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RURAL TOURISM IN POLAND

***Abstract:** The authors present the specific model of Polish rural tourism and discuss the perspectives of this type of tourism in Poland. The paper provides background data on the country, from various fields: history; geography; demography; ethnography; economy; society; services; tourism.*

***Key words:** Poland, tourism, rural tourism.*

1. Introduction

In Poland, the tradition of recreation in the countryside goes back to the 1870s, while currently this form of spending leisure time seems to be flourishing again. The changes which took place in Poland in the 1990s gave completely new quality to tourism in rural areas, showing first of all in its transformation into a form of farmers' non-agricultural activity. In this way, rural tourism became an important element of stimulating local development as well as diversifying economic activity, also in other European countries – it stimulates rural economy, creates employment opportunities for many inhabitants of rural areas, and in contrast to mass tourism offered by the tourist industry – it enables people to directly experience nature, discover local culture, customs, eat healthy food, etc. Therefore, it is undeniably worth developing.

Rural tourism is playing an increasing role, not only in Poland, but in many other European countries as well. However, despite many similarities, especially between neighbouring countries, each of them is different, at least in some aspects, such as natural environment, religion, traditions, customs and rituals, cuisine, languages, as well as the socio-economic situation, which is also reflected in the specificity of the developing rural tourism.

Obviously, just possessing assets is not enough – they must be “prepared” in a proper way. Sometimes an attraction must be created from scratch. In order to do that, however, one should be aware of the potential of a given country, region, so called “small motherland”, which means starting from an analysis of the advantages in order to choose those which are unique for a given country. Exceptionality is particularly important because tourists wish to experience something new and different.

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In Poland, rural areas constitute about 90% of the country's territory. This fact alone shows how huge their potential used for tourism development for many years is. However, what is the situation like in detail?

2. Historical aspects³

The contemporary geopolitical situation of Poland is the result of transformations which have been taking place over centuries. The beginnings of the Polish state are connected with the Christianization of the country and the baptism of Mieszko I, the Polish ruler from the Piast dynasty, in 966. By being baptized and by marrying the Czech princess Dobrawa, Mieszko included Poland in the west European cultural circle. It is worth mentioning that the period of the Piasts' rule left its mark on the contemporary map of tourist attractions in Poland, which is best exemplified by the Roman tourist trail, presenting mainly sacral architecture. The Middle Ages were also a time when people often went on pilgrimages to St. Adalbert's grave, to Gniezno, and the richer ones used the medicinal properties of the first Polish spas.

The king who greatly contributed to the political and economic development of the Polish state was the last Piast, Casimir the Great, who normalized the relations with the Czechs and the Teutonic Order. He introduced a new system of management, codified the law and contributed to the ethnic integration of individual regions of Poland, divided into districts for almost 200 years. He introduced tax and educational reforms (founded the first Polish university – the Jagiellonian University in Krakow), took care of the development of settlement. It is a common saying that he found Poland built of wood and left it built of brick. There are still many fortresses (mostly) which were erected at the time of his rule, which are currently popular tourist attractions. A remainder of the conflict between Poland and the Teutonic Order is a trail of gothic castles.

The time of the reign of the next dynasty – the Jagiellons (14-16th c.) is a time of great social, economic and cultural transformations. Over that period, the Nobility class was established, which on the strength of royal privileges often decided about the country's fate. It was the time when a strong, democratic state was formed – the Republic of Both Nations, formally known as the Kingdom of Poland and the Great Duchy of Lithuania, which was an effect of a union between Poland and Lithuania. The Jagiellonians developed agriculture and trade, and as a consequence cities which are still famous today flourished (Gdańsk, Toruń, Krakow). At that time, science was developing rapidly and the Jagiellonian University was one of the leading universities in Europe, which encouraged international cognitive

³ Based on: Jurek T., Kizik E., 2013, *Historia Polski do 1572*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa; Roszkowski W., *Historia Polski 1914-2005*, 2007, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa; Samsonowicz H., Wyczański A., Tazbir J., 2009, *Polska na przestrzeni wieków*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa; <http://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/>, <http://www.historia.azv.pl/>, <http://polskiedzieje.pl/>.

journeys and an exchange of opinions. Many touristically attractive examples of Renaissance architecture come from the period when the last Jagiellonians reigned. Representatives of the Nobility class traveled for cognitive purposes more willingly, due to their wealth and better education than that of the rest of the society.

The last king from the Jagiellonian dynasty did not leave an heir and as a consequence of that, in 1572 so called free election was introduced, which meant that the sovereign was chosen during an Election *Sejm* session by representatives of the Nobility.

During the period of the election kings' rule, counter-reformation was developing as well as wars with Sweden, Turkey and Russia were waged. At the same time, Cossak uprisings took place. However, those events did not prevent development in culture and architecture. As a result of the popularity of the baroque philosophy, numerous sacral buildings as well as noblemen's residences (palaces and courts) were erected.

Among the major historical events affecting further development of the Polish state were the partitions of the country in 1772-1795. Taking advantage of the weak political and military position of the Republic of Both Nations as well as internal conflicts among the Nobility class, the rulers of Russia, Prussia and Austria divided the territory of Poland amongst them, depriving the country of statehood for 123 years (until 1918). For several generations, it was a very dynamic period as regarded developing patriotism and love of traveling. It was proved not only by resurrections, but also by dynamically developing social activity, especially within the borders of the Prussian and Austrian section. This activity often developed under the pretext of sports and tourist activity.

Poland regained independence on 1st November 1918, having supported the coalition of the Triple Entente during World War I.

The interwar period was a time of rebuilding the country, recreating its economic, social and cultural life. As a result of the partitions and belonging to different countries, parts of the Polish land differed immensely as regarded economy. It is estimated that 65% of Poles were farmers and the level of agriculture was the highest on the lands that used to belong to Prussia (Greater Poland / Wielkopolska). There, industry practically did not exist. As an additional factor hampering the revival of Poland was the global crisis, the effects of which were felt nearly until World War II. The breakthrough came when the investment plans of the country were launched in 1936.

It is worth noticing that even at that economically difficult period the need for the development of domestic tourism was not ignored. Right after World War I ended, the first governmental organization was founded which was responsible for starting the first Cable and Rail Car system in Poland and for speeding up the development of cheap tourist accommodation, available first of all to children and youth. During the interwar period, many organizations of different types were established, which took care of proper recreation of various social groups,

including factory workers and farmers. At that time, the first travel agency appeared.

A phenomenon which gained in popularity in the interwar period concerned summer holidays – city inhabitants rested in the countryside in farmers' houses, and the more affluent ones bought themselves second houses in rural areas, usually close to where they lived permanently (Drzewiecki 2002). It was the beginning of recreation in rural areas organized on a larger scale.

