

Selected aspects from the everyday life of the Second Republic before the outbreak of war in 1939

ABSTRACT

The year 1939 functions in Polish historiography as *annus terribilis*, i.e. primarily the moment when the Second World War began. This does not change the fact that before September 1939, Polish society, apart from the threat of conflict, functioned within the framework of some everyday life. This text is about selected aspects of that everyday life.

Keywords: everyday life, Second Polish Republic, 1939

INTRODUCTION

On the one hand, the history of the Second Polish Republic was vectored by the country's difficult geopolitical situation¹. In addition, the young state had to contend with various types of civilisational backwardness, the genesis of which dated back to the era of the Partitions. Some deficiencies were made up for, others were not dealt with, and even the decline deepened². On the other hand, around all of this there was a kind of everyday life of the so-called ordinary people. The purpose of this sketch is to draw the author's (entirely subjective) attention to this everyday life in the last months before the outbreak of the Second World War. The idea was to signal a few literal matters, with the temperature measured primarily through the press. The intention of

¹ The literature on the subject is full of monographs on the Second Republic's bilateral relations with individual states. The Warsaw-Berlin and Warsaw-Moscow relations were prominent, defining Polish policy towards its allies, above all France. With regard to the last months of the Second Republic's existence, the situation was aptly diagnosed by: M. Kornat, *Poland and Europe 1938-1939: Four Decisions of Józef Beck*, Gdańsk 2024.

² For an important study on the subject, see W. Mędrzecki, *Odzyskany śmietnik. How we dealt with independence in the Second Polish Republic*, Krakow 2022.

preparing this sketch for a portrait does not claim any serious aspirations other than to add a brick to an existing, already serious, edifice³.

SOCIETY – THE END STATE OF THE SECOND REPUBLIC

The year 1939 brought a political breakdown, which – obviously – translated into all aspects of the everyday life of the inhabitants of the Second Republic. Had it not been for the outbreak of war, however, the same year would have been more of a continuation of the social processes that had been carried out in Poland for several years. Indeed, until the tragic September, this period was not distinguished by the intensification of any collective emotional or relative deprivation⁴. No factors emerged that would give rise to a sense of greater historical injustice than before. Nor did anyone publicise new slogans of egalitarianism, reinforcing popular aspirations for any advancement. In a word, big politics shook up everyday life, which was going on in a fixed and predictable rhythm.

At the time, the Second Republic was inhabited by around 35 million people, giving the Polish state a high sixth place in Europe. Population density – 90 people per square kilometre – also placed Poland at the top of the European table. The central and western provinces had the highest population density, while the eastern borderlands had the lowest. If one looks at age groups, youth was noticeable at almost every turn. In 1939, almost half of the country's population was under 25 years old, and 60 per cent were under 30. Consequently, families were also young and were usually formed early. There was no shortage of children either. Every tenth woman between the ages of 15 and 40 was a mum (a birth rate of 24.6 per thousand citizens)⁵. Departing for a moment from the known historical facts, the continued maintenance of world peace guaranteed that the population of Poland would quickly exceed 40 million, which would result in overtaking, for example, France.

³ Among the works dealing with various aspects of everyday life in the Second Republic, I will highlight just a few items: F. Kusiak, *Everyday Life of Officers of the Second Republic*, Warsaw 1992; M and J. Łoziński, *In pre-war Poland. Życie codzienne i niecodzienne*, Warsaw 2012; P. Gołdyn, *Życie codzienne nauczycieli II Rzeczypospolitej (Everyday Life of Teachers in the Second Republic of Poland)*, Warsaw 2024. In addition, there are plenty of popular science books on the publishing market about the everyday life of selected social and professional groups of that era.

⁴ On these phenomena see T.R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton 1970, p. 19, *passim*.

⁵ All statistical data in this text were obtained from the following publications: *Mały rocznik statystyczny 1939*, ed. S. Szulc, Warsaw 1939; K. Janicki, R. Kuzak, D. Kaliński, *Przedwojenna Polska w liczbach*, Warsaw 2020.

We know that society at the time was far from homogeneous, both in terms of nationality and religion. At the end of the 1930s, the first mosaic was as follows: just under 69 per cent of the population were Poles, followed by Ukrainians (more than 10 per cent of the total), then Jews (8-9 per cent), Ruthenians, Byelorussians (this group included "locals" – without a mature sense of national consciousness), Germans or, to a lesser extent, Czechs or Lithuanians. Catholics predominated (approx. 65 per cent). Other Christian denominations included Orthodox Christians (11-12 per cent), Uniates (about 10 per cent) or Protestants (2-3 per cent).

