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Hegemonic childhood in the Polish community of West Prussia in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries

Summary

In this article, I present the hegemonic concept of childhood in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries among the Polish community of West Prussia. The subject of the analyses was the content of articles dealing with children's issues, published in the local Polish press. The essential feature of the hegemonic discourse of childhood for the Polish community in the analysed region was that it was clearly based on the Catholic religion and national ideas, as well as on a strong relationship with the conservative and post-feudal image of family relations. The conducted research made possible the identification of seven basic categories of the hegemonic understanding of childhood in the Polish environment of West Prussia, which are: Polish and Catholic childhood, childhood sensitive to the needs of others, heroic childhood, tidy and pupil childhood, neat and orderly childhood, childhood based on obedience and subordination, sexual purity childhood.

Keywords: childhood, family, education, mentality, West Prussia

Słowa kluczowe: dzieciństwo, rodzina, edukacja, mentalność, Prusy Zachodnie

Introduction

Childhood is an ambiguous concept. From the cultural perspective, it is defined as "a derivative of the ways in which adult society treats the child" (Zdunkiewicz-Jedynak 2021: 42). In publications devoted to the social position of the child and dealing with him or her, the issues of childhood are generally considered through the prism of the following approaches: historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological-educational, and philosophical (Zdunkiewicz-Jedynak 2021: 42). Among the above-mentioned positions, the subject of this article corresponds to the historical perspective clearly resonant in the publications of Polish historians of education, including: Dorota Żołądź-Strzelczyk (2002), Krzysztof Jakubiak and Monika Nawrot-Borowska (2021).

The meanings given to childhood have always been (and still are today) conditioned by a specific historical moment, place, and the culture dominant in it. Philippe Ariès (1995) was the precursor of research on the semantic variability of the analysed term in relation to past times. Despite the fact that his thesis that the child was noticed as late as in the

16th century raises controversy (Żołądź-Strzelczyk 2002: 10–12), the work of this author continues to inspire historians of education and educators.

On the basis of the analyses carried out by P. Ariès and of the conclusions drawn by Jan Hendrik Van Den Berg (1988), Monika Obrębska (2011: 49–55) cites five categories of understanding childhood. Four of them concern past historical periods (childhood – a time of transition, passing quickly, not worth remembering; childhood – a time of innocence and purity; childhood – a time of unrestricted freedom and playing together with adults; childhood – a time of imperfection and immaturity), while the fifth relates to the present day (childhood – a time separate, specific, incomparable with adulthood). From among the above-mentioned categories, childhood perceived as a time of imperfection and immaturity, associated with treating the child as a defective being, requiring strict discipline and a planned process of education, is the closest to the period I studied.

In turn, Lloyd de Mause, analysing the discussed term from the perspective of psychohistory (i.e. the paradigm recognising the significant impact of childhood experiences on the motives of actions undertaken by past generations), divided the history of childhood into six periods, which correspond to the following parental attitudes and related educational models: infanticidal parenting, abandoning parenting, ambivalent parenting, intrusive parenting, socialising parenting, helping and supportive parenting. Socialising parenting, which, according to L. de Mause, was related to the beginning of the process of introducing children to fulfilling specific social roles, refers most to the period I have studied. This process took place especially in the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries (Zdunkiewicz-Jedynak 2021: 44, 46).

Although the approximate classifications are extremely valuable cognitively, it is worth emphasizing that there are most often significant differences between the social perception of childhood and the experience of being a child. Moreover, in each culture and historical moment, different childhoods function simultaneously, both in their practical and theoretical dimensions. This is because childhood is experienced differently by people coming from different social strata, with a different economic status and cultural capital, and narratives about childhood are constructed differently (i.e. depending on the represented world view and adopted educational ideology). Therefore, in order to unequivocally emphasize what kind of childhood we are talking about in this article, I used the term *hegemonism*. The use of this concept is a direct transfer of the category used by Raewyn Connell in relation to the issue of cultural masculinity, nowadays also defined in the plural, to the field of childhood research (Connell, Messerschmidt 2005: 832). By hegemonic childhood I mean an approach to it, which in a given culture and at a historical moment has a dominant meaning and is usually constructed by the most influential social classes. However, this approach is not tantamount to the experience of childhood in a practical dimension; on the contrary, it is primarily postulative in nature. Nor is it the only way to understand childhood in theoretical aspect.

