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Food Expenses in the Rhythm of Daily Life. An Analysis of Household Accounts

Abstract: The subject of detailed analysis presented in the article is the daily shopping and food expenses incurred by a single family resident in a large Polish city in the period of the People's Republic of Poland. The source material for the analysis is the ledger of daily food expenses originating from a set of household accounts in the household of a female clerk in Łódź, which in its entirety covers the period from August 1952 to August 2004. The analysis presented herein, however, is based on a detailed analysis of records pertaining to only three selected months of the autumn of 1960, that is expenses dated from 1st September to 30th November 1960. The main aim of the analysis is not to exhaustively document the specificity of the period of the People's Republic of Poland, but only to present the source material and its interpretative capability, as well as to show a small section from the picture of daily life revealed by one family's three-month expenses. The author demonstrates that a detailed description of the daily shopping may constitute a very clear illustration of the specificity of private life in the given time and cultural space, as well as a reflection of not only the socio-economic, but also the political conditions in which the shopping is done.

Key words: culture of daily life, food expenses, household accounts, People's Republic of Poland, family life in Poland.

Buying food belongs to the most basic procedures in the framework of the daily shopping practice. Regardless of the particulars of time and socio-cultural space, it is linked with the process of satisfying elementary physical needs; diversity in this type of shopping appears only on the level of detail, pertaining to the purchased items, their number or quantity, their price and place of acquisition. Only when this need is satisfied is it possible to think of the necessity of buying other items that enable a person

to function normally in a given socio-cultural space, such as the items of hygiene, medicines or the necessary clothing. In general, it may be assumed that daily shopping, understood as an element of routine cultural practice, belongs to procedures that are trivial, characterless and of little import (on condition that the financial situation is favourable), and that are accomplished without much reflection. Having no marked connection with the issue of product branding or the contemporary consumerist hedonism, this kind of shopping constitutes a type of existential necessity and a daily chore to fulfil virtually regardless of the time on hand and the buyer's enthusiasm for the task. At the same time, however, a detailed description of the daily shopping may constitute a very clear illustration of the specificity of private life in the given time and cultural space, as well as a reflection of not only the socio-economic, but also the political conditions in which the shopping is done; this kind of shopping may also be perceived as the actual content of the ordinary human existence.

The subject of analysis undertaken herein is the daily shopping and food expenses incurred by a single family resident in a large Polish city in the period of the People's Republic of Poland. The source material for the analysis is the ledger of daily food expenses originating from a set of household accounts in the household of a female clerk in Łódź. The entire set covers the period from August 1952 to August 2004; the current reflections, however, are based on a detailed analysis of records pertaining to only three selected months of the autumn of 1960, that is expenses incurred from 1st September to 30th November 1960 (the cycle of full months applied here results from the method of recording the expenses in the ledger, where the unit of one month is of fundamental importance). The fact that records pertaining to just three months were selected results not only from this publication's limits of space, but also from the desire to present no more than a sample from source materials which are currently undergoing a comprehensive and detailed scholarly analysis. This three-month accounting period falling on a single season is also relatively uniform with regard to food expenses, which makes it possible to conduct a coherent and objective analysis. The month of December with its Christmas shopping and the summer months of July

and August, when purchases reflect the character of another season and differ as to the available selection of foodstuffs, have been deliberately left outside the current analysis. The main aim of the analysis is not to exhaustively document the specificity of the period of the People's Republic of Poland, but only to present the source material and its interpretative capability, as well as to show a small section from the picture of daily life revealed by one family's three-month expenses. It is crucial that, while being aware of some very few details pertaining to the life of the author of the accounts, I focus my analysis solely on the ledger of expenses and a variety of detailed data it contains.¹

It is also worth noting that descriptions of daily life in various periods in the era of the People's Republic which are available in specialist literature are usually constructed on the basis of analyses of various consciously created texts of culture, such as press releases [Muszyńska, Osiak, Wojtera 2006], cinematic works [Pełczyński 2002; Talarczyk-Gubała 2007] or materials recorded in the authors' own memories or collected from other people's accounts. Such texts, however, in themselves constitute a certain proposal for an interpretation of some phenomena of social life, and hence they go beyond the ordinariness and banality of daily life. In the face of similar descriptions, the question posed by Georges Perec remains absolutely valid:

What's really going on, what we're experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual? [Perec 1989].²

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- 1 I received the entire set of household accounts from the author's family for the purpose of scholarly analysis, with a clearly expressed wish for full anonymity. Hence I limit the information to the fact that the author worked in a state office, not giving any additional details as to her education, workplace, position etc. The author and her family remain virtually anonymous to myself, too; hence my analyses are undertaken mainly from the position of a reader of the text.
 - 2 French text of the essay *Approches de quoi?* available at: <http://remue.net/cont/perecinfraord.html>; English translation: <http://www.daytodaydata.com/georgesperec.html>.

