'In transformation': trust, participation, and new socialities around collective food procurement networks in Gdańsk

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CHAPTER THREE.

The community around vegan food: manifesting political views and critical attitudes in a culturally intimate way

Introduction

The main topic of this chapter is the existing community around vegan food in Gdańsk. In the following pages, I explore how young urban Polish citizens express their political views and critical attitudes based on ideas of diversity and social inclusion. This, in turn, contributes to increasing trust and participation in the creation of a local community. The type of participation described in this chapter relates to involvement in social and political life through attending and promoting socially critical demonstrations. At the same time, I analyse how, in a culturally intimate way, by choosing vegan products, urbanites of *Trójmiasto* engage in the reconstruction of their 'Polishness' thus breaking away from the category of post-socialism, and exemplifying yet another dynamic of constant 'in transformation'. I explore the performance of political identity both in online and offline spaces, with the use of "new entrepreneurial strategies of self-promotion and branding" (Cross 2020: 162) such as "friendship marketing" (Rousseau 2012) and social media marketing. I understand veganism as a variation on the spectrum of vegetarianism (Christopher et al. 2018) and thus, depending on the context, I will use literature on vegetarianism to talk about veganism and vice versa. Veganism is a more niche phenomenon; it can be seen as a more radical form of vegetarian diet, therefore in the literature, both diets are often treated as one. While I focus specifically on a community around vegan food, when discussing a more general history of the meat-less dietary movement, I will refer to vegetarianism, which has more historical coverage in the Polish context. This chapter maintains continuity with the previous one as it delves further into the social dimensions of food enterprises, with a particular focus on vegan places and their online and offline marketing strategies.

The main case study for this chapter, *Spożyvczak*, is located in a newly renovated and recently popular neighbourhood of *Dolny Wrzeszcz*, often referred to by locals as a "basin of veganism", since within several meters there are two vegan shops, three restaurants, and one café. To broaden the scope of my observations throughout the chapter I also bring in examples of other vegan food places, such as a popular restaurant *House of Seitan* located in the same neighbourhood and *Faloviec*, a vegan restaurant in the quarter of *Przymorze*[140]. I choose to use the broad category of 'vegan food places' to cover their variety as they include shops, cafes, restaurants, and community meeting venues and thus they fulfil different functions related to food. Drawing on 15-month-long ethnographic research of *Spożyvczak* and observations of other vegan food places in Gdańsk, I analyse how vegan enterprises present themselves offline and online on Instagram and Facebook. The choice of these social platforms is driven by two reasons: the popularity of these two platforms in Poland[141] and the extensive use of them by *Spożyvczak* and *House of Seitan*. The analysis of the online and offline self-representation allows me to see how vegan food places in *Trójmiasto* are becoming left-leaning, and subvert traditional Polish (culinary) culture. To better understand the character of *Spożyvczak*, see the anecdote below derived from my field notes (June 2020).

One sunny summer morning I pass by *Spożyvczak*, partially as a part of my fieldwork but also to do some grocery shopping and visit Mil. By now, Mil and I are friends and I often come to the store to say hello, shop, and chat. The shop is always on my way, as it is right next to my house.

Spożyvczak (from *sklep spożywczy* – a grocery store) is a small vegan shop in the neighbourhood of *Dolny Wrzeszcz* (Lower Wrzeszcz). It is owned by a couple – a man and woman, in their 40s and

140 *Przymorze* is the seaside district of Gdańsk located in the northern part of the city.

141 According to the online website socialpress.pl, Instagram and Facebook are in the top most used social media in Poland among people aged 16 to 64 (Kuchta-Nykiel 2020).

Mil is their only employee[142]. Today is a delivery day and Mil is busy unpacking cardboard boxes, filling the shelves with new products, and serving customers. It is not easy to manoeuvre around the boxes because they take up most of the space in the small shop, especially when there are more than two customers at the same time. In those moments I try to squeeze myself somewhere behind the counter so I am not in anyone's way. When Mil is serving customers I look around the shop. The big window is covered with stickers supporting animal rights and fair trade, an unsurprising connection for a vegan shop. Next to those, there are colourful stickers of the LGBTQ+ flag, "Here you can safely come out" or "Hate free zone" sentences, and slogans supporting refugees such as "Everyone is welcome". As an anthropologist I am intrigued by these correlations, as an individual with "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld [1997] 2016) of Poland, its political climate, and food culture, I am not surprised that a vegan shop is openly showing their ideological stances associated with the widely understood political 'Left', because 'veganism', like 'left-wing' politics is challenging some Polish traditions, as will be explained later in this chapter.