With reference to the cited theory, in this article I present an image of childhood in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, hegemonic for the Polish community of

West Prussia¹, which I have constructed on the basis of the content of articles concerning children's issues (published in the Polish press in the region developing in that period) and using the method of critical analysis of sources characteristic of historical research. I analysed both magazines dealing with social issues ("Katolik Dyecezyi Chełmińskiej", "Nadwiślanin", "Pielgrzym") and those especially dedicated to children, including supplements to various newspapers ("Przyjaciel Działy" [A Children's Friend], "Przyjaciel Dzieci i Młodzieży" [A Friend of Children and Youth], "Przyjaciel Dzieci: pismo sześciotygodniowe z obrazkami dla pouczenia i rozrywki dzieci, młodzieży i starszych osób" [A Children's Friend: a six-week magazine with pictures for the education and entertainment of children, adolescents, and the elderly], "Gazetka dla Dzieci", bezpłatny dodatek do „Pielgrzyma" [A Gazette for Children: free supplement to Pilgrim]). The texts used for the purposes of the findings are representative of the adopted way of understanding childhood.

At the beginning, it is worth emphasizing that West Prussia was a multicultural region, although dominated by the German element, but with a distinct Polish community that was more and more active in the public space after the Springtime of the Peoples. The aforementioned multiculturalism, along with the 19th-century modernisation and nation-building processes, was not without significance for the forming of the hegemonic vision of childhood for the Polish population in the studied region. It is worth emphasizing that its authors were essentially representatives of the Polish national movement, exerting a significant cultural influence on the Polish community, most often expressing a conservative world view, represented mainly by the noble and post-noble milieux, editors of the Polish local press, and politically engaged Polish clergy of various origins.

Components of the hegemonic image of childhood in the Polish community of West Prussia

Constructed by representatives of the Polish movement, the hegemonic image of childhood was essentially democratic, i.e. it was not limited to a vision of childhood dedicated only to children coming from a specific social class, and avoided their hierarchization. This attitude was presented in particular in the 1860s in the magazine "Nadwiślanin", when it was postulated that parents of noble origin should stop teaching their children at home in favour of school education, jointly with peasant pupils. This postulate was argued for using national and religious reasons, which I will discuss in more detail later in the article:

¹ The no longer existing province of West Prussia was established after the first partition of Poland at the beginning of 1773. In the years 1829–1878 (after the merger with East Prussia) it was an integral part of the Prussian province. From 1878 to 1920, West Prussia was once again a separate province with the capital in Gdańsk. Its range covered the greater part of present-day Pomerania Province, the northern part of Kujawy – Pomerania Province, and individual poviats currently located in Warmia-Mazuria, Wielkopolska, and West Pomerania Provinces.

Although a civic child grows in the country among the Polish population, it grows like a pineapple in a greenhouse, i.e. closed tightly from the surrounding world, basking in the warmth that is provided to him or her by the life of family forests falling into ashes. **Thus, in one village two separate worlds grow: the lord world and the peasant world** – one looks with contempt at the country children, of whom he only hears that they have bad habits and use bad expressions, while another one with jealousy and a wounded heart, that they hold him in contempt and keep him at a distance. **We want to put an end to the disunion**, stress and irritability; **we want to erase lordly airs and sulks and the peasant hatefully keeping away from us – let's cherish one Polish world of Christian love in the place of these two** (*Gwałtowna potrzeba* [An Urgent Need] 1865: 1).