The process of rebuilding the country was stopped by the outbreak of the Second World War, and the next rebirth of Poland in the 1950s was strongly limited due to the introduction of the communist rule under the pressure of the Soviet Union. The effects of the cold war and the iron curtain (the post-Yalta order) were visible in every domain of life, also in tourism and recreation. Before 1956, foreign tourism had been practically non-existent, and visiting relatives living in Western Europe was forbidden. In the 1970s, traveling abroad became more popular, but tourist destinations of that time were situated in the countries dependent on the Soviet Union.

Domestic tourism became nationalized and took the form of social tourism. Recreation was planned top-down by the works councils, schools and other tourist establishments. Tourist accommodation facilities were largely seasonal (with a focus on using them in summer) and represented a low standard of service. It was not until the 1970s that attempts were made to introduce categories of accommodation facilities and maintaining basic standards. The sector of private tourist enterprises (travel agencies, tourist accommodation facilities) practically did not exist.

As regards rural tourism, the second half of the 1950s marked the beginning of recreation at individual farmers' homes. In tourist regions, a kind of summer holiday villages started to be organized (Drzewiecki 2002), which was supported by the "Gromada" Tourism Cooperative, promoting the advantages of the Polish countryside.

Radical changes in the political and socio-economic life took place at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s; they were a consequence of the activity of the Polish trade union "Solidarity", established in 1980.

The transition from centrally planned to free market economy brought many changes in the model of life of the Polish family. Tourism economy also underwent transformation. However, in the first years of the transformation and social pauperization, tourist activity was not a common phenomenon – nearly half of Polish citizens did not participate in any forms of tourist travel.

Services were commercialized and many state enterprises were privatized, as a result of which about 3000 small travel agencies were set up and tourist accommodation facilities were modernized (fewer seasonal facilities of a lower standard) (http://www.lotur.eu/UploadFiles/524/178/1265187566-Historia_turystyki_w_Polsce_DOT_IT.pdf 11.01.2016). A new national organizational structure was

designed, which dealt with the promotion and popularization of tourism. In 2000, the Polish Tourism Organization was founded – a government agency supported by 16 regional and 124 local tourist organizations (<http://www.pot.gov.pl/o-polskiej-organizacji-turystycznej/p/wspolpraca/lokalne-organizacje-turystyczne> 17.12.2015). A new law concerning tourist services was constructed – the Act on Tourist Services, based on its predecessor from 1997. In the same year, the first *Development Strategy for the domestic tourist product*, adjusted to the new market conditions was created, which assumed creating five brand products of Polish tourism, including rural tourism (Stasiak, Rochmińska, 2010).

Abolishing the iron curtain in 1989 opened the borders between Poland and West European countries, as well as generated spontaneous and very dynamic tourist traffic, both as regarded incoming and outgoing tourism (particularly noticeable in 1995-2000). As regards the number of foreign visitors/tourists, it was the largest in 1997, when Poland came seventh on the list of the world's most popular destinations (Poland was visited by 3.2% of all tourists) (UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2000 Edition, http://tourlib.net/wto/WTO_highlights_2000.pdf 13.01.2016). It was the consequence of an increased interest in Poland internationally and lower prices of tourist services for foreign visitors. Currently, Poland is outside the first fifteen most frequently visited countries (UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2015 Edition, <http://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284416899> 13.01.2016). This, however, is not a reason to resign from foreign tourism. Quite on the contrary – it encourages organizations on various levels (national and regional) to search for new segments of customers, representing different nationalities, often very distant culturally (e.g. the Chinese, Hindus or Japanese).

3. Geographical aspects

Poland with its variety of natural landscapes, natural habitats and the animal and plant species living in them is in the lead of those European countries which have managed to preserve some of the primeval nature. These valuable spaces are usually found in rural areas, where there are also quite many elements of precious cultural heritage, which additionally increases the tourist potential of these areas.

Poland is a typically lowland country (91% of its total area) (Zajac 1995), which Poles perceive rather as touristically unattractive. It is generally known that what we have in abundance every day seems boring and unnoticeable to us. However, if we look at it through the eyes of an Italian or a Swedish person, even this landscape may be very interesting. Besides, despite the fact that the average altitude in Poland is 173 m above sea level (Szlajfer 1999), there are also the Carpathian Mountains with the Tatras range and the highest Polish peak – Rysy (2499 m above sea level). Geographical regions in Poland stretch latitudinally, going from lowland areas in the north and in the central zone to uplands and mountains in the south (Kondracki 2002).

The most touristically attractive areas are those situated in the north (on the Baltic coast) and in the very south, with a typically mountainous landscape, rare in Poland.

The coastal region – a plain or curvy lowland – is strongly predisposed to the development of rural tourism. There are not many large cities here; there are various forms of protected areas and, of course, agriculture. Although due to the special history of Poland its western periphery and the coast had been the land of state farms until 1989, only a small percentage of the arable areas were private property. Hence, at present, there are large agricultural monocultures here, which do not offer very favourable conditions of resting in the countryside. However, in the middle section of the Polish coast, a traditional division of lands has been preserved – for generations, they have been forming a picturesque chessboard of fields, balks, ponds and groups of trees growing among the fields. An additional advantage is the Baltic coast – wide and sandy, but also with high cliffs, forming picturesque scarps (protected as a part of the Woliński National Park), as well as the rare phenomenon of shifting sand dunes (a part of the Slowiński National Park) (Batorowicz, Nalewajko, Suliborski 1994). However, there is the problem of the very large numbers of mass tourists, “invading” the beaches, though it must be said that they are usually those belonging to given localities, while the places which are slightly more difficult to reach, devoid of abundant tourist infrastructure, remain empty, especially outside the holiday season. Thus, generally, the Polish coast is certainly predisposed to the development of coastal rural tourism. An addition to the very interesting natural conditions is the rich cultural heritage, including for instance the remains of the already non-existent ethnic group of Slovicians, traces of the Mennonite settlers in Żuławy, who came from the Netherlands, or the Kashubians, who are still inhabiting the area (Licińska 1998).

In the southern regions, on the other hand, there are mountainous landscapes formed by the older Sudetes, shared with the Czech Republic and Germany, as well as the younger and higher Carpathians, the second largest European mountain range stretching across seven countries (Kondracki 2002). Both mountain chains, covering about 9% of the country, offer very well developed tourist infrastructure, although as the natural conditions and cultural heritage are concerned, non-urbanized areas are strongly predominant. The height of the Tatras, the highest Carpathian chain in Poland, reaches nearly 2500 m above sea level, and Śnieżka in the Karkonosze Mountains is slightly over 1600 m high (Ressel 2002). A characteristic land relief makes this area suitable for practicing active rural tourism, e.g. skiing or mountain climbing. Other popular activities include rafting and kayaking on the rivers, which form picturesque gorges (Figiel, Krakowiak, Dygała, Żywczak 2004; Grocholski, Grocholski 2007).