When there are no customers Mil and I chat while she is busy organizing products on the shelves. We joke, talk about everyday life, and comment on the political situation in the country. Mil has strong opinions which could be considered as 'left-leaning'. She has been living in *Trójmiasto* since 2010, became involved in an activist scene by attending 'leftist' demonstrations as an individual and a part of Samba Collective. She is a good source of information on what is happening and where. She and the owners of *Spożyvczak* knew each other from activist circles already before she started working in the shop.

It is still early in the day and Mil asks me if it is OK if she takes a picture of me and posts it on their Facebook page. Updating their Facebook and Instagram profiles daily is an essential element of *Spożyvczak's* marketing strategy. I agree and she takes a picture of

142 Because of the economic difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the owners of *Spożyvczak* had to stop employing Mil. They parted in a friendly atmosphere and with mutual consent, and Mil immediately got another job. At the moment of writing, it is the two owners who take turns to run the shop.

me and a friend who just appeared in the shop (see Fig.1, facemasks on as we are in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic). Within a few seconds, she puts it online and signs in a humorous, informal way, typical of *Spożyvczak* but also noticeable in other vegan enterprises in the neighbourhood (see Fig. 1).

Fig.1 Myself and a friend leaning on the counter of *Spożyvczak*. Mil signed this photo saying "Clients and helpers will not let a person work in peace, but they arrange a common room from the very morning. We invite you to do shopping and *chilałt* (phonetically written 'chill out' in Polish) in our store! P. S. *Promki* (causal way to say discounts) are still with us, those for the burgers, margarine, and mayonnaise."

These daily pictures often feature friends and customers, categories that overlap here contributing to a sense of community (as will be explained later in the chapter), as well as funny memes. In another post, Mil wrote a reminder that the shop is open as usual that day, but the day after would be different, so it is better if people come over soon to do their daily shopping. When finished with her social-media updating, she asked me if I was going to a "*demo*" (slang for demonstration) the next day and explained that the whole

team (the owners and herself) were going, so the shop would close early. The demonstration in the city centre was against the tightening of abortion laws in Poland and it was not the first time the shop had reduced working hours for the team to take part in political demonstrations. I answered that I would come and that I would see her later. It was time for me to get going with other fieldwork responsibilities. I left the shop and continued with my day.

The above vignette serves to highlight various issues that will be addressed in this chapter, particularly concerning the established vegan dining community in Gdańsk, their set of values, and politicisation. To understand the formation of a community around vegan food and its subversive character, I refer to Michael Herzfeld's ([1997] 2016) concept of "cultural intimacy", which he initially developed to describe the Greek nation-state and its discontents. Herzfeld uses this concept to help us understand how people can "negotiate the tensions of social identity and daily life within the […] modern nation-state" (91). The vegan food places analysed in this chapter simultaneously engage with Polish culinary tradition and subvert it, defining group boundaries and creating new forms of belonging. Herzfeld's expression about Cretan shepherds who are "fiercely patriotic and just as fiercely rebellious at one and the same time" (ibid: 91) applies to the community around vegan food in Gdańsk, as vegan food places and people who visit them combine their faithfulness to Polish culinary traditions with sometimes bold and openly critical stances towards other traditions and the more general political situation in the country. Therefore, I use "cultural intimacy" as a lens which will allow me to expand my understanding of collective identity self-representation around vegan food in Gdańsk and their way of building an alternative (national) identity, situated within the socio-cultural context of Poland.

"Cultural intimacy" helps to understand the ways and the language in which *Spożyvczak* and other vegan enterprises create and maintain cultural content, and, through this, appeal to a specific collectivity. I chose to talk about 'community around vegan food', rather than 'vegan community' as many customers and some employees of those enterprises are not vegan, or as they like to say "not fully

vegan"[143]. In this way, I also hope to make clear that *Spożyvczak*, as well as other vegan food places, are "more than about food"[144]: where 'vegan' exceeds dietary choices and stands for other identity traits and ideological standpoints, which constitute community values. Vegan food places actively engage in actions driven by tolerance and acceptance of diversity (in this specific case, sexual and ethnic diversity). In these places, one can encounter neighbours and people that one might have seen at political demonstrations, like the one referred to in the vignette, so people who share a similar set of values and political stances. Thus, vegan enterprises in *Trójmiasto* become spaces of inclusion of certain minorities (specifically the LGBTQ+ community and refugees, which at the time of fieldwork were the most targeted for hate speech in Poland[145]), which contribute to shaping the community and allow for people to meet and be together. At