The answer is not easy, but this does not mean that it is entirely impossible. It requires access to a record of quotidian life produced by an author who was not consciously creating any image of the world; a record that was produced in a spontaneous or indeed natural manner and not subjected to that scrupulous process of correcting the message which in some cases may extend over several stages.

The selected source material is rather unusual in its nature; this results from the genre features of a set of household accounts, which in general can be typified as intimate documents, yet in their form and content refer to trade-related registers, inventories or summations. Among the models for such records are the so-called household books, *livres de raison* in French, which were especially popular in Europe in the late 17th and 18th century [Foisil 1989: 327]. Citing a late 17th-century source, Madeleine Foisil writes that a *livre de raison* is “a book in which a good householder or merchant writes down what he receives or spends, keeping a systematic record of all affairs” [Foisil 1989: 327].³ Above all, however, household books are characterised by the fact that they are written from day to day and thus constitute a direct, ongoing record arranged according to a simple pattern: the rhythm of daily life and its most trivial aspects and actions. Household books constitute thus a type of direct documentation of mundane life understood as routine, repetitive actions associated with ordinary existence. It is also worth noting that intimate records of this kind, in contrast to, for instance, memoirs or diaries, are not intended for reading, and consequently they do not have the classical narrative form. In the majority of cases, the volume appears at the first glance to be essentially an ordinary account ledger (one is tempted to say: a revenue and expense ledger); even if occasionally it is more extensive, more scrupulously kept and richer in information, its topic is nonetheless related to accounting, to revenue and to everyday

3 The fact that the author of the accounts discussed herein for many years scrupulously fulfilled the duties of a clerk in a Łódź branch of a large state enterprise and at the same time was responsible for running a household is not without import to the analysis of the collected material.

expenditure noted down mainly in order to carefully control and wisely plan the household budget.

In what is one of the most singular novels of the past century, Georges Perec describes in great detail the universe of the residents of a tenement at rue Simon-Crubellier 11 in Paris; *Life: A User's Manual* contains a comprehensive, almost indexical description of their routine behaviour and habits [Perec 1978]. In this and in his other works,⁴ Perec, considered to be the creator of a bizarre version of the anthropology of everyday, conducts a detailed, all-inclusive description of everyday life, perceived not as momentous events reported in newspaper headlines, but rather a collection of objects, facts, actions and personages who transpire as entirely banal and, as Dariusz Czaja writes, belong entirely to the domain of unimpressive mundanity [Czaja 2004: 86]. A similar image and quality of everyday life, with special attention to food expenses, is revealed by the records under analysis. Scrupulously, day after day, they document events linked with the stark reality of the ordinary day; in this light, their analysis is an attempt to come as near as possible to the living substance of ordinary life. It might be said that household accounts present time, and the commonplace action of buying, as a succession of events whose minimum unit of duration is one day (sometimes divided into two or three entries of expenses), the average units are weeks, months, quarters and years, and the maximum unit is the lifetime of an adult. Shopping turns into a fundamental event of daily life, while household accounts amount to shards of reality in which the author and her family truly lived, and which in the absence of these records would have been forgotten and socially annulled.

In addition, routinely purchased foodstuffs are components, in a sense, of the taste, colour and smell of everyday; comprising the given family's menu, they also make it possible to imagine its way of life, the

4 Georges Perec was also the author of a text published in 1976 entitled *Attempt at an Inventory of the Liquid and Solid Foodstuffs Ingurgitated by Me in the Course of the Year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Four*, in which he meticulously recorded all that he had eaten and drunk that year. In *Je me souviens* [1978] he attempted to render an account of his memories from ordinary life in the years 1946–1961, putting down a few hundred sentences all composed according to one pattern, starting with: *I remember...* [Czaja 2004: 86].

