

**Modern History Sourcebook:
Jan Slomka:
The Life of a Polish Peasant, c. 1900**

From: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1900polishpeasant.html>

During serfdom days Dzikov belonged to the 'demesne', i.e. to the lords of Dzikov. This had been from long ago the home of the Counts Tarnowski, whose chief seat was the manor house in our village. In addition there were other villages belonging: Miechoćin, Zakrzov, Sielets, Wielowies, Trzesn, Sobov, Furmany, Zupava, Jeziorko, Tarnovska village, Demba, Rozalin.

Towards the end of serfdom the total number of cottagers in Dzikov was forty-two, of whom twelve were owners, twenty-three tenants and seven day-laborers. The first named had eighteen acres each, and did their dues six days a week for the lord of the manor, with team or yoke of oxen and implements, e.g. wagon, plough, harrows, disc, etc. For this they had, in addition to the pasture for cattle used by the whole village, a special fifty acres near Zwierzyniets and six acres on the Vistula. The latter, known as the 'Jewish Shrubbery', was for the use of three farmers from the hamlet Podlenze. The tenants had six-acre lots in each case, and did their dues three days a week with hand tools---flail, sickle, hoe, spade, etc. The labourers had only huts, and were not bound to any dues at all. They went to work for farmers engaged in doing their dues, but who often could not overtake them. The master in each case would give directions for the morrow's work, appointing the foreman under whom each hired helper was to work.

As the folk who knew this system and remembered it used to tell of it, no worse punishment could be found for men and women than serfdom was. People were treated worse than cattle are today. They were beaten both at work and at home for the merest trifle. What I have heard from them could not be written down. It is unbelievable how men could thus torture their fellows!

Every farmer had first to do his dues at the manor house, whether with his team or on foot. Only then could he work his own land, sowing and reaping at night. No excuse as to pressing needs at home was of any use. If one did not appear as ordered, at once the overseer would come. If he found the wife busy cooking he would throw a pail of water on the fire, or in winter would carry off the windows or the doors. In case that did not work, and men were needed for service, the overseer would come with his foremen and eject the farmer from home and homestead. Another would be put in his place. Nor was there any appeal anywhere since that was the usage and at bottom the lord of the manor was owner of everything. His was both land and water, yes even the wind; since only he was allowed to build a wind-mill to grind corn.

Only when all his compulsory dues were done could the peasant sing the old song: *I'm not afraid the landlord will molest me, My dues are done, I'll set me home and rest me!*

Our Dzikov masters were esteemed as kindly and humane folk, yet no one dared go to the manor with any complaint about the manor servants: for the latter would find excuses and then afterward make trouble for us. The result was that all gave up the thought of just dealing. Running away would have done no good, for elsewhere it was no better---rather worse. As already noted, the number of houses in the whole of Dzikov was something like seventy, each as like the other as two peas. They stood by the roadside, with backs to the street. If there was a grove round about, it was of wild trees, oak, elm or lime, which came up for the most part from the roots, and without any special care on anyone's part. The farmyard would be fenced in, either with a willow hedge or with a picket fence made of splints from pine or spruce; or with a rail enclosure two, three or four rails high. Even the manor house park was surrounded by a hedge that was tended yearly: and not until about 1880 was this replaced by the present brick wall or by iron pickets. The last named, so common now, were formerly not known at all.

The village area of Dzikov was divided into several parts, each with its own name: the High Street, the Sands, the Bottom, and the hamlet Podlenze. As a whole its appearance was that of days long gone by, far different from what we see now. So, too, during the decades it had grown enormously; partly for the reason that it lies close to the county town, Tarnobrzeg, which is growing all the time. As a result Dzikov is today four times as large as fifty years ago.

The cottage of the peasant or the hired laborer was made up of a single living-room, alongside of which was a large shed and store room. The peasant had besides this his stable for horses, cattle and pigs, and his granary. All such buildings were built of round logs, laid almost as they grew, and with little trimming. At the corners the ends projected a couple of feet, so that when wood was scarce they could be cut off for fuel. Many, however, built this way in order to get a finer appearance. In neighboring villages, especially farther from the Vistula and set in the woods on sandy beaches, the cottages were almost all 'smoke' ones: i.e. the fire was built on a broad drum, made of packed clay, called an 'old woman'. The smoke went through the whole room, and out through the door to the shed, and so out the roof. The door had to be open when cooking went on, and everybody had to sit on the ground or go about stooped in order not to be choked. The walls were covered with soot, never whitewashed. The people were blackened and saturated with smoke.