As for the upland areas, they cover a small percentage of the country’s total area, but are extremely varied as regards landscape. This is due to the geological landforms creating exceptionally picturesque scenery – rocks of fancy shapes and

deep caves. In addition, because of the existing relics of the old mining industry, e.g. places where bog iron was smelted at the turn of the eras, or an even older striped flint mine in the Świętokrzyskie Mountains, or the traces of dinosaurs (focalized footprints), these areas are particularly predisposed to the development of rural geotourism (Migoń 2012).

Particularly suitable for the development of water tourism in rural areas are the lake districts, with their very varied land relief due to four glaciations which left numerous lakes and forms of post-glacial accumulation behind them, such as moraine hills, drumlins, eskers, outwash plains or kames. The very presence of a water reservoir is a great attraction for tourists. It does not really have to be specially prepared – it is enough that there is water and the tourists may spend their time doing a variety of things, depending on the weather. That is how it has been since the beginning of tourism. Water has always attracted people who wanted to relax; even in antiquity tourists traveled to spas. This phenomenon still exists nowadays and concerns rural tourism as well – sites situated on water attract the largest numbers of customers.

Finally, there is the type of area which is found in Poland most frequently – the lowlands. It must be stressed, however, that there are few areas which are completely flat – the predominant form is the undulating plain. Their main function is agriculture – that is why this region is particularly predisposed to developing classical rural tourism. Of course there are crops grown over vast areas, including monocultures, which are absolutely unsuitable to develop any tourist function. However, there are also areas, such as e.g. the Dezydery Chłapowski Agri-Ecological Landscape Park, where next to the fields, meadows and pastures exploited by farmers, there are 19th c. complexes of mid-field trees and ponds, which keep the whole ecosystem in balance. This picturesque chessboard of fields, bulks and purely natural elements makes it possible to successfully practice educational rural tourism. It should be remembered that not only traveling people benefit from doing it – it also has an influence on prolonging the tourist season or even extending it beyond holiday months.

Finally, we should stress the uniqueness of nature in Poland on the European scale. The resources include, among other things, a forest resembling the former European complex – Białowieża Forest, the largest European complex of marshes (Biebrza marshes), one of the longest rivers – still unregulated, flowing on the natural riverbed of the Vistula River. All this makes the country ideal to develop rural nature tourism there (Wędrychowska 2005).

4. Demographic and social aspects

The present population of Poland is about 38.5 million people, which gives it the ninth position among all European countries <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/>

table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00001&plugin=1_29.12.2015). 52% of the inhabitants of Poland are women.

World War II brought population losses of about 30%. Returning to about 35 million citizens was not possible until the 1980s. This dramatic decrease in the number of population was caused not only by direct warfare but also by the changes in the country's borders and territory.

By the 1990s, an increase in the number of the population of Poland had depended first of all on the population growth rate, which was exceptionally high then (up to 20 % annually in the years immediately following the war). At the turn of the century, for the first time in the post-war history of Poland, this index oscillated around 0; unfortunately, in recent years the phenomenon has recurred – in 2013, the recorded value was –0.5 %. Figures from 2014, however, show the value of about 0 (0.1 %) again (<http://stat.gov.pl/statystyka-regionalna/rankingi-statystyczne/przyrost-naturalny-na-1000-ludnosci-wedlug-wojewodztw/> 29.12.2015).

The population growth rate decreased as a result of the political process in the 1980s, which resulted in economic restructuring and, regrettably, worse financial situation of the society. In addition, Poles realized that it was possible to live according to the western model – the professional activity of women increased, which caused a trend of setting up families and having children later in life.

Considering the situation above, we should not be surprised by the advancing process of the aging of Polish society. Naturally, this is also caused by the longer life expectancy (currently, about 77 years). The percentage of the population at the pre-productive and productive age (18% and 63%, respectively) is decreasing percentage for the benefit of the citizens at the post-productive age (19%). Generally, a statistical inhabitant of Poland is about 39 years old, the average age for women being 41 and for men – 37.

Demographic structure is connected with migrations, both internal and external, which are due to various reasons. In the past, an important factor in Poland was history, particularly the following events:

- the loss of independence at the end of the 18th c.;
- national uprisings and the following persecutions;
- poverty and overpopulation in rural areas after regaining independence between the wars (c. 1.5 million);
- World War II (voluntary emigration and enforced deportations – about 2.2 million);
- Growing anti-Jewish atmosphere in 1945-1970 (c. 150 000 Jews).

Moreover, after World War II, Poles emigrated for economic and political reasons. The last wave of emigration, after Poland joined the European Union, was related to the opening of Western labour markets; an estimated number of two million people left the country, especially young, very well educated people and specialists. In 2007-2009, the number of emigrants fell, but recently it has been on the rise again.

In Poland, immigration occurs on a relatively small scale and includes mainly the citizens of the neighbouring countries.

As for internal migrations, they concern first of all women at the production age, moving from rural areas to large cities, mostly from the eastern part of Poland; the migration balance for Poland has been negative since World War II.

The population density in Poland comes at 123 persons per 1 km², which gives Poland a middle position among other European countries. In urbanized areas, this parameter naturally increases to 1078 people, on average. In the countryside, it is only 52 persons, but there are areas, where population density is about 2 persons per 1 km², e.g. the rural area of the Nowe Warpno *gmina*.

Since the 2000s, the number of urban population has been slowly falling – over the past 15 years it has decreased by about 15%, to 60%, which is new for Poland, because since the 1940s it has increased by nearly 100% (!). It is the effect of depopulation, especially in the centres of large cities whose inhabitants move to suburban areas.

World War II had a huge impact not only on the number of the population of Poland, but also on its ethnic composition. As a result of warfare and spatial changes of the country, the percentage of people of other nationalities (mainly Ukrainians, Belarussians, Jews and Germans) decreased from 30% nearly ten times. Currently, Poland is an ethnically homogenous country. However, some minorities exist and they are very important. The Act of 6th January 2005 on national and ethnic minorities and on the regional language refers to four such groups. The most numerous are Gypsies – about 17 000 citizens, who belong to five different sub-groups. Their origins on Polish land date back to the early 15th c.; they first arrived from the south and a little later from the west of Europe. Polish Gypsies continue to communicate in Romani – their own language; they organize many events, and the District Museum in Tarnów shows the only collection of Gypsy artifacts in Poland.

