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*Farmers and traders:
two ethe of work, two conventions
of storytelling in memory-based
stories told by the Vilamovians
about the Second World War and
the post-war persecutions*

*Gospodarze i handlarze: dwa etosy pracy,
dwie konwencje opowiadania w opowieściach wspomnieniowych
Wilamowian o drugiej wojnie światowej
i powojennych prześladowaniach*

The Vilamovians are a small ethnic group inhabiting the town of Wilamowice in the borderland between Silesia and Lesser Poland. The bonding agents cementing the local Vilamovian identity include the legend of their Flemish descent (Lipok-Bierwiaczonek 2002), their traditional attire (Filip 2003; Chromik, Król, Małanicz-Przybylska 2020), language (Wicherkiewicz 2003; Król, Olko, Wicherkiewicz 2017; Majerska-Sznajder 2019), engagement in trade and awareness of their being distinct from other groups (Król 2022a; Król 2022b).

The Vilamovians have hitherto been described as a homogeneous community. However, as my own research has shown, the group was divided into social strata including the intelligentsia, large farm owners, traders, small farm owners and servants.

The present article focuses on large farm owners and traders, who constituted the two dominant groups, each having its individual, distinct ethos. It demonstrates how these two ethe translate into different storytelling conventions present among the Vilamovian community.

The analysis employs material gathered in the course of many years of ethnographic field research consisting of participant observation and interviews with ca. 200 individuals (some of whom were interviewed several times). This allowed me to observe how texts of folklore function, and how they are fabulised and folklorised. Significantly, I have been immersed in the Vilamovian culture from the start, being a member of the community myself. I have also comparatively used materials made available by other researchers, e.g. Dr. Tomasz Wicherkiewicz from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, who conducted research on the sociolinguistic situation of the Vilamovian language as early as the late 1980s.

Since Wilamowice is a small town, I use a manner of marking citations from my interlocutors that makes it more difficult to identify individuals. Each statement is therefore labelled separately, even if they were made by the same person. The label contains: the gender of the interlocutor, their approximate date of birth and the year in which the statement was recorded. The statements were recorded in either the Vilamovian or the Polish language; in the present article, both are translated into English with no attempt at stylisation.

The diversity of memory-based stories told by the Vilamovians

Analysis of the gathered memory-based stories told by the Vilamovians about the war and the post-war period indicates that regardless of their declared ethnic identity, my interlocutors belong to more than one community of memory.¹ The present article examines statements made by individuals from the Vilamovian-centric community of memory.² Narratives constructed by its members are based on the following interpretative models:³ “attachment to one’s native land”, “faith in the State”, “you need to be a good person”, “the Vilamovians were treated unfairly after the war”, “the Vilamovians are better than everyone else”, “our Poles cannot be trusted”, “a rich man will always

1 Following Lech Nijakowski, I define the community of memory as “an assemblage of individuals (not necessarily a group) who share a particular biographical experience, not always traumatic in nature, and their descendants who have inherited the family memory” (Nijakowski 2006: 33).

2 I deliberately use the term ‘Vilamovian-centric’ and not ‘Vilamovian’, in order not to exclude individuals who identify as Vilamovian but do not share the common image of history characteristic for members of that group.

3 The term ‘interpretative model’ is understood as recurring, complex models of interpretation adopting a certain structure of argumentation, and considered obvious by members of a given collective (Welzer, Moller, Tschuggnall 2009: 383).

be fine”, “the death of the Vilamovian culture is the death of the Vilamovian people”, “the cultural otherness of the Vilamovians was the reason for their persecution”.

These models contain numerous topoi and fossilised phrases serving as the foundations for the dichotomous mental images of “us” (the Vilamovians) and “others” (the Poles, Germans, Red Army soldiers).

Like all texts of folklore, memory-based stories are not individual tales, but are imbued with motifs and plot themes practised in the narrative tradition of the given group (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2016: 10). A memorate is a story of a witness that exists at the intersection between an individual and a communal tale. It is selective in nature, with the manner in which the events are told being influenced by the teller’s own experiences and the present circumstances (Lehmann 2007: 32), as well as the wish to adjust the story to collective ideology ascribed to a given community (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 1986: 27).

Once a memorate is embraced by a group, it becomes objectivised, refined and detached from its original narrator; in other words, it is fabulised and folklorised (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2016: 65), and “all that was subjective and individual is absorbed by the collective and becomes anonymous” (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 1986: 27).⁴ It becomes a fabulate, i.e. a qualitatively new memory-based story.

Significantly for the present considerations, the folk repertoire may vary in different professional groups, as they can constitute separate communication communities (cf. Simonides, Hajduk-Nijakowska 1989: 343–345, Kajfosz 2011: 54). Invoking research conducted in Polish folklore studies (cf. Grzeszczuk 1970; Simonides 1976), Violetta Wróblewska noted that “[e]ach of the presented groups uses forms of communication specific to itself, chooses common topics that guarantee understanding, and presents a similar system of values” (Wróblewska 2005: 9).

Thus, the community to whose views folklore messages communicated by the Vilamovians is meant to cater does not necessarily mean the ethnic group or the community of memory. It can also signify one of the two professional groups dominant in Wilamowice, namely farmers and traders. As my research suggests, each of the two had a separate ethos, i.e. a moral code which “was expressed to the individual in the form of a set of prohibitions and injunctions. It was based on the oppositions of: one must – one must not, one should – one should not act a certain way” (Kantor 1982: 138). The principal elements of an ethos may be passed down intentionally through upbringing (Kubica 2011: 61), while the prohibitions and injunctions become fixed in the mind of the individual and “are remembered all the better, the greater the authority from which the information originated” (Kantor 1982: 139). According to Katarzyna Marcol, memory-based stories do not discuss models of behaviour

4 All citations from non-English-language sources have been translated solely for the purpose of the present article.

or hierarchy of values directly: "It is the protagonists' actions put in a given context that reveal what is good and socially acceptable, and what is bad and objectionable within the group" (Marcol 2020: 223).