The hustle and bustle of everyday life spread above all through the villages. It was there that the typical daily life of the Second Republic was played out, and it was there that the individual functioned as a product of socialisation: in a particular social group, which in turn remained immersed in the wider culture. Three quarters of people woke up in the morning precisely in rural areas. The society there – taking the division of social groups as a yardstick – by the year 1939, which is of interest to us, consisted mainly of peasants (55 per cent). They were followed by the workers (27-28 per cent), the petty bourgeoisie (around 11-12 per cent) and the intelligentsia, white-collar workers (5-6 per cent), the bourgeoisie (around 1 per cent), and finally the landowners (0.3-0.4 per cent). The latter played an immeasurably greater role than would appear from a summary statement. In 1921, their estates covered at least 30 per cent of the area of agricultural property. By the end of 1938, this figure had decreased by a few percent (to 24 percent). Nevertheless, the disproportions were still pronounced, fundamentally affecting the layout of rural relations⁶. Outside the nucleus of the structured reality described here, so-called "derailed elements" vegetated – a social margin governed by its own rules.

However, regardless of the burdens of origin and place of residence, in 1939 already approx. 90 per cent of children attended school. At that time, there were, in round numbers, among others, 1,500 kindergartens (with 74,000 pupils), nearly 29,000 general primary schools (with around 5 million pupils), 790 general secondary schools, twenty-eight institutions of an academic nature (with 50,000 students). Thus, the advancement in enrolment statistics, compared to the first years after independence, literally took on

⁶ W. Roszkowski, *Gospodarcza rola większej prywatnej własności ziemskiej w Polsce 1918-1939*, Warsaw 1986, p. 28-35.

a milestone dimension (in 1922, 65 per cent of children were covered by institutional education)⁷.

COST OF LIVING AND SALARIES IN THE PATRIARCHAL SECOND REPUBLIC AT THE END OF ITS EXISTENCE

Culturally defined values, norms and patterns were not significantly transformed in 1939 compared to earlier years. Although women gained access to suffrage and civil or family law legislation was also slowly changing in their favour, social relations fundamentally looked the same. In the reality of the twilight Second Republic, men continued to be the decision-makers, dominating the family and professional space. In general, 80 to 90 per cent of the household budget was based on their earnings. They were the ones who worked and earned better, if in a few cases there was a comparison with the activities of their female partners. At the end of the 1930s in Poland, women were paid up to 60 per cent less than their male competitors, with all of them having identical qualifications⁸. In this situation, fortunately for society as a whole, the scale of male unemployment was already decreasing. It is estimated that during the Great Depression up to 20 per cent of the population fell into a state of 'absolute poverty'⁹, and some 2 million people of working age were looking for work (half of them in the countryside – labourers – and half in the city – wage labourers, without specialised skills), but by 1939 this condition had improved significantly¹⁰.

A man's status was legitimised by a cultural norm, but not by a strategy for his effective acquisition of wealth and financial resources. In this dimension, he functioned neither in an individualist culture nor in a collectivist one (putting the good of the whole – in this case the family – above that of the individual for the same economic reasons)¹¹. The man of the Second Republic struggled against the hardships of everyday life, hoping to survive. At the

⁷ See also P. Stańczyk, *Wykształcenie ludności II Rzeczypospolitej w świetle badań GUS, „Społeczeństwo i ekonomia”* 2016, no. 1(5), pp. 17-26.

⁸ See D. Kałwa, *Kobieta aktywna w Polsce międzywojennej. Dylematy środowisk kobiecych*, Cracow 2002.

⁹ J. Żarnowski, *Bieda i dostatek 1918-1939*, [in:] *Nędza i dostatek na ziemiach polskich od średniowiecza po XX wiek*, ed. J. Sztetyła, Warsaw 1992, p. 250.

¹⁰ C. Leszczyńska, W. Mędrzecki, *Introduction*, [in:] *Work and Society of the Second Polish Republic. Social Metamorphoses*, vol. 9, Warsaw 2014, p. 11.

