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VOLUNTEERING IN POLAND – TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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The aim of this article is to try to find the answer to the question: how has volunteering changed in Poland over more than century-old experience in this field? To meet this question we have to present the genesis of the activities undertaken by the Poles, which today are called volunteering, then the development of this idea over the next decades, and also its current condition. There will be presented the views of Polish creators of social pedagogy, on the subject of voluntary activities and the current situation of the volunteering.

The word volunteer is of Latin origin. *Voluntas* means “will, desire”, and *voluntarius* “voluntary”. While *voluntari* has a military context, as it meant voluntary soldiers” (Kozmiński, 1784, 459-460). This voluntary nature of work is adopted by

today's understanding of this concept – in the recent publication of the Central Statistical Office we read that “a volunteer is a natural person, who voluntarily and without remuneration provides services for organisations, institutions, individual people, wider community or natural environment. The performance of these services is referred to as volunteering.” (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2013, 231).

As beginnings of volunteering activities in Poland we can adopt the times of building the first Polish social welfare system in 1918-1939. Clearly, however, before that time – i.e. in times when the Poles as a nation were deprived of statehood, finding themselves under occupation, the selfless work for the needy was undertaken on a large scale.

In 1918 Poland regained its independence and began the struggles aimed at rebuilding the state structures. Then the actions were undertaken, which result was to create the welfare system. Undoubtedly the basis for this system is the Social Welfare Act adopted in 1923. Both the law itself, and its executive regulations, did not mention the volunteers (or people, who would perform a similar role). While – what is interesting – it predicted the appointment of social workers – working honourably, free of charge for the city/municipal structures of the social welfare. These details were regulated by the Regulation on social workers and on committees of social welfare of 1928. The social worker was to be appointed for three years by the municipal council (city). True, it was assumed that social workers had to be social workers experienced in this scope and willing to undertake this function, for whom the honourable work for the needy was not a stranger, nevertheless, from the formal point of view the regulation predicted the possibility of the top-down indication of the specific person. The choice could have only been avoided by people over 60 years of age, as well as the diseased, public office-holders, and having important, according to the municipal council, reasons. The re-election for the next term was only possible with the consent of the person concerned. Basic duties of a social worker were – as for a freelance work – quite large:

- „1. initiative and cooperation with the municipal authorities in carrying out the social welfare,
2. ensuring that people in need of care and help were granted with care as far as applicable,
3. examination on own initiative relatively on demand of the community board of personal and property relations of people using or who can use the social welfare for determining their right to care and type and size of necessary assistance,
4. in urgent cases providing emergency help from funds allocated for this purpose by the municipality and in the way determined by it,
5. communicating the municipality board their findings and conclusions and submitting reports from the activity to the municipal commission of social welfare at least once a year
6. performing activities, provided by separate provisions.” (Rozporządzenie, 1928, art. 7)

Social workers also has certain privileges – they could wear badges – round, in silver, with the inscription “social worker” and an eagle feeding four chicks; the sign from the badge was also visible on the identity card of the social worker. They were also entitled to the legal protection of officials, also the possibility to request from the state police granting help with performing professional activities. Moreover, caregivers received from the municipality, for which they worked, the reimbursement of expenses incurred in relation of their duties (Rozporządzenie, 1928, art. 5-9; Brenk, 2012, 137).

The above-described form of work, apparently looking as “voluntary coercion” can be surprising from today’s point of view. However, it is worth remembering about Polish social traditions during partitions, among others expressed by the positivist slogan of “groundwork”, which was managed to be implemented on a large scale thanks to the commitment of Polish elites, dealing with work with the poorest and the most neglected sectors of the society. The law emerging after this period did not forget about this potential and assumed its use in the conditions of the independent country.

In addition to the social workers, whose work, in principle, did not always have to result from good will, in the interwar era there were also plenty of other social activists. During the Second Republic, work for the society, especially of the people in need, was called “voluntary”. Continuing the social traditions was expressed in a considerable involvement of the population in this type of activity. In the study of 1928 it was written that “volunteers play a major role in social service, especially in the cultural and educational service”. The scale of voluntary involvement depended on the form of the organisation’s activity (most volunteers worked in associations and foundations with long-term traditions) and also the type of the performed work – the institutions spreading care over the mother and the child prevailed, e.g., data from the period state that in the stations of the Care of Mother with a baby in 1925 there worked 126 nurses and 81 voluntary workers (Krzywicki, 1928, 30-31).

