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Gifts to Children and the Ritual Year in Eastern Lithuania and Western Belarus in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries

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Abstract: In this paper, I chose to analyse the gifts given to children in Lithuanian villages in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries on the occasion of various calendar celebrations. I tried to reveal what types of gift were given to children from different social groups: one's own children, one's godchildren, children who worked as hired hands (herders), and neighbours' children. I also analyse the dominant ways that gifts were given to individual children or groups of children at these times. After conducting this analysis of the gifts and gift-giving traditions, we can conclude that during the research period gifts were given only within limited periods, usually from Easter to Pentecost. In most cases, the gift was an egg or another edible product. When analysing occasions for giving gifts, little difference was found in the types of gift given to one's own children, godchildren, herders, the neighbours' children or even those from other villages. However, the way these gifts were given did differ. When giving a gift to one's own child a mediator would usually be called for, while gifts to godchildren, herders and village children generally were given directly. In all cases, a gift to a child carried a sacred value. However, of all the gifts it was those received from one's godparents that were cherished the most by children. These children held a number of social statuses: that of child, godchild, herder, neighbour's child, and in different situations they would receive gifts from their parents, neighbours or masters. In most cases (except one's own child), gifts served the function of balancing or ensuring an equal exchange, which is typical in a community.

Keywords: gift, eastern Lithuania, western Belarus, children, herder, godchildren, community

In the Lithuanian ethnographic encyclopaedic dictionary, Birutė Kulnytė and Elvyda Lazauskaitė define the concept of a gift as an object given as a sign of love, respect or prosperity (Kulnytė, Lazauskaitė 2015: 67). Research by Lithuania's ethnologists shows that from the earliest times, rural people have given incomparably greater symbolic value to gifts than their monetary worth. The symbolic value gifts are charged with also reflects a particular community's values. A gift is the goodwill giving of an object to another person with the purpose of conferring a pleasant feeling or repaying an earlier good deed, or it is an act of charity or aims to obtain someone's favour (Vyšniauskaitė 1995: 273–285). When researching Lithuanian village community customs, a link between gifts and food and/or drink treats was found to exist. In the traditional village community, cakes, sweets, drinks and hand-woven textiles were given as gifts for hundreds of years, being considered women's currency (Savoniakaitė 2006: 60). Arnold Van Gennep (1960 [1909]: 29) wrote about such treats as an act of social solidarity. Therefore, I will attribute treats (food products) and gifts to the same category of exchange.

French anthropologist Marcel Mauss emphasised the reciprocity of the act of giving. He pointed out that donation is never a one-sided act, it is an implementation of the principle of mutual exchange. Reciprocity, according to anthropology, reveals the profound social fabric of society and is universal in archaic communities (Maus 2002 [1950]). Marshall Sahlins distinguished several types of reciprocal exchange: 1) Generalised reciprocity, i.e. an indefinite exchange without expecting to receive anything in return; 2) Balanced reciprocity or equivalent exchange; 3) Negative reciprocity, where you expect to get more than you give. The first type takes place within the family, the second within the community, and the third relates to relationships outside the community (Sahlins 1972: 193–196). In the today's perception, speaking about gifts for children we must use generalised reciprocity to means transactions that are putatively altruistic, transactions along the lines of assistance given and, if possible and necessary, assistance returned (Sahlins 1972: 193). In his summary of gifts and gift-giving experiences, American anthropologist Yan Yunxiag states:

> While revealing that the highly diversified patterns of gift exchange derive from different perceptions of the relationship between culturally constructed notions of personhood and material objects in the larger social setting, the anthropology of the gift also unpacks the nuances of social life by examining patterns of gift-giving behavior all over the world, the spirit of the gift and the principle of reciprocity (Yunxiang 2020:1).

