

Women in the Tatra Mountains of Central Europe

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the specificity of a woman living in the Tatra Mountains in comparison with the femininity canon which was characteristic for 19th and 20th century Poland. I am reconstructing the images of highlander women which are preserved both in writings of the first explorers of the Tatras and in local folklore. Thanks to those two sources, the above mentioned topic can be analysed from an ethical and native perspective. Comments of modern highlanders are also the important source of knowledge about the role of a woman in traditional life in the Tatra Mountains. They enable the comparison of the past with the present situation.

Keywords:

Tatras, highlanders, women of Tatras, cultural image, history, contemporary life, reports of travelers, folk songs.

Life of each man is shaped by two interconnected aspects: nature and culture. Apart from big cities, nature is still one of the most essential elements shaping human existence in social and cultural dimension. General rules which regulate social life in a defined cultural circle are interpreted through the local natural conditions of living. It is particularly visible in areas where conditions of living are very demanding and where nature imposes its' laws which cannot be ignored. The more severe the conditions the more distinctive the people. The same rule is applicable to the life of highlanders in the Tatra Mountains. .

The Tatra Mountains

The Tatra Mountains are the highest mountain range in the Western Carpathians. They are located in central Europe, in the south of Poland, on the border with Slovakia. They are the only mountains in this part of Europe which have the alpine-type landscape. The highest peak in the whole Tatras is Gerlach, which located on the Slovakian side of the mountains and it is 2655 m a.s.l. Rysy is the highest peak of the Polish part of the Tatras and it is 2499 m a.s.l.

The northern part of the Tatras, which belongs to Polish territory, was uninhabited for a long time. The high mountains created a natural barrier which could not be overcome by the settlers from the south. Polish settlers from the north, who had been coming there since early Middle Ages, lived in this unfriendly area with difficulty. They had to go through thick primeval forests, cutting down clearings where they built their settlements.

The first settlements were built in the 13th century. In the 15th century, native Polish settlers mixed and interbred with people of Walachian origin. Walachian shepherds, who were Balkan nomads, were slowly wandering along the Carpathians from the Balkan peninsula towards the north-west. They were travelling together with their herds of sheep and goats in search of grazing, and they settled down on territories where they managed to reach. In the Tatra Mountains, they chose mainly the warmer and richer southern part of the mountains (Kowalska-Lewicka 2005: 27-28). However, some of them settled down in Polish Podtatrze [the territory which is located at the foot of the Tatra Mountains] and they contributed to the development of pastoralism. The local culture absorbed many Walachian elements. Moreover, Walachian influence is still visible in contemporary folk costumes, dances and in the language of Polish highlanders, especially in the vocabulary connected with pastoralism and clothes.

Citizens of other parts of Poland were not interested in the Tatra Mountains for a very long time as this region was perceived as remote and dangerous. Consequently, its inhabitants lived in relative isolation for a very long time. Only in 19th century, explorers and naturalists discovered this area for the first time. Also the healing features of both the thermal waters and the mountain air were noticed and more and more tourists started visiting the area.

Among them there were representatives of Polish intelligentsia who were able to appreciate the value of this land. In this way, the rich and distinctive highlander culture was discovered, and it was different from peasant cultures from other parts of Poland. Newcomers from the lowlands were amazed not only by the beauty of the Tatra Mountains, but also by the cultural richness and beauty of the local people.

Highlanders in the Tatras have always been free and have never been obligated to serfdom. They were independent hosts on their own land. Difficult conditions of living, love of freedom, direct contact with beautiful landscapes and life on the peripheries of civilization and official social structures created a type of an inhabitant who was different than the one living in the lower parts of the country. The differences between typical Polish peasants and highlanders were very visible. Because of that, discoverers of the Tatras devoted a lot of descriptions to their inhabitants, and thanks to them, the first portraits of highlander women were preserved.