143 From an interview with an employee of *House of Seitan*. 19th of February 2020, Gdańsk.

144 From an interview with the owners of *House of Seitan* on ofemin.pl. Reszkowska, K. 2020. Available at: https://www.ofeminin.pl/swiat-kobiet/kariera/w-moim-interesie-o-sukcesie-house-of-seitan-rozmawiamy-z-tworczynami/4nfcjsj. Accessed on 28th of July 2022.

145 As reported by a team of Polish researchers, in 2016 refugees and gay men where the most common victims of hate speech in Poland (Winiewski et al. 2017: 5). Sociologist Barbara Pasamonik (2017) also argued the Poles are negative specifically about this category of migrants and she attributed this attitude to the "homogeneous ethnic structure of our society and limited contacts with foreigners as well as global and local media panic around refugees" (ibid: 15). However, the popular stance towards, and the meaning of the word 'refugee', appear to be more nuanced in Poland again. Following the Russian invasion on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, over 1.3 million Ukrainian refugees settled down in Poland (Available at: https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/02/23/over-1-3-million-ukrainian-refugees-remain-in-poland-one-year-since-russias-invasion/. Accessed on 26th of April 2023), many of whom were invited to ordinary people's homes. Nevertheless, in Poland (and in Europe in general), there seems to be a distinction between those refugees who are allowed in and others who are not; consider the dramatic situation at the Polish-Belarussian border, where many refugees and asylum-seekers are constantly being pushed back and mistreated by border guards. See for example Human Rights Watch report: https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/07/violence-and-pushbacks-poland-belarus-border. Accessed 26th of April 2023.

the same time, the community around vegan food, through certain foods, defines its distinction from the rest of society. The analysis presented in this chapter aims to draw a larger picture of how inclusive spaces based on common trust are created in contemporary urban Poland, through mechanisms of boundary-making and management of the ambivalent tensions between belonging and differentiation. This chapter is divided into three parts. Part 1 presents a literature review, divided into three sections. First, I delve into how social scientists approached food as a marker of both unity and distinction. Next, I move on to presenting the vegetarian movement in Poland with particular attention to the cultural position of meat and its symbolic meaning. Finally, I demonstrate how Polish social scientists have explored the vegetarian and, to a lesser extent, the vegan movement. I also outline my intention to address the current gap in empirical knowledge. After the literature section, I move on to the second, ethnographic part divided into four sub-sections. In the first sub-section, I present an ethnographic description of my main case study *Spożyvczak*, and then I delve into how the shop uses marketing strategies for community building. The third sub-section focuses on the concepts of friendship, care, and trust as essential elements of community building, while the final sub-section explains how vegan enterprises expand the concept of inclusion thus strengthening the community. Finally, I move on to part three, where I analyse ways in which vegetarians and vegans manage cultural tensions around food and political identity in culturally intimate ways.

Part 1

1.1. Social relations, group distinction, and community creation – food from a social sciences perspective.

Food has been frequently investigated as a marker of group distinction and I treat it as such in this chapter. For example, sociologist Deborah Lupton (1996) paid attention to the social and communitarian aspects of food, underlining the importance of shared food tastes and meals in the process of community formation and maintenance. Lupton stated that not only "sharing the act of eating brings people into the same community; they are members of the same food culture", but also "food is instrumental in marking differ-

ences between cultures, serving to strengthen group identity" (ibid: 25). In this chapter I describe how for the community around vegan food in *Trójmiasto,* food preferences become tools for boundary making, which serves as a strategy for exclusion and inclusion at the same time. Similarly, anthropologist Pat Caplan acknowledged that food can be seen "as a marker of identity and difference" (1997: 1) and is used "to express significant relationships" (ibid: 25), such as those towards and within a group.