¹¹ Cf. A. Nowak, M. Wójcik, *Kobieta w rodzinie w II Rzeczypospolitej i współcześnie: zagadnienia filozoficzne, społeczno-edukacyjne i prawne*, Katowice 2000.

same time, he tried to keep his family afloat, constituting in many cases an existential burden. A general (monthly salary of 2,000 zlotys), a judge (1,000 zlotys) or a professor (750-1,000 zlotys) did not fight such battles, or they were much easier to get through. However, the earnings of an average worker, paid on a weekly basis, oscillated in 1939 around the sum of 200-400 zlotys. Seasonal workers were in the worst position, not to mention domestic servants (a housekeeper often received less than a few dozen zlotys). Interestingly, the pre-war calculations did not include peasants, who had a significant bonus. Unlike city dwellers, they had the ability to produce food for their own needs. In addition, they usually lived in their own buildings (disregarding the standard of these facilities), while in urban centres they rented premises in tenement houses¹². Let us add that, for example, a teacher earned an income of 160-260 zlotys, while a police commissioner was paid over 300 zlotys.

At the end of the 1930s, the cost of renting premises generally increased. In the final months just before the outbreak of war, they statistically consumed up to 15-20 per cent of income, half the amount of a decade earlier. However, the lion's share of urban earnings was spent on food purchases. In the case of multi-generational families, this ratio may have exceeded 50 per cent. In childless marriages, the proportions were, of course, different, but here too, food accounted for almost 40 per cent of finances. In addition to this, there were expenses related to the purchase of clothing and footwear (regardless of place of residence), which were higher in families without children (at the end of 1938 – up to 15 per cent, although down 10 per cent compared to 1928). Childless families were also able to afford stimulants (alcohol, tobacco – up to 10% of the household budget), which clearly distinguished them from the average Polish family raising offspring.

The everyday life of most Poles thus revolved around the regulation of purposeful behaviour, i.e. making choices. Life, in a small but pregnant part, consisted of small choices: what to buy, and then more – what to give up. Let us note, therefore, what the prices of selected – basic – foodstuffs looked like. In the first half of 1939, they were as follows:

¹² J. Żarnowski, *Własność a struktura społeczna w Polsce w latach 1918 – 1989*, [in:] „*Rewolucja społeczna*” czy „*dzika przebudowa*”? *Spoleczne skutki przekształceń własnościowych w Polsce (1944-1956)*, ed. T. Osiński, Lublin 2016, pp. 431-436.

Table 1. Prices of selected products in the first half of 1939 (PLN)

Product	Warsaw	Poznan	Lviv
potatoes (1 kg)	0,45	0,40	0,40
rye bread (1 kg)	0,30	0,30	0,30
pork fat (1 kg)	1,61	1,59	1,65
eggs (1 kg)	1,51	1,45	1,35
pork (1 kg)	1,52	1,50	1,30
beef (1 kg)	1,53	1,60	1,55
milk (1 litre)	0,26	0,22	0,21

Source: *Mały rocznik statystyczny 1939...*, op. cit., *passim*; K. Janicki, R. Kuzak, D. Kaliński, *Przedwojenna Polska...*, op. cit., *passim*.

The above table shows that there were no significant differences between the different parts of the Second Republic. On the other hand, poverty ruled out following individual standards or preferences. Regardless of the rising temperature of geopolitical disputes, the subjective self-consciousness of the then inhabitants of the state was mainly focused on a fragment of the external world, i.e. existential survival consisting in the fulfilment of elementary needs¹³. Hence, many things/services changed position in the general perception of the world from cardinal goods to luxury goods. A meal for two eaten in a restaurant (two courses plus a bottle of vodka) entered the luxury sphere, oscillating in price around 20-30 PLN. It thus amounted, for example, to 10-15 per cent of a teacher's monthly salary. In this environment, more than among workers or peasants, the need to spend time in this formula was felt. Only that the idea of similar pleasure soon became an obtrusive return to the unwanted thought of the divergence of one's social position and the income earned with individual capabilities and aspirations. In this ruminative dimension, even a tram journey could turn out to be a daily occurrence, for which one had to pay on the basis of the kilometres travelled, and not inconsiderable amounts at that: 15 gr for one kilometre; 20 gr for two kilometres; 25 gr for three¹⁴. If the above-mentioned spheres, to a greater or lesser extent, were still within the reach of at least some significant part of the citizens of the Second Republic, nothing of the sort could be said in the case of air travel, which had in fact always been expensive (a ticket to Paris cost around 300

¹³ City or province – the question did not matter much. See J. Dudek, M. Kruszyński, T. Osiński, A. Skura, *Dzieje Lubelszczyzny 1918-1939. Album*, Lublin 2020, pp. 85-124.

