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THE ROLE OF AN ELDERLY PERSON
IN A FAMILY LIVING IN PODLASKIE VOIVODESHIP

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2012 United Nations report *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge* sends a clear message: we are ageing at a breakneck pace, because there are more and more people above the age of 60 in societies¹. The authors indicate that the number of old people is increasing much faster than any other type of population. Nowadays, two people celebrate their 60-th birthday every second and every ninth person on Earth has already turned 60. In ten years' time there will be more than a billion people over 60. The process of population ageing will be progressing. According to the prognosis there will be two billion people over 60 in 2050. Population ageing is a phenomenon occurring in every region and country in the world, regardless of their development level. According to the report, today only in the society in Japan there is more than 30% of population over the age of 60, but in 2050 sixty-four other countries will be in the same situation². Poland might also be one of those countries.

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¹ The classification adopted by the World Health Organization assumes that late adulthood (old age) begins at age 60. Compare: A. KLIMCZUK, *Kapitał społeczny ludzi starych na przykładzie mieszkańców miasta Białystok*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Wiedza i Edukacja 2012, p. 17-18; E. KRAMKOWSKA, *Człowiek stary jako ofiara przemocy w rodzinie*, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe KATEDRA 2016, p. 20-28.

² *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge* 2012, UNFPA, New York and Help Age Internationa, London 2012, p. 12. Available at: <http://www.helpage.org/resources/ageing-in-the-21st-century-a-celebration-and-a-challenge> [date of access: 14.11.2012].

According to the study of Central Statistical Office of Poland from November 2014, “at the end of 2013 the population of Poland was 38.5M, of which 5.7M were people aged 60 or above. In the years 1989-2013 the number of elderly people rose by 1.9M, and its percentage of population increased by 4.7 percentage points, so from 10% in 1989 to 14.7% in 2013. For comparison, the percentage of children and youths decreased from 30% to a little above 18%”³. The increasing population of senior citizens is a consequence of low birth rate, the improvement of living conditions, and medical advances, which result in lower mortality rate. Moreover, Poland’s unique feature is the gradual retirement of people born during the post-war baby boom of 1946-1960. As a result, the demographic pyramid is turning upside down.

The ageing of the Polish society leads to numerous economic, political and most importantly - social challenges. In 1959 a Polish demographer, Edward Rosset had already written, “world, in which we live, is unlike the world of our fathers. The world of our children and grandchildren will be different, too. Not only will it be different because of technological and economic changes, but also because of demographic transformation. Population ageing leads to a complete revision in the society’s structure and its legal, moral or any other norms”⁴. Rosset accurately forecast our times. In the light of his observations, it is worth asking to what extent the social, legal and moral changes taking place over the years have modified the position of an elderly person in the society or in the family? Is the revision significant? What is the role of an elderly person in a contemporary family?

Basing on the research conducted in social welfare institutions in Podlaskie Voivodeship, the role of an elderly person in a contemporary family in Podlaskie will be depicted.

2. SOME INFORMATION ABOUT MY RESEARCH AND THE LOCATION OF THE RESEARCH

The empirical data, which is the basis of this paper, is a part of qualitative research conducted amongst social welfare institution workers in Podlaskie Voivodeship. The research was concerned with the presence of an elderly person in the social welfare system as well as the violence against elderly people, so against women

³ *Sytuacja demograficzna osób starszych i konsekwencje starzenia się ludności Polski w świetle prognoz na lata 2014 2050*, GUS, Warszawa 2014, p. 3. Available at: <http://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/ludnosc/sytuacja-demograficzna-osob-starszych-i-konsekwencje-starzenia-sie-ludnosci-polski-w-swietle-prognozy-na-lata-2014-2050,18,1.html> [date of access: 19.04.2016].