The question is then what type of reciprocal exchange dominated in village communities that ran extensive farms in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus in the

late 19th and early 20th centuries? In the traditional Lithuanian village of this period, gifts were largely given on occasions such as house warming, christening, name days and weddings. Gifts were given to adults and young people, while children only received gifts from their godparents and then only during the major calendar celebrations (Kulnytė, Lazauskaitė 2015: 67). Gifts given to children have received almost no attention in ethnologists' research, which is why I have chosen to analyse this particular field.

In contemporary society, the giving of expensive gifts to children on their birthdays, for Christmas or the New Year is hardly surprising. Gifts for children these days make up one of the most important aspects of the commercialisation of celebrations. However, as little as fifty-seventy years ago, the situation was very different in certain Lithuanian and Belarusian villages. In the majority of agrarian societies, social prestige was closely tied to ageing. The experience accumulated throughout one's life was held to be the main value, which therefore determined the relatively low prestige of a child. The types of gift given to children also reflected how their value was perceived.

In the first half of the 20th century, in villages inhabited by Lithuanians in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus engaged in farming, children's name days or birthdays (here, childhood is taken to mean below the age of youth) would be remembered very rarely. During various celebrations, children were more likely to receive sweets or another food product as gifts, rather than a toy, item of clothing or other material object.

In this paper, I will analyse the gifts given to children in Lithuanian villages located in Eastern Lithuania and Western Belarus in the late 19th – first half of the 20th centuries on the occasion of various calendar celebrations (for Christmas, New Years', the Epiphany, Mid-Lent, for Easter, Children's Easter (the Sunday after Easter Sunday), on Storks' Day (March 25 – the Feast of the Annunciation), St George's Day, Pentecost, and on parish and personal celebrations (birthdays and name days)[1]. This is why I shall try to analyse what types of gift were given to children from different social positions: 1. one's own children; 2. one's godchildren; 3. children who worked as hired hands (herders); 4. neighbours' children. I shall also analyse the dominant ways that gifts were given to individual children or groups of children in this period.

As Olga Nieuwenhuys, a researcher from the Netherlands, has mentioned, gift exchange between adults and children is a surprisingly neglected area of childhood studies (Nieuwenhuys 2006: 147). A similar situation exists in Lithuania where the topic of gifts and gift-giving to children as part of calendar celebration customs remains poorly researched to this day. The author of this paper also looked at the gifts given by godparents to their godchildren on the occasion of calendar celebrations in the article "The Ritual Year of Godparents and Godchildren in Contemporary

Lithuanian Society" (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2015: 471–478). The most comprehensive ethnologists' studies of gifts given for calendar celebrations are dedicated to the Christmas period. These are by ethnologist Juozas Kudirka in his book *Lithuanian Christmas Eve and Christmas* (Kudirka 1993: 53–57, 210–215) and "Preparation for Christmas Festivals in the families of Vilnius Citizens: Is it a Stress or a Pleasure?", an article by the present author (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2013: 316–327). Another article by ethnologist Rūta Latinytė, "Christmas Gifts Exchange between Parents and Children as a Means of Communicating Care", is dedicated to the exchange of Christmas gifts (Latinytė 2021: 68–85). Ethnologist Irena Regina Merkienė wrote more extensively on Easter gifts in her article "Easter Signs of Spring: The Culture of the Baltic Region in the 20th Century" (Merkienė 1999: 187–207).