On the basis of my research, I selected seven basic categories of the hegemonic understanding of childhood in the Polish circles of West Prussia, and ten corresponding ways of perceiving the child, namely: Polish and Catholic childhood (the child as the future of the Polish nation and Catholicism, the child as a property and gift of God), childhood sensitive to the needs of others (the child as an altruist), heroic childhood (the child as a hero), well-tended, “cared for” and pupil childhood (the child as a creature requiring care, upbringing, and attending, the child as a creature with the best predispositions to learn), neat and orderly childhood (the child as a pedant, the child as an imperfect being that requires proper formation), childhood based on obedience and subordination (the child as a performer of an adult's will), childhood untainted with impudence (the child as a being avoiding immoral acts and self-controlled).

Polish and Catholic childhood (the child as the future of the Polish nation and Catholicism, the child as a property and gift of God)

It is no accident that I begin the description of the selected categories with Polish and Catholic childhood. For the representatives of the Polish movement in West Prussia, the nation and religion, Polishness and Catholicism, constituted superior and key concepts to which all other ways of seeing not only the child, but the Polish population in general, were subordinated. It happened so for the following reasons. For the peasant community, which was numerically dominant among the Polish inhabitants of the region still in the mid-19th century, religious affiliation (generally to Catholicism) was one of the most important factors in constructing identity. Since the concept of the nation in its modern sense began to take shape only in the discussed century, so-called national awareness was not clearly developed among the peasants. Being aware of this, representatives of the Polish movement aimed at the formation of national identity among the broad social masses of West Prussia on a religious basis, combining what is close to the majority of Polish-speaking inhabitants of the region, i.e. the Catholic faith with Polishness. This type of narrative was the content of numerous press articles. It is, therefore, worth quoting a few selected fragments of texts dealing with the discussed issues:

It is through church education that you will be brought up **in Religion without which there is no Nationality. Nationality without Religion is an echo, it is hollow, and a meaningless Word** (*Wychowanie dzieciak* [Education of children] 1849: 92).

So you can see that **our holy religion is the thing proper to us, which distinguishes us from the German nation**, having again a different rite, so our religion is one part of our nationality (*O narodowości* [About nationality] 1850a: 3).

We already know that **God decided about nationality**, and so **from it is from His hand that we have a separate and proper holy religion, separate customs and habits, a separate language, a separate land proper to us** because **all this together constitutes nationality** (*O narodowości* [About nationality] 1850b: 3).

God created us Poles and set us on Polish soil. We praise God with our Polish language and we eat Polish bread (*Potrzeba znajomości dziejów ojczystych...* [A need for awareness...] 1866: 11).

The presented way of thinking was directly reflected in the approach to educating children represented by Polish journalists. In one of the first Polish periodicals of the region, i.e. in “*Katolik Dyecezyi Chełmińskiej*” published in the years 1849–1851, we read that

educating children is to reassure and enlighten their young and undeveloped beings using the religious and national spirit (*Wychowanie dzieciak* [Education of children] 1849: 86).

Before the Germanization policy seized elementary education with increased force, not only the family, but also a folk school was to be the place where education was to be implemented in this way:

The school houses children, this next generation. **A school is, therefore, a small world, an immature village or commune, a society and again a part of the germ of a larger society – the homeland. (...) And as it is the duty of every human being to strive for greater and greater perfection, that is to try to be more like God, so should every nation do** (*Chełmno 7. maja* [Chełmno, May 7] 1858: 2).

Representatives of the Polish movement also emphasized building the image of the child as a property and gift of God. Understandably, this point of view appeared above all in texts by clergymen who presented the Catholic Church as “the greatest and most caring protector – the most tender mother of children” (*Wychowanie dzieciak* [Education of children] 1849: 86–87). These priests also emphasized that

the Church (...) considers the child a little Christ Church, a member of His body, an heir of the treasures of Salvation, and also **a being free and independent** (*Wychowanie dzieciak* [Education of children] 1849: 89).

