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POLISH COUNTRYSIDE IN THE YEARS 1929—1935

The effects of the economic crisis of the years 1929—1935 were in Poland different in agriculture than in industry.

Unlike in industry, it was falling prices and not falling output that constituted the main feature of the agricultural crisis. As regards grain production, some increase was even noted in the years 1930—1934, compared with the years 1926—1930. On the other hand, the yields per hectare of certain crops decreased as a result of a drop in the consumption of fertilizers. The average wheat yields which amounted to 12.4 quintaux per hectare in 1926—1930, dropped to 11.7 q. per hectare in 1930—1934. The corresponding drop for barley was 0.2 q. and for oats 1 q. However, the average yields of rye increased by 0.3 q. per hectare and those of potatoes by 4 q. per hectare.¹ The total production was not affected because the area under cultivation considerably increased in the years of crisis. In 1935 there were 17.1 million hectares of cultivated land, as against 16.5 million hectares in 1929.² The increase was the largest in the areas under potatoes which, in some parts of Poland, were becoming the principal food of the peasants. The number of cattle and pigs was growing during the crisis years; that of cattle only slightly, while that of pigs by nearly 40 per cent., although it varied very much from year to year with the fluctuations of the demand for pigs. Only the number of horses fell by 5 per cent. The changes in the cattle population were not evenly spread over the crisis years; an increase occurred in 1930 and 1931. The following two years saw a drop and another increase was noted in 1935.³

Total agricultural production remained unaffected by the crisis. However, because of the growth of the population, production *per capita* was decreasing. In 1929 *per capita* production of wheat and rye amounted to 281 kilograms, to

¹ *Statystyka rolnicza 1935* [*Agricultural Statistics 1935*], part I and II, Warszawa 1936, p. 7; 'Mały Rocznik Statystyczny' (abbr. MRS), 1931, p. 20.

² *Statystyka rolnicza 1930/31* [*Agricultural Statistics 1930/31*], Warszawa 1932, p. 24; *Statystyka rolnicza 1935* [*Agricultural Statistics 1935*], p. 3.

³ MRS, 1934, p. 33; 1936, p. 49.

fall to 255 kilograms during the last years of the crisis; the corresponding figures for barley, were 53 and 43,95 for oats were 77, and for potatoes 1,016 and 961 respectively. ⁴

In agriculture, the crisis resulted first of all in a fall of the prices of the articles produced and sold by the rural population. The abruptness of this process is illustrated in the Table 1. ⁵

Table 1

Article	Unit	1928	1929	1930	1932	1934	1935
Wheat	100 kg.	47.4	42.8	33.5	24.6	17.8	16.1
Rye	100 kg.	40.9	28.4	19.1	20.7	15.4	13.3
Potatoes	1,000 kg.	96.9	71.3	46.3	42.1	35.4	33.1
Beef cattle	100 kg.	139.3	137.8	118.7	72.2	66.7	59.7
Pork pigs	100 kg.	212.3	239.3	196.8	108.8	79.1	77.1
Milk	100 lit.	41.7	40.1	33.5	22.4	15.7	16.0

During the period under review the prices of wheat dropped 66 per cent., of rye 68 per cent., of potatoes 66 per cent., beef cattle 57 per cent., pork pigs 66 per cent. and milk 62 per cent. That meant that, in order to receive the same amount of money, the farmer had to sell in 1935 three times as much as in 1928. The fall of the prices of agricultural produce in Poland was, on the one hand a result of an analogous process on the world markets, caused by a rapid growth of production and of the stocks, and on the other hand it was accelerated by the diminishing purchases of agricultural produce by the urban population and industry (an effect of the crisis), and by the falling consumption in the countryside. In the circumstances, the relative surplus of agricultural produce on the market resulted in spontaneous adjustments of the supply to suit the demand, through reductions of prices.

If Polish agriculture had strictly followed the pattern of natural economy, the fall of prices of agricultural produce would have been of little importance. However, in spite of its small-scale marketable production character, farming in Poland had innumerable ties with the market, money circulation and capitalist forms of trade. The farmer was not in a position to refrain from selling his own products, for he had to pay taxes, repay his debts and buy some industrial products.

Particularly burdensome were the debts incurred in connection with payments to members of the family (in lieu of their shares of the inherited land), and with purchases of land in pre-crisis years. For the crisis came at a time when Polish

⁴ MRS, 1938, p. 77.

⁵ MRS, 1936, p. 165.

agriculture was intensifying production and when the agrarian system was being reformed. Those two circumstances required both large capital investments and equally large working capitals. As a result of the favourable prices of agricultural produce in the years 1927—1928, peasant-farmers had borrowed substantial amounts in the hope that, with the good market position and the promise of high profits, they would be able to repay their debts. Capital willingly co-operated with agriculture, confident that the debts were secure because of the high prices of and the keen demand for land. In relation to the value of land and the prices of agricultural produce prevailing at the time, the amount of debts was not excessive. However, the profitability of farming ended with the crisis which also resulted in a fall of land prices.

With the falling prices of agricultural produce, the annual incomes of the farmers per hectare of cultivated land dwindled accordingly (figures for farms of 2 to 50 hectares). In the years 1928—1929 these incomes amounted to 506 zlotys, to fall to 143 zlotys (65 per cent.) in the worst year of the crisis.⁶ The drop in the total cash incomes of the peasant-farmers was just as large (4,700 million zlotys in 1928/29, 2,600 million in 1931/32, and 1,500 million in 1933/34).⁷ From a comparison of the income of the 2 to 50-hectare farms with their annual consumption it appears that in each of the years 1928/29—1934/35 the value of consumption exceeded the total income from the farms. So, in spite of the ever shrinking consumption the incomes were falling at a still higher rate. The excess of consumption was being met from the only source available to the peasants, that is through decapitalization of their farms.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture estimate for 1931 various debts of the peasant-farmers totalled 3,850 million⁸ and in 1933 reached 4,273 million zlotys. Out of this amount long-term debts accounted for 2,563 million and short-term debts for 1,710 million.⁹ These totals did not include certain categories of debts, as e.g. private cash and commodity credits; neither did they include payments to members of the family in lieu of their shares of land, or tax arrears. The growth of debts during the crisis years did not result from new loans but from the growing arrears in payments towards old debts. The number of new loans granted to farmers during the years of crisis was relatively small. Most of them were given to big landowners who used them to repay old debts.