Gifts to one's own children

As I already mentioned, children did not receive special attention in agrarian societies. They would become accustomed to the heavy labour expected of a farmer from an early age. According to Laima Šilainytė, who described the world view of people from Gervyaty County (western Belarus), it was believed that the more hardship a child had experienced, the better the child (Šilainytė 1989: 200). A similar view applied in Lithuania, where in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, a child in a peasant family would be educated through labour (Vasiliauskas 2006: 131). When we are talking about gifts and gift-giving, as the ethno-pedagogue Romanas Vasiliauskas noted when studying customs in Dubičiai County in Varėna District (southeastern Lithuania), peasants would generally use verbal rather than material means to get their children used to hard work. Verbal praise dominated, while encouragement through the giving of gifts was mainly practiced in wealthier families (Vasiliauskas 1989: 185). According to ethnologist Nijolė Pliuraitė-Andrejevienė, who researched children's toys, in a Lithuanian peasant family in the interwar years, only a little more than a quarter of peasants' children up to the age of three, a little more than half of three-to-six-year-olds and less than a third of children aged seven to 14 had toys that were bought (Pliuraitė-Andrejevienė 2012: 26). Meanwhile, according to ethnographic field research data collected by ethnologist Angelė Vyšniauskaitė in Dubingiai County (Molėtai District), children had practically no bought toys. Only rarely would a peasant bring back a horse- or ram-shaped clay whistle from a Vilnius market for their child without any special occasion. Children usually played with toys they had made themselves (Vyšniauskaitė 1971: 205).

Even in the economically wealthier localities of northern Lithuania, children were not spoiled with gifts. In old age, many would recall the first gifts they had received as children, such as a linen dress, a handkerchief or a pair of shoes handmade for a 14-year-old (Sabaliauskaitė 1980: 62). One rare example recalled by a

man born in northeast Lithuania in 1934 was his delight, as a herding-aged boy, at receiving a matchbox when his father had returned from the market one time. It was a gift he remembered for the rest of his life. The poor children of small Lithuanian and Belarusian towns and villages also referred to food products as gifts. It should be noted that even on various other occasions unrelated to the calendar celebrations, parents would often give their children sweets or another food product rather than a toy, item of clothing or material object.

Gifts would be given to children during calendar celebrations, of which Easter truly stood out when children would receive decorated eggs called *margučiai*. We should note that during this period, parents would not give them to their children directly, but via a mediator. In eastern Lithuania, it was commonly said that *Velykų Bobutė* (the Old Lady of Easter) had given the children gifts. Adults would explain to children that she would bring *margučiai* at night and leave them for the children to find in the morning (Marcinkevičienė 1998: 107–108). A similar account comes from western Belarus. According to Merkienė, in Lida District, a mother would bring her children *margučiai* and leave them on the windowsill, saying that *Vėlykis* (a man) had brought them (Merkienė 2002: 339). Thus, only the sex of the alleged gift-giver differed.

Children would receive gifts from a mediator during other calendar celebrations as well. One such celebration in eastern Lithuania was March 25, also known as Gandro diena (Storks' Day). According to ethnologist Nijolė Marcinkevičienė, in the village of Grabijolai (near Vilnius) women would bake special buns from various grains, which they would place on fence posts, saying to children that a stork had brought them. That morning, children would rush to grab the *gandro pyragai* (stork's cakes). It was just a coincidence that the stork had made its nest at the midwife's farmstead, and thus all the children thought that the stork had brought them as well (Marcinkevičienė 2005: 29). In addition to stork's cakes baked from various grains, sometimes parents would secretly dye eggs and say that the stork had brought them as well, while near Kietaviškes (Elektrėnai Eldership, southeast Lithuania), boys would receive a few red eggs and a bun tied in a handkerchief, while girls received the same parcel tied in a new scarf (Marcinkevičienė 2009: 23). In Dūkštai County (Vilnius District), back in the early 20th century, similar treats would be decorated with gooseberry branches and were placed on the corner of the fence, the children would think they had been left for them by the stork (Dundulienė 1991: 88–89). In Eastern Lithuania the stork was meant to give a child a pair of shoes.

> [O]n that morning, when the children woke up, they'd be told that a heron had flown back – 'run outside, you'll find some shoes on the *žardas*' [a drying rack for hay, flax, etc]. When the children ran outside, their feet would get cold and they'd return inside with red feet,

> as if they had red shoes. People would say: 'so, you found the shoes then' (Švenčionys District) (Galinytė 1979: 36).