⁴ E. ROSSET, *Proces starzenia się ludności. Studium demograficzne*, Warszawa: PWG 1959, p. 12.

and men at/above the age of 60⁵. The research was conducted using the interview technique, more precisely – it was an unstructured interview with a standardised list of goals⁶. In line with the assumptions, in every social welfare centre (municipal, communal, municipal-communal) in Podlaskie Voivodeship, one social worker and one psychologist (if employed) were asked to take part in the research. It was assumed that the social worker or psychologist working in an institution helping different groups of people in need will have the knowledge about the problems of the residents in the area. In total, 145 people were interviewed, 133 social workers and 12 psychologists. The researcher asked the interviewees about the issues of interest to her, including: the problems with which senior citizens come to the social welfare institutions, the nature of work with the elderly, the scale of domestic violence against elderly people, the experience of working with a victim of violence, the profiles of victims and perpetrators, etc. The research was conducted from July to December 2011. From the recorded interviews transcriptions were written, which were later subjected to in-depth qualitative analysis.

The research was conducted in Podlaskie Voivodeship, which is in northeastern Poland. This voivodeship, “neighbours three voivodeships: Warmian-Masurian, Masovian and Lublin. On the north-east it is bordered by Lithuania, and on the east by Belarus. Podlaskie Voivodeship is an internal border (with Lithuania) as well as external border (with Belarus) of the European Union”⁷.

According to the data from 01.2014 Podlaskie covers an area of 20,187.02 km², which constitutes 6.5% of the area of Poland. The population of Podlaskie Voivodeship as of 30.06.2014 was 1,193,348, which constitutes 3.1% of the population of Poland. Podlaskie is one of the poorest regions in Poland (The B Poland, eastern Poland) and at the same time is one of the demographically oldest⁸. The results of the 2011 *National Census* indicate that retired people amount to 17.5% of the population of Podlaskie Voivodeship and it is by 1.2 percentage point more than during the census in 2002⁹.

⁵ The classification adopted by the World Health Organization.

⁶ K.T. KONECKI, *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych. Teoria ugruntowana*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN 2000, p. 169-170; L. SOŁOMA, *Metody i techniki badań socjologicznych. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej 1999, p. 65.

⁷ M. KIETLIŃSKI, *W suwerennej Polsce*, [in:] A. DOBRŃSKI (ed.), *Historia województwa podlaskiego*, Białystok: Instytut Wydawniczy KREATOR 2010, p. 316.

⁸ M. HALICKA, *Satysfakcja życiowa ludzi starych. Studium teoretyczno-empiryczne*, Białystok: Akademia Medyczna 2004, p. 93.

⁹ *Narodowy Spis Powszechny Ludności i Mieszkań 2011. Raport z wyników w województwie podlaskim*, Urząd Statystyczny w Białymstoku, Białystok 2012, p. 56. Available at: http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/bialystok/ASSETS_2012_nsp_2011_raport_z_wynikow_wpodl.pdf [date of access: 07.12.2012].

What is worth mentioning about Podlaskie Voivodeship is its unique multiculturalism and multinationalism. “The region of Białystok is this special area in Poland, in which inhabitants belong to a few different ethnic groups. (...) It is true that ongoing economic and social changes did also influence (...) on inhabitants of this region, but rural societies seem to be an enclave for traditional family and social relations. Ethnic and religious differences, so typical for Białystok region, make it an attractive research place”¹⁰. The above mentioned ethnic groups are: Belarusians, Lithuanians, the Tatars, Russians, Ukrainians, the Romani, or Jews. Such abundance of minorities in Podlaskie Voivodeship makes it one of the most culturally and religiously differentiated areas in Poland¹¹.

Marek Kietliński, one of the historians from Białystok, while describing Podlaskie Voivodeship explains, “when praised, it is described as welcoming towards people and animals, filled with powers which will promptly make Podlaskie a jewel of united Europe. In a completely different version it is a land forgotten by God and wealthy people, partly dying, coarse and conflict-ridden”¹². Doubtlessly, it is a striking picture of the northeastern region of Poland. Is it true? To some extent, yes. The issues discussed in this paper force us to look at the region described by Kietliński through interpersonal relations.