The position was dangerous not only to the farms themselves but also to

⁶ J. Curzytek, *Położenie gospodarstw włościańskich w 1934/35* [*Situation of Peasant Farms in 1934/35*], Warszawa 1935.

⁷ W. Zaklika, *Bilans obrotów gotówkowych rolnictwa polskiego. Cyfry i wnioski* [*Cash Turnovers of Polish Agriculture: Figures and Conclusions*], Lwów 1933, p. 29.

⁸ Exposé of L. Janta-Polczyński, Minister of Agriculture, of October 16, 1931. Quoted after 'Polska Gospodarcza', 1931, p. 1532—1533.

⁹ Discussion motion of the Minister of Agriculture and Land Reform concerning financial aid for agriculture, dated March 15, 1934, Archiwum Akt Nowych, [Recent Records Archives (abbr. AAN)], KEM, vol. 1137.

all the enterprises which were directly or indirectly connected with agriculture. When most of the farmers were insolvent debtors and 80 per cent. of their bills were overdue, industrial and trading firms which were their creditors also became insolvent. Moreover, the debts could hardly have been collected through sales by auction of the property of the insolvent debtors because of the usual lack of buyers.¹⁰

In 1933, the payments due towards the interest and the current amortization instalments of the farmers debts totalled 523.7 million zlotys, and those towards the immediately payable instalments (except the current amortization) amounted to 1,719 million zlotys. So, the farmers were to spend about 2,242 million zlotys on their debts during a single year.¹¹ That was absolutely impossible, since the cash incomes of the whole of agriculture during the economic year 1933/34 totalled some 1,500 million zlotys.¹² In addition to the repayment of their debts the farmers had to pay the current and overdue taxes, and to buy the necessary minimum of industrial articles. To repay even a small part of the debts was a task far beyond the possibilities of the rural population.

Apart from the debts, another considerable burden on agriculture was the state and local taxes. The rate of the land tax, the principal but by no means the only tax paid by the rural population, had remained practically unchanged since the pre-crisis years. In 1928, this tax totalled 70 million, and in 1935, the worst year of the agrarian crisis, it amounted to 68 million.¹³ In terms of rye that meant that in 1928 the farmers had to sell 171,000 tons and in 1935 as much as 511,000 tons of rye to obtain that sum. Apart from the state land tax, the farmers had to pay the local additional land taxes (36 million zlotys in 1933/34), road taxes (35 million), the rural compensatory tax (34 million), and some other taxes.¹⁴ In the economic year 1933/34 the taxation of agriculture totalled 220 million zlotys. In addition, the farmers had to pay a number of indirect taxes, concealed in the prices of goods, and numerous minor imposts like tolls, market fees, etc. According to the figures obtained from the Puławy Institute, taxation per hectare constituted an ever growing part of the total expenditure of the farmers. Its proportion amounted to 12.9% in 1928/29 to raise to 25.7% in 1932/33.¹⁵

The farmers, ruined by the falling prices, were unable to repay debts or pay taxes. The small farmer, the typical representative of Polish agriculture, usually had to sell the whole of his surplus production in order to meet the current

¹⁰ Note on the actual state of the anti-crisis action, AAN, KEM, vol. 768.

¹¹ Discussion motion of the Minister of Agriculture and Land Reform concerning financial aid for agriculture, dated March 15, 1934, AAN, KEM, vol. 1137.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ MRS, 1938, p. 368.

¹⁴ M. Mieszczankowski, *Podatki rolne w Polsce międzywojennej* [Agricultural Taxes in Poland Between the Wars], 'Roczniki Ruchu Ludowego', 1961, No. 3, p. 120.

¹⁵ *Badania nad opłacalnością gospodarstw włościańskich w roku gospodarczym 1932/33* [Studies on Profitability of Peasant Farms in the Economic Year 1932/33], Warszawa 1 33.

needs of his farm, even during the pre-crisis years. During the crisis it was not enough to sell the surplus to meet the outstanding and enforceable financial obligations. That was the origin of the so-called 'hunger supply' of agricultural produce. In order to obtain the necessary minimum of money, the farmer had to sell not only the surplus of their produce but also some parts of it that were needed to support his family and keep his livestock. This sudden, artificially large supply of agricultural produce, excessive in relation to the shrinking consumption in towns, resulted in further reductions of the prices. Since the increase in grain and flour exports, observed during the crisis years, was based on dumping prices, it could in no way affect the home market prices.

The falling prices of agricultural produce resulted in a poverty unequalled since the war, and brought backwardness of farming methods. In the farms of 2—50 hectares, net profit per hectare which amounted to 214 zlotys in the economic year 1927/28, fell to 25 zlotys in 1930/31, only to decrease by another 17 zlotys in 1931/32. During the following three years it was 26,35 and 18 zlotys respectively.¹⁶ These figures are approximate, since they are based on a survey of a relatively small number of farms with proper accountancy. It should be pointed out on this occasion that the farms where accountancy books were properly kept, were as a rule more efficient farms which consequently brought larger profits. So, the general picture was far more sombre than it might transpire from the above quoted figures. The more so as the high enough average was largely affected by the profits attained in larger farms of 20—50 hectares, and by the omission of the poorest farms not exceeding 2 hectares which accounted for some 34% of the total number of farms in Poland. In smaller farms, net profit was at that time of only historical character.

The position was being made worse by a large disproportion between the drop of the prices of the goods sold by the farmers and that of the prices of the industrial articles which they had to buy. The prices of the former were falling much more steeply, as can be seen from the Table 2.¹⁷

Table 2

Prices	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Paid to agricultural producers	76	49	54	48	40	34	33
Of industrial articles budget by farmers	101	99	91	81	73	71	67

From the quoted figures in Table 2 it can be concluded that in order to buy the same industrial products the farmers, had to sell many times more of their

¹⁶ MRS, 1939, p. 74.