A similar situation also existed in western Belarus. In Gervyaty County (western Belarus), at Mid-Lent (Laetare Sunday), a child might be told to collect the red shoes left for him or her by a bear in the courtyard. Once the child came back inside, the parents would point at their child's chilled, red feet[2], saying that this was the bear's gift. (Šaknys, *Gervėčių krašto kalendoriniai papročiai*, manuscript). One respondent recalled how on one occasion she asked her parents, "where are the shoes then?" Her parents replied, "look at your feet, they're as red as a stork's, so there you have your red shoes". The woman said she cried for a long time after this kind of joke. Later, some parents would buy their children real shoes on this occasion (Šaknys, *Gervėčių krašto kalendoriniai papročiai*, manuscript).

Christmas gifts for children in Lithuanian and western Belarusian villages became widespread in the early to middle of the 20th century. According to Kudirka, this custom was linked to the spreading popularity of the Christmas tree. As in the case of *Velykų Bobutė*, children would not see the gift-bringer, i.e., *Kalėdų Senelis* (Father Christmas). The custom that gifts would be handed out by a man dressed as *Kalėdų Senelis* became known only in the interwar years (1920s–1930s) (Kudirka 1993: 214–215). According to Kudirka: "In the beginning, *Kalėdų Senelis*, as we know him today, would rarely appear. Little was said about him, just like *Velykų Bobutė*. Children would fall asleep on Christmas Eve without even having waited for him, and in the morning it would be too late – only gifts, sometimes a letter would be left as well..." (Kudirka 1993: 214). Between 1920 and 1939, in the Poland-occupied Vilnius Region, attempts were made to introduce the tradition[3], popular in various parts of Poland, of hiding a gift from St Nicholas in various nooks on December 6 (Znamierowska-Prüfferowa 2009: 140; Kudirka 1993: 215). However, this tradition, unknown up to 1920, did not become established in eastern Lithuania.

The gifts we are today used to receiving and giving for New Year have their own history. During the Soviet years, attempts were made to shift the celebration of Christmas, which embodied the symbolism of transition rituals, to New Year's Eve, and for many *Senis* Šaltis (Old Man Winter) handing out gifts at New Year became an inseparable part of this celebration (Gutautas 1991: 33). According to ethnologist Dalia Senvaitytė, in these years great ideological and press attention (according to data from 1953–1964) was focused on the popularisation of New Year's celebrations for children at school, in companies, in collective farm clubs and elsewhere. Not only was the fun of the celebration accentuated, but also the giving of gifts and the decoration of Christmas trees. In this period, children's school holidays would begin just before New Year's Eve, with no days off over Christmas. The government's measures were meant to divert people's attention from the Christian Christmas and

towards secular New Year celebrations (Senvaitytė 2013: 116–117). However, even at these mass events, gifts pre-arranged by parents would be given to children via the mediator *Senis Šaltis*. Christmas gifts did exist in some areas too, even during the Soviet era. Marcinkevičienė recorded a very detailed account from a respondent born in the village of Kibyšiai (Varėna District, souteast Lithuania) in 1944:

> The *Kalėdų dziedukas* [Christmas Old Man] would come to our house on Christmas Eve. My grandma and mother would say that the *Kalėdų dziedukas*' place was under the table. He would crouch there, but he was invisible and no one could see him. No one would see or hear how he came or how he left – the door would open for him by itself. He saw and knew everything (Marcinkevičienė 2008: 149).

According to the respondent, there were no toys at the time, but the *Kalėdų dziedukas* would leave a gift on the chair where the child would sit, and it would be a sweet, bun or little Christmas Eve sweet buns (*šližikai*). But if the child had not been good, some coal pieces is all that would be put on the chair (Marcinkevičienė 2008: 149).

To summarise all the celebrations mentioned above, we see that parents would not actually give gifts to their children themselves. The function of giving gifts was in the hands of a mediator. Traditionally, this would be done by the *Velykų Bobutė*, *Velykis*, a bear, stork, or later *Kalėdų Senelis*, St. Nicholas and *Senis* Šaltis. In this way, with the help of the mediator the gift would be imparted with a sacred character. We shall see a different situation when analysing the gifts given by godparents and on what occasions they usually gave them to godchildren.