diet its members favoured or the culinary customs they observed. The role of food in the cycle of daily life is elucidated by the very arrangement of the accounting entries, showing the division of expenses in relation to the consecutive days of the week, and hence perfectly illustrating the rhythm, weekly distribution and frequency of various forms of everyday behaviour. For instance, it is evident that small-scale shopping for food was done each day except Sundays; a double entry usually appeared of Friday or Saturday, which is linked with the organisation of the Saturday and Sunday celebration time and the need to store food for a few days; shopping done on a Sunday usually concerned foodstuffs typical to a work-free day, for instance sweets. Simple, terse manner of expression based on repeated formulas, characteristic to record-making, is naturally typical to the accounts under analysis. Entries are divided into successive months; each entry begins with a date (day, month and year), followed the sum total of expenses incurred on that day; afterward, in parentheses, comes a detailed record of shopping with the sum noted in *zł* (abbreviation for *złoty*) and *gr* (abbreviation for *grosz*), and the type of item purchased. By way of an example, the following is a weekly record dating from September 1960:

- 19.09.60 41.35 (2.50 rolls, 2 *zł* cigarettes, 6 *zł* sugar, 2 *zł* knife sharpening, 12 *zł* tights repair, 1 *zł* borscht, 50 *gr* matches, 6 *zł* ice-cream, 5 *zł* milk, 1.85 bread, 2.50 rolls)
- 20.09.60 18.40 (12 *zł* sausage, 1 *zł* rolls, 5.40 minced sausage)
- 20.9.60 39.85 (1.85 bread, 1 *zł* half-moon roll, 37 *zł* vodka)
- 21.9.60 8.50 (1 *zł* rolls, 2 *zł* pears, 50 *gr* tramway, 5 *zł* Janusz)
- 21.9.60 36.95 (19 *zł* meat, 4 *zł* cabbage, 3.70 *zł* bread, 5 *zł* milk, 5.25 *zł* plums)
- 22.9.60 27.75 (9 *zł* sausage, 6 *zł* Cracow sausage, 50 *gr* large roll, 1 *zł* rolls, 5 *zł* milk, 1.85 *zł* bread, 1.40 *zł* puddings, 3 *zł* cocoa)
- 23.9.60 68.85 (2.50 *zł* rolls, 5 *zł* Janusz, 2.50 *zł* milk, 1.85 *zł* bread, 50 *gr* bułka, 4.50 *zł* cottage cheese, 7 *zł* sour cream, 3 *zł* apples, 7.50 *zł* plums, 1 *zł* tramway, 18.50 vodka, 15 *zł* meat)
- 24.9.60 18.35 (4.60 cigarettes, 8.75 butter, 3 *zł* apples, 2 *zł* pears)

24.9.60 101.40 (12 zł sugar, 5 zł milk, 7.40 zł bread, 36 zł beef, 9.50 zł fatback, 18 zł sausage, 6 zł brawn, 3 zł cocoa, 4 zł apples, 50 gr large roll)
25.9.60 16.00 (9 zł candy, 7 zł Janusz)
Altogether: 377.40 zł [Budżet domowy... 1.09.1959–1.12.1960⁵].

In addition, completing the material and further increasing its value, at the top of the page, before the record of expenses for each month, there is usually a record of the household members' salaries, compensations and bonuses due in that month, occasionally some extra earnings, and often a sum left over from the preceding month. Expenses are summed up every week, before the following Monday's heading. In addition, at the bottom of the page at the end of each month, there is a sum total of all expenses: the overall sum spent in the given month. It is divided into the basic cost of household maintenance, described as the so-called "living expenses", and other expenses, that is those going beyond the elementary daily needs. It may be said that this is a record of private life depicted in dates, numbers, and thus in money. Genre features of this text alone point out a definite manner of not only reading, but also interpreting and analysing it. It is to a great extent the numbers that are the main markers of routine everyday practices; the specific image of a social universe is here constructed on the basis of numbers.

In the analysed household accounts, food expenses belong to the most elementary daily expenses; they appear in the entries for every single day and definitely predominate over other costs of maintaining a household. An analysis of the accounts makes it possible to determine the entire inventory of foodstuffs used in the framework of everyday life, which in turn may potentially reveal the characteristics of the daily menu of the author and her family, as inhabitants of Łódź, a large Polish city, living in a two-person household. The analysed accounts supply also the prices of particular foodstuffs in a Polish city (i.e. Łódź) in 1960. Regrettably,

5 This set of household accounts in manuscript form remains the property of the author's family; it was made available for scholarly analysis, after which it is going to be donated to the Marshal Piłsudski Regional Public Library in Łódź.