Highlander Woman in the Tatra Mountains versus Polish woman of 19th century

The first guests who visited Podtatrze Region mainly came from noble families of landowners. In this cultural environment, a woman was fully depended on her husband's or her father's will and was expected to sacrifice her whole life to her family. According to a generally accepted ideal, a woman should be a guardian of her family home, a model mother, a good hostess and a faithful and devoted companion of her husband who always remains in his shadow. A young unmarried woman was required to have perfect reputation, to be modest and to be obedient to her parents' will. What is more, deep religiousness and following social rules were greatly appreciated. Marriage meant changing her father's jurisdiction into her husband's control (Kałwa 2006: 246-247). The cultural image of a woman of those times was submitted to the patriarchal vision of the world adapted from biblical tradition. This model was also relevant for women living in the countryside.

The first observers of life and traditions of highlanders from the Tatra Mountains quickly noticed the difference between highlander women and women from other regions. First of all, they attracted attention with their original beauty. They were described as petite slim women with noble face features and dark hair and eyes. Being aware of the impression they made on men, highlander women willingly underlined

their attractiveness by wearing proper clothes and jewellery (Goszczyński 1853; 121, Kamiński 1992: 25). In spite of hard work, they took care of themselves. In “The Journal from the Trip to the Tatra Mountains” , written in the first part of 19th century, we can read:

‘Highlander women are aware of their beauty and they take care of it. It is hard to see a highlander girl working outside without a scarf covering her whole face and forehead. When I was looking at those wrapped faces and shining eyes sparkling under the cloth I thought they resemble women from the Middle East who cover their face in a similar way.’ (Goszczyński 1853: 121).

Highlander women were admired not only because of their beauty but also because of their distinctive personality and behavior. They were described as hard working, brave and bold with dynamic temperament. The way of conduct of young highlander girls must have been difficult to accept for newcomers from lowlands. Instead of being modest and reserved, they showed big initiative in contacts with men. Moreover, Ludwik Kaminski, who knew highlanders well, underlines in his work “About Inhabitants of the Tatra Mountains”, written at the beginning of the 19th century, that a highlander teenager would consider a lack of interest from boys as a disgrace. That is why, from the age of thirteen and fourteen, they started to encourage young boys to closer contacts. What is vital, their parents had nothing against such behavior since they had done the same in their youth. More importantly, highlander life style and lack of parental control created a favorable conditions to such a way of conduct. Young people used to leave their houses for months and lived in shelters on alpine mountain meadows during the time of grazing sheep.

Those accidental affairs rarely changed into stable relationships because in those days the economic reasons were very important while choosing a spouse. Having illegitimate children not only did not lessen the chance of a women to get married, but on the contrary, it enhanced her attractiveness. Children were a visible proof of her fertility, and they were her important contribution to a family business because a host who accepted illegitimate children of his wife did not have to hire an additional workforce and pay for it (Orkan 1953: 479). With time, mentality changed because of the influence of catholic priests who underlined catholic morality and publicly stigmatized such behavior. In spite of the influence of catholic religion, the traditional moral code of conduct was still tolerated in 20th century (Tomicki 1977: 51-55).

In conclusion, before the wedding, highlander women had a lot of freedom, however, after marriage, they were becoming model hostesses and devoted guardians of their families' well being. There were hardly any divorces among highlanders and separation happened very rarely because marriage was a lifetime decision and a highlander woman was the foundation of her family.

Kaminski writes:

'Highlander family life is quiet, relaxed, agreeable, full of brotherhood and kindness. It is surprising as highlanders are rather impetuous and willing to fight. A hostess is the most authoritarian person at home and a host sits quietly in the corner repairing household equipment or he is outside the house. She is the one who gives commands, teaches and tells what to do. She may also punish with a physical reminder, and thus a husband respects her sometimes being even afraid of her. Highlander men very rarely show unreasonable conceit and they seldom object to their wives' wise advice showing their superiority.'

The above description proves that a family model which developed in Podtatrze Region Region in 19th century was different than the one from other parts of Poland. A hard working, resourceful and resolute woman played a fundamental role, and a man willingly gave up patriarchal privileges in order to put the burden of maintaining family on the female's shoulders. He preferred freedom from everyday duties connected with running a farm. It does not mean that they avoided doing any work. While being at home, he helped his wife, and he tried to do typical masculine tasks such as plowing or collecting crops. However, he sometimes consciously avoided his duties, and he chose seasonal jobs outside the house; for example, hunting in the forest, robberies in the southern part of the Tatra Mountains, several-day mountainous trips with tourists, and finally entertainment in the inn. Especially wives of shepherds were in a difficult situation as their husbands left homes for the whole summer. In such cases, women managed the whole family farms and employed workers.