Although the presented way of thinking arose from church circles, it was not criticized by lay authors. On the contrary, in the Polish circles of West Prussia, seeing the essence of education in the forming of moral virtues, determined by religion, was common practice. Moreover, in the Polish journalism of the analysed region, attacks against the Catholic Church were generally treated as simultaneously directed against the Polish nation. Catholic and Polish education created an inseparable being, the obverse and the reverse of the same medal, and its common value was emphasized many times over several decades. On the other hand, abandoning the faith and language of the ancestors was to be associated with painful results, i.e. eternal damnation and loss of identity. Therefore, all the more so, in the light of the analysed press, every Polish child should act in accordance with Catholic ethics and in accordance with “national virtues”, and it was up to the family and the values conveyed by the family to implement the indicated educational ideal:

Families – make up a nation, it is **in them** that **national virtues are brought up, in them is the beginning of a happy eternity** (*Chełmno 21. maja* [Chełmno, May 21] 1858: 1).

It is undeniable that **the entire direction of education depends to a large extent on its origins**. (...) Already at the first dawn of waking up ideas **one should instil a passion for work, the concept of civic duties and virtues, love for the homeland, attraction to all that is good and noble**, in the hearts of this young generation, in whom rests the seed of hope and the future of the country (*Uwiadomienia* [Notifications] 1861: 4).

The road to achieve such a goal, however, was not easy. The practice of everyday life differed from the patterns created in the press. This is evidenced by the following fragment of an article published in 1880 in “Pielgrzym” with a suggestive title, i.e. *How are children raised to be good Catholic Christians?*:

Parents have forgotten to raise their children because otherwise they would have raised better children; parents repeatedly do not know that **children should become good Christians, Catholics**; otherwise, they would try to ensure that their family life, above all, adhered to Christian principles, for upbringing can mature only in a Christian family (*Jak się dzieci wychowuje...* 1880: 2–3).

Summarising this part of the analyses, it is worth noting that secular representatives of the Polish movement in West Prussia looked at the child mainly through the prism of national interests, and the clergy from the perspective of the survival and development of Catholicism in Protestant Prussia. In the opinions of both, one can clearly see a collective view of childhood, devoid of the individualism characteristic of modern times. The child, as the future of the Polish nation and Catholicism, was to be focused primarily on meeting the needs of the community (nation, religion, etc.), and not its own needs.

Childhood sensitive to the needs of others (the child as an altruist)

The communal perception of childhood, however, was not to be limited only to the ideas already presented. It also contained a component of altruistic thinking. “Beloved Polish Children!” were encouraged to be sensitive to the needs of other people, to look after them, and to share their material possessions with them. This way of thinking about childhood was also constructed on a religious basis and strongly correlated with the 19th-century “folk” image of God’s love and blessing, which one must earn:

It is such good children that God and people are happy about. **For this, they gain love from people and blessing and reward from God** (*Ukochane Dzieatki Polskie!* [Beloved Polish Children] 1910: 1).

Heroic childhood (the child as a hero)

Heroic childhood, referring to the idea of a hero child, is strongly connected with the categories of Polish and Catholic childhood as well as sensitive to the needs of others presented above. Although the representatives of the Polish movement in West Prussia recognised childhood as a time separate from adulthood, without today’s knowledge in the field of developmental psychology, they placed very high demands on children, expecting from them great maturity and often attitudes difficult to meet at such a young age.

The heroism expected of children was to be mainly expressed through readiness to make sacrifices for the sake of another person, the Catholic Church, and the national cause. For example, in 1903, the editor Stanisław Różanowicz, who for political reasons spent twelve months in prison himself, called for this type of attitude in the following words:

I have suffered this heavy prison sentence and no one will take it away from me. I would like, however, my torment also to bring some benefit to you, Beloved Polish Children. And what is the use of, what lesson comes from my 12-month prison sentence? Well, you should learn from it that **the Holy Faith and loved Polishness can and should be fought and suffered for even at a young age** (*Ukochana Działwo Polska!* [Beloved Polish Children] 1903: 1).