In Dzikov we had for the most part chimneys carried through the roof, but they were made of clay, mixed with straw. Here and there were chimneys made of a hollowed-out tree trunk, and in that case they were lined with clay. Not until about 1870 did the peasants begin to build proper brick chimneys, when the iron cooking stoves came in, which are now used everywhere in the kitchens.

Of old we used for cooking only the open hearth, on which the pots with food were set either close to or on the fire, according as we were in a hurry or not. Here and there folk used tripods or other iron fixtures to hold the pot. In addition there was in every house a bake-oven, big enough so that one could bake at one time the bread from a half-a-sack of flour. There was also a heater, into which the fuel was put from the outside passage,

through an opening called the 'shoot'. These ovens were built of raw brick, and they took up a lot of room. The top surface of the oven and the heater together, faced off with stucco, was big enough so that four people could sleep on it. Right through the winter the children and the hired girl slept there all the time; and any one of the family who felt miserable or got a chill crawled up on the oven, to stretch out and toast himself. Between the oven and the wall was a space, which was called the 'oven-corner', where the children would also sleep.

The house furnishings were of the simplest. For furniture we had tables (though not in every house), a couple of benches, a chest that took the place of drawers, and beds or bunks. In addition the cottage had a hand-mill for grinding, a mortar for cracking up meal for porridge or linseed for oil; and a block for splitting wood. All these were hewn of wood with a hatchet but no plane. Still all the walls were hung with pictures---a thing everyone loved. Once a year the walls would be whitened---mostly at Easter.

In every living-room there would be two beams just under the ceiling, called 'poles'. On them wood was put to dry, or flax or hemp was hung. On them the loaves of bread were laid. There were no floors, except in the manor house. When the cow was to calve in winter, they would bring her into the house, so that she would be warmer. For cooking we had mostly earthenware pots. Only in later times, more or less with the coming of iron stoves, did iron utensils and kettles come in (from far-away Tarnov); the kettles being used to heat mash for the pigs. Dishes, jugs and bowls were of earthenware. For spoons we had wooden ones, much larger than the metal ones we now use.

There wasn't a clock in the village. In every house, however, there was a rooster, whose shrill crowing told you in winter when to get up. And he would crow with the greatest regularity; the first time at midnight, the second about three in the morning, the third time 'for the day' about four. It was the wife's business to keep track of his crowing, for she would waken the household after a second, or at the latest right after the third crow. Apart from this the farmer would step out to the yard and look at the stars to see how near it was to the morning.

From the start I did not like the idea of getting out in the cold and observing the stars in winter time, so as to see when to get up. At times the rooster made a mistake, or when he crowed for midnight one thought it was the second or third. I therefore decided to have a clock in the house. In order, however, not to have unpleasantness from our neighbours as a result (for clocks at that time were thought of as a curiosity and an extravagance!), I consulted the wife, and we decided for as long as possible to hide it from the village. We went together to the watchmaker in Tarnobrzeg and bought a clock for four ducats, with the understanding that he was to bring it over in the evening and hang it for us.

This was done. But the cat was soon out of the bag, for the children while playing in the street in front of the house heard the striking of the hours. "Slomkas have a clock!" was the cry, and we soon had all the children at the door. They would listen for the ticking under the window; and in time their elders began to come, too, to look at the clock. They were amazed that I could pay four ducats for it, and more than one made the remark that I

thought myself quite a person! Later on the nearer neighbours, who had some date to keep, would come to the window day or night and ask what time it was. In time everyone came to the conclusion that a clock is a useful thing in a house, and today there isn't a cottage in Dzikov without one. Even watches became the fashion with the farmers.

In those times feather ticks and pillows were seen only in the better situated and kept peasant homes. The poor did not have them at all, and the household would use as covers at night, according to the time of year, sheepskin coats, cloaks or jackets---in a word, the same things they wore in daytime. The children or servants, who slept on the oven or behind it in a warm place, needed only a sheet or a jacket. The beds for the most part lay all in confusion during the day, a thing that can still be seen with careless housekeepers; only more diligent wives made them up for the day---and in time there came to be pride in doing this. Fair bed-linen became then one of the aims of all the best housewives, who would put out the bedding on the line during the day, both to air it and to show it to the neighbours. This they held as something to boast of before others....

Source:

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