Consequently, the term "gaździna" [grand dame] was quickly associated not only with duties but also with an essential position in society. Saint Mary is called the Grand Dame of the Podhale Region (sub Tatra areas) and this title reflects the importance of this social role.

The typical feature of personality of highlanders which developed as the consequence of their vivid nature and rich fantasy was the aversion to monotony and

long term, tedious effort and systematic work. Poor quality soil did not require constant attention of a man all year round so it did not manage to change highlanders into farmers devoted only to their land. On the contrary, lack of good crops forced men to look for different sources of income and thus, to leave all household duties to their wives who often had to do typical male jobs too. Despite hard work, highlander women seldom complained, and they were ready to appreciate their husbands, regardless their behavior towards them. A real man must be free and only this kind of husband deserves respect and devotion.

Jan Sabała, who was a famous itinerant bard and highlander musician, often left his wife alone, and he did not hide his resentment towards farm work. When his wife was asked how she managed to cope with so many duties without her husband, she humorously replied : ' Oh, John has taught us all how to work hard because he does nothing.'(Wójcik 2010: 56) Perhaps she accepted his attitude because she was wise enough to know that she had to tolerate something she could not change.

The example of Sabała's wife shows another feature typical for a woman living in the Tatras, namely tolerance. Without this feature, peaceful atmosphere in a house would not be possible. A highlander wife was acquainted with highlander temper since her early youth and with time she was becoming more understanding for her husband's vices and his tendency to abuse alcohol. To protect harmony at home and very often her own dignity, a woman rarely revealed her marriage disagreements publicly. Also her high position in the family's hierarchy protected her from accumulating bitterness, sorrows and complexes which would cause sudden outbursts of negative emotions in any moment. She surrounded her husband with almost motherly love and understanding. There were cases when wives brought their drunk husbands back home and tenderly put them to sleep, leaving a well-deserved reprimand for later. Highlander women understood the needs of their husbands and they preferred to hush up their faults rather than feed the fire of family quarrels.

A teacher who worked in a highlander village in the 70's of the 20th century told a story about a highlander woman who had been neglected by her husband for many years. She was admired by her neighbors for hard work because everybody knew that the effort of supporting family was totally on her shoulders. On the other hand, they could hardly understand why she tolerated all her husband's wrongdoings and why she showed him so much care. When she was asked why she endured all this hardship in

the second part of 20th century and why she did not divorce such a sponger and a lazy man she replied: 'Because he is so beautiful!' And it was enough.

Female domination in a family did not mean that a husband was supposed to be in an inferior position all the time because a highlander woman loved her man the most for his freedom.

Woman from the Tatra Mountains in highlander folk songs

Majority of observations connected with women in the Tatras, in 19th century are still valid nowadays. However, it is worth remembering that the first descriptions of highlanders were made by men so, in their notes, they sacrificed much more attention to the men. They perceived women from a male perspective, although, it does not mean that they were biased or resentful towards women. They were rather culturally dominated by the social norms of their times. What is more, they came from a different environment and social classes so they were observers from outside. It is worth wondering how highlanders perceived themselves. Therefore, the second part of the article will be devoted to the partial reconstruction of the image of a highlander woman by the analysis of folk songs from this region.

A folk song belongs to those folkloristic genres in which both women and men present themselves on equal terms. Consequently, it is the source of knowledge about the female and male way of perceiving the world and their understanding of social roles. Let's analyze in folk songs only those aspects which are directly connected with a highlander woman and exclude universal topics common for European folklore.

Songs with a female narrator are mainly devoted to courtship, love and family. In coquettish songs, a young girl announces to the world that she is ready for a love affair. She tries to present all her positive features, mainly connected with her beauty. She is courageous enough to boasts about her previous love experiences and she underlines her independence.

Strength which emanates from those songs comes from self esteem and a deep conviction that the final decision about the choice of a partner is hers. Girls willingly and unceremoniously underline their superiority in this matter over boys. They sing that they neither ask nor make requests to boys and they have a lot of boys around them so they have many choices. They also know that such love affairs cannot be treated

seriously and the marriage will put an end to them. So in their songs, girls encourage boys to take an opportunity now as when they are married they will not be able to invite them again.