The quoted author encouraged children to learn to endure even the toughest punishments in order to defend Catholicism and Polishness. In another issue of the journal, reference was made to the example of St. Agnes, who showed an uncompromising attitude in fighting evil and enduring suffering, and even under the threat of death, did not renounce God. Setting St. Agnes as a model worth following, the editors of “Przyjacieli Dziełwy” asked rhetorically:

Look how St. Agnes loved the Lord Jesus; do you also love Him this way, do you willingly say prayers and go to church? Be good like St. Agnes (*Ukochane Dzieatki Polskie!* [Beloved Polish Children] 1905: 1).

It seems that, at least in part, this heroic childhood, created in the Polish press of West Prussia, was put into practice. This is evidenced by the large participation of Polish students from folk schools in the school strikes of 1906–1907. Although the strikes were initiated by the eldest children, to whom the German language was introduced by law as a teaching language in religion classes, the youngest children often willingly joined the protest (Burzyńska-Wentland 2009: 73). Despite the threats and physical punishments, and even being threatened with the use of weapons, as was the case in Kasparus in Kociewie (cf. Śpica 2015: 512–516), the students refused to use the German language. The phenomenon of the school strikes of 1906–1907 was based precisely on the resistance put up by children, and it is worth emphasizing that this resistance went down in history as one of the most expressive acts of the struggle of the Polish population of West Prussia against Germanization.

**Well-tended, “cared for”, and pupil childhood
(the child as a creature requiring care, upbringing, and attending,
the child as a creature with the best predispositions to learn)**

In the second half of the 19th century, more and more content devoted to the issues of upbringing and caring for children appeared in the regional press. As a result, from the end of the 19th century, greater care for the child could be observed, with the changes taking place mainly in larger cities and towns, where parental care slowly began to go beyond meeting only basic needs. Increasingly, parents themselves paid more attention to providing their children with the right conditions for playing and enjoying their free time. Toy stores, which at the beginning of the 20th century already existed in almost every town in the studied region, became a symbol of the changes taking place. However, in rural communities, the possession by the child of the products offered by them was still regarded as a kind of whim and extravagance (Krzemiński 2017: 222).

A strict approach to upbringing still prevailed in the country. There was a long “tradition” in the peasant community of perceiving children as the property of their parents and cheap labour force (*Kawalki z postępowania...* [Pieces from the demeanour...] 1869: 6–7). Representatives of the Polish movement tried to fight this way of thinking, apparently unsuccessfully, as early as in the 1860s (*Kawalki z postępowania...* [Pieces from the demeanour...] 1870a: 45).

It is worth recalling here that the roots of the above-mentioned beliefs about the role of the child in the peasant family should be found in the pre-industrial era, and more specifically in its hierarchical social relations and feudal ideas about the household, which was also the workplace. The durability of these ideas in West Prussia resulted, inter alia, from its economic backwardness (capitalist transformations in the studied region proceeded much more slowly than in other parts of the Prussian state, despite the enfranchisement process completed in the mid-19th century). By showing parents that the child is not their property,

but the property of God and a gift without which they would have to cope in life themselves, representatives of the Polish movement tried to make the Polish population aware that children should attend school in the first place (*Kawalki z postępowania...* [Pieces from the demeanour...] 1870b: 60). Even at the turn of the 1860s and 1870s, it was common practice for the Polish population to avoid compulsory education for children not for national reasons, but owing to the use of children by their parents for various farm work.

