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A FARMHOUSE IN MIEDWIEŻYKI

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Abstract

The results of a drawing inventory of an old village house (dated 1936–1937) in the village of Miedwieżyki in the municipality of Milejczyce, Siemiatycze County, in the southern part of Podlaskie Province, are presented and discussed. The inventory drawings are comparative material for possible future studies of the evolution of folk culture in the area, especially the evolution of vernacular aesthetics of farmhouses. The collected data confirm the thesis of the “accumulativeness” of the interiors of old rural houses in this part of Podlaskie Voivodeship.

Keywords: vernacular architecture; vernacular farmhouses; countryside architecture; northeastern Poland

INTRODUCTION

It was the intention of the authors to present an inventory of an old country house in the village of Miedwieżyki in the municipality of Milejczyce, Siemiatycze district, in the southern part of Podlaskie province, developed in December 2022. Photographic documentation and inventory measurements were made, and on this basis, inventory drawings (projections, cross-sections, elevation drawings) were developed, enriched with a virtual 3D model. The whole can serve as source and comparative material for possible future studies of the evolution of folk culture in the area, including the evolution of house aesthetics.

The drawings and 3D model also highlight the furnishings and decor of the house. They are a record of the history of the house and are of scientific interest, even though much of the furnishings and equipment are contemporary. They are also important for the following reasons.

First of all, in folk culture, a building became a “home” only after it was equipped with the basic elements of household furnishings. For example, it is well known that in certain areas of Slavic lands (including eastern Poland), a family moving to a new house would

ceremonially carry a bread bowl and fire from the old one, and in areas inhabited by Orthodox peoples, icons were also ceremonially carried. Thus, a house was understood holistically as a synthesis of an architectural object and the key elements of its furnishings that give it its identity. The holistic understanding of the home was also evidenced by all the rituals associated with the home: one-time (rituals of interment), cyclical (domestic holiday rituals), occasional (baptismal, wedding, funeral rituals, etc.), but also daily. The latter included ritual behaviors in force when entering a house, leaving it, greeting the hosts (or welcoming guests by the hosts), as well as daily prayer rituals.

Thomas Salmon wrote about the elaborate customs of the old Russian peasant households in 1744 (p. 613–614): *“When someone pays a friendly visit, upon entering the house, he first looks around for the saint whose image painted on a board stands opposite on the top shelf (...). If the icon is dilapidated and there are no lamps hanging in front of it as every Sunday, then the visitor first asks about the ‘place of God’ and, having learned of it, worships it, while if he is zealous in his faith, then he falls face down in front of it, bids farewell and*

says *“Gospodi pomoli”* (...), after which he turns around and honors the head of the family and then the others”. Another English author traveling in Russia in the 18th century, Peter Henry Bruce, described such an event: *“Once a Russian came to me with a message, and as usual at the entrance he looked around looking for the icon, but when he did not find it, he asked: – where is your God? I replied: – in heaven. At these words he immediately fled”* [P.H. Bruce 1782, p. 103]. Attention to household devotional items and superstitiousness towards certain places of the home were also unfamiliar to Polish folk culture; they have been described at great length, especially in relation to the Podlasie-Mazovian borderlands [S. Dworakowski 1964, p. 211–224]. And if this was the case, it raises questions about contemporary relics of ancient rituals associated with the house, the contemporary symbolism of places and parts of the house, as well as the impact of civilization changes (including technological and aesthetic ones) on domestic symbols, customs, superstitions, rituals and the understanding of the house in general. We believe that the inventory of the Miedwieżyki house presented in this article can be a contribution to answering these questions.

Secondly, as already mentioned, furnishings and decor used to be a record of the history of the house. Today it is usually different, because having the financial means for new furniture and the desire to buy it, homeowners usually make a complete renovation of the apartment or the interior of the house on this occasion. In the past, however, changes used to be slower, successive, accumulative. Accumulating the changes seen in remodeling, additions, furnishings and decor, the house gradually became, as was written about noble houses, or manor houses, *“Witness (...) the powerful cultural factors that normalized the lives of our fathers and grandfathers”* [J. Obst 1910, p. 110; por. W. Łoziński 1907, p. 56–57; J. Szewczyk 2018, p. 34–35]. The same was also true of small-town and urban houses. Rural cottages, on the other hand, were less subject to this process of accumulating changes, but already at the end of the 19th century, after the enfranchisement of the peasantry and a certain enrichment of this social stratum, people in the countryside also began to accelerate the processes of adopting aesthetic patterns characteristic of the higher social classes (usually urban), with the accumulation of various fashions and aesthetics, etc. The country house in Miedwieżyki described here,

although still inhabited and with a fairly contemporary interior aesthetic, also remains a house accumulating changes rather than erasing traces of the past.