3. ELDERLY PERSON AS A CONDUIT OF VALUES AND THE SO-CALLED “THEIR TONGUE”

Family has been a conduit of culture since time immemorial; it shows its members the world of “meanings” and values, thanks to which “a child, and later an adult could find themselves and understand what is happening”¹³. What is more, “if you look at a family as the smallest natural rearing environment, which is also a society in microscale, then a truism and a banality should be brought up stating that it is the family that largely determines the personality of its members—children, who in

¹⁰ J. BOROWIK, W. PĘDICH, *Status społeczny ludzi starych na wsi (na przykładzie Białostocczyzny)*, [in:] L. SOLECKI (ed.), *Problemy ludzi starszych i niepełnosprawnych w rolnictwie*, Lublin: Instytut Medycyny Wsi 2004, p. 37; compare: M. HALICKA *Satysfakcja życiowa ludzi starych*, p. 93-94.

¹¹ *Narodowy Spis Powszechny*, p. 95-96; A. SADOWSKI, *Struktura religijno-etniczna mieszkańców województwa podlaskiego*, [in:] A. SADOWSKI, T. SKOCZEK (eds.), *Mniejszości narodowe i etniczne a media elektroniczne. Białoruś, Estonia, Litwa, Łotwa, Polska, Ukraina*, Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku 2001, p. 123-126.

¹² M. KIETLIŃSKI, *W suwerennej Polsce*, p. 324.

¹³ L. DYCZEWSKI, *Rodzina jako twórca i przekaziciel kultury polskiej*, [in:] J.M. MARKOWSKA (ed.), *W kręgu rodziny dawnej i dzisiaj. Materiały z konferencji: Jesień życia – blaski i cienie, Rodzina – tradycja i współczesność*, Białystok: Regionalny Ośrodek Polityki Społecznej 2000, p. 11.

their grown-up life will support different child-rearing methods, will still copy some patterns from their family home”¹⁴.

Values, preserved family customs and tradition, which are the foundation of young person’s personality, play a crucial role in upbringing and socialization of the young generation. It is the elderly people who usually try to transmit the models of behaviour or keep the traditions alive. The research conducted amongst the social welfare institution workers indicate that in a lot of families in Podlaskie Voivodeship, an elderly person still fulfils the traditional role of conduit of values. It was very often said by the workers of communal social welfare institutions, i.e. located in the countryside.

Our voivodeship, I think, we are cultured people in comparison with Poland, one of social workers explained, because here there is a traditional family with values and elderly people. Of course, there are examples of dysfunction, like it happens everywhere, but in our places there are no drastic things, at least here. I have been working in social care for a long time and there haven’t been any ghastly cases, there are normal misfortunes, but there is no serious neglect when somebody is bedridden, somebody’s health deteriorates or somebody loses their life and has no one to rely on. Such things don’t happen here. In fact, it’s the opposite—there is respect for the elderly (F, GOPS, 61 A)¹⁵. Here is another remark, In the villages where farmers and parents stayed, I must tell you that in such villages when I go to them, elderly people are greatly respected and there is deep respect for the parents. The mother and father are sanctity. There are multigenerational families here. But the parents are respected. Grandchildren respect their grandmother; granny will cook for them, help them, prepare breakfast for school, and talk about the ancestors. Such a granny is deeply respected, and this teaches something (F, GOPS, 58 A).

The literature, including the Rural Sociology publications, state that the countryside is a peculiar area; a place consisting of both unique characteristics and those shared with others. The characteristics of a rural environment are, inter alia, farm work, which is a dominant type of activity; lower population density than in cities; social relations mostly based on family-neighbour bond and the considerable length of living next to one another; social relations based on the principles of “familiarness”, and important role of tradition¹⁶. Antoni Kożuch, basing on the research

¹⁴ J. TOMIŁO, *Biografie ludzi starszych jako źródło wartości wychowawczych*, [in:] S. STEUDEN, M. MARCZUK (eds.), *Starzenie się a satysfakcja z życia*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2006, p. 212.