¹⁴ This is how things looked in the capital; M. Łozińska, J. Łoziński, *Everyday life...*, op. cit., Warsaw 2011, p. 68.

zlotys; to Berlin – around 130¹⁵). Moreover, during the period in question, there was one car per more than a thousand inhabitants. Its price, depending on the brand, started from 3,000 zlotys (Fiat) and went upwards, on average staying between 4 and 5 thousand zlotys¹⁶. The convenience of owning a car correlated best with the affluence of the wallet.

Before 1939. Warsaw was often and eagerly referred to as the “Paris of the North”, the centre of Polish fashion. However, the promotion of fashion was also at the opposite end of the spectrum to its interpretation in society, for which a more accurate term to define the situation would be today’s *fashion street*. Until the end of the interwar period, the clientele of the capital’s shops or factories was dominated by wealthy landowners and merchants, industrialists, artists and the country’s political elite, who purchased the most fashionable clothes. At the time, the cheapest men’s colourful shirt cost more than 10 zlotys; the simplest men’s hat cost at least 20-30 zlotys, and for stockings alone you had to pay at least 4 zlotys¹⁷.

FEAR (?) OF WAR

Although the faults of everyday life in the Second Republic overwhelmed the average citizen, it would be wrong to say that the atmosphere of impending war conflict did not creep beyond the thresholds of homes. It is difficult today to determine the scale of this phenomenon, especially as peasant and working-class families remain in many respects a *terra incognita* sphere for the researcher. What can be synthesised with a fair degree of certainty is the characterisation of the atmosphere of public life, saturated in 1939 with specific state propaganda. The ruling camp tried to bring about top-down social projection, i.e. to create a uniform perception of reality among the broad masses. Efforts were made to induce the so-called “false universality effect”: to reinforce the conviction that all Poles actually think alike. A kind of ‘information ghetto’, based on the selectivity of knowledge about political realities, led directly to the promotion of a clear pattern. Good and evil were located on known sides (the antagonistic arrangement Poland *vel* Germany), with the

¹⁵ “Price Statistics 1937” 1938, Series C, z. 96, p. 43.

¹⁶ M. Łozińska, J. Łoziński, *Everyday life...*, op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁷ See more: N. Sola-Sałamacha, *Warszawianka – “Parisian of the North”. On women and women’s fashion of Warsaw in the interwar period*, “Komunizm: system – ludzie – dokumentacja” 2021, no. 10, p. 15-64.

inhabitants of the Second Republic concentrated around the authorities. This procedure destroyed pluralism of views. At the same time, the institutional consolidation of society – regardless of its negative effects – was necessary in the face of the increasing threat of war. This issue is not subject to much discussion and, above all because of this historical context, must be judged positively. In social interaction, people appear as individuals with a specific identity, but in 1939 an attempt was made to blur identities in the name of intended goals.

Firstly, panic was suppressed, using arguments from different levels of rationality and emotionality. The *Kurier Poranny* published a text under the telling title of *Account of Conscience*, which stated, among other things:

When we refer to the latest facts, we wonder why the situation is as it is now: the occupation of the Czech Republic, the Slovakia issue, the Klaipėda issue. Whereas in Poland there is calm on the borders, and inside the country in society there is balance and readiness¹⁸.

An account of a healthy conscience has never failed and will never fail (ontologically speaking). Moreover, reading such articles seemed to indicate that Poles possessed nerves of steel. It could not have been otherwise, given that *Sanacja* was to give every evidence that the Second Republic was not only well-prepared for a possible armed conflict, but was a monolith made up of excellent politicians and commanders and a self-sacrificing, conscious, patriotically-minded nation. In the quoted article, its author adds with hurrahenthusiasm:

The first air loan was disbursed [...] and the dynamics of the national alert unloaded immediately [...] the attitude of the nation was like marble¹⁹.