Irrespective of the gradually progressing Germanization of elementary education in the second half of the 19th century, the dominant discourse on childhood in the Polish community focused on learning, emphasizing that childhood was the best time to acquire knowledge. Based on organic ideas, at least until the beginning of the 1870s, not infrequently in spite of the views expressed by peasant parents who were not yet able to perceive the benefits of school education, and contrary to the aforementioned practice of teaching noble children at home (cf. Nawrot-Borowska 2011), the authors of the texts published in the local press emphasized the educational values of the folk school. In addition, they saw it as an opportunity for social change, including the raising of the culture and material well-being of the Polish population. At the same time, they were strongly convinced that the neglect of education in childhood would cause irreversible losses in the intellectual development of the child, which would not be able to be made up in adulthood:

You have to learn when you are young, as long as you are a child, and as long as your parents are working toward your education and support. When you get older you will have to work to earn your own living, so there will be no time to learn. **At a young age, there is also the best head for learning and the best memory** (*Dzieje Polskie* [Polish History] 1884: 1).

Neat and orderly childhood (the child as a pedant, the child as an imperfect being that requires proper formation)

In the views of the representatives of the Polish West Prussian movement, childhood also appeared to be neat² and orderly. Publicists who created a hegemonic image of childhood made high demands on children in terms of keeping order, cleanliness, and neatness, regardless of their social and economic status:

Getting children accustomed to neatness and order must be attached to this example (...) Poverty and deprivation are only an apparent obstacle, because in fact it is true that one can and should be poor, but neat. (*Chełmno 1. czerwca* [Chełmno, June 1] 1858: 1).

In the local Polish press, ideal children were presented as pedantic in their everyday functioning. Their day from morning to evening was to be filled with strictly defined activities that had to be carried out accurately and reliably. In this vision of childhood there was no

² It means: tidy, clean, neat.

room for imperfection and spontaneous behaviour. What became a necessity, however, was the regularity of doing things:

Regularity should also be observed. There are children who are probably regular in this that they are always irregular: they come too late, they will never submit their work on time, and they are constantly making excuses, pretexts, there is always something in their way. **If you do not break this addiction strictly,** you will not learn to value time and adhere to the hour; **this will result in the emergence of people who will sow, or clean, or eat, or work, or pray, or play, but they will always arrive too late, always others will have to wait for them** – they will be always making excuses – they will die even too late, because God keeps such people in the world for repentance. We cannot insist enough here upon constant attention, unrelenting strictness, to avert such wretched behaviour (*Chełmno I. czerwca* [Chełmno, June 1] 1858: 1).

An important role was also to be played by adherence to strictly defined procedures, sometimes presented in the form of specific “instructions”, e.g.:

When you wake up, make the sign of the cross and say thanks for a happy night. (...) After the prayer: get dressed quickly and modestly. (...) Approaching your parents say: “Praised be Jesus Christ”, kiss the Father and Mother on the hand and say: good morning; do the same for other family members, if they are at home. Wash your face, ears, neck, and hands thoroughly: “How awful it is when a mother, or worse, a teacher or someone else, has to say to a boy or girl: »you sloven!«”. (...) Kneel down to say your prayer, say it slowly, carefully, and piously. (...) At the end of the prayer, even a sigh: “Lord Jesus, have mercy on the poor Polish people! Queen of the Polish Crown, pray for us Poles!”. Afterwards: breakfast, eat it slowly, but before and after eating make the sign of the cross piously. Before going to school: are all school things in order, are the clothes clean, no stains, and have the shoes been cleaned. Don’t forget: the stylus, sponge, pen, and blotting paper (*Jak się dzieci mają zachowywać w domu* [How are the children...?] 1899: 33).

Homework: do it as soon as possible and, if possible, organize yourself so that you do not study by the lamp in the evening, but during the day. Prepare styluses for the next day. Every Saturday, wash the writing slate with soap and salt water. Always behave politely and modestly in the room. Do not fight with or cuff your brothers and sisters “Because it’s only little kittens that scratch and beat each other, and good children should be loving.” Do not spit on the floor in the room, but always go to the spittoon bowl or spit in front of the entrance hall (*Jak się dzieci winny zachowywać w domu* [How the children should...] 1899: 35).