they do not include the amount of purchased items; mainly the value of single items can be ascertained. Baker's goods are the basic item in the inventory of purchased foodstuffs, including bread (1.85 zł/loaf), usually bought daily or every second day in the quantity of two to four loaves, rolls (0.50 zł each), usually bought once or twice a week in the quantity of three to five, and sporadically a half-moon roll (1 zł each). Second in importance are eggs and dairy products, that is milk (2.50–2.70 zł),⁶ usually bought three to five times a week, cottage cheese (4.5 or 9 zł), eggs (3.80 zł), usually bought by five or ten twice a week, and the sporadically purchased butter (8.75–19 zł) and sour cream (14 zł). Meat and cold cuts appear quite often, being bought two or three times a week; prevalent is the general entry "meat" without description, bought for 15–19 zł each time, but other relevant entries mention beef (15.50 zł or 36 zł), spare ribs (5 zł), minced meat (9 zł), belly meat (13 zł), sometimes pork loin (26 zł), very occasionally veal (30–40 zł). In addition, meat products include fatback (ca. 3.30–8 zł) and lard (9.50 zł), liver (16 zł), broth meat (13 zł) or bones (2–4 zł). Cold cuts, bought on the average three times a week, include the most generally bought sausage (za ok. 9 zł), mortadella (6.40 zł), frankfurters (19 zł), pâté sausage (5.40 zł), brawn (6 zł) or buckwheat sausage (7.50 zł), sometimes also smoked ham (11.80–18 zł). The period under analysis contains a single entry recording the purchase of a cockerel (30 zł), noted one Friday in October, probably in connection with the well-established Polish culinary custom of serving broth on Sundays. It is also worth mentioning that "home-style cooking" was highly valued in the era of the People's Republic of Poland; making use of self-grown crops and home-raised animals, or buying such products from private retailers bringing them from villages to town marketplaces, were also considered essential [Brzostek 2010: 131].

Vegetables were an important element of the daily diet as ascertained on the basis of these household accounts. Those included potatoes (1.50–5.60 zł), cabbage (1.80–4 zł), carrot (0.70 gr), onion (0.60 gr), peas (6 zł), cucumbers (3 zł) or mirepoix (1.50 zł). Fruit were mainly seasonal; in

6 Prices given in the parentheses are average prices of the given product bought at one shopping trip.

September those were apples (3–4 zł), pears (2 zł) and plums (5.25–7.50 zł), as well as wild mushrooms (6–8 zł). Frequent purchases include also sugar (3–12 zł), usually bought in larger quantities, groats (12.80 zł), flour (6.70–12.70 zł), rice (8 zł), breadcrumbs (3 zł), pudding (0.70 zł–1.40 zł), borscht (1 zł), vinegar (7.55 zł) and, sporadically, oil (16–18 zł). In the entries under analysis, fish are represented only by herrings (10.80–12 zł). The taste of the everyday food was enhanced with salt (1.20–3.60 zł), horseradish and mustard (3.90 zł), while the prevalent spices were pepper (7 zł), allspice (0.70 gr) and bay leaves (0.60 gr). The monthly record included also expenses for ice-cream (6–8 zł), candy (3–9 zł), waffles (3.60 zł) and cakes, like poppy seed cake (14.80 zł), usually bought on Sundays as a special treat. The basic menu was complemented with beverages: tea (2.85 zł), coffee, (0.65 gr), vodka (18.50–37 zł) and beer, concealed in the records under the entry *2 zł Janusz*.⁷ Much more expensive coffee (23.50 zł) is also recorded, but with a note that it had been bought as a gift for a person from outside the family. Vodka often appears in a similar role, bought for various persons who assisted or supported the author in household chores or professional work, bought in recompense, so to speak, for their services. It needs to be added that coffee promoted in the period of the People's Republic of Poland was mainly the so-called "national coffee", that is grain coffee; it was a substandard ersatz, but it was also linked with the official propaganda, promoting appreciation of Polish agriculture, products of which were supposed to be valued more highly than imported products [Brzostek 2010: 75–76].

On the basis of information contained in the accounts it is easy to recreate a range of tastes of home cooking of that time and place. Nevertheless, all the above food expenses depended on the availability of products on the market, and above all on the monthly budget; the household's income was based on the salaries of the author and her husband. It is worth noting, however, that with respect to household expenses, the author's average weekly expenditure in the autumn of 1960 amounted to ca. 300 zł, whereas the sum total of the income of both household mem-

⁷ The meaning of this entry is clarified by records dating from other years.

bers ranged from ca. 2700 to ca. 3000 zł per month. An analysis of the accounts reveals that each month, food expenses amounted to well over a half of monthly expenditure; residence cost was relatively low (e.g. ca. 20 zł for rent on the apartment), and average outgoings for various industrial goods (e.g. clothing), cleaning products and detergents reached one-fourth of the total expenditure. Interestingly, research on household budgets in post-war Poland reveals that the best part of acquired remuneration was expended on foodstuffs, and the increase of income in later years did not cause the decrease of food expenses in relation to other daily expenses [Beskid 1977: 101]. This discovery points to the importance attached to eating in the Polish society of the second half of the 20th century – a society much affected by war experiences and the shortages of the era of the People's Republic; yet it also reveals that prices of various industrial goods, especially clothing and furniture, were high in relation to incomes, and hence they were perceived as luxury goods and bought only occasionally [Brzostek 2010: 214].