Another ethnic minority are Lemkos (about 10 000). Today, they inhabit the north-western periphery of Poland as a result of the “Vistula” campaign, conducted in 1947-1950, relocating them from the south-east of Poland. They speak their own language, have their museum in Zydranova and organize numerous events.

About 2000 Poles declare that they belong to the Tatar ethnic minority. They are Polish Muslims who live on the north-east periphery of the country and do not speak their own language any more. They arrived in Podlasie in the 14th c. and still cultivate their customs. In two villages, there are historical mosques and historical cemeteries, which are still in use.

The least numerous minority are the Karaims – they form a group of merely 300 Polish citizens whose predecessors arrived from Crimea in the 13th c. They are adherents of Karaism – a monotheistic religion, derived from Judaism; they use their native language only during liturgy.

Apart from the languages spoken by the main national and the abovementioned ethnic minorities, also regional languages are used in Poland. The most popular is

the Kashubian language, which is the only one to have this status, according to the Polish law (<http://www.mniejszosci.narodowe.mac.gov.pl/mne/prawo/ustawa-o-mniejszosciac/6492,Ustawa-o-mniejszosciach-narodowych-i-etnicznych-oraz-o-jezyku-regionalnym.html> 29.12.2015). According to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (<http://www.coe.int/pl/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/148> 29.12.2015), a regional language is one which is traditionally used on the territory of a state by a group which is less numerous than the group of the remaining citizens. It cannot be a dialect of the official language or the language of national minorities. The Kashubian language is the only remnant of extinct Pomeranian languages, used every day by over 100 000 people. It is worth mentioning that attempts are being made to include the language spoken by Silesians in this category ([http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki6ka.nsf/0/53D98A50C193B814C125782A0046A5A0/\\$file/3835.pdf](http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki6ka.nsf/0/53D98A50C193B814C125782A0046A5A0/$file/3835.pdf) 29.12.2015).

Territorial local dialects are also very interesting, e.g. *kmına ochweśnicka* – a jargon which developed in the first half of the 19th c. in the borderline area between the Russian and the Prussian occupation zones in Wielkopolska (Greater Poland). Initially, it was used by traders of holy pictures (*ochweśnik* means the maker of such a reproduction) (Reinfuss 1962), and then by geese and feathers sellers – smuggling flourished on an enormous scale in that area (Januszkiewicz, Pleskaczyński 2006). Nowadays *kmına* is spoken only by the oldest inhabitants.

An even more interesting history is that of *wymysiöeryś* – a dialect spoken by the inhabitants of Wilamowice, situated in the south of Poland, whose 13th c. predecessors came from the territories of today's Netherlands, Scotland and Germany. Nowadays, it is spoken only by about 70 persons, but more and more young people are beginning to appreciate the exceptionality of *wymysiöeryś* as their heritage and are learning it. Language workshops may be an attraction for tourists – even one lecture from which they will learn that *comb* and *starve* in *wymysiöeryś* sound the same as in English (*comb* – *komp* and *starving* – *starwa*) may be the most memorable fact from the whole trip (<http://inne-jezyki.amu.edu.pl/Editor/files/AZak%20wymysioerys.pdf> 12.01.2016).

The A. Mickiewicz University in Poznań runs a project entitled “Language heritage of the Polish Republic”, which is to record the dying languages, protect or even revitalize them. At present, there are 22 languages, dialects and jargons, including seemingly exotic ones, such as the *kipezacki* language used by Polish Armenians, or a variety of Yiddish spoken once by Polish Jews (<http://www.inne-jezyki.amu.edu.pl/Frontend/> 12.01.2016).

5. Ethnographic, folkloric, cultural aspects and any other aspects related to tradition

Traditional or folk culture means “activities taking place according to adopted social models, in all areas of human life, as well as the products and

objects of such activities” (Bukraba-Rylska 2002). Taking this definition into account, folk culture consists of: the sphere of production, exchange and material consumption (e.g. handicraft and crafts, construction, outfits, food), the social life in the country (e.g. local groups, relationships and family ties), folk beliefs and knowledge (e.g. traditions and rituality, aspects of religiousness, social customs), as well as artistic culture (art, music, dance, verbal folklore).

Poles come from west Slavonic tribes, inhabiting the catchment basins of the Vistula and Odra Rivers at the time when the Polish statehood was being born. The regional division of the country connected with the tribal past and differences in the economic and cultural development was preserved at least till the end of the 18th c. They are the following sections of the country, preserving their own culture for a long time:

- Wielkopolska – in the Warta River catchment basin; the first territory inhabited by the Poles;
- Silesia – the Upper Odra catchment basin; inhabited by small tribes living in the area of the Polish state;
- Małopolska – mostly in the upland belt in the Upper Vistula catchment basin;
- Masovia – in the middle section of the Vistula River
- Pomerania – in the wide belt of the south coast of the Baltic Sea (Gieysztorowa 1976).

This spatial mosaic together with the population inhabiting it were undergoing a transformation along with the changes of the country’s borders and the inflow of immigrants, e.g. from Germany, the Netherlands, the Carpathians, Crimea, Armenia, etc. Another extremely important factor were the political differences during the period of the partitions of Poland, especially as regarded the legal, technological and temporal aspects of the abolition of serfdom, granting equal rights to townspeople, industrialization, development of education, etc.. All those phenomena caused regional differences in the cultural landscape of Poland, which are still observed today (!). This is visible, e.g., in the results of contemporary elections of central or local authorities (Ogrodowska 2011).

At present, it is hard to talk about homogenous ethnographic regions, with few exceptions (the Kashubia or Podhale) (Szymanderska 2003).

As regards individual components of folk culture, one of the most distinctive elements is the manufacturing activity by the country inhabitants, which can be most generally divided into handicraft, i.e. production for the needs of one’s own farm, and crafts – producing things for trading purposes. Both activities were changing over the centuries, being most popular in the pre-industrial era. In some areas, they were continued until the 1950s and at some places they are still thriving, almost unchanged (e.g. making straw baskets or ropes for private use or sale). Many skills were developed all over Poland, but other ones, like constructing wooden shingle roofs, could be found only in the south of Poland; on the other

hand, characteristic raw materials, models, ornaments or names contributed to regional distinctiveness (Chwalba 2008).

In Poland, there are many facilities presenting old crafts and handicraft; in addition to this, the majority of them are “living museums”, where you can not only see tools and furniture, but also touch them, or even take part in demonstration workshops. A classical example is the Regional and Natural Education Centre in Mniszki (www.mniszki.pl 22.12.2015), or the trail of disappearing professions in Kudowa-Zdrój (<http://www.szlakginacychzawodow.com.pl> 22.12.2015).