The army armed itself intensively, correlating these steps with the citizens' accepting views on the subject. A different view, moreover, threatened environmental anathema²⁰. The ideological universality thus formed transcended all the boundaries that existed at the time: membership of a particular

¹⁸ *Rachunek sumienia*, „*Kurier Poranny*”, 7 April 1939, no. 97, p. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ See M. Gieleciński, *Świadczenia społeczeństwa polskiego na obronność państwa przed wybuchem drugiej wojny światowej (1936-1939)*, Poznań 2014, p. 87, *passim*.

social group, degree of affluence or gender issues. For the country's efforts were supported by both wealthy and poorer citizens. The mobilisation also included women, hitherto excluded from these "men's affairs". At the end of May 1939, a Women's Military Mobilisation (PWK) Propaganda Week was held under the patronage of the most famous ladies of the era: Aleksandra Piłsudska and Maria Mościcka. In addition to the now traditional fund-raising, it proved that young girls were well prepared for war service. They were able to take over the housework and care for the family when the men put on the uniform. At the same time, they were able to perform tasks related to auxiliary or sanitary service for the army²¹. At the same time, they seemed to ignore or disregard the memory of Poles, who knew that moments when it came to women's participation in the country's defence effort did not mean anything good. Experiences before the Battle of Warsaw were not evoked – they were not reproduced. If anything, the marching out of the First Cadre Company in August 1914, for example, was celebrated loudly, larding similar celebrations with comments along the lines of: "[...] The homeland of its soldier can always be certain"²². Any doubts, fears and anxieties were quelled by public hype assurances: "We will not give the sea"²³ or optimistic, unrealistic and megalomaniacal formulations:

Germany is still losing the great war of nerves. All recent international crises have increased Poland's prestige [...]. The foreign press brings almost daily reports from Poland [...] articles about the Polish army appear [...] in a word, Europe is discovering us²⁴.

Realistically, the importance of individualistic values (ambition, skills, life success) was being reduced in favour of an increased preference for collectivistic values (responsibility, generosity). This was expected by those in power; this was the understanding of the *raison d'état*. Whether in or outside the capital, the climate of collective participation in building the power of the state was complemented by the slogans: "the freedom of the country will not

²¹ See: E. Zawacka, *Czekając na rozkaz. Pogotowie Społeczne Organizacji Przynależności Wojskowego Kobiet w przededniu II wojny światowej*, Lublin 1992; eadem, *Szkice z dziejów Wojskowej Służby Kobiet*, Toruń 2001.

²² *Poland on the trail of Józef Piłsudski*, "Naród i Wojsko", 6 August 1939, No. 15, p. 2.

²³ *We will not give the sea*, "Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny", 26 VI 1939, no. 174, p. 1.

²⁴ *'Kuracja uspokajająca'*, "Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny", 12 July 1939, no. 190, p. 2.

be defended by other people's hands, but only by one's own force armed"²⁵. The role of community content and social bonds was therefore growing. The global idea of Poland's defence gave everyone without exception their proper place: even the aforementioned women, even the youth²⁶.

The mobilisation ethos and the new ritualism, together relating to public declarations of sacrificial patriotism, were to reduce not only this fear, but any political dilemma. Social activism shortened the space of personal 'territory', directing the attention of the individual to matters of paramount importance (unified from above) – maximising the country's gains in the form of internal integration. The collectively nailed-down pose made the Second Republic a Goliath in intention. What was forgotten, however, was how that story ended. The most important task became the programming of self-confidence in Poles, as if it were a key element in the war battle. In the pages of the daily newspaper "Czas", literally a few days before the start of the armed conflict, the recipient of the newspaper could read:

Nobody talks about the war. When it is hinted that all it takes is a few minutes – after all, they can play guns and cannons – only eyes laugh, fists clench and one answer falls everywhere: "Let them just try to start". This is what the elderly say, who have already had the opportunity to deal with the Germans, and this is what the young say, who live the living tradition of insurgent fights at every step²⁷.

The famous 1935 slogan that 'we will not give up a button', previously encouraging the modernisation of the armed forces, took another spectacular turn in 1939. At the same time, it is worth noting the phrase concerning 'laughing eyes'. State propaganda also made use of comedy, making use of it in a sociobehavioural aspect. Through the ridiculousness of the events presented to the citizens, an attempt was made to generate in them a sense of superiority and to degrade the object of this comedy. Added to this were the cognitive adaptive functions of humour, also not to be underestimated at the time. As a result, the skills of the new command staff in the Third Reich, where

²⁵ Quoted after: A. Jędrzejewska, *Łodzianie wobec zagrożenia wojennego 1939 roku. Nastroje – przygotowania – działania propagandowe*, „Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis. Folia Historica” 2021, 109, p. 119.

²⁶ J. Kęsik, *Naród pod bronią. Society in the Polish military policy programme 1918-1939*, Wrocław 1998, p. 90.

