginning with Oskar Kolberg's works), papers and the aforementioned methodological articles in special series as well as popular providing information about folk costumes and artists, etc. Among our publications of special value is "Biblioteka Zesłańca" ["Library of Exiles"] which stresses the importance of the so-called personal documents and supplements our knowledge not only of the unknown periods of Polish history, but also – in a universal sense – about human life under extreme circumstances.

One flaw of our publishing activity are too small numbers of published copies, which reduces our audience. Another drawback, which is closely related to first one, are high prices of our publications, which again is the reason why many potential readers cannot afford them. The most important reason why the distribution of our publications is not wide enough is not, however, the aftermath of the two drawbacks mentioned above, but rather ignorance of what ethnology actually deals with! Thus, dissemination of knowledge about ethnology should be the main task and responsibility of the Society.

Recently, our hopes for the improvement of the situation have been related to the involvement of some of the representatives of our discipline in the reform of school curricula and to the new idea of fostering in schools the interests in the problems of the traditional culture of the region. Still, the contributions of ethnologists to more popular magazines are much too rare. There are too few ethnological commentaries on various urgent issues of our contemporary life! Ethnologists should express their opinions in the discussions about the needs of the local government, ecological problems, or cultural planning both in the micro and macro-scale. With no intention to belittle the achievements of many different ethnographic or folklore studies and their needs to develop, we should inform the public opinion that these two are not the only fields of interest of our discipline. A step in this direction is the common tendency to change the

names of ethnographic institutions into “ethnological” or dealing with “cultural anthropology”. This apparently formal procedure has been also considered in the circles of our Society with reference to the change of its historical name, i.e. “Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze” [The Society for Folk Studies], which does correspond to the contemporary pursuits of our discipline. What solution can reconcile respect for our 100-year tradition with the need to inform what contemporary ethnologists are doing now?

Concluding this short introduction to our discussion about the future of the Polish Ethnological Society — the discussion which we all very much need on the threshold of its next century — we wish to emphasize the immediate interest and usefulness of some traditional values which have been long present in the works of our Society. Among them, we would like to mention the ability of our Society to combine research and popularizing goals, cognitive tasks and those of immediate socio-cultural importance; the broad cognizance of folk studies — ethnology that is close to the concept of cultural anthropology; the acceptance of many schools and approaches to research; the dissemination of beliefs in the values of folk culture which constitute the heritage of nations as well as humanity in general; and, at last, the conviction that science should oppose ethnocentric attitudes and xenophobia, which is so important at the moment of bridging gaps between nations and cultures. One hundred years ago, in the first volume of “Lud”, a cofounder of our Society and an outstanding Ukrainian ethnologist, Ivan Franko, wrote that ethnological works may “contribute to elevating us into the bright and pure sphere of tolerance and understanding” where mistrust and ethnic hostility will become impossible.

The traditions of the Society may turn out to be a valuable factor stabilizing ethnology — a science about which Professor Anna Kutrzeba-Pojnarowa wrote in the text published posthumously in the jubilee 78th volume of “Lud” that “it has always been as if *in statu nascendi*”. For the future development of Polish ethnology and of the Society, and for its proper place in scientific and cultural life, the joint intellectual and organizational effort of all of us concerned about ethnology and the Society will be of great importance.

*Translated by Marek Wilczyński*