Third, furniture and home decor elements accumulated over the lifetime of one or more generations can sometimes testify to the vitality of folk culture. This vitality can be seen when elements of old culture (including old furniture, devotional items, ancient ornamental and ceremonial textiles, souvenirs, etc.) are not removed or disappear with the passage of time, but rather are adapted to modern conditions and fused with newer appliances, furniture, ornaments and utensils, and even modern consumer electronics. Polish ethnographic writing has long featured articles showing these processes. Perhaps the most interesting descriptions concerned the “domestication of the television set”, to use the term used by Joanna Zalewska [2018]¹, which further concludes: *“I take the placement of the television as an indicator of the importance of fashion as a regulator of daily practices, while the placement of devotional items, souvenirs and traditional ornaments as the importance of custom as a regulator of daily practices.”* [J. Zalewska 2018, p. 203].

Fourth, in some Podlasie country houses, it is precisely this fusion of tradition and modernity that can sometimes be a phenomenon when it reveals the aesthetic sensibilities of the hosts. After all, we are not writing here about interiors designed in a vintage or retro style by trained designers, but about the spontaneously created modern aesthetics of rural houses, which even a little more than half a century ago retained (in some cases) their old straw coverings and clay floors, and are modernized today - but you can still find an old trunk, a spinning wheel, a *pokuć* (ritual corner) with icons decorated with votive towels, hand-knitted doilies or bedspreads formerly woven on two-strand looms.

Inventory drawings have been prepared that primarily include information on the furnishings and interior design of the house, as:

- it is a record of the history of the house;
- consideration of furnishings and décor allows for a holistic portrayal of the house as a cohesive cultural creation;
- in the folk tradition such furnishings were an integral part of the home interior, constituting its identity (in the Podlasie countryside this is still the case);

¹The aforementioned author also writes [p. 215]: *“The dominance of the television set and television viewing as the most important practice in the home produced resistance to custom (...). Resistance was also provided by the spatial organization of the apartment, where objects of worship as elements of the order of custom continued to perform their functions, albeit in spaces less exposed than the TV set.”*

- such a record shows the vitality of popular culture under new economic and technological conditions;
- it shows the interesting phenomenon of the aesthetic fusion of tradition and modernity in a contemporary old house.

Thus, we consider it a scientific duty to include the found furnishings and decor of the house in the inventory record. The assumption of this work is also its interdisciplinary approach to the subject. This is because the authors consider the eponymous house in Miedwieżyki to be an issue of interest in three ways: architecturally, ethnologically and artistically.

1. LOCATION AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Miedwieżyki is a small, heavily depopulated village² located 7 km northwest of the Polish-Belarusian state border, between the municipal villages of Milejczyce and Czeremcha. The village lies in the eastern part of the Milejczyce municipality, although it is closer to Czeremcha. The name of the village, in turn, comes from the East Slavic noun *miedwieżyk*, meaning bear (a diminutive of *mied'wied'*, bear), and corresponds to the village's location on the edge of the Białowieża Forest; the village's location can be dated to the 15th century.

Miedwieżyki has a street layout, as if "squeezed" between the forest complexes (which are an extension of the Białowieża Forest complexes to the southwest) and the Nurczyk River valley cutting through them (flowing parallel to the village street axis at a distance of about 200 meters from the street, and 120–150 meters from the nearest buildings). The village has 76 address points. Most habitations are uninhabited permanently. The buildings are loose, with secondary cavities, nevertheless the former layout of the village also con-

tained considerable gaps in the buildings. They were caused by the location of the village along the Nurczyk River valley by minor streams flowing into it, today turned into drainage ditches. The result of such a location was that within the village there were also marshy or seasonally flooded areas, unsuitable for development. Thus, they were never built on, instead they were given local names (microtoponyms), indicating their topographical features and relevant connections to the past or culture of that village.