²⁷ *Silesia as proof that Poland had won the 'war of nerves'*, "Czas", 23 August 1939, no. 232, p. 4.

“it was not qualifications but the attitude to the National Socialist Party that decided”, and after all – as was justified – “it was not the Roman legions that conquered Gaul, but Caesar”²⁸ – i.e. the success of the war campaigns depended on the leaders. The message was reinforced by the fact that negative assessments regarding the low level of the German military majors were shared in other capitals²⁹. The Nazi regime itself was regarded as a façade, artificial, amusing in essence, a... Nazi social projection. It was written that “the Gestapo confiscates fairy tales and arrests people for telling them”. This is how a satirical article began, where the author made fun of the views expressed by Joseph Goebbels³⁰. The Poles therefore had nothing to fear.

The joke was used to deliberately extrapolate the views of the ruling Sanation on the basis of premeditated imagery. A joke circulating in Warsaw was quoted in the satirical press: “Actually, the future Olympics should be held in Poland – Why? – Well, because we are characterised by Olympic calm”³¹. The steel nerves mentioned symbolised the self-control of the people of the Second Republic, who resisted impulses, i.e. an unfounded fear of Germany. The western neighbour was losing to the willpower and potential of the Poles, just as it was yielding to the weight of historical responsibility. The following dictum was also told in the capital:

But Germany is in debt to the powers that lent them money after the war. From 1920, 1922, 1925-ish. Let them pay – My beloved. Germany has older debts to Poland. From 1772, 1793, 1795 and 1815. Let them pay ours first, and then get on with the new ones³².

This joke – paradoxically a thoroughly serious one – underlined the tendency among the public to value themselves (leaving aside the legitimacy

²⁸ *Supreme German Commanders. The combat qualifications of Reich officers*, “Kurier Poranny”, 26 August 1939, no. 239, p. 3.

²⁹ *In Paris they mock German fortifications*, “Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny”, 1 VI 1939, no. 149, p. 7.

³⁰ *The first victim*, “Sparrows on the Roof”, 20 August 1939, no. 34, p. 1. Thus, the permanence of the Nazi system was doubted, which was also attempted to be documented in a “serious” manner. One article reads, among other things: “[...] sympathetic Viennese had not reconciled themselves to belonging to the Brown Reich. [...] Now in Vienna there are boisterous and self-satisfied Germans – occupiers and their beautifully dressed wives [...]. Austrians refer to those there as “they”. ‘We’ are Austrians [...]. When asked, an Austrian says in a whisper: ‘Everything is terrible. Life has become unbearable. It can’t go on like this [...]. No one believes the German press and radio’”. *Everyday Life in Vienna*, “Robotnik” 25 August 1939, no. 232, p. 2.

³¹ *From the editorial cart*, Sparrows on the Roof, 20 August 1939, no. 34, p. 3.

³² *Long*, “Fly”, 9 June 1939, no. 24, p. 2.

of Poland's historical grievances against Germany). The Germans were "asking how to live without bread, eggs, butter and sausage nowadays"³³, so world conflicts were not on their minds. And seriously and ironically, everything confirmed the apparent threat of war. Thus, better or worse domesticated fear seemed lighter to bear.

RELIGIOSITY IN THE FACE OF WAR

The intimacy of this sphere means that the historian can say little about the extent to which faith helped to calm the fear of war. Intuitively, we assume that this was rather the case. Only that – given the structure of the society of the Second Republic – the religiosity of the time possessed features which not only make it additionally difficult to discern the above issue, but which may call into question the legitimacy of the intuitively expressed judgement³⁴. This would not have been the case if the mass character of Catholicism – for I am focusing exclusively on it – translated into something more than tradition and fear of *the sacred*. In 1939, the clergy realised that all attempts to give this Catholicism a deepened formula had failed. For the most part, the faithful living in Poland did not know how to think abstractly, viewing their relationship with God through the lens of life's needs. Religious ideology was hidden not in philosophy or theological reflection, but in images and comparisons: in objects of worship, devotions, songs and emblems³⁵.

The Catholic Church thus proposed autoschemata to describe reality along the lines of an iceberg, i.e. the focus was on the tip (a small area), without taking into account the changing contexts, since these contexts could not be properly grasped by the majority of Catholics in Poland at the time. The mere presence of "Christ's thought in the world" was supposed to guarantee security³⁶. One was urged to unreflectively accept the authority of Christ, who did not entangle people in the meanderings of rules controlling reality. It was the domain of God to know better. At the same time – obviously – the same God was on the side of the Poles. He granted them historical rightness in their quarrels with their western neighbour. He was guided in this by a kind of proportional justice, i.e. the Poles suffered historically more from the Germans

³³ *On the Germans*, "Mucha", 9 VI 1939, no. 24, p. 2.