Furthermore, the consumption of food has been linked to establishing and negotiating identity. More recently, anthropologist Judith Farquhar (2006) investigated food consumption in relation to identity positioning. Reflecting on young Minnesota housewives' practices of buying and preparing certain foods perceived as belonging to the past, Farquhar suggests that food preferences can be "creative reinventors of a local 'identity'" (154). Like Farquhar, I observe that by choosing vegan food products, some Polish citizens cut loose the relationship with traditional food while, at the same time, they immediately rebuild this link by creating new vegan dishes. In this context, traditional food symbolizes traditional cultural values and the re-invention of common meals stands for the reconstruction of 'Polishness'.

Lately, food studies researcher Isabel de Solier (2013) approached food as an example of material culture, and investigated how consumption of food and engagement in food media contribute to the "modern self-identity formation" (ibid: 2) as opposed to the creation of social identities. The work of de Solier is useful for my analysis as the community around vegan food pays particular attention to using social media for promotion, and as a tool for constructing its politicised identity, or to use de Solier's words "to form a meaningful and moral self" (ibid: 8). While in her work de Solier focuses on the category of the 'foodie' (a passionate lover of food), I borrow her understanding of food as the material culture used for group distinction to interpret the strategies of identity and community formation employed by vegans of *Trójmiasto.*

Also within the Polish context, food has been studied as a marker of local/regional/national distinction, from a historical perspective, within a rural context, and, more recently, through the analysis

of media in shaping contemporary foodscapes (Bachórz and Parasecoli 2023)[146]. For example, social scientist and historian Agnieszka Chmielewska approached food as a tool for constructing national identity and distinctiveness (2021). Based on an analysis of historical resources, Chmielewska described the participation of the Second Polish Republic[147] in three international exhibitions in New York and Paris during the interwar period. She argued that national food, and especially borscht[148], was used as a representation of a distinct Polish cultural identity and aimed to "convince international audiences of the existence of a nation separate from others, firmly rooted in tradition, but dynamically developing and worthy of its own state" (ibid: 265, translation by myself).

Conversely, anthropologist Joanna Mroczkowska described how pork consumption and production in eastern Poland become a "tool[s] of community building" (2019: 223). She analysed "pork politics" as contributing to the process of group identity and boundary-making at two levels: local (such as family and neighbourhood) and a regional and national level. Mroczkowska chose to focus on pork as she understood that within the rural context, pork had "symbolic value […] to mark farmers' way of life" (ibid.).

While Polish social scientists approach food as a marker of national group identity, little has been written on the role of food in community-making in contemporary urban Poland (apart from Mroczkowska's text which, however, focuses on rural areas), especially in the

146 Bachórz and Parasecoli (2023) delve into how Poland's culinary past is used in future-oriented discussions within food discourse. Through a qualitative analysis of popular food media (magazines and TV shows), the authors explore the interplay between interpretations of historical food practices and ongoing contemporary debates, revealing that evaluations of the past and the visions of the future tend to be diverse.

147 The Second Polish Republic (*II Rzeczpospolita*) referred to the country of Poland which existed between 1918 (when Poland gained independence after 123 years of occupation) until 1939 (beginning of the Second World War and invasion by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union).

148 Borscht (*barszcz*) is a typical Polish beetroot soup, traditionally served during the Christmas Eve dinner.

context of the vegan movement. Therefore, by focusing on the community around vegan food choices, I aim to fill a gap in knowledge on the creation and self-representation of the vegan community in Poland as well as its political aspect. More specifically, I delve into the evolving ideological alignment of veganism with left-leaning values within the distinct Polish context. My study underscores how a nuanced adaptation of this alignment happens in a culturally intimate way, while fostering a sense of community centred on vegan food.

To better contextualize the topic of this chapter, in the next sections, I provide a short overview of the vegetarian movement in Poland versus the position of meat in Polish national culture.

1.2 Meat and the vegetarian movement in Poland

Vegetarian and vegan diets in Poland became popular in specific educated circles of artists and intellectuals, in the XIX and the early XX century, under the name *potrawy jarskie* (meat-less meals)[149]. As Polish philosopher Paweł Pasieka (2018) explained, the vegetarian movement of that time (which included variations such as vegan and raw vegan) was eclectic in its ideologies, exclusive in terms of belonging, and anthropocentric. Their main focus was to, through changing the diet, renew a whole person including his/her spiritual dimension, and did not address the well-being of animals. Polish writer Janisław Jastrzębowski wrote in 1912 that "vegetarianism […] is connected with the ethical drive to RENEW THE WHOLE HUMAN" (Jastrzębowski 1912: 12, emphasis in text, translation by myself). The movement was