In the Polish community of West Prussia, which was generally conservative in terms of worldview, it was common to understand the child as an imperfect being, which should be properly formed. The child’s opinion was not taken into account because he or she was considered too immature, insufficiently teachable. Reaching maturity could only take place thanks to appropriate efforts made by adults. However, this maturity always meant placing the child in a strictly defined and ideological framework.

Childhood based on obedience and subordination (the child as a performer of an adult's will)

In the dominant childhood discourse, keeping children within certain frames also meant complete obedience and subordination of children to adults. In this regard, hegemonic childhood was quite consistent with common practice. The young generation owed their parents, as “God’s deputies on earth”, love and respect. The elderly were also to be respected (*Szanuj człowieka starego...* [Respect the man...] 1866: 52). As Tomasz Krzemiński points out, “the parents decided (...) about the most important decisions concerning the future of their offspring, especially about continuing secondary education after the period of compulsory education in folk schools, or about choosing a profession. The financial situation of the family was almost always the basic criterion for making the individual choices” (2017: 223–224).

Obedience and subordination to parents had their clearly religious, but also educational foundation:

The Saviour (...) recommended to children that they should honour their fathers, for this is the first commandment that promises a long and happy life on earth. This doctrine, although only quoted in a few words here, contains almost all the rules of education (*Wy-chowanie dzieciak* [Education of Children] 1849: 88).

Honour thy Father and thy Mother. After the commandments in regard of God, this is the greatest commandment. (...) This virtue is the cornerstone of human society. (...) **Parents are God’s deputies on earth**, then, by obeying and respecting them, you obey and respect God Himself. (...) Please do not sadden your dear Parents with disobedience, misdeeds, but **be obedient**, study well, and in any way you can give joy to your father and mother. (...) **Love and respect your parents** because God promised those who honour their parents long life and holy grace (*Czcij Ojca twego...* [Honour thy Father...] 1869: 1).

They **should** [i.e. children – P.Ś.] **obey their parents and not do what their parents forbid them to do** because it causes them to lose health and contract disease. Children do not have this sense yet so that they can know for themselves what is harmful to their health (*O zdrowiu* [On health] 1884: 3).

I will encourage you especially to one virtue, dear children, that is, to the honouring and loving of your parents. That is why I will often provide you with models and examples of honouring parents for imitation, so that you, sons and daughters, may be encouraged to obey and respect your beloved parents (*Kochane dzieciaki!* [Beloved Children!] 1892: 2).

Nevertheless, the dominant discourse also emphasized the important role of a personal example flowing from the moral behaviour of the parents themselves, while child abuse was stigmatized:

Parents are instructed not to scandalise or annoy their children in any way, let alone to do any bad things to them, or even take their lives. By this order the Saviour placed this sacred and inevitable duty upon parents to watch over their children most carefully, to keep all evil away from them, and not to instil anything in their hearts and minds, or to delude them so as to irritate them, that is, distract them from their real destiny. For this, children owe their parents obedience, love – reverence. (...) Immediately at the beginning of its being and action, barring the **church** in such a way that customs and bad examples would not pass from the unbelievers to the faithful, **it imposed severe prohibitions that fathers and mothers would not allow their children anything that would harm their health and life** (*Wychowanie dzieci* [Education of Children] 1849: 88–89).

However, this does not mean condemning the use of corporal punishment, which throughout the analysed period was perceived as an appropriate educational measure, without which it is impossible to instil in a child love, obedience, and respect for parents:

The fact that **maintaining children's discipline at an early age often will not work without a stick** is true, but it is not a misfortune: The Holy Spirit advises to beat little children with a stick! **It is better to use the stick effectively, rather than later to be forced, in vain, to seize an oak switch** (*Chełmno 11. czerwca* [Chełmno, June 11] 1858: 2).