¹⁵ The interview description: F (female), M (man); GOPS/MOPS/OPS – type of social welfare centre (municipal – MOPS, communal – GOPS, municipal-communal – OPS); last figure is interviewee’s age.

¹⁶ K. GORLACH, *Socjologia obszarów wiejskich. Problemy i perspektywy*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar 2004, p. 14.

conducted in Podlaskie Voivodeship communes, confirmed the existence of features listed by Gorlach. Kożuch writes, “In that region there are visible signs of traditional rusticity. Rural population there is characterised by: low specialization and division of labour, relatively low education, slight inter-village population movement, close family ties, social status connected with family and strong local ties”¹⁷. The listed features are of benefit to the elderly people.

Another distinguishing feature of Podlaskie Voivodeship, especially its southern part, is the existence of dialects. In many places a local dialect or the Belarusian language can be heard. Orla Commune (Bielsk district) is listed in the list of communes as a place on which people use the minority language-the Belarusian language-and the names of towns are written in two languages. The employees of social welfare institutions in Hajnówka and Bielsk districts sometimes said that they had problems communicating with local people because of the language barrier. *There is a group of people here who cannot speak Polish properly, they usually speak “broken” Belarusian*, one employee explained (F, MOPS, 54 A). A worker from the neighbouring commune said, *if we’re talking about our area, we – social workers – should know the language, in our area people often use the so-called “their” language, and it’s a mixture of various languages, Polish, Belarussian and some Russian; if you don’t understand it, it’s very difficult to get through to the client* (F, GOPS, 30 A). Or: *people use regional language here, it’s neither Belarusian nor Ukrainian, it’s a dialect; you use it especially while talking to elderly people* (F, GOPS, 50 A). Wiesław Romanowicz, an expert on the subject, explain that ethnic and religious groups living in southern Podlaskie Voivodeship feel like “at home”, because they have been living on this land since time immemorial. “Such a situation has caused the creation of various specific norms and values. The characteristic feature of local population is using their own dialect. Although it is mostly used by older inhabitants of the region, the younger generations seems to understand this dialect”¹⁸. It is assumed that this ability has been passed on the youths by the elderly.

¹⁷ A. KOŻUCH, *Rozwój obszarów wiejskich. Teoria i praktyka*, Siedlce: Wydawnictwo Akademii Podlaskiej 2002, p. 171.

¹⁸ W. ROMANOWICZ, *Pogranicze jako miejsce kształtowania się postaw ekumenicznych*, [in:] M. BIENKOWSKA-PTASZNIK, K. KRZYSZTOFEK, A. SADOWSKI (eds.), *Obywatelstwo i tożsamość w społeczeństwach zróżnicowanych kulturowo i na pograniczach*, vol. II, Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku 2006, p. 109.

4. AN ELDERLY PERSON AS A BREADWINNER AND HEAD OF FAMILY

There are a lot of features distinguishing old age from other periods of life. One of them is having a pension. The amount of pension is obviously a debatable issue, but still the fact remains that every month a retired person receives a certain amount of money. This factor is of importance not only to the pensioners, but also to the pensioners' families.

Barbara Tryfan, who deals with the issues of old age in rural areas, explains that in a traditional peasant family every member of the family has a role in the production system. The protection function is overseen by a local community, however, younger generation supports elderly people in order not to lose their inheritance¹⁹. The situation dramatically changed when in the 1970s, 1980s farmer's retirement schemes were introduced. Retired people managed to get some sort of economic independence, which influenced intergenerational relationships. The importance of old people in a family and local environment increased²⁰, which has both advantages and disadvantages.

While I was conducting research in cities and villages in Podlaskie Voivodeship, the social welfare institution employees often said that Polish "family-like" social security model is a permanent component of Polish culture²¹, which can be seen, inter alia, in multigenerational households. On the one hand, it is expected that a family will support its oldest members. Taking care of an old person, especially ill and bedridden is extremely demanding²². On the other hand, a multigenerational household greatly influences a family budget, which is vital when faced with unemployment. Being unemployed is one of the biggest problems in the voivodeship²³. It was usually mentioned by the workers from the southern part of Podlaskie. Therefore, if there is a retired person in a family, the family has higher income. *An elderly person didn't use to have this money, but now they have*, one of the workers said, *young people want to get that money and manage it* (F, GOPS, 53 A). Here is another remark, *till 1976 farmers didn't have any pension regardless of age and it was such a difference in the 70s when they got first pensions, and now when there*

¹⁹ B. TRYFAN, *Wiejska starość w Europie*, Warszawa: Polska Akademia Nauk 1993, p. 21.