Also in theoretical works from the Second Republic period we can find reflections dedicated to volunteers. The creator of the Polish social pedagogy – Helena Radlińska drew attention to popularisation of the idea of voluntary work, performed by “activists, who perform it voluntarily, without abandoning their workshop of the daily work” (Radlińska 1947, 333).

The period of Polish People’s Republic, covering the period of 1944-1989, is not homogenous, when it comes to the possibility of the activities of the entities involved in the support of the needy. Directly after the cessation of hostilities, the social rescue took place – to the unprecedented scale in Poland the assistance was borne to the millions of people, who were not provided with basic life needs. This actions included a number of organisations that bring people together, who undertook voluntary work – we can list, for example: Caritas, Workers’ Society of the Friends of Children, Peasant Society of the Friends of Children, the Peasant Self-Help Association, Polish Red Cross, the League of Women (Brenk 2014, 145-160).

The situation changed significantly after 1948, when the communist authorities nourished the belief that the socialist system introduced eagerly is able to ensure everyone with gainful employment and thus contribute to the elimination of all social pathologies resulting from unemployment: poverty, homelessness, vagrancy, begging, prostitution, addiction and others. The consequence of this period was the removal of the structures of the state system of social welfare, as well as numerous organisations, which continues the pre-war activity, focusing the crowds of volunteers.

After Polish October 1956 started the attempt to rebuild the system of social welfare. Although the independent charitable organisations were not returned to the idea – even the church Caritas remained under the state control, but people tried to restore the idea of social activities – honourable and unpaid. Unfortunately, the terms of “social work” an “social action” during Polish People’s Republic period gained the ideological meaning and undertaking such work was associated with expressing support for the ruling regime and its political authorities. Moreover, there was an unwritten obligation to belong to social organisations, especially by young people, what resulted in the mass-participation, with the loss of authenticity of motives.

Initially, the authority returned to the idea of social workers, who would perform their duties honourably on the local community grounds – as the field social workers, for example, working within the block, villages, municipalities, districts, estates. Caregivers were guaranteed with the legal protection equal to government officials, they had identity cards and badges (in the revised layout). Despite the obvious references to the pre-war system it was not mentioned that the institution of social workers in a similar form existed before the war and was eliminated by communist governments (Brenk, 2013, 103-104).

Over the next years the assumption of organising the field networks of social workers turned out to be unrealistic to implement, staff shortages were big. The basic, although not predicted by the ministry, problem was the shortage of people wanting to perform the honourable, unpaid function. The shameful practice of national councils was the accidental addition of people – such “selected” field caregivers were often not competent, or even did not know that they perform some kind of function (Rak, 1965, 5). This translated into practice – research from the 60s said that every third social caregiver in the village within one year has not spent even one hour to his work (Ziółkowski 1970, 32). Carelessness in this regard was also depicted by trainings of social workers, which were to raise their qualifications, if they were present, they were conducted irregularly and carelessly (Rak, 1970, 6).

Professionalization of the social welfare system taking place in the next decades of the Polish People’s Republic assumed the gradual abandonment of social work for the full nationalisation. Aleksander Kamiński, who knew well the value of work of the volunteers encouraged not to neglect this type of social activity – he wrote that “there are always enough people wanting to serve the society, country, neighbours, culture and socialism of good will” (Kamiński, 1968, 17).

In the first years after the change in the system (i.e. after 1989) in the Polish society the interest in the idea of volunteering was negligible, and the term of volunteering started to popularise in the Polish language only in the second half of the nineties. The first volunteer centre was established in 1993 by the Warsaw BORIS Foundation (Office for the Movement Service of Self-Help Initiatives). Three years later the same foundation sent one of the first publications after 1989 dedicated to the volunteer work: „Wolontariat – nowe spojrzenie na pracę społeczną” (“Volunteering – a new look at social work”). It wrote, illustrating the contemporary situation of social work, that “volunteering is probably the most important, and yet little known, aspect of the non-government organisations’ activities. Most of the associations, foundations, other formal and informal groups use the unpaid volunteer work, although the number of volunteers can only be estimated (...). With this, the large number of leaders of these organisations is not aware of the fact what is the specificity of the volunteer’s work, how to use his enthusiasm and desire, what he can be offered in return. Engaging and functioning of volunteers in the organisation is still more spontaneous than conscious (...)”. (Wejzman 1996, 6).