Gifts to godchildren

The institution of godparents was very important to the functioning of village communities in both eastern Lithuania and western Belarus. For example, during weddings in eastern Lithuania back in the early 20th century there was a custom of giving gifts to the groom's godchildren (Jokimaitienė, Vėlius 1986: 336–337). The role of the godparents when children received first communion, got married or upon the death of a godchild is often mentioned in ethnographic sources from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, ethnologists make only fragmentary references to these gifts during annual calendar and lifecycle celebrations. Nonetheless, how did the tradition of gift-giving to children function during calendar celebrations?

Significantly from the perspective of gift-giving, of all the calendar celebrations marked in Lithuania's villages, Easter again stood out. On this occasion, decorated Easter eggs would be handed out not only by the imaginary *Velykų Bobutė* or the male being *Vėlykis*, but also by godparents. Communication between godparents

and godchildren would traditionally be given greater significance during this celebration (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2015: 473). The egg, i.e., *margutis*, was identified as a special Easter gift. When analysing the egg as a gift, Merkienė noted that a decorated egg was considered an attractive gift for children, godchildren, neighbours, friends and loved ones (Merkienė 1999: 199–201). At the end of the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century, eggs would be given to children not just for Easter. Even though analysis of ethnographic sources shows a great number of occasions, for the purposes of this article our attention will focus only on Easter eggs given to godchildren. The custom of giving Easter eggs was equally widespread in all ethnographic regions of Lithuania in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Paukštytė 1999: 124). Kudirka states that a godmother's Easter duty was to give her godchild an Easter egg. In some places, the godfather would also give Easter eggs. Godparents would visit younger children, while older children (especially boys) would pay a visit to their godparents themselves (Kudirka 1992: 64). The tradition of giving Easter eggs to godchildren during Easter was alive in western Belarus as well. According to Merkienė's research data, in the Lida District (western Belarus) in the 1940s godparents and godmothers would visit children aged one to seven and give them Easter eggs, and sometimes another object as well, for example a scarf for a girl, or sweets. Sometimes, in the hope of receiving gifts, godchildren would visit their godparents (Merkienė 2002: 339). Meanwhile, based on memories from the interwar years, Kudirka noted that in the village of Plikiai (western Belarus), godparents would give their godchildren only Easter eggs and nothing else (Kudirka 1998: 28). This is confirmed by Malvina Miškinienė from the village of Giry (western Belarus), however according to her recollections, she would go looking for eggs not only at her godmother's house, but also her aunts' and grandmother's, i.e., her female relatives. The respondent claimed to have collected as many as 30 eggs (Miškinienė 2008: 56). Sometimes the Easter visits of godparents to their godchildren would go on until the second Sunday of Easter (Divine Mercy Sunday) (Kudirka 1992: 92). In southeast Lithuania there was also a custom to give godchild a bun and an egg for Easter, and for St. George's Day (Marcinkevičienė 2008: 134–135)[4]. The final date for 'paying-off' one's godchildren would be Pentecost (Marcinkevičienė, Mukaitė, Vakarinienė 2006: 185).

There are some mentions in ethnographic sources of gifts received from godparents for name days, although according to Šaknys, in Aukštaitija between 1920 and 1940 neither name days nor birthdays were celebrated on a wide scale (Šaknys 2008: 23). A similar situation existed in southeast Lithuania. For example, as Vyšniauskaitė has stated, in Dieveniškės County (southeast Lithuania), godparents would buy a gift for their godchild for their name day only if the name day was marked with a corresponding saint's day in the parish (Vyšniauskaitė 1995: 370).