As regards traditional Polish construction, the most popular building material in rural areas was wood, even in the times documented with the earliest archeological discoveries. This trend continued until the mid 20th century. Apart from wood, locals also used what was available in the vicinity, i.e. straw, reed, clay, stone, lime, and other natural materials, which linked the buildings with the surroundings (Fryś-Pietraszkowa, Kunczyńska-Iracka, Pokropek 1988).

In present times, Polish wooden architecture is disappearing, first of all as a result of the natural degradation of this building material, fires, but also due to the lack of continuation (Uruszczak 2013). The last 30 years of the 20th c. in particular caused real havoc – nowadays, there are only remains, usually displayed in open air museums. The areas with a relatively large amount of historical wooden architecture are Małopolska (in the south) and Podlasie (north-eastern periphery of the country). Many localities in Podlasie, especially those situated near the eastern border even preserved the special layout from the 16th c. – there are terraced houses, built along the main street and the ornamentation of the residential houses is very rich and colourful. This in a way resulted from the distinctiveness of the local population, who have Belarussian and Ukrainian roots. The house ornamentation, which particularly developed in the south-eastern parts of the region, inhabited by people of that origin, is enhanced by the variety of colours of individual elements. The most popular were geometrical and floral motifs, but even today it is possible to see silhouettes of animals and people, or even religious or patriotic symbols, used to decorate the corners and eaves of the huts, especially in the gable section, as well as shutters, window heads and interior and exterior window ledges. Those characteristic features were used when creating the rural tourism product called “The Land of Open Shutters” (Fig. 2).

A characteristic element of architecture in Małopolska is the artificially created Zakopane style, which for most Poles is traditional and indigenously Polish while it was created at the end of the 19th c. by S. Witkiewicz, who patterned it on the traditional building style of Podhale, enriching it with numerous secession details. Another element that is worth mentioning is wooden sacral architecture, whose representatives (both churches and *tserkovs*) have been placed on the UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage List. Apart from that, there is the Wooden Architecture Trail, crossing the southern voivodeships of Poland.

It should also be mentioned that in Poland there are over 30 open-air museums, presenting Polish folk culture, including first of all traditional wooden construction (<http://www.muzeum-radom.pl/muzea-skansenowskie/skanseny-w-polsce/spis-muzeow-na-wolnym-powietrzu-w-polsce/1004> 23.12.2015).

The changing borders, inflow of immigrants, as well as the openness and tolerance of old Poland influence the native culinary tradition as well – it is possible to find traces of the Russian, German, Austrian, Jewish, Lithuanian, French and Italian cuisine (the latter two were introduced by the wives of Polish kings – Queen Maria Kazimiera Sobieska and Queen Bona Sforza). That is why it is often difficult to clearly define the degree of “Polishness” of a given dish. Very typical Polish dishes and drinks include *flaki* (triples), *czernina* (duck blood soup), *bigos* (a cabbage dish), *pierogi* (dumplings), cucumber in brine, sauerkraut, sour milk, buttermilk, kephir (Librowska 1982), while the Polish List of Traditional Products consists of 1499 entries (<http://www.minrol.gov.pl/Jakosc-zywnosci/Produkty-regionalne-i-tradycyjne/Lista-produktow-tradycyjnych> of 27 December 2015).

The next element of folk culture is rituality. In Poland, nearly all holidays and rites still have a familial character. Most rituals that are still observed today are those related to agriculture, and their typical feature is the strongly Christian character, despite frequent pagan provenience – a combination of magical thinking and attempts of Christian interpretation of incomprehensible prohibitions and magical procedures. The factors conducive to preserving some rituals are certainly their spectacular character and the accompanying gift collecting and traditional treats. On the other hand, some rituals disappeared because they were negatively evaluated by contemporary communities or there was no need for them (once boisterous celebrations of St Nicholas Day – the patron saint of shepherds) (Szymanderska 2003). Among the most interesting holidays of this kind in Poland are Christmas, All Saints Day and Corpus Christi (connected with the liturgical calendar) as well as the drowning of Marzanna and Sobótka as remnants of pagan beliefs.

Folk art comprises painting and sculpture, followed by music and dance. The history of creating paintings is strictly connected with the cult of saints, popular in the 17th c., and pilgrimages, which used to have an immense influence on the life of villages and small towns. Portraits were painted on boards, canvas, tin foil, paper and were supposed to protect the household from all misfortunes, disease and natural disasters. It was only later that painting became secular and typically decorative. Currently, folk artists present scenes of country life, landscapes, as well as biblical scenes.

An exceptional art on the global scale is painting on glass, involving painting on the inside of a glass pane, using the reversed cycle, without backgrounds or foregrounds (www.kulturaludowa.pl 05.01.2016).

Sculpture also occupies an exceptional position in Polish folk art. It was initially connected with religious cult and expressed spiritual needs of the Polish country population. Up till the 19th c. it had been taking the form of embellishments

of the by-the-road shrines. After the Second World War, sculpture lost its practical character and the wooden figures in the shrines were replaced with plaster ones. Contemporary folk sculpture has completely lost its original character, but preserved the theme – the most popular are still the figures of the Pensive Christ, angels and patron saints. However, they are not bought for cult purposes but merely for aesthetic reasons. The basic sculpting material is wood, mainly linden, sometimes also stone.

Polish folk music shows many similarities to that created in other Slavonic countries. The composers and artists were ordinary amateurs – singers and instrumentalists, performing in bands at wedding parties, during other ritual situations, at parties or during livestock grazing (e.g. trumpet sounds were used as a way of communicating) (Sobieska 2006). Many folk musicians can still play traditional instruments, some of which can be found only in Poland (e.g. the devil's violin). As for the folk dances, the most popular ones include *mazurek*, *oberek* and *polonez*. However, they are usually performed by folk ensembles, like "Mazowsze".

In Poland, there are a number of events, including international ones, which refer to traditional folk art.

Polish folk art is very rich and, most importantly, it is still alive in many domains of life. Polish rural tourists' interest in folk art is considerable – 78% declare that the presence of the folk culture element in an offer is crucial to their choice and purchase. Unfortunately, the response to such high demand is very modest, as only 34% of agritourist farms introduce such components into their offer (they are usually: handicraft – shows, workshops and an opportunity to buy products, regional cuisine, interior décor) (Wyrwicz 2010). Thus, the service providers of Polish rural tourism face a very large challenge, but the potential of the Polish countryside – and in this case traditional culture in particular – is really impressive.