¹⁷ MRS, 1936, p. 162.

produce during the crisis that in the pre-crisis years. The Table 3, showing retail prices of some industrial products in terms of kilograms of rye, gives a more detailed illustration.¹⁸

Table 3

Article	Unit	1927/28	1929/30	1931/32	1934/35	1935/36
Plough	one	100	220	191	264	270
Superphosphate	100 kg.	31	68	43	73	81
Shoes	pair	99	220	150	184	205
Sugar	10 kg.	36	83	72	95	92
Coal	100 kg.	15	40	35	43	43
Matches	100 boxes	16	24	41	68	76
Salt	10 kg.	8	17	16	17	29

Since the farmers had to spend a large proportion of their cash incomes on taxes and repayments of debts, and failures to do so threatened with auction sales or sequestration of their farms, they had to restrict their purchases of industrial products. That resulted in a steep decline in the sales and, consequently, production of agricultural machines. The output of horse-drawn ploughs fell from 51,037 in 1929 to 10,371 in 1934 (80%), of horse-drawn harrows from 99,130 to 3,059 (97%), of threshers from 15,396 to 1,075 (93%), of winnowers from 23,693 to 1,570 (93%).¹⁹ The total sales of agricultural machines and implements to the farmers in 1932 amounted to only 8.8% of the figure for 1928.²⁰ This figure should be compared with the total fall in industrial production which in 1932 amounted to 46%. This is the best illustration of the acute form of the crisis in agriculture as compared with the crisis in industry.

The consumption of fertilizers diminished similarly. According to a survey of farms of 2—50 hectares made by the Small Peasant Farm Economics Department of the Agricultural Institute at Puławy, these farms used 12.81 zlotys worth of fertilizers per hectare in the economic year 1930/31. In the economic year 1934/35 the amount spent on fertilizers per hectare dwindled to 2.93 zlotys. The amounts invested in buildings also diminished from 14.04 to 6.34 zlotys, and those invested in machines and implements were reduced from 9.25 to 1.83 zlotys.²¹ The expenditure on the purchases of land, so considerable before the crisis, was also reduced. In spite of the continuing hunger for land, the

¹⁸ MRS, 1938, p. 236; W. Mateńko, *Zagadnienie monopolów skarbowych w Polsce* [*The Problem of Treasury Monopolies in Poland*], Warszawa 1939, p. 349.

¹⁹ MRS, 1939, p. 140.

²⁰ L. Grosfeld, *Polska w latach kryzysu gospodarczego 1929—1933* [*Poland in the Years of Economic Crisis 1929—1933*], Warszawa 1952, p. 251.

²¹ Curzytek, op. cit., p. 11.

owners of undersized and medium-sized farms had no money with which to pay for additional land. In consequence, the rate of implementation of the land reform dropped considerably during the crisis years. The area of land distributed under the reform amounted to 227,600 hectares in 1928 and 164,500 hectares in 1929; the corresponding figures for the years 1930—1935 were 131, 105, 74, 84, 57 and 80 thousand hectares respectively.²² Although during the crisis years there were much more big landowners willing to part with their land, the implementation of the land reform was markedly slowed down.

Apart from the falling prices of agricultural produce and the disproportion between the prices of industrial and agricultural products, farming was also affected by the ever growing difference between the prices obtained by the farmers as direct producers and those paid for agricultural produce by urban consumers. In October 1928, the farmer received 68% of the retail price of bread; after five years this proportion dropped to 48%. The farmer's share in the retail price of pork dropped similarly (from 61% to 50%). The position was the same as regards milk; a litre of milk which cost 7 groszy in the country sold in Warsaw at 35—40 groszy. The differences between the grain exchange quotations and the prices actually paid to direct producers were also considerable. In August 1934, when rye was quoted in Lwów at 17 zlotys per 100 kilograms, farmers at the district town of Rzeszów were paid only 13 zlotys, and in the villages of the Rzeszów district even as little as 11.50 to 12.50 zlotys. The difference was much the same in the prices of wheat; it was larger still in the prices of potatoes and eggs. Farmers were getting 3 grosze for an egg with the wholesale price at 5.8 groszy.²³

The prices paid to the farmers by the traders were inversely proportional to the distance from larger trade centres and dependent on existing transport facilities. Trade in agricultural produce was in the hands of well-organized groups of traders who divided the area of their activity into 'zones of influence' and successfully fought all competitors. In this way they were in a position to dictate low prices to non-organized peasants; prices that were much lower than those prevailing in towns. Co-operative organizations and State institutions could offer but a little competition when faced with groups of private traders. It should be pointed out, however, that these traders were in turn exploited by other links in the long chain of middlemen, and could retain only a small proportion of the profits.

We have so far dealt with the countryside as a whole, irrespective of class differences. It is obvious, however, that the effects of the crisis in large estates, large peasant farms, medium-sized and small farms differed very much. The small, economically the weakest farms were the worst affected. That resulted from the fact that those farms were most heavily in debt per hectare, and on much

²² MRS, 1938, p. 65.

²³ J. Michałowski, *Wież nie ma pracy* [*The Countryside Has No Work*], Warszawa 1935.

harder terms than large farms which benefited from the comparatively cheap credits of the Agrarian State Bank. To give an example, in 1931, the farms up to 5 hectares had 491 zlotys of debts per hectare, while the 5—10 hectare farms only 389 zlotys, those of 10—20 hectares — 351 zlotys, and 20—50 hectare farms — 293 zlotys.²⁴

In order to illustrate the position of the smaller farmers who had to seek credits at exorbitant rates of interest, we should recall that the rate of interest varying from 3% to 15% per month, i.e. 36% to 180% per annum was quite usual. In some cases, short-term credits granted by usurers carried an interest reaching 500—600% per annum.²⁵ During the crisis years there was a downward trend in the rate of interest, though it still presented a very heavy burden for the farmers. Numerous examples are quoted by A. S. Broda in his works. A peasant farming on 6 hectares in Jędrzejów district described as follows the terms on which he had managed to obtain credit: 'In 1929, on a private loan of 100 zlotys I had to pay 40 zlotys as annual interest; in 1930 I paid 30 zlotys, in 1931 again 30 zlotys, and 18 zlotys in 1932. In all, in four years I paid 118 zlotys in interest alone. In addition, when I was borrowing 100 zlotys I had to sign a bill for 140 zlotys.' Another debtor gave his creditor half a *morga* of land, since he had no cash to pay the interest. In some cases 'for a loan of 200 zlotys the farmer had to rear a calf until it was one year old, in lieu of interest.' An owner of a 14 hectare farm had to put out to five-year lease six *morga* of his land as the interest for a loan of 300 zlotys.²⁶ It should be pointed out on this occasion that the amounts owed to private creditors accounted for about one-third of the total debts incurred by the farms not exceeding 50 hectares.²⁷

During the years of the crisis the government took some measures to reduce the debts of the farmers. In effect, the amount of debts decreased considerably. Debts per hectare were reduced to 256 zlotys for the farms not exceeding 5 hectares, to 240 zlotys for 5—10 hectare farms, 241 zlotys for 10—20 hectare farms, and 205 zlotys for 20—50 hectare farms.²⁸ However, even those reduced amounts still presented a heavy burden.