If folklore expresses the behavioural norms of a given social group, it therefore is "a phenomenon related to the everyday human existence of a specific community, included in the set of values passed down in inter-generational transmission as part of undisputed legacy of one's forefathers that constitute an elementary component of universal folk education" (Simonides 1989: 11–12). After all, as noted by Jan Kajfosz, "the motivation behind the actions and views of folklore protagonists reveal not only the laws that govern the world presented in the narrative, but very often also the laws governing the world-view of the teller" (Kajfosz 2009: 140). The existence of two ethe may therefore affect the form of the story.

The aim of the present analysis is to reconstruct the two storytelling conventions: the farmer- and the trader-centric one, stemming from the dissimilar ethe of the two groups. It does not endeavour to ascertain whether the protagonists of the stories did indeed act the way the narrators suggest. Similarly to the ethos of Silesian Lutherans, the ethe of Vilamovian farmers and traders are myths that allow them "to be distinct from others, construct their own identity and orient themselves within the world" (Kubica 2011: 65). I regard storytelling conventions as types of content based on ethe. They may therefore be characterised by means of analysing the topoi and fossilised phrases they contain. Topoi are recurring motifs and thought habits that express knowledge of what is deemed probable. They are only applicable and understandable in specific circles (Knoblauch 2000: 652–654). On the one hand, they are based on social experience and collective memory; on the other – they are expressed in language (Knoblauch 2000: 654; Schröder 2005: 25). Where there are habits (i.e. ready-made scenarios for reaction), people do not need to waste their energy on reliving events and evaluating facts, since they are provided with ready interpretations in the form of topoi.

Topoi with a more narrow meaning will be referred to as fossilised phrases (cf. Tokarska-Bakir 2008: 42). What is important in a topos is the recurrence of interpretation; in a fossilised phrase, the crucial element is the recurrence of form.

The successive sections of this work present topoi and fossilised phrases associated with the farmer-centric and trader-centric ethos that are typical for the two storytelling conventions.

The ethe of Vilamovian farmers

The present work sometimes employs the term 'homesteaders' (Polish: gospodarze) to denote Vilamovian farmers, since this is how the group was referred to by the residents of Wilamowice (cf. Krzyworzeka 2014: 57–58): "When you went a-courting, you would

look at how many [horse] collars were hung in the hallway. If there were two, it was a grand homesteader. If one, it was good. If none, you'd already know this was no homesteader at all" (M/1950–1954/2022⁵). Thus, not all farmers were dubbed homesteaders; the term only applied to those that had at least 6 morgen of land.⁶ The acreage owned may also have affected one's attire. According to the German ethnographer Adelheid Marie Beil, women from homesteads that owned less than 6 morgen of land were not allowed to wear monochromatic skirts with their festive Vilamovian dress (Beil 1942: 22).

Similarly to the farmers studied by Jaworska and Pieniżek, Vilamovian homesteaders considered work to be of value in and of itself, and constitute "a measure of a person's worth and their responsibility for the land they cultivated" (Jaworska, Pieniżek 1995: 13). In memory-based stories told by residents of Wilamowice in the farmer-centric convention, the topos of "hard-working Vilamovians" is of considerable importance.

Yes. Because he was a cherished farmer, because before the war and under the occupation we were model farmers, as we had sixteen morgen of land, 'cause we had morgen here. Because we were working like oxen, because there were five of us, and there were no tractors. We had one horse, one. If there'd been a boy there then maybe there would have been a pair of horses, but there was one. So we worked with the horse, we made chaff, we raked, we threshed, as we went about the field "oh, the Płaćnik [family] are in the field, them we can't outdo". My granddaughter was here recently, I am not bragging, as I am old now, seventy years of age. She was here in the field, we were digging about the cabbage. She says to me, "Granny, granny, you have to live two hundred years. For your deftness, for your shrewdness for work". Yes. Because I am afraid of no work, like any woman here. We are not afraid of work, because we do everything. I am in the field, in the byre, and amongst people I can also manage (F/1915–1919/1989).

As in the case of Silesian Lutherans, work in this community has "religious and moral value" and pertains "not to work in an abstract meaning of the term, but understood specifically – as manual labour" (Kubica 2011: 51). The above tale also reveals other topoi, e.g. that of "honest Vilamovians" – the "work" of which the narrator is not afraid is work in the field – honest and compliant with Catholic ethics, and thus also with the morals of "pious Vilamovians". Although it is not stated directly, the "work" mentioned here may implicitly be put in opposition to trade, which the homesteader ethos presents as something deceitful (cf. Jaworska, Pieniżek 1995: 14). The "shrewdness for work" the narrator mentions, and of which she is proud, should therefore be

5 Statements made by my interlocutors have been anonymised. The labels presented herein only provide the person's gender and approximate date of birth, as well as the year in which the statement was recorded.