In the nineties there were no specific legal regulations, which normalised the manner and conditions under which the volunteers were employed. Some changes in this scope – regulating the issues of volunteering in a quite narrow area (i.e. in care and educational institutions) were brought only by the provisions of the Regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of September 1, 2000 on care and educational institutions. This regulation governed the issue of volunteer work, who had to be of legal age, not punished, committing to secrecy in matters concerning the pupils. The director of the institution was obliged to conclude a contract with a volunteer determining the

scope of work, his insurance against liability for damages caused during the performance of his obligations, as well as supervision of his work. The scope of responsibilities of volunteers was characterised quite generally – as the “expansion of the scope of care over a child in the institution” and “support of pupils’ work by introducing extracurricular activities and developing individual abilities of children”. The regulation has also mentioned a quite specific – family form of volunteering, which concerned befriended families, supporting the institution in the process of educating the pupils in respect to family life.

Two years later – in December 2002 – the issue of volunteers’ work was regulated in public psychological and pedagogical clinics, with principles similar to those of the childcare institutions.

It should be noted that these regulations situated the volunteer work in a very narrow area of social life – support of activities of institutions acting as the care, compensatory and corrective role against the children and young people, who required this type of support. Other forms of volunteering still existed, but usually in an informal way, without having legislative norms.

The breakthrough in the field of legal regulations concerning social work in Poland concerned the adoption of the Act of 24 April 2003 on the activity of public benefit and volunteering. This document defined a volunteer as a “natural person, who performs services voluntarily and without pay (...)”. The scope of entities included in the document, which can use the volunteers’ work was very broad and included a series of institutions (with the exception of their conducted business). They include, among others: non-government organisations; entities conducting the public benefit activity; associations of local government units; social cooperatives; joint-stock companies and limited liability companies; sports clubs; bodies of public administration; organisational units subject to bodies of public administration or supervised by these bodies; healthcare entities.

Volunteer’s qualifications were not specifically defined in the act – due to various forms of work, which he can undertake. While it mentions that they should be adjusted to the scope of performed services. While there are no contraindications – as a rule – to perform this work by minors (unless this is specified by separate regulations).

An important issue regulated in 2003 is the far-reaching protection of volunteers. It is true that the agreement with the volunteer can be concluded only in the form of the oral contract, but at the request of the interested party, as well as with benefits lasting over 30 days, it should be made in writing. Moreover, the person using the benefits is obliged to inform a volunteer about the risk for health and safety associated with the performed services, provide him with safe and hygienic working conditions, insure him against accidents, he can also cover the costs of business trips and diets.

There is no doubt that the regulation of legislation in the field of volunteering, which was performed in 2003, has somewhat “taken out” the term of volunteering from its previously attributed sector of social help and gave it a broader, more universal meaning.

One of the issues, which would require analysis, are the quantitative data concerning the involvement of volunteers into work for the community. Unfortunately, for the next decades, starting from the pre-war times, regular research was not undertaken and the comprehensive statistics in this regard were not prepared. The breakthrough in this regard are the initiatives, which have been taking place in recent years, so it is possible to accurately reflect the profile of the currently performed works by volunteers in Poland. Within the celebrations in 2011 of the European Year of

Volunteering, the Central Statistical Office published the folder containing the results of the research of unpaid work of the Poles – in it we can read that in 2010 people age 15 and older devoting time to the voluntary and unpaid work outside their households have worked within this work the total of 2,5 billion hours, i.e., 1,46 million of conversion jobs. This number represents 10,6% compared to the paid work performed in the whole national economy (13,8 million jobs) These data give rise to optimism, although it should be clarified that 85 of such work was devoted to the family (outside the household) and friends. However, this does not detract the readiness of the Polish society to work for the closest environment (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2011, 1-2)..

While data from 2012 determine the number of volunteers in Poland as more than 3 million people (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2013, 26). The main place of work of the contemporary volunteer are the organisations of the third sector, which can perform a huge part of their activity by using the potential of volunteers – 90% of these organisations use the social work, and over 60% in total did not employ the paid personnel”. The voluntary and unpaid social work constituted for most organisations in the third sector the basis for the implementation of statutory goals. In 2012, in total, these institutions involved about 2,5 million people in the voluntary work, compared to 2,3 million in 2010. Most people (22%) were involved in cooperation with organisations dealing with sport, tourism, recreation, hobby. Slightly less – 19% with entities providing social and humanitarian aid (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2014, 26, 45, 156, 161).

The above-described changes, which took place in the last hundred years, in the perception of the volunteer's work involved, among others, the expansion of the range of social works performed by him. Traditional social work – support of the poorest and the least educated – has been completed with all forms of work for the entities having a positive impact on the life of the society and natural environment.

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