

Paper for the Anthropology class at CCSU by Sophia Rodin. (1988)
Subject: Aniela Kasica's Life in Poland based on her own account.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Family History

The Bakaj family has been living in the village of Wola Ranizowska in the southeastern part of Poland for many generations, through wars and occupations by different countries.

Aniela's parents, Michal and Rozalia Bakaj, were born in the late 1800's. Both were farmers, as their ancestors before them. However, as young adults and before they married, they came to the United States to seek work. They married in the United States (New Britain, CT) and had their first child (Jozef) here before returning back to Poland due to intolerable working and living conditions here in the early 1900's. They both worked in factories. Their education level

is not known to Aniela, she just knows that both could read and write. Both parents were Roman

Catholic, as were all the Polish people in the village, except a small Jewish population which practiced their own faith.

Aniela was born on September 8, 1928 in the village of Wola Ranizowska. She was the ninth of ten children. Two children, a girl and a boy, died in infancy. The others (in order of birth)

were: Jozef, Katarzyna, Zofia, Maria, Jozefa, Ewa, Aniela, and Anna. As mentioned earlier,

Jozef (the only living boy) was born in the United States and when he was fifteen years old, returned to the United States and made his life here. Zofia and Katarzyna both died young,

Katarzyna in her late teens from pneumonia, and Zofia as a young married woman, grief stricken

when Germans killed her husband as one of the men whose last name happened to be that of the man they were looking for. She did not take care of herself, just wanted to die, and finally died of meningitis. Three small children were left behind, who stayed with Aniela's parents for a few years, and later, her sister Maria when she married. All others lived or are presently living into the older age.

The Community

The village of Wola Ranizowska was and still pretty much is the community of about 600 families. Over the years families became smaller and less dependent on children's labor. There

was a church, a small school, and a few small shops. After the Second World War, the shops were run by the government. All transportation was done using a horse and an uncovered wagon or a large sled in the winter. The houses were clustered both sides of the main road, which was very muddy. The next closest village was approximately five kilometers away. Each household's farmland stretched as a strip directly in opposite direction of the household buildings

for approximately two kilometers. Parts of these strips could belong to another household as a marriage dowry to the person who left to live in the home of the spouse's family. The land was divided this way between those children who remained in the village. Those who left for the city, or were too far away to be able to farm the land, were given financial compensation. Most farmers had few animals, one to three cows, one or two horses, a couple of pigs, few chickens, geese.

The community's social life was limited to organized dances, usually in someone's home that had a wooden floor, weddings in the village, and religious activities. People worked very

hard all week, and only the Sunday afternoon was reserved to sit around, talk, visit with others, and receive visitors from other parts of the region.

Christmas and Easter were considered very special holidays. Each was observed by participation in special church services, and also with traditions such as meatless and greaseless supper on Christmas Eve. An extra place was always set in case a stranger happened to be passing by so he/she could also have this special supper. A Christmas tree was

decorated with all handmade decorations made of paper, acorns, and straw. Goodies such as apples and cookies were also placed on the tree. No gifts were exchanged. Children received gifts from St. Nikolas on December sixth. Special treats in the form of carrots and the best hay were given to the animals in the remembrance of the special role animals played when the baby

Jesus was born.

Easter was marked by attending special masses in the church. Baskets of goods containing ham, kielbasa, bread and eggs were brought to the church on Saturday at noon for the traditional blessing. The evening church service included the blessing of the fire (a large bonfire was constructed outdoors), and the water. The food basket items were consumed for breakfast on Easter Sunday. The holy water was used to sprinkle the house to chase the bad spirits away. On the afternoon of the Easter Sunday and all day Monday, also a holy day, boys did their darndest to soak the girls with ice cold water. This signified that a certain type of grain called proso (millet) would have a good harvest. Many baked goods were always prepared for the holidays during the days prior.

Religion played a very important role in the lives of the people. All activities were in

in some way connected to the catholic religion. The village priest was highly regarded by all.

The house where Aniela's family lived, as most houses in the village, was made of large logs and it had a thatch roof made of straw. It was divided into one large room which served as a sleeping room for everyone as well as the dining area. The kitchen was a separate room with a clay floor, much smaller, and it contained a small sleeping area. There was also a storage room which was dark and also had a packed clay floor. This room was used to store grain, meat

and dairy products. Potatoes and other root vegetables were stored outside in a separate, partially dug up pit under a thick cement dome. This dome was covered by a thick layer of soil.

It was very dark and cool inside. From the outside it looked like an oval mound of soil overgrown

with weeds.

The house had three small windows in total, two in the large common room, and one even smaller window in the kitchen. There was no electricity or running water. The electricity for

the house was installed around 1960. The water was manually brought in from a well on the property. Kerosene lamps were used for light, and the wood was used for cooking and heating.

Other buildings that comprised the household were the stable for animals and the barn for storing straw and hay. There was also a shed for storing wood and a chicken coop.

Weddings were and still are a grand affair with plenty of food, live music and dancing. The party often lasted for two days. On the morning of the wedding, the band would go to the groom's house, then with the groom continue to the bride's house. The bride greeted the groom and led him inside where she dressed him in a new white shirt - a gift from her. The band

continued to play outdoors. Once both the bride and the groom were dressed in their wedding clothes (white dress for the bride and a dark suit for the groom), they kneeled before their parents who were sitting on a bench, and asked forgiveness for any past offenses. Then the bride and groom would circle the bench and repeatedly ask for forgiveness. This was repeated three times and it was the most emotional part of the wedding ceremonies. Afterwards,

the entire group led by the musicians walked to the church where the wedding vows were said.