6 The typical acreage was ca. 10 morgen; in the inter-war period only three homesteads had more than 20 morgen of land.

understood as noteworthy diligence, not as slyness or trickery, negatively valued by farmers (cf. Jaworska, Pieniążek 1995: 14). The woman also expressed pride in the fact that her family (nicknamed Płaćnik) is identified in Wilamowice as one of hard-working farmers, not traders. In this storytelling convention, it is common to calculate the homestead's wealth and independence not only in the acreage, but also the number of horses. The narrator's remark that if she had a brother, and not only sisters, they would certainly have had another horse, is therefore meant to ensure that her homestead is not mistakenly classified as smaller.⁷

Fossilised phrases appearing frequently in the farmer-centric storytelling convention include the phrase "they sell their own [produce]". It is used by way of an explanation, to make sure that a given family or individual is not erroneously classified (by third parties) as belonging to the group of traders. For instance, homesteaders from Wilamowice sometimes sell surplus produce on the market, whereas traders – setting up similar market stalls – sell goods they bought from farmers with an appropriate price markup. In such situations, it is important to emphasise that someone is selling their own produce – the suggestion that they bought them from someone else at a lower price and are now selling them for profit might come across as offensive. This is because the farmers considered trade to be "not entirely work", but rather its "lesser kind" (Jaworska, Pieniążek 1995: 20). "And the things we had worked hard for, they bought from us for cheap and later sold them at high prices" (F/1920–1924/2022), as one Vilamovian woman from a farmer family recounted with resentment. The importance of the information regarding whether someone is a farmer or a trader was clearly apparent, for instance, in the movie *Mówią o nas hołdy bołdy*, directed by Dorota Latour in 2003. It includes a conversation between two Vilamovian women and a man:

F1: You know how it is, here in Wilamowice. That everyone works, even ones that don't have to anymore, they still work, don't they? Until they die. For instance these ladies that sell vegetables here at the market...

F2: Their own.

F1: (...) they actually have their pensions, benefits, they could just be sleeping or watching television, but they get up at the crack of dawn and work, like Nuśka, no?

One of the two women found it necessary to add that the ladies selling things at the market are not traders, selling only "their own". Similarly, when I asked my interlocutors whether their parents had been going to markets, many answered that "yes, but they were only taking their own [produce]" (F/1925–1929/2022).

⁷ The most serious work in the fields required a pair of horses. Homesteaders that only had one horse (usually those that owned less than 10 morgon of land) had to 'harness up' together with another farmer.

Another thing that seems important to those Vilamovians who tell their stories in the farmer-centric convention is “attachment to the land”: the strip of field one inherits from one’s ancestors needs to be worked and should not be sold away. One of my female interlocutors expressed it thus: “The most important things in my life have been prayer and daily work in the field. I am a Vilamovian farmer. I was born in the field, and I will die there” (F/1920–1924/2007). According to my interlocutors, work in the field was congruent with the Catholic faith, whereas trade was not, as it involved deceit: “My Dad always used to tell me that those traders always need to cheat, otherwise they would make no profit” (F/1920–1924/2022). Amanda Krzyworzeka also wrote of farmers perceiving trade as “getting easy profit from someone else’s hard work” (Krzyworzeka 2014: 296).

To conclude, the pattern of behaviour of a Vilamovian homesteader consists of the following values: attachment to their land, industriousness, piety and honesty. Farmers from Wilamowice ought to work their land and refrain from taking away anyone else’s land or buying other people’s produce to sell them at a profit.

The ethos of Vilamovian traders

Traders from Wilamowice followed a different ethos altogether. They were a diverse group that had, over the years, greatly changed the scope of their goods and their modus operandi.⁸ There are well-known stories of Vilamovian traders that had, from the 17th century onwards, travelled the length of Europe with their goods, visiting such places as Warsaw, Lvov, Prague, Bremen, Lübeck, Hamburg, Graz, Linz and Iași (Latosiński 1909: 240). Some of them settled in Vienna, where a sizable Vilamovian community soon formed, offering support to their compatriots in Wilamowice. Others engaged in transporting various goods across the Austro-Prussian border. One group that gained much recognition in the inter-war period were Vilamovian *puterbowa* (butter women), who walked on foot or rode in carts to Bielsko-Biała and sold dairy there. In the Communist period, such women went by bus to deliver dairy to their regular customers, most of whom were bank clerks, shopkeepers, employees of health centres, etc.: “For more than a dozen years I went about with the dairy, to the bank, everywhere. So when I needed to get something done, I got it done faster. Because they would say »Look, here is this sour-cream granny«” (F/1920–1924/2007). The last of these women stopped coming to Bielsko-Biała to sell her wares only in the second decade of the 21st century. However, there are still traders who buy their goods in other regions of Poland and sell them at higher prices at markets near Wilamowice. Instead of the horse-drawn carts they once used to bring them in, they now travel in

⁸ The dictionary of the Vilamovian language, written in 1936, contains the following sentence: “In Wilamowice it was the merchants that went extinct, in Poland, it was the nobility” (Mojmir 1936: 374).

delivery vans. There were also other trader groups, e.g. women selling candy, cherries and other sweets at church fairs.

Regardless of this diversity, all traders shared a specific storytelling convention in which the topos of the hard-working Vilamovian was replaced by that of the “cunning Vilamovian”. In this case, cunning means the ability to gain the most profit while extending the least effort, not the already mentioned “shrewdness for work”. In this context, I have often heard the phrase “an ounce of trade is better than a pound of work”, which is regionally associated with Vilamovians (cf. Libera, Robotycki 2001: 389). In contrast with the farmers’ ethos, to traders work is not the goal, but the means to an end – which is money. One of my interlocutors recounted:

Trade has always appealed to me. And there was nothing here, and I opened a bakery and a confectionery here, and I had a husband who only knew how to work the field. He had no other skill, and I liked it [trading]. I took [hired] a baker, so I had to pay him, and a confectioner too, so I had to pay him as well, and in three years, when they left, I got [master craftsman] certificates for my husband too. I liked it very much, business. And as to the field, I didn’t like it one bit. There were five cows in the sty here, I didn’t go care for them, but I only liked to trade. So later I sold that [the cows] and turned all of it into the bakery and the confectionery (F/1925–1929/2008).