The village is currently inhabited by a mixed population in terms of ethnicity, and is predominantly East Slavic – Belarusian-Ukrainian of Orthodox faith. As a result of migration to cities, Miedwieżyki lost more than 80% of its population in the half-century 1970–2021 (while the entire municipality recorded a loss of more than 55% of its population during this period; Table 1), and most of the current residents are elderly.

Such a strong depopulation of the village of Miedwieżyki, which is, by the way, characteristic of almost the entire border belt in Podlaskie Voivodeship, raises questions about the condition of the buildings. Many of the approximately 76 houses³ in this village are old, wooden buildings, valuable as a testimony to the past, but among them, most are no longer permanently inhabited, although generally these houses remain well-kept, cared for during the holiday season, when the owners, who live and work in cities on a daily basis, come to visit. There are only a few old houses in Miedwieżyki that are already in a bad state of repair, and several others have been demolished in recent years (generally, these were houses on those properties where newer, brick buildings had already been erected, allowing the old wooden house to fall into disrepair, which eventually ends up with its demolition after a while). However, this is precisely

Tab. 1. Population of Miedwieżyki and its parent municipality, Milejczyce, from 1921 to 2021

Year	1921	1970	1978	1988	2011	2021
Miedwieżyki village population	145	198	131	86	46	37
Milejczyce municipality population	no data	3725	3144	2505	2083	1 659

Source: own elaboration based on Polish GUS census data

² Miedwieżyki had 37 residents in 2021, while in 1921 it had 145 residents.

³ This is the number of address numbers in the village of Miedwieżyki, approximately corresponding to the number of houses (on several properties there are two houses, and on several others there are currently no residential buildings). The house in question is on property no. 67.

why the search for and inventory of the most valuable old buildings, especially residential houses, seems to be an urgent need in the case of the village of Miedwieżyki.

Old livestock buildings and barns are deteriorating and disappearing even faster. They are subject to spontaneous or intentional destruction, especially on properties owned by non-farmers who have to pay a substantial property tax for such buildings⁴. In order to reduce the tax burden, they decide to demolish redundant outbuildings, i.e. former barns, pigsties and barns.

2. A HOUSE IN MIEDWIEŻYKI

The one-story timber-framed house was built in 1936 or 1937 using wood from a pre-existing granary – *świronek* (a pigsty) (actually, the granary was expanded so that it became a house). The house originally had a “trojak” layout, i.e. it was, according to ethnographic terminology, a wide-fronted asymmetrical house with an all-round amphitheatre of rooms, with a system of two stoves (kitchen and heating) separating a sleeping annex, called in Podlasie an alcove. Nowadays its layout is only slightly modified from the original state by separating a small room next to the vestibule (in place of the former chamber) and minor changes in the functions of some rooms (the alcove became a bedroom-cum-office, the small room became an actual bedroom), but it can be considered a modernized derivative of the “trojak”. The house is situated gable-end (perpendicular) to the village street, on a corner plot at the intersection of this street and a side dirt road.

Little is known about the history of the house (including the number, extent and timing of changes, renovations, etc.), as this information has faded into oblivion (information obtained from the owners and neighbors is uncertain or contradictory). However, the owners mention that the house was originally erected in a colony under the forest, but when World War II began a few years later and the Germans entered, they demanded that the house be removed or relocated (the elimination of colony housing and the concentration of the population in villages were intended to control the neighborhood and thus obstruct the activities of parti-

sans). The owners recount that “*the whole village mobilized and moved the house*”. Although Soviet soldiers also lived in the house for a while, it survived without damage until the end of the war and served the family of the current owners.

The house retains a stove and chimney system rebuilt in the early postwar years. The carefully crafted main kitchen stove with a four-burner cooking hearth, a baker’s hearth, a “ghost room” (a chamber for storing warm food) and two heating walls is faced with about 300 square tiles measuring 13 × 20 cm each and has a flue system controlled by three shafts under the kitchen hood. The separately standing heating stove (in the wall dividing the two rooms) is less carefully made, faced on two sides with white tiles of inferior quality, on the third side (the most visible and representative) with green tiles, and on the fourth side with non-segregated off-grade tiles. This heating stove is the oldest, while the kitchen stove was rebuilt. The two stoves connect at the attic level with a common chimney. The connection is made by diagonal brick loungers supported by “stabbed” or sawn boards (“dranice”, boards split with wedges rather than sawn through). However, no measurements or photos were taken in the attic for safety reasons.