It is also worth emphasising that the records pertain to the period of the People's Republic; that the author of the records, being female, was the organiser of household life, the chief shopper and the manager of household purchase accounting, is natural. The patriarchal family model, in which the woman was expected to cook and take care of the proper nutrition of her nearest relatives, whereas the man's share in household life was limited to carrying coal, firewood or water, was very markedly predominant in Poland of the second half of the 20th century. The male role in daily culinary practices was therefore negligible.

Perusal of these accounts justifies the assumption that all foodstuffs bought by their author were used in household cookery which, the era of the People's Republic, was a crucial counterbalance to the generally promoted mass catering associated with canteens and the so-called "milk bars"; basic, unrefined food was served there to the "populace" only with the intention to assuage hunger. Housewives who cooked at home tried to live up to their families' culinary expectations, even though, considering the limitations of the era, maintaining a household demanded much restraint. Official popularisation of the principles of "rational" nutrition was

intended to influence culinary preferences of the Polish society; the task of the new cookery was to replace old culinary traditions and to introduce a new, ideological approach to food. Collective catering gained scientific foundations in the 1950s and, as alleged by the official propaganda, its ingredients were based on calculations of “balanced meals” carried out by physiologists and economic coordinators [Brzostek 2010: 19]. The approach central to collective catering was rationalistic, not sensualistic, which went very much against the principles of traditional Polish cookery. It was proposed that eating – an action so deeply rooted in the sphere of social life – ought to change so as to involve mainly the satisfaction of physiological needs. Vegetarian cuisine, as well as such foodstuffs as fish, fruit and vegetables, were promoted in connection with the country’s economic situation and in particular with the shortage of meat. Yet throughout the entire period of the People’s Republic home cooking offered an escape from mass catering; the favoured menu was as fatty, and as clearly connected with the Polish culinary tradition, as it was only possible. Poles preferred to eat at home and sample dishes based on recipes circulated among friends; even in those difficult times Polish home cuisine clearly referred to old culinary models.

All in all, regardless of the shortcomings of the source material under analysis, it is quite evident that food expenses in the analysed period were the foundation of the costs of everyday living. The analysed material does not provide direct data regarding the amount of acquired foodstuffs or the places of their purchase; no data are available regarding the dishes prepared from these products, the manner of their serving, the time of day or conditions in which they were eaten, or descriptions of the emotions or actions of the people who stand in the background, so to speak, of these records. However, the fact that biographical experiences of the author and her family, the specificity of her environment, or various complex social situations that constitute the cultural foundation for the recorded food expenses are not directly taken under consideration here, does not mean that those aspects of reality were entirely overlooked. On the contrary, it may be said that they were concealed between the lines, just suggested to the reader, thus creating a very dense undercurrent of meanings. In the analysed

material, generally speaking, the richness of contents is contrasted with the modesty of form; also intriguing is the density of all data contained in the records (e.g. in the form of underlines, diverse annotations, graphic abbreviations or mathematical calculations). Hence this “literature” must be approached with great caution and analysed most meticulously and with utmost care. Repeated references to foodstuffs, their prices and the time of their purchase constitute a very peculiar illustration of the practices of everyday life which resulted from, and were directly dependent on, the character of the historical period in which they occurred, the lifestyle of a typical Polish family of the era, and the level of social aspirations of its members. It is also necessary to consider the fact that the author of these records hailed from Łódź, and hence was an inhabitant of a concrete city space; this is of considerable importance with regard to the period in question. In a different cultural scenery, in a different historical period, or in connection with a different lifestyle of the author, these records would simply illustrate a different image of everyday behaviour. Yet regardless of all these reservations, the most important aspect is undoubtedly the fact that this is a record of quotidian life in its stark, direct, tangible dimension; the record of, to quote Dariusz Czaja [2004: 86], “life as itself”, which in so many other analyses of mundanity is shown already shrouded in the cloak of cultural interpretation.

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