In another interview, the same woman stated: “Vilamovians, they really could count. My Mum [at the market] in Biała, she did everything in her mind, better than a calculator” (F/1925–1929/2014). The phrase “better than a calculator” is a fossil frequently repeated in the trader-centric storytelling convention. Narratives told from this perspective often feature the topos of “clever Vilamovians” who have more skill than others and thus are able to earn more. This motif frequently appears in tandem with the topos of “Vilamovians helping others”, according to which the greater earnings made by the Vilamovians allowed them to help those in need: “Whoever came and asked, I would always lend money. One cousin came and said: Have mercy, we’re getting a house built, lend me some money. And I did. And with another cousin it was the same. We did trade, so I had something and I could help” (F/1930– 1934/2015). It should be noted that the topic of lending money was mostly discussed by women, since they were the ones who typically managed the household funds in trader families from Wilamowice.

To conclude, the behavioural model of Vilamovian traders comprises the following values: cunning, the ability to earn large sums of money, as well as readiness to help others. The aim is to work in a manner that will allow a person to gain the largest profits with the least amount of effort. It is permissible to profit from other people’s work, yet one is obliged to help those in need, e.g. by lending them money (though not

at interest), and to contribute to the local community – one’s town or parish.⁹ Work is regarded only as a means to an end, which is money. Renting one’s field out to someone else is perfectly acceptable, yet selling it would not be deemed so.

The farmer- and trader-centric storytelling conventions thus feature vastly different topoi that stem from the dissimilar ethe of the two groups and the different values they convey. This is not to mean that the stories told by the Vilamovians may be divided into two distinct types, since in this kind of content division lines are only apparent from an analytical point of view, whereas “in empirical data they may sometimes overlap” (Welzer, Moller, Tschuggnall 2009: 355).

Traders as seen by farmers; farmers as seen by traders

Traders were often a part of stories told in the farmer-centric convention. Some of these included episodes from my interlocutors’ childhood, which they recalled to highlight significant differences in living standards:

I only remember how your sister Nusia went to school with my sister Hilda. And my sister took me and we went to your sister. And this Nusia had a ball and we played with it, and then Nusia showed us her rooms, so beautiful, so many rooms, all so pretty. The prettiest house in Wilamowice. Then we came home and told our parents: Do you know what a beautiful house Nusia has, so many rooms, so pretty inside, while we have such an old hut with a single chamber (F/1930–1934/2008).

My cousin’s wife had money, so I borrowed from her, when we were building or had to pay these fines (F/1925–1929/2021).

She was actually my cousin, but I was friends with her... because her mother did trade, so she would bring her oranges, so I always benefited from it somewhat (F/1925–1929/2006).

In the second and third statement, my interlocutors emphasised that although they themselves did not come from trader families, they enjoyed certain benefits of their acquaintance with traders. They did not engage in trade themselves and, when asked about the reasons for this, replied that “you have to be born to a trader family, others would not be able to do it” (F/1920–1924/2022), or that they considered trade to be a dishonest occupation they would not be able to reconcile with the values they cherished. Trade was also perceived as competition for farmers (cf. Krzyworzeka 2014: 92). Differences in the system of values were often highlighted in stories about daughters-in-law:

⁹ Even to this day, Vilamovian traders often sponsor various interior elements for the Roman Catholic church in Wilamowice.

I have a very good daughter-in-law, though she is not from Wilamowice, she comes here, talks to me. And the other daughter-in-law... well, she's not bad either, but she does trade. It's just this kind of family that does trade, these people are simply different. I don't have such a connection with her (F/1925–1929/2008).

My daughter-in-law is from a family that traded. Both my daughters-in-law are from such families. We had everything, machinery, and they had it all sold away and only traded. The fields, they had them rented out, because it doesn't pay to work it: *Work doesn't pay, only trade* (F/1920–1924/2014).

Thus, both women suggested that their daughters-in-law who came from trader families behaved in accordance to a different model. In the eyes of my interlocutors, these differences in values make it more difficult to form a connection, or may even lead to conflict; one of the women clearly resented her daughters-in-law for introducing changes in her life that were difficult to accept to someone from a farmer family: selling machinery, abandoning work in the field and focusing on trade.

Mentions of traders in farmer-centric narratives were more frequent than remarks on farmers appearing in stories told in the trader-centric convention. Most of such remarks were neutral in tone, e.g.: “they did not trade” (F/1930–1934/2017), or “we bought milk from them and went to the market with it” (M/1930–1934/2017). Negative comments pertaining to homesteaders were usually made in the context of contemporary trade relations, in which one trader complained that a certain farmer wanted to sell his produce to him at the same price he sold them at the market:

He doesn't know how to trade, it can't be like this that he's selling me, say, parsley, for 5 zloty, and then sets himself up at the market next to me and also sells for 5 zloty. For me to make a profit I need to mark the price up to, say, 7 (M/1960–1964/2022).