Smaller farms were much more affected by the crisis also because they did not benefit by the intervention purchases of grain, arranged on government

²⁴ A. S. Broda, *Zadłużenie drobnych gospodarstw na dzień 1 VII 1935* [*Debts of Small Farms on July 1, 1935*], Warszawa 1936, p. 13.

²⁵ T. Zakrzewski, *Lichwa na wsi. Wyniki kwestionariusza rozeslanego do Kas Stefczyka* [*Usurious Practices in the Countryside: Replies to Questionnaire Circulated to Stefczyk Savings Country Banks*], Lwów 1927.

²⁶ A. S. Broda, *Zadłużenie drobnych gospodarstw na dzień 1 VII 1933* [*Debts of Small Farms on July 1, 1933*], Warszawa 1934, p. 33.

²⁷ A. S. Broda, *Zadłużenie drobnych gospodarstw na dzień 1 VII 1931* [*Debts of Small Farms on July 1, 1931*], Warszawa 1932, p. 25.

²⁸ Broda, *Zadłużenie drobnych gospodarstw na dzień 1 VII 1935* [*Debts of Small Farms on July 1, 1935*], p. 13.

orders, at prices higher than on the market. This form of grain sales was available to large farms only, as only large transactions were involved. The small farmer, deprived of direct access to distant town markets, was exposed to exploitation by middlemen to a considerably larger degree than big landowners or village capitalists. In the early stages of the crisis, larger estates had some finance reserves of which small peasant farms were entirely deprived. On the other hand, the crisis also seriously affected the farms with intensive production, as a rule larger farms in western parts of Poland. For in these farms the large disproportion between the prices of agricultural produce and those of the goods which were part of the cost of agricultural production (fertilizers, machines) had a direct influence on profitability stronger than in the case of farms with extensive production. Therefore during the crisis years, yields per hectare were falling in the western parts of the country, while they were slightly rising in the eastern parts. But the average yields were still much higher in the west than in the east, and in the large estates than in the peasant farms.

The crisis in Polish agriculture considerably widened the gap between the yields per hectare in Poland and in other, better developed European countries. The gap was enormous. Compared with the leading European countries the yields of four cereals in Poland amounted to some 45%. The average rye yield in Poland during the crisis was 11.2 quintals, as against 23.9 in Belgium, 21.5 in Holland, and 20.3 in Switzerland. Yields higher than in Poland were also attained in Sweden, Ireland, Norway, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Britain, Finland, Austria, France and Lithuania. The position was similar regarding the yields of wheat, oats and barley. Potato yields in Poland were even lower than in Lithuania and Latvia.²⁹ Milk yields in Poland were also below the averages attained in other countries. These disproportions, large enough before the crisis, were further increased to the disadvantage of Polish agriculture in the years 1930—1935. The crisis in agriculture directly affected the living conditions of the rural population.

According to the results of the second general population census of December 1931 the rural population numbered 23.2 million. Agriculture was the main source of subsistence for 19.3 million people.³⁰ For certain part of the population, the size of which is difficult to assess accurately, agriculture was a side line, supplementing the means obtained from other occupations. It is estimated that the farms of that category numbered 870,000.³¹ In all, farming was the main

²⁹ MRS, 1936, p. 46.

³⁰ *Drugi powszechny spis ludności z dn. 9. XII. 1931 r. Mieszkania i gospodarstwa domowe. Ludność. Stosunki zawodowe. Polska (dane skrócone)* [*Second General Population Census of December 9, 1931. Dwelling Accommodation and Households. Population. Professions. Poland (summarized)*], Warszawa 1937, p. 49.

³¹ M. Mieszczankowski, *Struktura agrarna Polski międzywojennej* [*The Agrarian Structure of Poland Between the Wars*], Warszawa 1960, p. 35.

or supplementary source of subsistence for some 70% of the population of Poland.

In spite of its large numbers the rural population's share in the national income was smaller than that of the people employed outside agriculture. In 1929 it amounted to 46.8% to drop to only 39.5% in 1934. For the crisis not only reduced the total amount of the national income (from 26,000 million zlotys in 1929 to 12,700 million zlotys in 1934, i.e. 52%) but also changed its distribution to the disadvantage of the rural population.³²

The reduction of the total amount of the national income, accompanied by a drop in the rural population's share in it, resulted in a decline of the living standard of the rural population in the years 1929—1935, much more pronounced than in the case of the urban population. In 1929, the national income per head of the rural population amounted to 643 zlotys per year, as against 1,138 zlotys per head of the urban population. The corresponding figures for 1935 were 244 zlotys and 572 zlotys respectively. During the crisis years incomes of the agricultural population fell by 62% and those of the non-agricultural population by 50%.³³

The figures illustrating the average drop in the national income per head of the agricultural population can give only a rough idea of the decline in the financial position of the countryside, for the term agricultural population covered the tenants of diminutive plots of land as well as the owners of latifundia. Therefore, in order to analyse the situation of the agricultural population it is necessary to present its social structure and to analyse the situation of the particular sections of the rural community. It should be pointed out on this occasion that, because there was no agricultural census in 1931, all the figures relating to the agrarian structure are approximate. The agrarian structure of Poland in 1931 is illustrated by the Table 4.³⁴

As it can be seen, the class differentiation of the Polish countryside was considerable. There was a small number of large estates of the capitalist character, and a large number of undersized, semi-proletarian small peasant farms. The number of medium-sized and large peasant farms was comparatively small. That was a result of a long process of partitioning peasant lands. Undersized, semi-proletarian farms not exceeding two hectares constituted nearly one-third of the total number of farms. But only 1/30 of land belonged to them. On the other hand, large estates which accounted for only 1/300 of the total number of farms covered an area nearly eight times as large as all the semi-proletarian

³² C. Klarner, *Dochód społeczny wsi i miast w Polsce w okresie przesilenia gospodarczego 1929—1936* [*Social Income in the Country and in Towns in Poland During the Economic Crisis 1929—1936*], Lwów 1937, p. 23.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

³⁴ Mieszczankowski, op. cit., p. 329, 333, 337; MRS, 1939, p. 68, 73.

farms taken together. While 14,700 families of big landowners held 9,774,000 hectares, 2,660,000 families of small farmers owned only 6,200,000 hectares.