³⁴ I assume that religiosity is understood as a spiritual, mature relationship between God and man.

³⁵ See J. Bełch, *Catholic revival of villages*, Poznań 1939, p. 44.

³⁶ *'The need for apostles for the young worker's cause'*, Catholic Guide 1939, no. 4, p. 54.

than vice versa, and therefore Poland even deserved a moral overpayment. All the more so, Providence would not have allowed the disproportion to increase in the form of another war, from which the Second Republic would only have lost³⁷.

Such a conviction was acquiring the statute of an obligation norm for God. It became morally right, socially desirable, or necessary. We do not know the measurable effects of authoritarianism of similar thinking. Certainly the tasks set before Polish society in 1939 were reduced to a minimum. Loyalty to the Church was accompanied by concern for one thing: the upbringing of youth in a particular spirit and nothing more. God guaranteed the geopolitical success of the Republic. He did not provide such a guarantee only in the risk of laicisation of young people, who were threatened more by cultural than political dangers:

[...] the young quickly succumb to the influence of their elders – especially the shouters, the conceited and the debauched. Proximity to individuals of the opposite sex, coarse freedom in behaviour, talking, drawing on walls, quickly do their thing [...]. Adolescence, pubbing, dancing and promiscuous sports, lack of moral direction, lack of parental control [...], holidays and entertainment, the negative influence of the press, literature, theatre and cinema, and finally the often reprehensible indifference of the authorities – all this creates a terrible, even tragic situation³⁸.

It was suggested that civilisation as such – more than transient regimes and states – was causing the most serious trouble for a generation of Poles entering adulthood. It encouraged immorality, bringing dishonest benefits. It grew out of selfishness, being the result of social ignorance and lack of conscience. A different, practical method was found for dealing with the Germans:

Much is said about the merits of independence, but little is said about Polish parents. Polish mothers gave birth to more children in Silesia, Pomerania and Wielkopolska than German women. It was Polish mothers who decided whose Silesia, Wielkopolska and Pomerania were to be. [...] A married couple must have not two children each, but four. There are

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Ibidem.

now twice as many Germans as there are of us. If there are more children, it will be clear that alone we can win any war with the Germans³⁹.

Although God assumed the Polish national colours, he ultimately needed a little support. Victory in the demographic race was chosen as a recipe for problems in bilateral relations between Warsaw and Berlin, even though the Second Republic was playing with marked cards (that intuitionist model of religion with the Absolute identified with the Polish *raison d'état*). The clergy, responding to the needs of the moment, used a kind of rationalist model. Poles, after all, did not delve into dogma. Morality was defined as the avoidance of breaking the rules, supported by the threat of inevitable punishment. It was not explained in terms of upholding reciprocal relationships, but of being seen as a good person. It was among the pillars that sustained the social and political system. As a result, pragmatism conceived in this way stripped religiosity of its transcendent layer⁴⁰.

LAST HOLIDAY

How did people prepare for war? Mentally, psychologically and often also practically, it was precisely not preparing for it, or more precisely, running away from premonitions, despite the obvious evidence pointing to an impending conflict⁴¹. Some tension hung in the air. Nevertheless, reality was attempted to be pushed into the background. They wanted to disenchant it with the everydayness of the exceptionally hot summer of 1939⁴². A young woman from the Lublin region later recalled:

A few days before the outbreak of war we were returning from swimming in Bystrzyca with Andzia Borensztajn. People were standing and reading

³⁹ W. Majdański, *Im liczniejsze rodziny, tym silniejsza Polska*, „Przegląd Katolicki”, 6 August 1939, No. 32. This topic appeared frequently. A month earlier it had been written, among other things: “every state, if it wants to be powerful, must have good schools, just laws, an excellent army, excellent agriculture. But it must also have as many families as possible, having numerous offspring. For no state is strong without a numerous, multiplying population”; *Why must the pasture tenderly care for numerous families?*, “Przegląd Katolicki”, 9 VII 1939, no. 28.

⁴⁰ For the practicality of looking at religion in the context of the patriotic duty to support the family, see also L. Halban, *German marriage*, “Universal Review” 1939, no. 1, p. 39.