Memory-based stories told in the trader-centric convention rarely featured negative opinions on farmers; their work is presented as honest, only “not for me”, as the traders with whom I spoke emphasised. Farmers were sometimes portrayed as less smart, since they devoted their time and attention to work that did not bring as much profit as trade. The fossilised phrase of “all his/her life [was] spent in the field” appeared in both conventions, yet was interpreted differently. In trader-centric narratives it had depreciating connotations: e.g. for the interlocutor who said that her husband “only knew how to work the field” (F/1925– 1929/2008), and when he got ill “we rented everything out to our neighbour, six hectares, to be free from the hassle” (F/1925–1929/2008). Another Vilamovian spoke of a certain farmer family: “These were such lowbrow folk, all their lives spent in the field” (M/1935– 1929/2020). A female member of the Vilamovian intelligentsia described another woman: “When I recall her, she worked in that field, and it's gotten her nowhere” (F/1930– 1934/2014).

The same fossil was interpreted quite differently in the farmer-centric convention, as exemplified by the following statement about a neighbour who died: “When I recall, this Halusia, all her life spent in the field, such a good woman, and honest, dear Lord” (F/1925–1929/2007). The dissimilarities stem from a different perception of the meaning of work found in the farmers’ and the trader’s ethos: for the former, work was their life’s purpose, for the latter – only a means towards profit.

The two ethe of work and two conventions of telling stories about the Second World War and the post-war persecution of Vilamovians

An analysis of these two Vilamovian storytelling conventions in narratives about the *Volksliste* and post-war persecutions would merit a separate study. However, the spatial constraints of the present article compel me to make substantial generalisations.

The image of Vilamovians emerging from memory-based stories about the *Volksliste* and post-war persecutions in the Vilamovian-centric community of memory was overwhelmingly positive, with a few exceptions. Most of these exceptions were made for traders whose behaviour did not conform with the farmer ethos, particularly the part about the “Vilamovian honesty”. This motif appears in a narrative told by a Vilamovian who claimed that it was not his father, but another Vilamovian – a trader with the same surname – who was supposed to be deported to a labour camp in the USSR. However, the trader managed to bribe someone to the detriment of my interlocutor’s father. Other “bad Vilamovians” were traders that did not appreciate the work of homesteaders, or treated their displaced compatriots like cheap or even free labour. In one of the stories, a certain farmer lady (Kaśka),¹⁰ who used to be wealthy, after the forced relocation ended up living together with her trader sister (Nuśka). After some time, they were joined by Kaśka’s daughter (Halusia, my future interlocutor), who was released from a labour camp. When Nuśka went out to trade, Kaśka and Halusia had to work the fields, with poor-quality food as their only remuneration. After several months, Kaśka’s other daughter also returned to Wilamowice. When she saw how emaciated Halusia had become, she said to her: “You look worse than if you came back from a concentration camp. ‘Cause auntie would have a little something to eat at the market, she would buy herself some stew, and me and Mum only ate plain bread” (F/1920–1924/2014). My interlocutor Halusia later suggested that their trader aunt did not value work in the field, which was hard and also required proper nutrition.

The farmer-centric convention clearly featured the topos of “needing to abide by the law”: my interlocutors perceived tricking people for financial gain as unacceptable, even during occupation. In the farmer-centric convention, the *Volksliste* was

¹⁰ Fictional names introduced for the sake of clarity.

a document which, despite the element of coercion, did reflect the reality in some way. For traders it was all fiction that could be used to make survival under occupation a little easier. Thus, one Vilamovian woman told me that “the *Volksliste* [category] two was given to decent people, homesteaders who did honest work, while traders were already dubious, so they got [category] three” (F/1920–1924/2022). In the farmer-centric storytelling convention, bending certain rules to help others – Poles, deserters or Jews – hide or avoid forcible deportation was approved of as “decency”. Meanwhile traders who ran illegal businesses (e.g. sold moonshine) for profit fit the rarely used topos of “bad Vilamovians”.

Narratives important in the farmer-centric convention included tales of escaping the Germans in 1939, in which it was emphasised that not all household members would leave, because “someone had to stay to manage the cows and pigs” (F/1920–1924/2007). Numerous stories mentioned Vilamovian homesteaders recognising their own horses that had been requisitioned for war purposes among the animals brought by the Polish army, and bringing them oats (F/1920–1924/2007). One of my interlocutors said that when her family had heard the news of the German army entering Wilamowice, she ran to the balk strip with her father, because he wanted to tell the soldiers not to trample his potatoes (F/1920–1924/2014). Narratives in the trader-centric convention, in turn, emphasised the cleverness with which people managed to avoid being conscripted or arrested: “My brother Józek, him they didn’t snatch, he would climb a tree somewhere, or hide, they didn’t get him” (F/1935–1939/2018). Another woman, who emphasised her homesteader background, told me how her father was hiding in the floor beneath the wardrobe. She drew attention to other aspects: the stressful visits of the SS and Gestapo troops searching for him, as well as the poverty that the household had fallen into due to the lack of male workforce (F/1925–1929/2022). The topos dominant in the former of these stories was that of the clever Vilamovians, in the latter – of the Vilamovians as victims, even though both narratives feature a protagonist that was the victim of persecution and used cunning to avoid it. The analysis focuses not on the factual behaviour of the protagonists, but the manner in which they are portrayed in the present, in this case through the farmer-centric storytelling convention. Features of the two dissimilar conventions of storytelling are also apparent in two tales about young girls being arrested in 1945 to be sent to a gulag in the Ural mountains:

So then... so like to Wadowice I also went needlessly, because I could have run (...), but I wasn't able to get up. I already had anxiety, I must have been sick with nerves, I was shaking all over, my legs would not hold me. “Mum, pick me up”. My Mum picked me up, “come”, opened the closet, “get dressed, take your coat”. “No, it'd be a waste to take such a coat, what would I wear to church [if it got damaged]” (F/1920–1924/2014).