As regards the financial situation during the crisis years, four categories of the rural population can be distinguished: hired farm workers, peasants farming small and medium-sized lands, peasants — owners of larger farms of the capitalist character, and owner of big estates. Farm workers constituted some 14.6% of the agricultural population, i.e. 2.7 million people including families. Small-scale production farms, i.e. in principle those not exceeding 15 ha., as well as those of the larger ones which did not employ hired labour regularly and were worked by their owners and their families, provided subsistence for some 82% of the agricultural population. The groups of capitalist peasant farms and of big estates were the smallest. The last mentioned one only slightly exceeded 60,000 (including families), i.e. 0.3% of the total agricultural population.³⁵

Table 4

Size (ha.)	Farms		Area	
	Number (1,000)	%	Number (1,000 ha.)	%
0—2	1,262	30.3	1,256	3.3
3—5	1,398	33.5	4,944	13.0
6—10	1,007	24.1	7,341	19.4
11—20	404	9.7	5,629	14.9
21—50	90	2.2	2,646	7.0
above 50	15	0.3	9,780	25.8
Total	4,178	100	37,897	100*

* 16.6% of the total area of land was not used for the purposes of agriculture.

In big estates and capitalist peasant farms the crisis reduced the profits and sometimes the assets, too, but it never brought poverty or hunger which were the usual lot of all the poor peasants and of a major part of the owners of medium-sized peasant farms. In order to understand the difference between the situation of the big landowners and that of the poor peasantry it is sufficient to compare consumption per capita for these two categories. In the years 1933—1935, annual consumption per head in the category of big landowners amounted to 10,204 zlotys. The corresponding figure for larger capitalist farms (30—50 ha.) was 433 zlotys; for smaller capitalist farms (15—30 ha.) it was 363 zlotys, and for

³⁵ *Drugi powszechny spis...* p. 57—58; J. Tomaszewski, *Gospodarka drobnotowarowa w Polsce międzywojennej* [*Small-scale Farming in Poland Between the Wars*], 'Zeszyty Naukowe Szkoły Głównej Planowania i Statystyki', 1959, No. 15, p. 36.

owners of two or three-hectare farms only 158 zlotys.³⁶ It can be assumed that incomes of the undersized farms (not exceeding 2 ha.) were smaller still. There are no reliable estimates relating to them.

Because of its size the group of small farmers and hired farm workers is the most interesting.

The situation in agriculture during the crisis has been presented above. The progressing degradation and pauperization of agriculture directly affected the financial situation and standard of living of the owners of small and medium-sized peasant farms. Small farmers were nearly entirely deprived of cash incomes which could be spent to meet their life and cultural needs. What small amounts of cash they could obtain, they put away, as a rule for taxes and debts.³⁷

Some idea of the reduction of expense can be given by the figures illustrating the annual expenditure of private farms (2—50 ha.) per adult person (in zlotys) see Table 5. Children were counted as 0.6 adult person.

Table 5

Expenses	1928/29	1930/31	1932/33	1934/35
Clothing, underwear, footwear	124.42	83.26	45.57	44.82
Furniture, household goods	13.58	6.80	3.66	3.60
Doctors, medicines	13.54	10.27	5.95	5.20
Education of children	25.62	19.30	7.36	7.00
Newspapers, books, postage	5.22	3.32	1.89	1.76
Travel	13.35	6.87	2.81	2.20
Tobacco, cigarettes	10.38	9.02	5.35	4.44
Meat, fats	24.86	17.27	10.51	8.76
Sugar	12.77	12.23	6.94	5.77
Coal	13.03	10.48	3.72	3.10
Total	381.28	262.77	144.08	132.50

It should be remembered on this occasion that the inclusion in one group of the figures relating to the farms from 2 to 50 hectares distorted the picture considerably. It can be safely assumed that the drop in expenditure was in larger farms comparatively smaller than in small farms. Neither was the drop in expenditure the same in all parts of the country. The southern and eastern parts, where agriculture was most backward and the partitioning of land most advanced, were particularly strongly affected by the crisis. For example, in 1933, a peasant farm in the western part of Poland consumed 13.46 kilograms

³⁶ A. Hodoly, W. Jastrzębowski, *Handel wiejski w Polsce międzywojennej. Liczby i fakty* [*Rural Trade in Poland Between the Wars. Figures and Facts*], Warszawa 1957, p. 96.

³⁷ J. Curzytek, *Położenie gospodarstw włościańskich w 1935/36* [*Situation of Peasant Farms in 1935/36*], Warszawa 1936, p. 14—15.

of sugar. The corresponding figure for the central parts was 10.11, for the southern parts 6.75 and for the eastern parts 3.96 kilograms. In the western parts of the country coal was still used in rural areas in 1933. At the same time it practically disappeared from use in the southern and especially eastern regions.³⁸

A picture of the situation of the small farms and of the life of their owners was best presented by the farmers themselves in the now famous *Peasants' Memoirs* published before the war by the Social Economy Institute. Interesting information is also contained in Michałowski's monograph entitled *Wies' nie ma pracy* [*The Countryside Has No Work*], published by the Social Affairs Institute, and describing the situation of the agricultural population in the district of Rzeszów, as well as in numerous publications of the State Institute of Agriculture Economy at Puławy. The picture presented in these works can be accepted as typical for the small and medium-sized peasant farms.