When the custom of Christmas gifts started to become widespread in the first half of the 20th century, in some places in Lithuania godparents would go to wish their godchildren happy Christmas on December 26 (the second day of Christmas), while older children would pay a visit to their godparents themselves (Kudirka 1993: 202). During the Soviet years, when religious traditions came under fire in Lithuania, godparents would visit their godchildren and bid them well on the occasions of New Year and birthdays. In the early 21st century, a tradition had formed where the godchildren would contact their godparents for Mother's Day, Father's Day, International Women's Day, Christmas, Easter, name days and birthdays, giving them a bought object or a drawing or something they had made themselves (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2015: 476–477).

This research revealed some differences in gift-giving traditions. Godparents would give gifts directly, not via mediators, as parents did to their own children. Godchildren would value gifts they had received from their godparents very highly, as these were held to be sacred gifts. Both in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus, gifts would be given to one's own children and godchildren in spring, most often during Easter. Winter gifts were a phenomenon that developed at a later period.

Gifts for herders

In the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, herders would also receive gifts on various occasions in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus, either individually or as a group with other herders when visiting neighbours. On what occasions were gifts usually given, and by whom?

One such occasion was Easter, when herders, along with the other children in a village, would receive *margučiai* (decorated Easter eggs). However, based on ethnographic sources, it can be said that among herders Easter was not as important as *Jurginės* (St. George's day), when herders were generously rewarded by farmers for taking livestock outside into the meadows for the first time after the winter. A record was made of *Jurginės* customs where one egg would be given to a herder, another would be taken to church or a herder would be given two eggs so that the sheep would give birth to a pair of lambs (Dundulienė 1979: 85). In Tverečius County (northeast Lithuania), they would be given a bread bun with an egg cooked inside (Kudirka 1997a: 19). Even though it was associated with receiving gifts, for a herder, taking livestock out into the meadow again was often not a pleasant experience. The farmers' wives would pour water over their herders, believing this act would make the cows produce more milk. However, afterwards the herders would be treated to home-made cheese, butter and eggs (Balys 2013: 175–176). As the egg-gifting custom was gradually phased out (in around 1945), the tradition remained of gifting eggs only to first-time herders (Mikštaitė-Čičiurkienė 2007: 43). This custom is

mentioned less commonly in western Belarus. For example, in Lida District, eggs would only be gifted over *Jurginės* to beggars, while children were told it was forbidden to touch *Jurginės* eggs. The belief was that if girls ate such eggs, they would not marry (Merkienė 2002: 341–342). Kudirka meanwhile mentions a custom alive in the village of Plikiai (western Belarus) in which one would go out to the sown rye field and eat one or two eggs, then bury the egg shells and roll around in the soil; this would be done by both children (herders) and adults (Kudirka 1998: 30–31). In the village of Kupchely (western Belarus), herders would be given eggs and the livestock would be driven out into the meadows with a *verba* (decorated branch) "so that the herd would be fat and sturdy" (Kudirka 1997b: 44). This shows that in the period under discussion, in both western Belarus and eastern Lithuania, giving gifts to herder(s) was associated with successful animal husbandry. The herder could also be perceived as a beggar, whose prayers could guarantee success.

Nonetheless, the most important herders' celebration, according to numerous ethnographic sources, was Pentecost (*Sekminės* in Lithuanian). A herder could be given a gift individually or gifts could be given to a whole group of herders from one village. In both cases, this was related to Pentecost being considered the professional celebration of herders, during which common feasting or sharing of food and drinks was traditionally arranged. According to the folklorist Jonas Balys, on the eve of Pentecost herders would drive the cows home decorated in all sorts of foliage: wreaths woven from birch branches or other grasses were placed on their horns and neck, or tall birch branches were tied to or wound around the horns. The next day herders had the day off and would organise *melstuvės*, i.e., food and drinks, while the maids would herd in their place. Herders would try to gather gifts of food from their employers' wives (whose cows they herded), and thus celebrate their feast; the most important dish was scrambled eggs (Balys 1948: 132). In economically wealthier regions, such as Kaišiadorys District (central Lithuania), herders would sometimes be given clothing. They were bought shirts, trousers and other clothes (Daunoraitė 2011: 35). Even though the herders' feast was held during Pentecost, according to different ethnologists' studies the feast could have had later origins than that of adult hired hands. According to ethnologist Vitalis Morkūnas, by the 1940s when this festival was gradually being phased out celebrations for herders began to be organised. During these celebrations herders would place wreaths on the livestock and collect food products, i.e. gifts, and hold a big feast (Morkūnas 1977: 177). As similar celebrations for adult hired hands became less popular, farm owners focused their attention on their herders instead, giving them better food, gifts, and if the herder's parents lived nearby, they would be allowed to go home (Morkūnas 1977: 180).