⁴¹ For example, on 17 August 1939, the Polish government blocked border trade with Germany in Upper Silesia, and the Krakow curia, for example, recommended against going on the annual pilgrimage to Jasna Góra. The pilgrims were, after all, supposed to pray for peace at that time.

⁴² We already have a serious literature on the last holidays before the outbreak of war. See, for example, A. Lisiecka, *Holidays 1939*, Warsaw 2019; M. Zaborski, *Lato'39. Still alive*, Warsaw 2019.

the mobilisation announcement. You could already feel that war was going to break out. We stood in front of this announcement and I then asked her: "Well, Andzia, how do you say, will you survive the war or not?", she says: "No, I won't survive the war", I say: "And I will survive". I survived and she died⁴³.

Undoubtedly, the result of state propaganda about universal compactness or preparedness can be seen in this. Moreover, a peculiar rule of distance worked here: reality took on a subjective dimension with a hyperbolic function of time. "We are still alive" – this was the subtitle given by the author of one of the monographs on holidays at the time described. This slogan reflects well the problem described. Life was to be enjoyed. Those in power, on the other hand, exacerbated the asymmetry between the mood and the threats, the real state of the Second Republic and the facts.

Rest – of course – was taken by those who could afford it. The season – as usual – was still beginning in late spring. By the end of May, the lakes were already filled with sailing boats:

On Pentecost the waters of Polish rivers, lakes and canals swarm with thousands of sailboats, boats and canoes. Slow boaters take advantage of their days off to forget their weekday troubles in the sunshine in the lap of nature⁴⁴.

"To forget the troubles of everyday life" – the above formulation also becomes a good interpretative cue. They enchanted this weekday, intensifying the well-being by a specific mystification in the form of pretending to be normal. Hence, the summer people, as usual, "did their morning gymnastics in Jastrzębia Góra"⁴⁵. It was customary for Józef Beck to rest in June. In 1939, the Foreign Minister was seen in Jurata⁴⁶. Tourism was invariably led by such resorts as the aforementioned Jurata, followed by Chałupy, Rozewie, Cetniewo, Rewa, Mechelinki and Hel. The Hel Peninsula was supposed to be the least crowded and noisy that summer. Being close to these matters, "Dziennik Bydgoski" informed its readers:

⁴³ <https://teatrnn.pl/para/historia-mowiona-9-wrzesien-1939/> [accessed 30 X 2024].

⁴⁴ *On the water! For health, strength and joy*, "Christmas Illustration. Supplement to the publications of the Press House S.A.", 28 May 1939, p. 1.

⁴⁵ *By the Polish seaside*, "Christmas Illustration. Supplement to the publications of the Press House S.A.", 16 VII 1939, p. 2.

⁴⁶ M. Zaborski, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

There are no summer temptations here [i.e. on Hel – M.K.] in the form of wasting the night listening to jazz. And somehow people do not play cards. And one would hardly meet a drunkard. [...] Here one gets up early in the morning, bathes, eats, strolls through the beautiful forest and, losing track of time, goes to bed just after sunset⁴⁷.

Prices at the seaside matched those in Zakopane⁴⁸, and the tourist discovery of the season turned out to be the picturesque countryside of Vilnius. The holiday goblins' dance thus put the emotions to sleep. Only a few sensed the coming cataclysm. The inner dilemmas of people like Witkacy were accompanied in minor cases by a cool realism. A section of the financial community, for example, was not involved in the events depicted. The king of the Polish press, the publisher of, among others, the Illustrated Daily Courier, Marian Dąbrowski, went on a trip to the United States in the summer of 1939, probably with no intention of returning, taking with him documents certifying that he owned property abroad. However, this was an isolated situation rather than the standard, even among the best-off Poles⁴⁹. The weather was fine. The last August day before the outbreak of war also proved unusually hot.

CONCLUDING...

To conclude, reflecting on 1939 and the state of society at the time also requires the use of a *from below* perspective. War hung in the air, but some sort of everyday life always played out, with the hope that the worst would not happen. This puzzled me and puzzles me, being – ultimately – a positive reflection on human nature. On the other hand, this society of the Second Republic ached as it entered the era of its independence and closed the period in a similar state.

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⁴⁷ Quoted in *ibidem*, p. 26.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

⁴⁹ See M. Barbasiewicz, *Ludzie interesu w przedwojennej Polsce*, Warsaw 2013.

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