A matter of essential importance for an estimate of the situation of small peasant farmers is the quality of nourishment. In this respect the crisis brought radical changes to the worse, especially in connection with the earlier mentioned so-called 'hunger supply' of agricultural produce. Sugar, meat, fats, eggs and all colonial goods disappeared from the menu of the rural population; the consumption of bread, milk and even salt was restricted. Directly after the harvest, i.e. at time of comparative prosperity, the country people usually had three meals a day. As it was getting nearer to spring, they more and more frequently sacrificed one of them, usually the supper which it was easy to sleep over. Hot meals mainly consisted of thin soup and potatoes with no fat in most cases. In some farms they added a little milk to the soup, 'just to give it a little colour.' By the way, the milk was usually skimmed. Occasionally they had cabbage, groats, and less frequently some dumplings. Bread, generally available in autumn, in 'most farms of one to two hectares was a rarity from the New Year to the harvest time.'³⁹ In order to save rye flour, barley flour, potatoes or lupin was frequently added to bread. Instead of bread, which in many parts of the country was a luxury in winter-time, children were given a few baked potatoes to take to school as their lunch. Unskimmed milk was drunk only on exceptional occasions, since cream, of which butter was made, was one of the few marketable products and for that reason could not be consumed by peasant families. Eggs were for sale only. The peasants ate practically no meat, except on the occasions of church holidays, of an unfortunate death of a chicken or a cow, or of serious illness in the family. 'Sugar is non-existent in the country. Most of the children [in Rzeszów district] have never seen it, unless in the shape of sweets, at village

³⁸ Z. Sobańska-Kieniewiczowa, *Zużycie wyrobów przemysłowych na wsi w r. 1932/33 w zależności od położenia geograficznego i stopnia zamożności gospodarstw wiejskich* [*Consumption of Industrial Products in Rural Areas in 1932/33 According to Geographical and Economic Situation of Farms*], Warszawa 1939, p. 33—36.

³⁹ Michałowski, op. cit., p. 44.

feasts. The salt now in use is grey in colour, sometimes even red, of the kind usually given to cattle. In the spring, when there is no money left even for these inferior kinds, they use the same salted water for a number of times to boil potatoes.⁴⁰ Peasants also boiled water in empty herring barrels and added the obtained 'brew' to their food, for flavour. On special occasions they would have coffee made of sugar beet with the addition of chicory and skimmed milk.

As a result of a number of surveys it has been found that the average daily calorific value of food in Rzeszów district was from 1,800 to 2,200 calories per head, and that only during the most prosperous time, directly after the harvest.⁴¹ For comparison, it should be recalled that the calorific value of the food of the unemployed workers was 2,078 calories in 1932, i.e. at the worst time of the industrial crisis; the corresponding figure for the office workers was 2,714. According to experts, a manual worker requires 3,400—3,800 calories per 24 hours.⁴² The peasant, whose work required considerable physical effort, was on the average nourished like an unemployed urban worker. According to Michałowski, 90% of the rural population of the district of Rzeszów were undernourished from the physiological point of view, i.e. their nourishment was insufficient to sustain the organism.⁴³

The standard of living of the peasants farming small and medium-sized plots of land was even enough, with only slight fluctuations downwards in the case of the poorest of them, and upwards in the case of the owners of 10 hectare or larger farms and of the village 'aristocracy', i.e. those in receipt of any regular pensions, the disabled, widows and orphans. Every regular cash income, however small, was still larger than that obtained by small farmers from their farms. The lower than the average standard of living of the peasants farming undersized plots of land found its expression in the shorter periods of bread consumption and in the restrictions on the consumed amounts of potatoes and cabbage.

On the average, during nearly six months of each year, the small farmers' families had to seek subsistence outside farming. And the prospects of finding additional jobs were very dim during the years of crisis. Continuous unemployment in towns made it impossible to find work there. The possibilities of finding occasional work in tree-felling, quarries, road or railway construction were reduced considerably. Earnings from seasonal work in estates were also reduced. In 1928, the daily pay of a male farm worker (with his own food) amounted to 3.90 zlotys, to drop in 1933 to 1.70 zlotys, or even to 1.30 zlotys or less in the overpopulated southern and eastern parts of the country. In some cases the daily pay in the eastern parts of Poland amounted to as little as 10 to

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² MRS, 1938, p. 270; E. Arnekker, *Przejawy kryzysu w rzemiośle i chałupnictwie* [*Symptoms of Crisis in Handicrafts and Cottage Industry*], Warszawa 1934, p. 27.

⁴³ Michałowski, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

24 groszy.⁴⁴ However, the situation of the rural population was particularly badly affected by the check to the regular seasonal emigration. In the years 1925—1929 the annual average number of emigrants was 165,000. In 1930 this number raised to 218,000. During the crisis years the emigration very nearly stopped. In 1932 there were only 21,000 emigrants (10% of the 1930 figure) and 39,000 re-emigrants. In the years 1934—1935 the number of emigrants increased to 43,000 and 54,000 respectively but it was compensated by re-emigration.⁴⁵ In this way the only outlet was closed for the huge so-called 'agrarian overpopulation' which according to various estimates amounted to 2.5—8 million.⁴⁶ The financial situation of the countryside also seriously deteriorated because of the sudden end of the financial aid from emigrants who stopped sending money to their families in Poland because of the world economic crisis.

All that directly resulted in the necessity constantly to reduce the consumption of industrial products and goods which were the State monopoly. 'I must admit,' Michałowski writes, 'that as regards the farmer I feel embarrassed to use the word "consumption"'. When examining the books of village shops in two large villages (5,000 inhabitants) Michałowski found that in July 1934 local inhabitants bought one scythe, six buttons, one aluminium mug and ten dekagrams of nails. The sales of industrial products in these villages totalled 5.35 zlotys.⁴⁷ In the areas populated by small peasant farmers money was replaced by a new currency — eggs. A large proportion of purchases in the village shops was paid for in eggs and that accepted at prices far below the market price. The pauperization of the countryside also found its expression in the condition of clothes.

The peasants used fuel and lighting very sparingly. In many areas, kerosene lamps were a luxury. They either spent evenings in the dark or used primitive oil lamps or splinters of wood. Factory made cigarettes were rarities. The peasants would buy the cheapest brands of tobacco and roll their cigarettes. 'Matches [...] had not only lost their character of necessities, but had become curiosities, seen on rare occasions when used by some visitor from town.'⁴⁸ Matches were bought singly, four for a grosz. They were split in two or in four for economy. More and more often the peasants had to go without them because they could not afford to buy them. Tinder reappeared in the country. The custom of borrowing fire, which was taken from cottage to cottage in a bucket, had been revived.