²⁰ J. TUROWSKI, *Socjologia wsi i rolnictwa*, Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL 1995, p. 164.

²¹ Ł. KRZYŻOWSKI, *Zobowiązania rodzinne i dynamika wykluczenia w transnarodowej przestrzeni społecznej. Polacy w Islandii i ich starzy rodzice w Polsce*, „Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny”, 38, 1(143), 2012, p. 126.

²² M. HALICKA, *Problemy rodziny w opiece nad człowiekiem starym niesprawnym*, [in:] M. HALICKA, J. HALICKI (eds.), *Zostawić ślad na ziemi. Księga pamiątkowa dedykowana Profesorowi Wojciechowi Pędichowi w 80 rocznicę urodzin i 55 rocznicę pracy naukowej*, Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku 2006, p. 249.

²³ The unemployment rate in Podlasie in the first quarter of 2016 years was 11,5%.

are direct payments and early retirement, young people would put an elderly person in a fridge if they could, because of the regular monthly income (F, GOPS, 35 A). It might be said that an elderly person plays an important role in a family, because improve the financial condition of the family or is one of the main breadwinners. Many workers noted that an elderly person feels obliged to participate in the costs of living and voluntarily gives away a part of the pension to help pay the bills or buy food. Leon Dyczewski even believes that old people “minimise their needs and are able to manage money in such a way that they can even help their children and grandchildren. They give presents, help buy a flat, a TV, furniture, or a fridge even though they themselves do not have many of those home appliances”²⁴. Unfortunately, there are also cases when an elderly person is unable to manage their own money and is a victim of economic violence of their grown-up children or grandchildren, who either extort the money or limit access to it²⁵. The researched conducted amongst the workers of social welfare institutions in Podlaskie Voivodeship has shown that economic violence was the third most common, after psychological violence or physical violence, type of domestic aggressive behaviour towards elderly people.

There is also the other side of the coin. Multigenerational household might generate conflicts because of certain types of elderly people’s behaviour. Such situations were mentioned by the social workers from the west part of the region.

The western part of Podlaskie Voivodeship is, inter alia, the area of the former Łomża voivodeship and this land is known for its attachment to tradition and religious values. It was assumed that in such conditions the quality of family relationships is going to be high and families are going to live in harmony. It turned out that in no other part of the region did the family members mention quarrelsomeness and entitlement attitude of the elderly people more often²⁶. The in-laws vs son-in-law/daughter-in-law conflict was also mentioned most often in this part of the voivodeship. According to the social workers, elderly people unsatisfied with the behaviour of their son-in-law or daughter-in-law do not hesitate to criticise them, which leads to quarrels and family problems. What is interesting is the fact that a son, daughter, daughter-in-law or son-in-law do not do anything wrong, they simply want to have their own idea about... (something). Elderly people have problems coming to terms with the fact that their role in a family is decreasing as their grown-up children start their own families. Young marriages or new hosts want to live their lives their way

²⁴ L. DYCZEWSKI, *Ludzie starzy i starość w społeczeństwie i kulturze*, Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL 1994, p. 54.

²⁵ Compare: M. HALICKA, J. HALICKI (eds.), *Przemoc wobec ludzi starych. Na przykładzie badań środowiskowych w województwie podlaskim*, Białystok: Temida2, 2010.