Pentecost was celebrated in a similar way in Western Belarus. In this region, the farmer's wives would also show their thanks for dressing up the cows with wreaths

by giving gifts. Gifts for such decorative efforts consisted of bread, cheese, eggs, cured pork fat, sausage, sometimes even money (Merkienė 2002: 343). Kudirka mentions that the herders used this gathered food-gifts for their feast. They probably did not receive many eggs, as it is written that wild duck eggs would also be added to the large, common scrambled eggs (Kudirka 1998: 31). In Gervyaty (Western Belarus), money would sometimes be given during other celebrations as well, such as Jurginės and the Feast of the Holy Trinity (Merkienė 1989: 99).

Thus, gifts would be given to herders, and godchildren, directly, yet this was perceived more as payment for labour, not as the godparents' duty to give gifts to their godchildren during certain calendar celebrations. By giving gifts to a herder the villagers expected success in rearing their livestock. Another belief was that by equalling a herder to a beggar, the former's prayers could bring about that success.

Gifts to neighbours' children

Werner Rösener, who researched European peasant culture, noted that the peasant way of life in villages formed a special kind of community awareness, which could be described as "good neighbourly relations" (Rösener 2000: 179). This was also reflected in celebration customs. As ethnologist Arūnas Vaicekauskas noticed, "in sources reflecting the state of calendar customs in the 1920s–1930s, children are mentioned increasingly often as the performers of these customs. In the post-war decades, the vitality of some community customs was kept alive by children exclusively" (Vaicekauskas 2005: 52).

In Lithuania's territory in the period under discussion, neighbours would also often gift eggs to children during Easter. Village children were often the recipients of eggs when, following the example of adolescents and adults, they would visit other farmsteads over Easter. Between 1920 and 1940 in eastern Lithuania, 75.7 % of herders would be hired after *Jurginės*, with their term of hire ending at Christmas (46 %) or on All Saints' Day (November 1–50 %) (Morkūnas 1977: 46). Therefore, in this period herders were still 'free' and could join in with any village children's processions that were going round visiting neighbours.

According to Merkienė, in western Belarus, in Lida District, after breakfast on Easter Monday children aged eight or nine (older children were usually too embarrassed) would form groups of six to eight and go around their village to collect eggs as gifts. Sometimes their parents would scold them for going out too early, saying it was impolite, so they would go to farmsteads further away on the second day of Easter. Children would say "glory be to Jesus Christ", or say a prayer if the farmer's wife asked them to, sing a song or answer questions, and then stand quietly, somewhat meekly, waiting to be given gifts; when they received something, they'd be too overjoyed to remember to say thank you. In earlier times, children

would be given one or two decorated Easter eggs, sometimes some sweets or cake, later they started to receive more, while today in Dubiniai children can get up to 10 eggs each. In the village of Stanišiai, it was said that a *kapa* of eggs (60) needed to be boiled in advance for the children. It was thought that if no children visited your farmstead over Easter, that year would be an unlucky one in that house (Merkienė 2002: 339–340). In Gervyaty County meanwhile (western Belarus), whoever had little land or few animals would not hire herders, and on those days when herding was needed, the farmer would ask a neighbour's child to help, promising to give them eggs or something else over Easter in return for their labour (Merkienė 1989: 99). Therefore it can be said that in most cases, decorated Easter eggs were perceived as payment for or a means of securing farming success, and not simply a gift with no strings attached.