A child with its own dissenting opinion was often stigmatized. Subordination was required of children in both public and private life. Already at the stage of socialisation in the family home, the child was taught subordination. This way of functioning was a legacy of feudal social relations, in which the monarchical and subordination-based approach to exercising power was reflected in intra-family relations (cf. Flandrin 1998: 145). Although until the second half of the 18th century the studied region (the then Royal Prussia) enjoyed considerable autonomy, and the system of Poland itself was more democratic than those of its neighbours, the submissive mentality resulting from the legally and culturally established social stratification was strongly rooted in it. This state of affairs was not changed (or, as it seems, it was even deepened) by the incorporation of Royal Prussia into the Prussian state, ruled in an absolute way, in which the conservative Junkers held a strong position. Although in the 19th and early 20th centuries there was a slow democratization of social relations in Prussia, and then in the united Germany, the submissive mentality was still overwhelmingly present in families (especially peasant families).

Childhood untainted by impudence (the child as a being avoiding immoral acts and self-controlled)

The hegemonic discourse of childhood, which is characteristic of the Polish community of West Prussia, also reveals the issue of morality and sexual purity, which were understood quite broadly. Regardless of the aspect in which they were written about, they were

usually reduced to the necessity of self-control and avoidance of unethical behaviour (i.e. inconsistent with the principles of faith).

It is worth emphasizing, however, that high ethical requirements related to dealing with one's sexuality and a kind of prudishness in this respect generally characterized the journalism of the period under study. Although adolescents and adults were most often warned against the dire consequences of pre- and extra-marital sex life, it was obvious that children should avoid all acts that could risk breaking the sixth commandment.

By copying the views of the 18th-century Swiss physician Samuel Auguste Tissot, children and adolescents were threatened, inter alia, with the disastrous health effects of masturbation, which was even compared to suicide:

The sin referred to here [**masturbation – P.Ś.**], **is a significant suicide**. For it **impoverishes the vital juices of human health and life**, and destroys both of them slowly but surely. (...) We see in cities, and unfortunately also in villages, young people looking pale and thin, devoid of healthiness, with faces covered with pimples as small as white poppy seed, and sweating doing even very little work. (...) As soon as they reach the middle of human age, they will infallibly become confused old people. (...) This misdeed has an enormous influence on the mind, weakening and destroying memory very early (*O nieczystości* [On unchastity] 1849: 189–190).

How these views translated into practice, however, is difficult to say, because in 19th-century Polish society, sexuality remained a taboo subject, regardless of age. One can only conclude that these types of narratives increased the feeling of guilt and fear of one's own developing sexuality.

Conclusion

On the basis of the conducted research, it should be concluded that the hegemonic image of childhood for the Polish community of West Prussia in many respects fits the concepts of L. de Mause and P. Ariès cited in the introduction, i.e. socialising parenthood and childhood understood as a time of imperfection and immaturity. In the narrative dominant in the Polish community of the studied region, the necessity of introducing children to fulfilling specific social roles and the need for their appropriate, i.e. chaste, education was emphasized many times. At the same time, attention was paid to the obligation to work with the child in order to overcome his or her bad habits.

The hegemonic image of childhood in the Polish community of West Prussia remained in a strong relationship with the prevailing patriarchal family model, reflecting post-feudal (despite progressing modernisation) social relations and monarchical state and church power. In this system of relationships, the child (as well as peasants in society) stood at the lowest level of the family hierarchy. Nevertheless, high demands and expectations

were placed on the children. Their better future, both economically and culturally, was seen in their education. The childhood discourse, dominant in the Polish community of West Prussia, did not focus on the individuality of the child, but on his or her communal usefulness. It tried to keep children within specific, uniform for everyone, frames and clear boundaries. In this sense, therefore, it was a discourse clearly monistic in nature.

What definitely characterizes the hegemonic discourse of childhood among the Polish community of West Prussia is also its clear anchoring in religious foundations and its harnessing for the implementation of national goals. In the analysed discourse, childhood was subordinated to the “higher”, supreme idea, i.e. the maintenance and development of Polish and Catholic identity, which to a greater or lesser extent permeates most of the categories identified in the course of the research.

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