²⁶ To the western part of the region included such districts as: kolneński, łomżyński, zambrowski and wysokomazowiecki.

or manage the wealth as they please, which is not always approved by the elderly people in the family. During one of the interviews such an opinion was present, *you know, I come from Białystok region, and here is Łomża, the old mothers-in-law here are so malicious, I don't think there are more malicious anywhere else in Poland, when a man says that the mother-in-law is malicious, I can believe it, because I was in many houses and there are no mothers-in-laws like that ... a son lets mother keep the money and a wife does not have a say about it, it is the custom here that a mother is in charge, and when a daughter-in-law comes to her farmland, the mother is in charge and she takes her money, because everything belongs to the mother* (F, MOPS, 56 A). What might be the reason of such elderly people's behaviour in the western part of Podlaskie?

Małgorzata Dajnowicz, a historian and a researcher of the history of Podlaskie, explains, "Łomża region, borderland between Podlaskie and Mazovian, has a larger number of petty nobility than any other region in Poland. This social class' remains of distinct features are clearly seen today. In no other region did petty nobility own so much land and nowhere else did peasants and landed gentry own so little land. It should be noted that petty nobility played an important role in shaping and maintaining the permanent social and political processes on the north-eastern lands of Poland"²⁷. In the following parts of her study she notices that in the literature there is a prevalent opinion that Masovia and Podlaskie regions have always been different because of the number of petty nobility. Masovian petty nobility was characterised by strong attachment to Polish values (e.g. Catholicism, the Polish language, land), which enabled them to act as guarantors of Polish national revival²⁸.

It seems that the elderly people's lack of willingness to step back and the constant need to influence what will happen to their life-time achievements or to influence the life of their children, may be connected with fact that people living in the western part of Podlaskie might be descendants of petty nobility, which was attached to land and certain values.

5. AN ELDERLY PERSON LEFT ALONE

From the provided information one may infer that in many families in Podlaskie Voivodeship, elderly persons are respected, they are important persons in

²⁷ M. DAJNOWICZ, *Badacze drobnej szlachty ziem polskich, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem szlachty łomżyńskiej*, [in:] A. DOBROŃSKI (ed.), *Badacze i historiografia regionu łomżyńskiego*, (series: *Badacze Ziemi Łomżyńskiej*), Łomża: Łomżyńskie Towarzystwo Naukowe im. Wągów 2008, p. 29.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

a family, and play an important role in a family. And this is the way it should be. Nevertheless, the picture would be incomplete if we fail to mention the families in which elderly people are victims of domestic violence or in which elderly people are neglected.

One of the questions to the social welfare workers in Podlaskie Voivodeship was whether they had come into contact with an elderly victim of domestic violence. The answer to such a question was often, *there is no such violence* (F, GOPS, 35 A) or *we have no cases of typical violence* (F, GOPS, 37 A), or *generally we didn't have any violence against elderly people* (M, GOPS, 36 A). Typical means physical, which could be understood from the rest of the answer. Nonetheless, the social workers and psychologists are aware that many such types of behavior can be categorized as violence. That is why, they did mention cases of physical, mental or economic domestic abuse towards the elderly. 85 interviewees, which constituted 58.6% of the sample, during years from 2005 to 2010, came in contact with an elderly person who was a victim of domestic violence. What is more, the workers mentioned that elderly people are neglected or alone.

During one of the interviews, one social workers with many years of work experience said, *now when parents give a farm to their children, they don't stop working there, they continue till they can and children stay in a city, and it's fine till parents are able to work, but children seldom visit their parents and it's also an example of violence, such neglect, they have everything, but the parents look after it not receiving any gratitude, it's exploitation* (F, GOPS, 56 A). Unfortunately, it is not an isolated incident. During another interview there was another comment, *it often happens that there are well-to-do children, and the parents live nearby, but they are so preoccupied with their things and earning money, or parties that such children forget about their parents. We had such situations that an old lady, she's dead, missed her daughter, and her daughter was running a big farm, taking guests and organizing events and she was believed to be the life of the party. But her mother, who lived 2 km from her, was alone. We went with a social worker to the daughter. She was a bit outraged, but later after longer talks she took her mother to her house, and later that mother died in good conditions* (F, GOPS, 39 A).