In eastern Lithuania, there would be an analogous procession of children during Easter, and according to Marcinkevičienė, the village of Levūnai (Varėna District, southeast Lithuania) would be visited by children from two other villages. Sometimes, children from several villages would gather and go around together, as one big group. For example, children from Levūnai would wait for the children from Sarkajiedai to arrive, and then all go 'egging'. This was an opportunity to receive gifted eggs from another, unrelated, village. Sometimes children would receive money, even as little as 10 cents was considered a great gift (Marcinkevičienė 2008: 128–130). However, in certain villages, the time available for 'egging' was limited to only the first day of Easter (Sunday) until sunset (Ulčinskas 1995: 94). Mid-Lent was another time when this custom was performed in the village of Pavarėnis (Varėna District). Children would go around the whole village, visiting one another to feast on the special festive dish made from oats called *šustamilcis* (Marcinkevičienė 1998: 94).

Based on photographs taken in the early 20th century by ethnologist M. Znamierowska-Prüfferowa, in the 1930s children in Vilnius would form separate processions from the adults, such as processions for the Epiphany at which they would dress up receive gifts from the farmers (Lapėnaitė 2020: 278–283). However, no processions of this type were found to occur in either eastern Lithuania or western Belarus. We can say that due to the conditions in villages (snow-covered roads, colder weather in general), similar processions of young children in villages would have been too difficult.

In summarising calendar festivals from the perspective of gifts given to children, it becomes clear that giving gifts to one's own children, godchildren and the neighbours' children mainly happened around Easter time. For young herders meanwhile, the feasts of St. George (*Jurginės*) and Pentecost were their special days.

Conclusions

After conducting this analysis of the gifts given to children and gift-giving traditions in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, we may conclude that gifts were given only within limited periods, usually from Easter to Pentecost. In most cases, the gift was an egg or another edible product. Later, such celebrations increased with gift-giving becoming popular for Easter, St. Nicholas' Day, New Year, name days and birthdays. When analysing occasions for giving gifts, little difference was found in the types of gift given to one's own children, godchildren, herders, the neighbours' children or even those from other villages. However, the way these gifts was given did differ. When giving a gift to one's own child a mediator would usually be called for, while gifts to godchildren, herders and village children were generally given directly.

The analysis of gift-giving to children during the course of the calendar year showed that in most cases gifts served the function of balancing or ensuring an equal exchange, which according to Marshall Sahlins is typical in a community. Within the family, gifts embody specifically undefined forms of exchange, i.e. giving without expecting anything in return. The gift is veiled in a cloak of secrecy, using a mediator such as a bird, wild animal or mythological being as the gift giver. I believe this mutual exchange expressed both actual and symbolic obligation to the community. In all cases, a gift to a child carried a special, sacred, value. However, of all the gifts, children cherished most those received from their godparents. On the other hand, the same child held a number of social statuses: that of child, godchild, herder, neighbour's child, and so according to the situation they would receive gifts from their parents, neighbours or masters.

The gifts themselves were most commonly food products. Even a small gift provided an opportunity to experience the festive mood and at the same time feel the rhythm of the ritual year. As my research showed, in many cases the most important holiday of the year for rural children in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus at the end of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century was Easter.

Notes

[1] In this article, gift-giving during other celebrations in the lifecycle is excluded, except for birthdays and name days.

[2] At the time it was common for children to run outside for a short time barefoot, even in winter.

[3] The custom of gift-giving is not exclusive to Slavs alone. On the occasion of St. Nicholas' Day, gifts are given in some West European countries as well, such as the Netherlands for example (cf. Helsloot 2011: 143–158).

[4] Perhaps St. George was associated with the first herding of livestock outside after winter, although the godchild would receive the gift, not the herder.

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