The agricultural population, especially in the overpopulated parts of the country, was threatened by hunger. In July 1932, famine was reported from

⁴⁴ MRS, 1939, p. 269; J. Gójski, *Fornale [Farm Labourers]*, II ed., Warszawa 1955, p. 23.

⁴⁵ MRS, 1931, p. 12; MRS, 1934, p. 18; MRS, 1938, p. 55.

⁴⁶ M. Stańczyk, *Przeludnienie agrarne w Polsce kapitalistycznej [The Agrarian Overpopulation in Capitalist Poland]*, 'Ekonomista', 1955, No. 1.

⁴⁷ Michałowski, op. cit.

⁴⁸ Michałowski, op. cit., p. 53.

Polesie region. It was stated in the reports that the position would be very serious in the autumn. In a secret report addressed to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers in March 1933, the Ministry of Home Affairs gave alarm because of the danger of famine. 'From the reports submitted by the Voivodship Offices it transpires that famine spreads very disturbingly among the rural population of some areas, especially the voivodships of Lublin, Białystok, Polesie, Nowogródek, Wołyń, Lwów and Stanisławów. Immediate State aid is imperative. It should be extended to the areas suffering from bad harvests, as well as those where the small peasant farmers, deprived of earnings in woods, saw-mills, quarries, etc. had long exhausted their modest reserves and are helpless.'⁴⁹

Because of the pauperization of the countryside, medical services had become an exceptional luxury. 'As for medical treatment, if anybody is taken ill, he just goes on being ill, unless a neighbour calls and recommends a quack or something [...] if a man who supports the whole family is taken ill, and his illness is protracted, the family takes a bushel of rye, sometimes the last one, and take it, and the patient, to town. The rye is sold and the patient taken to a doctor.'⁵⁰ This description is confirmed by the studies made by the Puławy Institute, according to which the expenditure on health decreased by 62% during the crisis years. The expenditure on education of children was still more restricted. It was reduced to 27% of the pre-crisis figure. It should be pointed out on this occasion that both the State and the local government also reduced expenditure on education. In the circumstances, a growing proportion of the children remained outside the schools. Those who started their primary education very often discontinued it after a year or two. The country schools were few and far, and the distances to them were very often considerable. The children had no warm clothes and could not attend schools in autumn or winter. There was no money to buy pens or copy-books, let alone books. At home there was no fuel or lighting and the children could not do their home work.

The landless peasants were still worse affected by the crisis. It was from among them that the huge army of farm labourers was recruited.

According to the 1931 census, the hired labourers in the countryside numbered 1.36 million (2.7 million with families).⁵¹ The crisis resulted in permanent unemployment of farm workers. The proportion of unemployed reached 10% in December 1931,⁵² and it further increased during the years that followed. According to the results of a survey made by the Union of Farm Workers in the

⁴⁹ Tajny wniosek ministra spraw wewnętrznych B. Pierackiego w sprawie pomocy głodującej ludności wiejskiej z dn. 24 marca 1933 [Secret Report from B. Pieracki, Minister of Home Affairs, concerning the aid for the starving rural population, dated March 24, 1933], AAN, KEM, vol. 1296.

⁵⁰ *Pamiętniki chłopów* [Peasants' Memoirs], Ser. I, Warszawa 1935, p. 13.

⁵¹ *Drugi powszechny spis...* [Second General Population Census...], p. 62.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

estates on the territory of the former Congress Kingdom, during the period from the economic year 1927/28 to the economic year 1934/35 the number of workers employed by the estates decreased by 27%.⁵³ While reducing the numbers of permanently employed workers, the estates replaced them with cheap, occasional labour recruited for seasonal field work from neighbouring small and medium-sized peasant farms. The more numerous were, in an area, small farms which could not support the owners and their families, the more readily the big landowners reduced the number of permanent workers and replaced them with seasonal workers. The drop in the numbers of permanently employed farm workers was also connected with the fact that larger estates were discontinuing labour-absorbing and little profitable cultures (e.g. sugar beet) and changed to extensive cultivation of cereals.

The capitalist peasant farms were also reducing the numbers of permanently employed labourers. Instead, they made the landless work in lieu of payments for a horse, or debts, or a bit of land. Many examples of these practices can be found in *Peasants' Memoirs*. 'The landless in our district [of Łęczycza] get their supply of potatoes through planting a few rows of them on plots belonging to wealthier farmers. For this privilege they have to do some work, according to agreement. Even those on larger farms economize as much as possible because of the crisis and reduce hired labour to the most necessary work which is done by the landless in exchange for the right to plant some potatoes, beans or cabbage.'⁵⁴ Another landless wrote: 'When I have no money to buy pepper, salt or onions, I go from cottage to cottage to borrow a cupful of salt, or with a jug to borrow fire for I have no money to buy matches. When spring comes the peasants work in the fields and I walk about and look at the sun, for I have no work here and no one will call me to do some work and earn some money for salt or potatoes. There is no farm work at all, for nearly everyone farms his land by himself, only his family helping. Such is life for a farm worker and if not for some other work which I can do I would have to wander round the country with beggar's sacks, as others do. I had some manure, which we had made together with the goats and chickens. I took it to a neighbour's field and planted 100 kilograms of potatoes, for which I had to do some work for the neighbour. I asked another one for a small strip of land and planted my potatoes there. I had to work for him two days at the harvest time, scything...'⁵⁵

Since the permanent and seasonal emigration had been stopped and there were no prospects of finding work in towns, the drop in the numbers of employed farm workers caused a further decline of the already very low standard of living of this part of the rural population.

⁵³ *Sprawozdanie z działalności Związku Zawodowego Robotników Rolnych* [Report on the Activity of the Union of Farm Workers], Warszawa 1936.

⁵⁴ *Pamiętniki chłopów* [Peasant's Memoirs], p. 127.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 217.