There came this militia man from Wilamowice. And with this soldier, this Russian, they came here. And we had a gate that closed by itself. (...) I wanted to go to bed, I was already in bed, when my Mum heard the gate close. This was not a metal gate, only a wooden one. As it was closing, it would always make this racket. And Mum came: "[name], they will take you, they are surely coming for you now". And indeed, they came, opened the gate (...) and as they entered, they asked where I was. I was in bed. I got up, we had a wardrobe and I got inside it. They were so clever that they took the bed quilt and checked that it was still warm. And me, it was warm, they opened the wardrobe. I was in this wardrobe. "Come, get dressed and come, get dressed and come" (...) So I got dressed, my head full of thoughts what to do, because I was afraid that they would take me who knows where. And our place is high up, just like here, high up. But I opened the window and hop! Jumped out. So high up, I could have broken my arms and legs. And I ran, ran and ran. I ran away. I hid there, there behind the barn and was shaking so much, such was my fear. But thank God they did not come anymore, and these two went outside and were standing there stupefied. Two of them and they didn't catch me. Two! (laughs) (F/1925-1929/2008).

The first of the two statements contains elements typical for the farmer ethos: asked to get dressed and knowing she would be taken to detention barracks, the girl refuses to take her warm coat, since it was only used for church. The narrator commented: "I would have frozen to death in it in the first transport" (F/1920-1924/2014). The teller of the second story, in turn, emphasises the methods she tried to avoid arrest. First hiding and, when that failed, escape. Topoi noticeable in the first statement include that of the "innocent" and "pious" Vilamovians and "Poles as persecutors". In the latter tale, the Vilamovians are clever while the Polish persecutors are shown as inept: "Two of them and they didn't catch me. Two! (laughs)". Continuing her story, the woman emphasised that she had been hiding for several months at the houses of several of her parents' acquaintances, in a succession of towns over ten kilometres away from Wilamowice.

In stories told in the farmer-centric convention, the loss of one's land due to expulsion was described as a great tragedy:

We had to leave it, I remember how it was. (...) this was an expulsion, 50 households had to leave, had to leave their properties. And generally these were people that simply had more farm, more hectares, were managing it well, were good people, pigs, cows, they made a living out of that. From the farm, from what it yielded. Only what was the most interesting and the most tragic, what our parents and grandparents said. That the closest people, sometimes living as neighbours, 'cause it was an authentic fact and we know who these people were, who died, who is still alive. They had half a hectare, they had little, didn't have much to farm with. While grandpa had five hectares, so he had horses and all the equipment, and he was helping, helping these small farmers, and for free, for naught. Nothing. He was giving them milk. These were good-natured people, these farmers who had property. Not rich, only hard-working. They were able

to use this land so as to live and give to their children, and so on. And what happened later was lamentable. That when there came expulsion, they had to leave that house, like everyone else. And then those who had received help, they struck. When there was expulsion, an official order. And various volunteers would group up, to later attack these Vilamovians, (...). So harass them they did, and drove all of them away. What strange times these were: these good people that farmed, like my grandfather, who had been helping them a lot, that when they had to leave, and they did have to under orders, because a Russian was standing there with a pepesha, 'cause there were Russian brigades here. But they were listening to what those people were saying to them. Who should be deported. And those people knew, so they went "this one, and this one, and this one", whoever was better off, out of envy, out of vengeance. About nothing. Yes. So they were given a day to pack up and leave. No information where they were to go, these families. Yes. And the people living nearby were watching what was happening, watching us leave. And they would rush into the pigsty, snatch a piglet, snatch hens, five at a time, for themselves. Theft. And so shameless, too. Horses. They wanted to take horses. (...) They lost, they lost everything. And they came to this house, to my grandfather's brother, and there was nothing there, everything makeshift, they were poor. But [it was] just to wait things out. (M/1940–1944/2018).

The man noted that his grandparents had had five hectares of land and a horse, and that they had been helping others even though they had no sources of income other than their land: "These were good-natured people, these farmers who had property. Not rich, only hard-working". Work, in accordance with the farmer ethos, was presented here as the goal in itself, not a way to become rich; a farmer was a good person, because he lived off the land. One characteristic element in stories of expulsion told in the farmer-centric convention involves waiting to be able to reclaim one's home, which could sometimes take several years (often from 1945 to 1957). Such behaviour testifies to attachment to the land – the farm one worked and had to leave because of the expulsions. In the farmer-centric storytelling convention much importance is placed on who was expelled and who worked that person's field in their absence, as well as on the harm done to the expelled family:

They expelled us after we had finished harvesting, and we had put everything in the barn. And we did that for them, they reaped the benefits. My biggest regret was the work that we did all summer (F/1920–1924/2014).

And so they expelled [people]. Those that didn't sow wanted to reap, those that didn't care for [the animals] wanted to slaughter, those that didn't work wanted to feed. Feed, 'cause I will not say eat, just feed (K/1925–1929/2008).

In the trader-centric convention, greater emphasis is placed on how people managed to cope in the new circumstances:

And then, my Dad, all these men went to work in the mine in Zabrze. There was an acquaintance there, they are even buried in Wilamowice, these... what's his name. (...) He was a foreman there in the mine and he hired these men, these Vilamovians. So what we did there, Dad rented a flat and my grandmother was there, and my youngest brother, and my Dad. And so we were, some here, some there. (...) Me and Mum, in turn, were closer to here. And they were doing very well there, they were good people, these Silesians, very good people (F/1925–1929/2008).