3. INTERIOR AESTHETICS

The current interior design reflects the process of the traditional country house’s accumulative annexation of new aesthetics and technological devices. Traces of the earliest tradition of shaping the interior of a country house include religious paintings hanging under the eaves in a corner, which are a relic of the old *pokuć* (ceremonial corner; Fig. 4/U), as well as the already mentioned general layout of the house. The old aesthetics of the small-town home, which permeate the countryside, are evident in the abundance of textiles (curtains, bedspreads, napkins) and the upholstery of the wooden log walls with smooth fiberboard, followed by wallpaper. Different rooms have different wallpaper designs; the oldest wallpaper from the 1970s is preserved on the bedroom walls (Fig. 3/O). Newer items include furniture from different periods, a TV, new kitchen appliances (Fig. 4/S,V).

⁴ For example, Resolution No. XI/18/2020 of the Milejczyce Municipality Council of 30 September 2020 on determining the real estate tax rates set the real estate tax rate related to conducting business activities at PLN 24.84 per 1 m² of usable area, which in the case of, for example, an old barn with an outline of 8 × 20 m and an area of 160 m², gives rise to an annual financial burden of PLN 3,974.4.



Fig. 1. The plan and ground level sections of the house in Miedwieżyki; source: the authors

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Fig. 2. The facade and perspective views of the house in Miedwieżyki; source: the authors



Fig. 3. The selected photos of the house in Miedwieżyki; source: the authors

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Fig. 4. The selected photos of the house in Miedwieżyki; source: the authors

4. DISCUSSION

This article, with illustrations resulting from field research culminating in an inventory study, is part of a series of thematically similar studies in recent years [A. Woszczenko, J. Szewczyk 2016; H. Aramowicz et al. 2017; A. Bednarska et al. 2017; D. Dakowicz 2018; A. Depczyńska 2018], while some studies emphasized the prominence of relic elements, such as the *pokuć* (penance' in the local dialect), in contemporarily inhabited old houses. It was pointed out that in old cottages the penitential angle was one in the whole house, opposite the stove, while in contemporary inhabited rural houses (and even apartments in cities) "one encounters penitential angles in each of the (...) main living rooms, (...) [and even there is] a multiplication of them within a single room, although this situation is still encountered quite rarely. Such multiplication (when two or even three of all four corners in a given chamber are decorated with sacred images or secular ornamentation) is sometimes accompanied by the disappearance of sacred semantics. The corners cease to be sacred, instead they remain determinants of the compositional coherence of the interior, giving the room a distinctly diagonal axiality." [J. Perkowska et al. 2014, p. 63].

However, in the studied house in Miedwieżyki, the ceremonial angle is only one. In addition, it is reduced to a single sacred image, under which a TV set is placed on a cabinet. In the aforementioned work by J. Perkowska et al, it was also noticed that in some houses technological gadgets are displacing the earlier sacred elements of the old ritual angle; a similar phenomenon of annexing the TV set by the fasting zone was also described in ethnological publications [J. Zalewska, 2018, p. 205]. J. Zalewska also describes extreme examples of sacralization of the TV set at the expense of devotional items: "It can be assumed that the custom of decorating a TV set comes from the custom of decorating objects of worship, thus giving it festive qualities (...). It is significant that in almost all the photos the TV set is decorated, and the sacred corner was present in only one apartment, which may mean that the TV set replaced the devotional as the focal point of the household" [J. Zalewska, 2018, p. 205].

CONCLUSIONS

The old country house in the village of Miedwieżyki in the municipality of Milejczyce, Siemiatycze County, in the southern part of Podlaskie Voivodeship, is a relic of the old folk construction: it has a clear layout of the trojak, has preserved an elaborate heating system consisting of two tiled stoves connected to one common chimney, and the aesthetics of its interior in-

clude relic elements such as a *pokuć* and an abundance of textiles.

However, the accumulative nature of the interior of the studied house in Miedwieżyki (also observed in other houses described in the above-mentioned research articles) poses new challenges for the residents. The abundance of aesthetics occurring in the same space and the multiplicity of objects from different periods and with different purposes raises the need to reorganize the interior, organize and unify the aesthetics, which also seems to be the most important aesthetic challenge in old country houses.

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