Apart from the growing unemployment, the situation of hired farm workers was equally seriously affected by a considerable drop in their earnings. The employers were taking advantage of the existence of a huge reserve army of landless and poor peasants and making many changes in contracts, to the disadvantage of the workers. They reduced the amount of the remuneration in kind which constituted a major part of the earnings. The reduction amounted to 90% for the permanently employed, 50% for the part-time workers and 25—40% for the seasonal workers.⁵⁶ The size of plots for vegetables and potatoes was restricted and the holiday and overtime pay reduced. Farm workers were not allowed to keep more than two cows. In many districts the landowners stopped paying in cash and paid the total in kind. Because of the falling prices of agricultural produce (by about two-thirds) the wages were reduced accordingly. During the crisis years the wages of the permanently employed farm workers decreased by 53% compared with the economic year 1928/29.⁵⁷ In spite of that, big landowners often very reluctantly paid the remuneration in kind. In Kielce voivodship alone the arrears in the wages due from 200 big landowners totalled 2.5 million zlotys.⁵⁸ In consequence, farm workers were often left without any means. In order to survive the crisis they had to seek loans on usurious terms, to collect the remnants of vegetables and potatoes left in the fields, or often to resort to thefts. Juvenile workers and women were the most exploited. Their wages amounted to only 18—30% of those the permanently employed men.⁵⁹ In addition, the wages of farm workers were different in different parts of the country, the highest in the west and the lowest in the east.

The farm workers were afraid to protest against the abuse and exploitation on the part of the employers. 'We could not demand our wages: everyone of us was happy to have a job'. For it should be remembered that to a large proportion of the farm workers the loss of their job meant not only the loss of earnings but also of homes. In 1931 more than 910,000 people were accommodated in workers quarters and nearly 392,000 lived together with their employers. Only 542,000 farm workers had their own homes.⁶⁰ With only one of every three farm workers having a home of his own, the problem of accommodation assumed a very special importance. The Housing Law, protecting the tenants, did not apply to farm workers. This was the reason for their being afraid to protest against numerous abusive practices of the employers. This was the reason behind many unsuccessful strikes of farm workers, since they failed to find support of all concerned.

During the crisis years the number of farm workers evicted from their quarters

⁵⁶ Grosfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

⁵⁷ MRS, 1936, p. 181.

⁵⁸ Gójski, *Fornale* [*Farm Labourers*], p. 25.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

⁶⁰ *Drugi powszechny spis...* [*Second General Population Census...*], p. 62.

was growing rapidly. This particularly applied to large families which, in accordance with the regulations, were entitled to a larger number of rooms. In a confidential circular the Landowners Union advised its members to evict such families first of all.⁶¹

The average housing conditions of the farm workers accommodated in workers quarters considerably deteriorated during the crisis. The landowners, who were bound by the law to provide decent accommodation to the farm workers, practically stopped all maintenance work although the workers quarters needed repair very badly. According to the results of a survey made within the boundaries of the former Congress Kingdom by the Ministry of Public Health in the years 1919—1926 only 20% of the farm workers quarters had wooden flooring, very often rotten, 80% of the rooms had no adequate day lighting, in 78% of them drinking water was of a dubious quality. The average number of persons per room was six, and in many cases it exceeded ten.⁶² There were three persons per bed. Many of the rooms were inhabited by two families. In the circumstances, the state of health of the farm workers was bad and required constant medical attention. This was particularly noticeable during the crisis which resulted in undernourishment. The new, unified social insurance law of 1933 instead of an improvement brought a disastrous deterioration of the position. The new law abolished the health insurance paid for by the employers, which had formerly existed in some parts of Poland. It was replaced by an obligation imposed on the employers to cover the cost of the medical treatment of their workers. This was virtually fictitious, firstly because the landowners refused to refund the cost of the treatment, and secondly because the workers would not admit illness, afraid lest they should lose their jobs. In the voivodships of Poznań and Pomorania, the two most highly developed voivodships in Poland, the standard of public health declined to the level of many decades ago. Treatment of social diseases (tuberculosis, venereal diseases) was discontinued and infectious diseases (diphtheria, scarlet fever, erysipelas) were treated with home or quack remedies. The number of hired farm workers seeking medical advice after the promulgation of the new law was below 5% of the corresponding number before the new law.⁶³ The farm labourer, paid for his work nearly exclusively in kind, could not pay doctors; the landowner would not meet the bill, either. Thus, the farm workers had been deprived of the possibility to avail themselves of medical services.

In this respect the position of the seasonal workers was equally bad. Since the law entitled them to medical aid at the employer's expense only after 25 days of work, they usually were dismissed after 24 days.

⁶¹ Okólnik Związku Ziemian powiatu hrubieszowskiego nr 24 z dn. 1. XII. 1933 [Circular of the Landowners Union in Hrubieszów district, No. 24 dated December 1, 1933], quoted after J. Gójski, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁶² Gójski, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁶³ Grosfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

The state of affairs in landed estates was still much better in comparison with the position of the 380,000 labourers employed by rich peasants. As a rule they were not covered by the general conditions of work; they had no separate accommodation and could not start families. Medical aid was out of the question. They usually had no cash remuneration but were given food and clothes. They knew no holidays. Their working hours were not defined. They started working with the dawn and did not finish before it was too dark to work. They had no rights whatever and for any offence could be dismissed without notice or compensation. The employers could easily find replacements. The overpopulated and hungry countryside could supply any number of them. In their reports labour inspectors gave alarm that considerable numbers of children under 15 were employed. In one case in Cracow voivodship it was found that a seven years old girl was employed as maid; she was working in appalling hygienic conditions from 5 a.m. to the late evening hours.⁶⁴

So, nine-tenths of the rural population lived in poverty. Some of them were less affected, the others more, but they all lived in conditions similar to those of the serfdom times when potatoes and cabbage were the staple food and home-spun garments the only dress of the peasants. That was the source of discontent of the rural population with the government, the agrarian policy of which was mainly directed to the aid for large landowners and not for the whole of the population. That was the source of the yearnings after the 'good old times' under foreign rule, and of the more active people's struggle for a change of the political conditions which were responsible for the difficulties experienced by the countryside. That was also the source of the rapid radicalization of the peasant masses during the crisis years.

(Translated by Jerzy Eysymontt)

⁶⁴ *Inspekcja Pracy w r. 1932* [Labour Inspection in 1932], p. XIV.