6. Specific economic aspects

Despite a difficult global economic situation as a result of the world crisis, Poland managed to remain economically balanced. In 2014, the increase in economic activity, noticeable for the last previous years, could still be observed. The gross national product (GNP) increased by 3.4% and was higher than in previous years, as well as in relation to the mean value for Europe, which was 1.3%. The main factor generating the growth of GNP was the domestic demand, which was strengthened by practically no inflation – it had been the lowest for the previous 25 years. The last two years had been the time of improved conditions on the work market – the employment rate (for people aged 15-74) increased by 1.7% to reach 61.7%, and the unemployment rate fell to 9.0% (it was lower than the mean value for the EU, which was 20.2%). At the same time, the percentage of persons

working on a fixed-time contract increased. A consequence of that was the increase of an average salary by 3.4%.

It should be stressed that in the context of external flexibility, the Polish labour market is one of the most flexible ones in the EU. The percentage of employees working for a fixed term in 2014 was about 28.3% (for comparison, in the EU – 14.0%). The result of the improved situation on the labour market is an increase in the real income of households by, on average, 3.2% (the mean rate for EU countries was 0.8%). The gross national product is created by the following sectors: services (64%), industry (25.1% – which is higher than the mean value for EU countries – 18.2-20.1%), construction (7.5%) and other sectors (*Sytuacja makroekonomiczna w Polsce na tle procesów w gospodarce światowej w 2014 roku* 2015). Let us add that nearly 60% of Poles are satisfied with their professional situation (*Jakość życia w Polsce. Edycja 2015* 2015).

Specific services

To satisfy tourists' needs, it is necessary to have properly developed tourist infrastructure. The accommodation resources consist now of nearly 10 000 registered facilities of various types. Since the mid-1990s, the percentage of seasonal accommodation facilities belonging to enterprises has been gradually decreasing (e.g. holiday centres, summer holiday centres for kids, artists' homes, etc.).

The ratio of beds in hotel facilities per 1000 persons has the value of 7.6, which is much lower than the mean values for Europe. Year after year, the number of hotels (mostly 3-star facilities), motels and guest houses is growing. The most numerous are hotels (23%) and holiday centres (10.3%), which are mainly seasonal facilities, affordable for medium affluent Poles. It must be noticed, however, that over the last few years the number of hostels has also grown – they are facilities of relatively high standard and reasonable price. In 2009, only several of them were registered while in 2014 – already 114. The mean occupancy rate of accommodation facilities is about 35%, and the highest one is recorded in spas – 77% (2% of all facilities), followed by hostels – 45% and hotels – 37% (*Turystyka w 2014 r.* 2015). It should be added that spa centres in Poland are gaining in significance among foreign guests, especially from Germany (due to the favourable ratio of the price and the quality of services) (*Lecznictwo uzdrowiskowe w Polsce w latach 2000-2010 2011*). The status of a spa is held by less than 50 localities.

The gastronomic infrastructure resources in Poland are made up by nearly 70 000 establishments, with the highest percentage of bars (38%) and gastronomic outlets (32%), most of them seasonal (*Raport o stanie gospodarki turystycznej w latach 2007–2011* 2013). The catering infrastructure connected with the functioning of accommodation facilities consists of about 7600 establishments, 48% of which are connected with hotels. Nearly a half of this infrastructure are restaurants, and further 1/3 – cafes.

An important element of infrastructure is transport. In passenger traffic, the main means of transport is the car, used in 79.6% of all journeys. It is followed by the bus – 14.1% (what is interesting, it is higher by a few percent than in the European Union). The third place is taken by rail transport – 6.2%. Air transport serving passenger traffic is rather insignificant – 1.0%. The mean number of cars per 1000 inhabitants is in fact the same as the European mean (Poland – 486 vehicles, EU – 487). However, the system of Polish roads is much worse – in Poland there are only 3 km of motorways per 1000 inhabitants, while in the EU it is on average 14 km (*Transport – wyniki działalności w 2014 r.* 2015).

Tourist activity⁴

Poland is a tourist destination of numerous assets and varied infrastructure, which creates an opportunity for specialist forms of tourism to develop. There are about 50 000 km of marked walking tourist trails, nearly 20 000 cycling trails and about 1200 kayaking routes (*Turystyka w Polsce w 2014 r.* 2015).

The potential of Poland as regards natural, cultural and human resources is considerable. In 2011, Poland occupied a high, 30th position among 139 other countries as regarded these resources (Blanke, Chiesa 2011).

Despite various changes taking place on the global market, the share of tourist economy in GNP is rather stable and comes at 5.6% on average, with the employment rate estimated at about 4.7% of all working people. Income from the visits of foreign tourists reaches about 4.5 billion Euros (*Program rozwoju turystyki do 2020 r.* 2015). The share of tourism in export is growing: in 2010 it was 5.0% and in 2014 – 5.6%. Unfortunately, the share of tourism in import is decreasing: in 2010 it was 3.0% and in 2014 – only 1.4%.

Incoming tourism

The intensity of foreign tourism in the last five years has been showing a growing tendency – in 2010, Poland was visited by 12 470 000 tourists, while in 2014 it was 16 million (Janczak, Patelak 2014). The majority of tourists coming to Poland are citizens of Germany (1/3) and representatives of countries situated east of Poland: Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Lithuania (1/4). They are followed by travelers from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Netherlands.

An average stay of a foreign tourist in Poland lasts 4.5 days (as of 2013), and longer stays prevail among representatives of the so called old Union and our eastern neighbours. The motivations to visit Poland also vary – visitors from the old Union and overseas arrive mainly for typically tourist purposes, while our eastern neighbours and representatives of the new Union usually come on business. The third motivation is visiting relatives and friends.

⁴ Based on data of Ministry of Sport and Tourism of Poland.

Foreign tourists most often stay in typical hotel-type facilities (hotels, motels, guest houses) – 54%, as well as at relatives' and friends' homes – 27%. The mean daily expenses are about 70\$. It must be stressed that a great majority of journeys are organized individually (c. 70%). The most popular voivodeships are Małopolskie, Lower Silesian, Pomeranian,

West-Pomeranian and Masovian, with 64.5% of all visits (<http://www.national-geographic.pl/porady/polska-kto-odwiedza-nas-najchetniej> 02.01.2016). Among the most frequently visited cities are Krakow, Warsaw and Gdańsk (according to the hotel reservations in trivago.pl).

According to the report by the Polish Tourist Organization, the level of foreign tourists' satisfaction comes to about 92%, and the main criteria of satisfaction with the stay are good atmosphere, safety, cleanliness and a reasonable price.