The narrator of the tale a passage from which is shown above put the most emphasis not on the suffering she has endured, but on cleverness and resourcefulness. These qualities allowed her family members to make a life for themselves after leaving Wilamowice. It should be stressed that Vilamovians stayed in Upper Silesia clandestinely – according to my interlocutor, if the authorities in Wilamowice had found out where they had been staying, they would have been arrested.

Narratives told in this convention typically include the motif of “acquaintances” or “colleagues” whom Vilamovians knew due to their trading contacts: “My Dad did trade, so he had such acquaintances and he made it so that we were not expelled” (F/1925–1929/2014), “When I ran from a roundup to a labour camp, my Dad took me to Oświęcim to some acquaintance of his, so that they wouldn't find me” (F/1925–1929/2008). These individuals appear at every place in which the story's protagonist ends up. In the farmer-centric convention, however, the only thing that can improve one's fate in life is hard work and waiting for an opportunity to reclaim one's lost property.

Vilamovians: farmers or traders?

The preliminary analysis of the gathered material indicates that stories told by Vilamovians are predominantly set in the farmer-centric convention. There is no statistical data defining the percentage of farmers and traders in the Vilamovian community across the years (Fic, Meus, Krzyżanowski 2018: 52–53). The data published by historians is limited only to acreage, which is why traders are difficult to distinguish from small farm owners. Asked whether there were more farmers or homesteaders in Wilamowice, my interlocutors provided contradictory answers. My observations lead me to believe that the majority belonged to farmer families, even though the number of large farm owners, or “homesteaders”, may have been equal to or smaller than that of traders. Meanwhile, literature pertaining to the Vilamovians, including academic texts, tends to emphasise attachment to trade as their typical feature. Vilamovian traders are usually mentioned in three types of context:

1. the wealth that distinguished Vilamovians from their neighbours and allowed them to buy their way out of serfdom;

2. trade journeys to distant places, from which they brought fabrics for the Vilamovian attire;
3. the resentment and envy felt by residents of the neighbouring villages who did not engage in trade.

In these three contexts, Vilamovian traders were presented in a positive light by all my interlocutors, including those that criticised tradesmen in their narratives. It may be surmised that the statements of farmers who offered positive comments on Vilamovian traders as a legendary group were associated with the need to promote a favourable image of the collective to outsiders. Relevant literature also states that the residents of neighbouring villages, both German and Polish, called Vilamovians “white Jews” (Libera, Robotycki 2001: 388; Perkowska 2001: 198; Bilczewski 2014: 444) or ridiculed traders from Wilamowice in other ways (Bathelt 1955: 126, Bathelt 1957: 44). The allegations (both factual and deemed probable by Vilamovians themselves) levied by Poles, and formerly also by Germans from neighbouring villages, calling Vilamovians dishonest because they engaged in trade, compelled Vilamovians to present traders as resourceful, hard-working and clever. It is this perception that lays the foundation for the legendary image of Wilamowice as the “little Vienna”: a town of wealthy people that bought their way out of serfdom, “arranged” to be given municipal rights, built a replica of St. Stephen’s cathedral. Press articles contained statements made by Vilamovians, who explained the neighbouring villagers’ resentment towards Vilamovian traders in the following words: “We were hard-working, clever, our people would travel to Vienna with fabrics, surely this is why they envied us” (Łoś 1999). Such a narrative has been employed by local activists from the 1960s onwards. Broadcasts recorded by the Polish Radio featuring the Regional Folk Band “Wilamowice” in the 1960s contain statements such as the following:

Naturally, these people were, let us say, a little bit smarter than those around them (...) And this is why they were laughed at, their wisdom was ridiculed (...). They were mocked so. But these were peasants... They were better off because they were traders, and this knack for trade has survived here to this day. This is how it is.¹¹

Such statements were made to journalists and researchers, thus entering wider circulation, not only within the country, but – most importantly – in the town of Wilamowice itself. They have been fabularised and folklorised, since they correspond to the needs and values cherished by members of that community.

Contemporary forms of oral folklore are ephemeral in nature, ‘in contrast with its folk predecessors, they quickly disappear from circulation, making way for new,

¹¹ A radio broadcast “Pastorałka wilamowicka” [Vilamovian carol] – a 1960s recording held in the archives of the Regional Folk Band “Wilamowice”.

more attractive examples” (Wróblewska 2005: 15). As noted by Kajfosz, folklore is “the realisation of a system that is inherently connected with the current state of social awareness, which is constantly changing” (Kajfosz 2011: 59). This is also the case in Wilamowice and its farmer-centric storytelling convention, which has become less attractive than the exoticising narrative about the clever Vilamovians whose “knack for trade” was what set them apart from the residents of the neighbouring towns and villages. Thus, the processes of fabularisation and folklorisation have occurred in those elements of the narrative that the Vilamovians found attractive in recent years.

Conclusion

The article presented two ethe observable in the Vilamovian community – that of farmers and that of traders, as well as the two corresponding storytelling conventions. The Vilamovians have hitherto been presented as a homogeneous group, even though, until very recently, the community had discernible social classes such as the intelligentsia, large farm owners, small farm owners and servants. Different social groups may (but do not necessarily) develop dissimilar storytelling traditions that affect the form of transmitted texts of folklore, including memorates, i.e. witness accounts.