After the church ceremony everybody went to the house where the lunch and a party was

to take place, usually the bride's home. More guests arrived in the afternoon and the party continued till late at night. The wedding gifts from the guests were in the form of money.

Parents gave land and household items. The next day the party continued but got smaller, usually limited to family relations and close friends.

Childbirth usually took place at home with the assistance of the midwife. One week after a child was born, it was baptized in the church and there would be a party afterwards with the family relations and close friends.

When someone died, the body was viewed in an open casket in the home of the diseased. Candles were lit, all mirrors covered with black cloth, family and friends gathered for prayers and singing. The following day, the body was brought to the church for services and then to the cemetery located just on the outskirts of the village. All the processions, from the home to the church and from the church to the cemetery were on foot, no matter how far the distance.

CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Education

Aniela's education was limited to the fourth grade due to the eruption of the Second World War in 1939. The entire village was taken over by the Germans, who evicted everybody from their homes and all farms were made into one large farm. All buildings were burned. Aniela's family found shelter with total strangers several villages away. While there, Aniela's parents did not send their children to school because they could not afford to clothe them. Anyway, Aniela was happy about it then, but later in life regretted not having more education. When the war ended in 1945, the family returned to the home village. By then Aniela was seventeen years old and did not go back to school. Rebuilding their lives after the war was the priority.

The village school had five to six teachers. Aside from regular classes, six days a week, activities included putting on shows for parents and gift giving by St. Nicolas.

Social Relationships

Not much time existed for play. Children had many chores to do. Hide and Seek was one of the few games played. Other games included sculpting with the mud, a ball, and various 'Pretend' games. No one had toys.

Dating would often occur with other people present. There were some organized dance events where the young people could dance together, but most of the time the dating was in the form of a young man visiting a young woman at her home.

Aniela married Franciszek Kasica in February of 1949. She was nineteen years old. He was thirty one. Aniela said that Franciszek was tall and very handsome. She wore a simple white satin below the knee dress and a long veil. Franciszek was the youngest in his family and

lived only with his father since all his other siblings left home. Aniela moved to the Kasica household, which at the time was an animal barn with one part or a room allocated as living quarter. The main house was yet to be built. Two years later the house was constructed from large wooden logs, and the family moved in before it was finished. It had packed clay floors. The wood floor and gypsum walls were done later.

Aniela's duties consisted of cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, baking bread, carrying water from the well, taking care of children and animals as well as helping out in the fields. All tasks were very hard since there was no such thing as an appliance. She was appreciative that Franciszek's father assisted with babysitting.

The clothes Aniela wore during weekdays were rather ragged, but her Sunday clothes were quite fashionable after she was married. The clothes were made by a local seamstress who kept up on the latest fashions. Some clothes were sent to Aniela by her husband's family in

the United States. As a young girl, she always wore hand-me-downs until her mother bought her

a dress of her own when Aniela was in her later teens. Before that there were no shoes either, at least not for the warmer months. The clothing styles were fashionable for younger people.

Elderly ladies wore long skirts, white aprons and babushkas. Some families received clothing their family in the United States. If they had more than needed they would sell to others.

Families spent a lot of time together since there was not much else to do. Some families had a battery operated radio to which everyone listened to after supper. Any arguments in the family had to be resolved because there was no place else to go but home. Most children were disciplined with a belt or a stick. There was no talk of sex. Young people learned about it from

each other.

ADULT LIFE/ROLES

As mentioned earlier, Aniela married at nineteen. She bore four children, two girls first and then two boys. Zofia was born in 1950, Maria in 1952, Jan in 1957, and Eugeniusz in 1963. At that time people had fewer children than the prior generation. Farming was the main activity for earning a living, but some younger people were leaving for work in the cities.

Aniela was a wife of a farmer until the family moved to the United States in 1967 arriving in New Britain, Connecticut. In the United States Aniela worked in various factories earning pretty much minimum wages. Her husband held similar jobs. But they were grateful, saved, and were able to buy a house several years after arriving. Leaving Poland was hard, but they had high hopes for their children since they did not see much of a future for them in Poland. Aniela's brother who lived in the United States sponsored the family. After a while the cost of the trip over was repaid to Aniela's brother, not because he asked, but because it was the right thing to do. The family relations already living in the New Britain area helped Aniela's family to start the new life. They donated used furniture, household items, and money to make the transition easier. Aniela found that she had many second cousins in the new country with whom she became friends and still keeps in touch.

Aniela is sixty years old now, and has been living alone since her husband's death in 1987. She is still working but is thinking about retiring next year. Living among the Polish community in New Britain never gave her much incentive to learn to speak English. There was no need, she claims. The church, shops, insurance agency, travel agency, and even driving school all use the Polish language. She counts on her children to translate everything else.

The various Polish traditions continue to be maintained in Aniela's family. Some of the grandchildren speak Polish but most do not making it difficult for her to communicate with them. Aniela never regretted leaving Poland because the work on the farm was so very hard. She traveled back to the old country twice and she plans to go again next year to visit her two sisters there. Also, to settle the business with the farm which was never sold.