Poles' tourism

Tourist activity is declared by 53% of Poles (as of 2014). In the case of domestic tourism, we can observe a falling tendency as regards long-term journeys (27%) and an increasing tendency as regards short-term journeys (34%), often made several times a year. A great majority (95%) of Poles make tourist trips in summer, and also in spring (due to the so called "long weekends" – sequences of free days including state and religious holidays). The main geographical areas of domestic tourism reception are strictly connected with the time of travel. The leading area is the coastal region (74% of trips) and the mountains (68% – the respondents could choose more than one answer) (*Raport z badania krajowego rynku turystycznego 2014*).

The main purposes of journeys vary depending on their duration. In the case of short-term trips, the main motivation is visiting relatives and friends, while the strictly tourist motivation is typical of long-term trips and foreign travel. For five years, 15% of Poles have been participating in journeys abroad, the most popular destinations including Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Croatia, Greece, Spain and the Czech Republic. The most frequently visited destinations in Poland (c. 54%) are the West-Pomeranian, Pomeranian (the main areas of long-term tourism concentration, connected with summer recreation), as well as Małopolskie, Masovian and Lower Silesian voivodeships (mostly short-term trips). The most frequently chosen accommodation facilities include hotels, motels and guest houses – they dominate during short-term trips. Private bed & breakfast facilities are usually chosen during long-term journeys.

Polish tourists usually use private cars (81%) and public transport (77%) – mostly trains and buses. The choice of the means of transport depends on who we are travelling with (e.g. the car is most popularly used by families with children).

According to the research conducted in 2014, Poles choose mainly moderate forms of spending free time during a tourist trip. The most frequently quoted forms

of activity include: sightseeing / contact with culture (34%), resting and passive recreation (25%), as well as entertainment combined with social life (15%).

Domestic tourists usually search for inspiration regarding a tourist trip on the Internet (76%) and are guided by the opinions of their family and friends (63%).

Poles are becoming increasingly aware of the attractiveness of their country. 85% of respondents regard Poland as a country attractive to tourists and worth visiting by foreigners. Unfortunately, the issue of promoting tourist assets and popularizing information about them is evaluated much lower.

7. The specific model of rural tourism in Poland and its perspectives

As it was mentioned earlier, recreation in the Polish countryside has a long tradition. However, the changing needs of the contemporary tourism as well as the growing competition on the tourist services market forced specialists to specify the forms of recreation in the country. Accordingly, rural tourism is a wider concept, comprising various tourist activities performed in rural areas but connected with widely understood rurality, while agritourism refers strictly to recreation on an active farm.

It is estimated that in Poland there are about 8000 agritourist farms, offering nearly 85000 beds. Agritourist farms make up slightly less than 1% of all farms. 80% of them are small farms, below 15 hectares.

According to the statistical data, in 2014, 612 500 tourists spent their holidays on farms, 7% of whom were foreign tourists (mainly from Germany and Great Britain) (<http://www.minrol.gov.pl/Ministerstwo/Biuro-Prasowe/Informacje-Prasowe/Czas-na-agroturystyce> 12.12.15). Accommodation is distributed all over the country, but we may observe the phenomenon of concentration – almost 40% of agritourist farms can be found in three voivodeships: Małopolskie, Podkarpackie (the south of Poland) and Warmińsko-mazurskie (the north-eastern periphery).

Rural tourism and agritourism clearly marked their presence on the market in the early 1990s, a sign of which was the foundation of the first organizations associating agritourism providers from the Mazury region. A major impulse for activity were the financial resources gained from the *Phare-Tourin*, a European program run in 1992-1999, in the countries aspiring to join the EU. A large part of this money was used to prepare farmers to providing tourist services.

The issue of the development and promotion of rural tourism nation-wide interests the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ministry of Sport and Tourism, as well as many other entities. The central role is played by the Polish Federation of Rural Tourism “Hospitable Farms”, founded in 1996 and supporting the activity of 45 regional and local organizations associating rural tourism facilities (<http://pftw.pl/kategoryzacja/Kategoryzacja/kategoryzacja> 27.12.2015). One of the Federation’s main tasks is to raise the quality of tourist services in the Polish countryside, by e.g. voluntary popularization of facility categorization, conducted

by qualified inspectors. It involves classifying facilities into one of two groups (after they meet the criteria ascribed to a given group):

- Recreation in the countryside
- Recreation on a farm.

The facility which is undergoing assessment may be given the third category maximum, symbolized with three little suns. This status is valid for four years, after which it is necessary to reapply for assessment. The dynamics of rural accommodation categorization is varied and depends on a number of factors. For instance, in 2004-2006, when new EU funds were being distributed, facility categorization was the necessary criterion to apply for a subsidy. So far, 250 facilities have been categorized (as of May 2015), most of them in Małopolskie voivodeship (http://www.arimr.gov.pl/fileadmin/pliki/PREZENTACJE_OR/1305_Dane_o_turystyce_wiejskiej.pdf 27.12.15). Service providers are most interested in the “one sun” category (nearly one half of all facilities), and least interested in the highest category – “three suns”. It is worth mentioning that over the last two years, the number of facilities applying for reassessment has decreased to only 10%. One of the main reasons for that is the poor knowledge of categorization among the guests resting in the countryside.

The Polish Federation of Rural Tourism “Hospitable Farms” are trying to reach potential tourists by creating topical catalogues which present facilities and their offers matching a specific segment of clients.

Another national organization supporting the development of rural tourism is the European Centre of Ecological Agriculture and Tourism – ECEAT Poland. This association works first of all for the preservation of the biological diversity of rural areas.

It must be emphasized that recreation in the Polish countryside is promoted by many entities of different organizational structure – these are Agricultural Consultancy Centres, regional and local authority departments, as well as tourist, ecological or agricultural associations.

At present, the characteristic features of Polish rural tourism and agritourism include growing specialization and the tendency to create brand products. According to *The program of tourism development in the rural areas of Poland* (2015) (http://ksow.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/ksow.pl/PROJEKTY_2015/Program_rozwoju_turystyki/Program_rozwoju_turystyki_na_obszarach_wiejskich_wersja_ko%C5%84c.pdf 27.12.2015), there are three groups of products:

1 – National – thematic/topical products launched by the Polish Federation of Rural Tourism, “Hospitable Farms” (Recreation in a farmer’s house, Accommodation in an eco-farmer’s house, For families with children, For mushroom pickers, For fishers, In the saddle, In the tradition, The hits of rural tourism), as well as by the Agricultural Consultancy Centre in Krakow (the Educational Farms Network). These projects are a result of cooperation with relevant ministries (for agriculture and tourism issues).