There are various reasons of lack of interest about the fate of parents. One of them is definitely international migration or city/village migration, hectic family and professional life, or illnesses of a grown-up child or any other member of their family. Consequently, elderly people are left to themselves, they experience emotional loneliness or loneliness because they live alone, which influence their wellbeing and everyday functioning. The persons suffering from loneliness are also familiar with feelings of distress, anxiety, desolation, and harm. As a result, such people withdraw

into themselves. It seems that in case of elderly people loneliness and isolation are incredibly powerful emotional states caused by health, limited mobility, death of a spouse or abandonment by children. Such experiences might shake people's belief in the institution of family.

6. CONCLUSION

The presented material leads to some conclusions. As the above mentioned historian from Białystok, M Kietliński said, respect towards elderly people in a family; using their wisdom; knowledge of the dialect, family and region history; or multigenerational households are the positive sides of the voivodeship and the feature distinguishing their inhabitants. On the other hand, the abuse towards the elderly people; leaving them alone, for example, as a result of migration; or questionable behaviors of the elderly towards the younger generations seem to fully embody the phrase used by the author "a land forgotten by God"²⁹. It shows Janus-faced nature of family and relationships between its members. Relationships and the role of an elderly person depend on many factors.

It is important to remember that we are living in interesting times. They are interesting because of the changes, and cultural, social and technological progress. On the other hand, there are people amongst us who are witnesses to history, times of war, uprisings or other dark times of our statehood. Therefore, we ought to remember about these characteristics of our times and we should not forget about the proper attitude towards elderly people, who will not live forever. And when they are gone, these things which make our times so interesting will disappear, too. The multigenerational coexistence in a family or, in broader terms, in a society is essential for people to keep their identity, to develop themselves and help each other³⁰.

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²⁹ M. KIETLIŃSKI, *W suwerennej Polsce*, p. 324.

³⁰ L. DYCZEWSKI, *Ludzie starzy i starość w społeczeństwie*, p. 79.

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ROLA CZŁOWIEKA STAREGO
W RODZINIE ZAMIESZKUJĄCEJ W WOJEWÓDZTWIE PODLASKIM

Streszczenie

Podstawowa komórka społeczna, jaką jest rodzina, zawsze narażona była na zmiany wywołane przeobrażeniami otaczającej ją rzeczywistości. Zmienia się definicja rodziny, zmieniają pełnione przez nią funkcje, czy koloryt wszystkiego, co składa się na codzienność. Przekształceniom ulegają również role poszczególnych jej członków – niektóre ulegają rozszerzeniu, np. jeden rodzic musi wypełniać obowiązki obojga, a inne zawężeniu. Prezentowany tekst dotyczy ról, jakie we współczesnej rodzinie pełnią najstarsi jej członkowie, które omawiane są na podstawie wyników badań przeprowadzonych wśród pracowników instytucji pomocy w woj. podlaskim. Czy seniorzy są traktowani z szacunkiem czy też nie? Czy odgrywają znaczącą rolę w dzisiejszej rodzinie czy są raczej spychani na margines? Odpowiedzi na te i podobne pytania zawiera przedkładany artykuł.

Słowa kluczowe: starość; ludzie starzy; rodzina; rola; województwo podlaskie.

THE ROLE OF AN ELDERLY PERSON
IN A FAMILY LIVING IN PODLASKIE VOIVODESHIP

Summary

Family, the basic unit of society, has always been exposed to changes caused by transformations of the surrounding reality. We are observing changes of the definition of family, changes of its functions, changes of everything that constitutes our everyday life. There are also transformations of the roles of family members – some are expanded, e.g. one parent must fulfill the obligations of both, while others narrowed. The presented text refers to the roles of the oldest members of the contemporary family, described on the basis of studies conducted among workers of welfare institutions in Podlaskie Voivodship. Are seniors treated with respect? Could they play a significant role in today's family or is their role quite marginal? The answers to these and similar questions are included in the article.

Key words: old age; the elderly; family; role; Podlaskie Voivodeship.