In the 20th century, the Vilamovian community was faced with many changes associated with political transformations, great wars (Fic, Meus, Krzyżanowski 2018), persecutions, expulsions (Król 2022b; 2022c; 2022d), allegations of endogamy, as well as folklorisation, the activity of regional folk bands and the arts and crafts chain store Cepelia (Majerska-Sznajder 2019), globalisation and the pandemic (Majerska-Sznajder 2022). Vilamovian traders and homesteaders still exist, though they are no longer counted among the dominant groups, and their rivalry no longer has such a strong presence in collective consciousness as it did forty years ago. Nevertheless, the Vilamovians are still keenly aware of the existence of a negative stereotype of Vilamovian traders, circulating among the residents of neighbouring localities. In response to these accusations (even if my interlocutors have not heard some of them verbalised by Poles from the neighbouring villages, they suspected what may have been said), the Vilamovians made numerous statements emphasising the resourcefulness of the local traders, owing to whom Wilamowice has long stood out from other localities in terms of prosperity. These tales have been fabularised and now circulate among different generations of both farmers and traders. Although the farmer-centric storytelling convention is likely to have been the dominant narrative even after the war (as accordant with the values of the Catholic Church), the fabulisation of messages that exoticised Vilamovians has made it less attractive than the trader ethos. Each historical period has its own storytelling culture, which changes with every generation (Lehmann 2007: 13). In texts of folklore, “representation of reality may blend with fiction; content remembered from the distant past is often unwittingly adapted to current

realities; it is imperceptibly tailored to fit present social needs” (Kajfosz 2011: 60). For this reason, stories told in the farmer-centric convention have now become a kind of alternative history, not shared with the media but surfacing during more informal interactions, in which other stories about the past often come to the fore. These might be “stories of past fission within »the community« (...) highlighting the fact that sentiments and goals were not necessarily shared” (Macdonald 2013: 64). Such narratives were not told to strangers, but to members of the community. Perhaps for this reason it was myself, an insider-researcher, that was able to record them. After all, what matters in the transmission of folklore is not only the situation, but also the person of the recipient (Lehmann 2007: 12).

In the case of stories about the Second World War and post-war persecutions, in which the image of the Vilamovians as victims (closer to the farmer ethos) plays an important role, the farmer-centric convention appears more frequently. However, regardless of whether the narrators emphasised cleverness and dishonest conduct (breaking certain rules) or their own honesty, both conventions relate heroic tales and stories of victims, as well as both active and passive attitudes. A person’s lot in life could be improved by either cunning or hard work.

The existence of different storytelling conventions may prove an interesting research subject for folklore studies. In the case of Vilamovian folklore, future analysis should be directed towards the ways the farmer and trader storytelling conventions are realised in tales about the *Volksliste*, the post-war persecutions of the Vilamovians, as well as the legend of Wilamowice being founded by settlers from Flanders. After a thorough analysis of a larger body of material it would perhaps be possible to distinguish stories associated with the ethe of other groups, e.g. the intelligentsia or the poorer classes, such as servants. These different storytelling conventions are models that constitute the Vilamovian storytelling culture (Lehmann 2007: 20).

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Summary

The Vilamovians are an ethnic group living in the town of Wilamowice in the borderland of Silesia and Lesser Poland. Literature has presented them as a homogeneous group whose members were famous for being traders, yet in reality the Wilamowice community was divided into several social strata. Especially the two dominant ones – large farm owners and traders – represented different ethe, which influenced two storytelling conventions, one focused on trade, the other – on agriculture. These conventions are apparent in memory-based stories told by the Vilamovians. In the former, it is work that constitutes the central motif and is valued in itself; in the latter, work is only the means to an end, which is to acquire more wealth. Today, as a result of the fabulisation and folklorisation of the content disseminated in the media, the trade-oriented convention has become dominant. Meanwhile, the work-oriented convention was more popular among the older generation, and is still clearly discernible today in memory-based stories about the Volksliste and the post-war persecution of the inhabitants of Wilamowice. These stories, however, do not tell us how the Vilamovians really behaved, but about what values the narrators professed at the time of conveying the given message. Their form was influenced by the narrative tradition of the given community – be it ethnic or professional.

Keywords: memory-based story, Vilamovians, Wilamowice, storytelling convention, ethos

Streszczenie

Wilamowianie to grupa etniczna zamieszkująca miasto Wilamowice na pograniczu Śląska i Małopolski. W literaturze przedstawiani byli oni jako grupa monolityczna, której członkowie słynęli z zajmowania się handlem. Tymczasem wilamowska społeczność dzieliła się na kilka warstw społecznych. Szczególnie dwie dominujące – duzi gospodarze i handlarze reprezentowali odmienne etosy. Wpłynęły one również na dwie konwencje opowiadania: gospodarską i handlarską, które widoczne są w opowieściach wspomnieniowych Wilamowian. W tej pierwszej w centrum stoi praca jako wartość sama w sobie. Tymczasem w tej drugiej praca jest tylko środkiem, a celem jest pomnażanie majątku. Dziś, w wyniku fabularyzacji i folkloryzacji treści rozpowszechnianych w mediach dominująca stała się konwencja handlarska. Tymczasem wśród starszego pokolenia silniejsza była konwencja gospodarska, która do dzisiaj jest silna w opowieściach wspomnieniowych o Volksliście i powojennych prześladowaniach Wilamowian. Opowieści te nie mówią nam jednak o tym, jak naprawdę zachowywali się Wilamowianie, ale o tym, jakie wartości wyznawali narratorzy w momencie przekazywania treści. Na ich formę wpływała tradycja narratorska społeczności, którą mogła być nie tylko grupa etniczna, ale również zawodowa.

Słowa kluczowe: opowieść wspomnieniowa, Wilamowianie, Wilamowice, konwencja opowiadania, etos

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