In 2012, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development commissioned an expert opinion regarding the potential of rural tourism products and their competitiveness on the tourist services market. A project called “Hits of rural tourism” was prepared and 42 products were chosen from all voivodeships, which had special, rural character and at the same time the biggest development predispositions (<http://agro.travel/data/file/agro%202013/konferencja/materialy/Hity%20turystyki%20wiejskiej.pdf> 22.12.2015). The products were grouped according to 9 themes (unique nature, herbs, disappearing and traditional professions, horses, wine production traditions, culinary heritage, education, buildings of exceptional architectonic and landscape value, other buildings), and next a list of national hallmark products was compiled. The “Hits of rural tourism” project is to contribute to increasing the prestige of Polish rural tourism and creating a network of recognizable, brand products. A result of the work is also a catalogue-guide to theme-specific places (under the slogan: *Rest in the countryside – actively, naturally, traditionally, culinarily, educationally*), published in five languages (Polish, English, French, German, Russian).

The Educational Farms Network is a project focused on promoting folk tradition and culture, discovering good Polish food and interactive education on a farm. This project, commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in 2011 and run by the Agricultural Consultancy Centre, comprises 182 educational farms situated in different regions of Poland (http://ksow.pl/uploads/tx_library/files/zagrody_edukacyjne.pdf 29.12.2015).

2 – Regional – usually created for specific administrative units, e.g. the projects in Małopolska included “Małopolska smelling of herbs”, “Małopolska for children”, “Małopolska for the elderly”, “Małopolska – a land of honey”, “Małopolska countryside in a saddle”.

3 – Local – they are usually eco-museums or theme villages, created mainly by Local Action Groups (based on several facilities situated within the area of one or several villages, within the radius of up to 20 km). An eco-museum is a network/system of objects forming a living and functioning collection, where natural, cultural and historical elements are presented at the place where they occur and in accordance with their original use, most often in rural areas (Davis 1999). Creating them in Poland has been supported by the Partnership for Environment Foundation, helped by public organizations, institutions and firms associated in the National Network of Partner Groups for Sustainable Development, along greenways since 2000. One of them is the Eco-Museum of Crafts in Dobków – a village in the Land of Extinct Volcanoes. The inhabitants, who live and work there, organize ceramics workshops and present the distant geological past of the locality. The “Three Cultures” Eco-Museum in the *gmina* of Lutowska is a historical – nature path taking tourists to a Jewish cemetery, ruins of a synagogue, an old Jewish school, a site where a *tserkov* used to stand and a Greek Catholic cemetery, old Boyko huts called *chyże*, the site where “Pan Wołodyjowski” was filmed, as well

as a few viewing points with boards presenting information about the fauna and flora of the Beskid Mountains. In turn, Lanckorona in Małopolska decided to rely on angels! It is a place with the only museum of these winged creatures in Poland, founded in 2004. The angels live everywhere in the village and in December, on the Day of the Angels, you may see them having a stroll in the Lanckorona market square, whose buildings are considered to be the greatest attraction of the Eco-Museum. The inhabitants organize creative workshops in tissue-paper craft, ceramics, embroidery, painting on glass, making candles or the art of paper cutting.

A theme village is a spatial facility whose image is created on the basis of a leading theme worked out by the local community. Currently, there are over 50 such places in Poland, e.g. the Flower Village – Żalno and the Mushroom Village – Krzywogoniec (the kujawsko-pomorskie region), the Land of Chamomile – Hołowno (Lublin Region), Blacksmiths' Village – Wojciechów (Lublin Region), the Village of Healthy Living – Dąbrowa (West-Pomeranian Region), the Labyrinth Village – Paproty (West Pomeranian Region), Hobbits' Village – Sierakowo Sławieńskie (West Pomeranian Region), etc. (<http://www.wioskitematyczne.org.pl/files/Wioski%20tematyczne%201997%20-%202013.pdf>, 6.01.2016). One of the most interesting examples is Iwięcino or the Village of the End of the World. The leading theme of this Pomeranian locality is church polychrome depicting scenes from the Last Judgment Day, including an exceptional image of the devil, corralling condemned souls to the abyss of hell. He does not have hoofs or even legs! His body is covered with scales and ends with a fish tail... All new activities and acquired knowledge are related to the passage of time – the village presents the heavenly observatory, “the barn of time and entropy”, whose creators attempted to present the process of the passage of time, as well the deprivation chamber, i.e. a dark and soundproof room where you can feel the difference in the perception of time. It is also possible to play a field game in which the participants solve the mystery of Father Malichius, connected with the main painting. The guides to the attractions are of course angels and devils, impersonated by the inhabitants of Iwięcin – both children and adults. The purpose of creating a theme village is to enliven rural economy through the integration of the local community around issues related to a given regional product, service or culture.

The progressing specialization within this form of tourism is proved by the International Fairs of Rural Tourism and Agritourism “AGROTRAVEL”, held in Kielce (Świętokrzyskie Region) since 2009.

Polish rural tourism and agritourism entered the next stage of development, involving the creation of brand network tourist products, based on an original idea and cooperation of different local entities. People are motivated to undertake the abovementioned activities by e.g. competitions for the best sites of rural tourism and agritourism, as well as the best related products. The competitions are organized by the national tourism organization functioning at the Ministry of Sport and Tourism, province authorities and related organizations.

The main tasks of the organizers of recreation in the countryside include the following: building a stable, recognizable brand of innovative tourist products, improving the quality of services in accordance with the assumptions of eco-development, creating a stable and coherent system of organizations supporting the development of rural tourism and agritourism, as well as running effective promotion. Completing these tasks is to result in the competitiveness of this form of tourism on the national and international scale.

Conclusions

Rural tourism is becoming an increasingly important element of tourism in a wide sense of this term – both as regards the demand and the supply. It is estimated that in Western Europe, rural tourism already takes up over 28% of the holiday time, while the farmers derive 50% of their income from non-agricultural activity (!) (10).

Rural tourism in Poland has an exceptionally big chance to develop even further, due to its potential presented above. For instance, taking all the states of Central and Eastern Europe into account, it is the only country where small and medium-sized farms are predominant, there is an abundance of tangible cultural resources, authentic folklore, customs and rituals which have been preserved and are being handed down from generation to generation, as well as unspoiled nature with preserved biodiversity. In addition to that, there are about 8000 agri-tourist farms offering traditional Polish hospitality.

Unfortunately, there are drawbacks as well, for instance the lack of coordinated development or promotion of this form of recreation. The facilities and attractions of rural areas are often scattered over a large area, insufficiently advertised and hard to reach. However, these weaknesses can be eliminated.

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