

Taking a Culinary Journey through the Pages of Cookbooks Published during the People's Republic of Poland

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In the cookbook entitled *What They Eat and Drink at the Rhine* (*Co Jedzą i Piją nad Renem*) from 1989, the author, Barbara Pokorska, writes:

I hope that a housewife using this cookbook will be able to diversify and expand her menu. Some of the included recipes might give rise to concern due to unavailability of certain products as well as the rules regarding rational feeding. In the first case, I attempted, where possible, to provide substitute products: the complete elimination of such products from recipes would deprive them of authenticity, and after all apart from using new dishes in our kitchen, it is worth knowing what the inhabitants of the Rhine regions eat and drink (3).

This short fragment can serve as a starting point in the analysis of the significance of cookery books centered on international cuisines published during the People's Republic of Poland as it provides insight into certain aspects which were typical of the socialist era in Poland. First, the author acknowledges the fact that a potential reader, in this case a housewife, can encounter some problems while preparing the dishes as certain food products are not available on the Polish market and in such a situation substitution is necessary. Second, Pokorska refers to the fact that some dishes might not adhere to the principles of rational eating, the aspect so often underlined in culinary discourses at the time. Third, she emphasizes that despite those issues, the aim of this publication is to broaden the knowledge concerning the culinary heritage of the regions situated at the Rhine River.

During the People's Republic of Poland (1945-1989), food production, distribution and prices were strictly controlled by the communist authorities in Poland. Also freedom of movement, especially to western countries, was limited due to the severe restrictions imposed on foreign travel. Such a situation had an immense effect on the Polish food culture, which at the time underwent some major transformations. Cooking and eating started to be viewed as a part of a wider social endeavor, rather than a personal matter. Such issues as socialist culinary science, rationality, modernization, avoidance of waste and product substitution were emphasized in the culinary discourses. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, a proliferation of cookbooks devoted entirely to foreign cuisines as well as an invention of numerous dishes implying a foreign origin brought some exoticism to this often-dull reality of the communist era. The number of publications devoted solely to foreign cuisines, as well as impressive print runs and multiple editions of some cookery books, indicate that people were very willing to reach for such

publications to take a short imaginary culinary trip during the time when their movement especially to western countries was highly restricted. Pokorska in another cookery book entitled *Fondue at Leman Lake: Swiss Cuisine* (*Fondue and Lemanem: Kuchnia Szwajcarska*), writes that 'apparently, studying cookbooks not only stimulates appetite but also imagination' (1986, 6), whereas Iwaszkiewicz and Włodek in *French Cuisine* (*Kuchnia Francuska*) note that "cuisine is the easiest means [...] to explore the world" (1976, 3). Potential cookbook readers were invited not only to prepare and taste some foreign dishes, but also to experience travelling vicariously.

Given the popularity, availability, and significance of such publications, it seems quite surprising that cookbooks in general and cookbooks devoted to foreign cuisines in particular published during the communist period in Poland have drawn very little scholarly attention (Has-Tokarz 2016; Keating 2018; Waleszczyński 2021). Nevertheless, the growing corpus of research attending Polish culinary history in socialist Poland provides valuable insights into the further and more detailed study of cookbooks (Bednarek 1997; Burrell 2003; Piotrowski 2007, 2008; Brzostek 2010; Sokołowska 2013; Stańczak-Wiślicz 2014, 2020; Straczuk 2016; Garstka 2017).

In line with Bracewell's observation, this research aims to show that rather than viewing cookery books as practical culinary guides, such publications "can be read as prompts to fantasy and desire, perhaps especially in the absence of the required ingredients" (2012, 170). However, cookery publications are more than that since, as Albala highlights, they "reveal what we might call complete food ideologies" (2012, 231). This is especially evident in the context of communist regime when the authorities exercised power over everyday lives of all citizens. Cookbooks offer a productive lens for examining those ideological mechanisms and they provide a valuable insight into economic, political, and socio-cultural characteristics of the researched period. As the vast majority of publications on foreign cuisines were published during the latter part of the socialist period, the content analysis of the selected sources embraces cookbooks published during the 1970s and 1980s. This study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on the Polish culinary history of the twentieth century as well as to validate the claim that cookery books can be regarded as valuable historical sources.

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