In some love songs, there is also a girl who is seriously involved in a relationship and she expects marriage and life with her beloved. When it cannot happen, she is disappointed but, although she is in despair, she does not give up to this feeling and she decides to do some magic to make a boy love her. She sings that she will go to the stream and she will collect some magic aphrodisiac plants and/or roots. and then she will give them to her beloved man to change his feelings. She also sometimes destroys all remnants of the past connected with her boyfriend to be able to start a new life. In her song, she says that she does not love him anymore, and she will destroy the stool no which he used to sit.

All in all, courtship was just a fun for a highlander girl but love was a serious and deep experience which required decisive actions either to support or finish the affection.

In family songs, the figure of a mother is in the most important as she decides about the fate of her children more often than a father. In the majority of analyzed texts, a son or a daughter asks a mother to accept his or her choice of a future spouse. This tradition confirms a high position of a women in a family and her right to make many decisions.

When marriages are not happy or successful, adult children also address their complaints to a mother. Moreover, there are more songs in which children express their sorrow after the loss of a mother not a father. This proves the central position of a women in a highlander family and the important role of a mother in adult life of her children.

The mpetuous character of highlanders mixed with alcohol was sometimes the reason for domestic violence against women and there are some songs devoted to this topic.

However, only four family songs out of 150 texts from Podtatrze Region gathered in the book "Songs of Podhale Region" contain female complaints about the aggressive male behavior (Sadownik 1971: 152-170). It is a very low percentage, and it proves the unwillingness to reveal family secrets. Even less are texts present of a husband's complaints against his wife. Male songs connected with a wedding are the exception. The main motive of those songs is losing freedom and highlanders used a pretty

dramatic comparison to illustrate their despair, namely they compared marriage to death. For example, a singer sings that he has already got married and for him it is as if he hanged himself on gallows. Family life meant for them not only the change of their careless lifestyle but also the necessity to be under the jurisdiction of his wife and accepting her superiority in common work for the good of their household.

As it was mentioned before, highlander women were pretty tolerant and independent so they were capable of managing a farm on their own and they turned a blind eye on their husbands' weaknesses. Thanks to such attitude, highlander marriages were very stable and kids learned their future roles. Generally speaking, folk songs reflect observations and descriptions of the first explores into the Tatra Mountains.

Contemporary Woman in the Tatra Mountains

The recent 25 years have brought huge changes in Podtatrze Region . Poland has joined EU and opened its borders. The process of globalization is visible in many aspects of human life and together with the process of integration, it has contributed to the growing wealth of highlanders. Women in the Tatras have new opportunities in life. From housewives they have turned into businesswomen who run family enterprises which are mainly connected with tourism. A husband often helps his wife to run a business, however, he usually leaves all formal matters in her hands.

There are also essential changes in financial emigration. In the past, in most cases, men emigrated and were bread winners. They traveled abroad, most often to the USA, where they did typical male jobs such as: building houses, mining, or working in factories. Women used to stay at home with children and tried to invest financial resources earned by their husbands, for example in building a house which could be later used as a hostel. Economical emigration of men to the USA is less frequent nowadays. However, there are more and more families where women go to one of the EU countries, and husbands stay at home and take over some of their duties.

Highlander women get used to the new environment faster. What is more, they are quick learners,` and they can take up jobs available all year round so their work abroad generates bigger income¹. There are no official statistics in this matter, however recent

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observations indicate that this kind of diversification of social roles is a visible phenomenon in the Tatra Mountains.

In 1994, highlander women founded an association which defends private properties in Podhale Region. Today, this association is still ran by women and has a lot of economic and legal successes.

Feminization and cultural expansion of women in Podtatrze Region is particularly visible in professions which used to be considered as typical male jobs, for example: a tour guide, a mountain rescuer or a shepherd. All those changes have been triggered by the personality of highlander women which was formed through centuries. They owe their emotional and physical strength and intelligence to hectic life in the mountains.

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☐ In 2013 local media published the news that the first woman in history, Mrs. Janina Rzepka from Bukowina Tatrzańska, received a chief-shepherd licence. Before this event, the profession of a chief shepherd was reserved only for men.