149 At this point it is important to mention that in Poland vegans and vegetarians seem to constitute one relatively unified group, as opposed to the globally perceived distinction between vegans and vegetarians. For example, literary critic Tzachi Zamir (2004) describes how vegans tend to criticize vegetarians for inconsistency in their beliefs and insufficient involvement in challenging the harmful food industry. Similarly, psychologists Cara C. MacInnis and Gordon Hodson (2012) argued that there are "substantial tensions" between vegans and vegetarians which threaten the cohesion of the group. Differently, as I will develop further in this chapter, within Polish context vegan and vegetarians belong to the same group of politically left-leaning individuals.

also characterized by different forms of abstinence. In the same text, Jastrzębowki said that alcohol and drugs as well as vaccination and vivisection ought to be boycotted by vegetarians (Jastrzębowski 1912: 8-9). Likewise, anthropologist Patryk Zakrzewski (2016) described that early Polish vegetarian groups urged a refrain from tobacco, gambling, and debauchery in general. Despite having a strictly expressed set of do's and don'ts, "Polish vegetarianism at its beginnings had no distinct political label" (ibid: n.p.). Rather, it was a movement with versatile socio-political views. For example, some late XIX and early XX century proponents of vegetarianism in Poland saw this dietary choice as representing the true teachings of the bible (Jankowski 1912: 6), while others perceived it as the only way to resist harmful Christianity and go back to the Slavic harmonious way of living (Moes-Oskragiełło 1888). The translator and cultural scientist Natalia Mętrak-Ruda described the eclectic character of early Polish veganism. She noted that in the popular XIX/XX-century, sanatoriums where meatless diets were promoted, nationalist leader Roman Dmowski might encounter a socialist politician Ignacy Daszyński, while passing through the corridors (2022: 192).

Nevertheless, as several Polish social scientists suggested, meat has had a relevant symbolic dimension since at least pre-war times. Sociologist Justyna Straczuk (2016) described how the level of meat consumption was an indicator of status and a means to differentiate between social classes. Anthropologist Joanna Mroczkowska also pointed out that "meat acted as a symbol of satiety and prosperity in Poland before WWII" (2019: 224). Poorer citizens of pre-war Poland did not consume meat regularly, while wealthy Polish citizens consumed it on a daily basis, even up to 100kg yearly per person (Straczuk 2016: 37). Only during communism, certain meat-based dishes, such as *kotlet schabowy* (pork breaded cutlet) or *rosół* (chicken soup), gained nationwide popularity and "became a permanent item in the repertoire of 'traditional' cuisine" (ibid.) Despite its nearly quotidian character, or perhaps because of it, meat was a desired, although not easily procured, object for all social classes (Mroczkowska 2019: 224) and, according to sociologist Ewa Kopczyńska, it played "a central role as a measure of success" and a symbol of "abundance, satiety, health, and a nutritious meal" (Kopczyńska 2021: 222). Anthropologist Monika Milewska described how, in Sta-

linist Poland (1948-1956), meat was considered a luxury, "a synonym of wealth and abundance" (2022: 308). In its pursuit of creating a "New Human": strong, fit, and healthy enough to handle heavy workloads, the communist system pledged to make meat accessible to all. However, as Milewska noted, this promise was fulfilled only to some extent, as workers could afford, at best, items like pâté, black pudding, or brawn – products with unknown (and most likely low) meat content and quality. Considering the symbolically loaded position of meat in Poland, choosing a vegetarian diet and thus rejecting meat can be viewed as a rejection of certain norms and traditions[150].

Due to the important position of meat in Polish culture, vegetarianism did not have a good reputation. Rather, as argued by Kopczyńska, "it was politically unpopular, even fought as an ideological influence of the hostile West" (2021: 222). Only later, in the 70s and 80s, vegetarian meals became of interest to those curious about exotic cuisine (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2020).

The vegetarian movement started to be part of the activist scene at the turn of the XX century. In 1988, the *Front Wyzwolenia Zwierząt* (Animal Liberation From) was established, initially associated with Animal Liberation Front[151], but rejecting all violence (Mętrak-Ruda 2022: 246). In 2000, the Polish branch of Vegetarians International Voice for Animals (VIVA!) Was launched. While most of its members are vegans, the foundation advocates vegetarianism in order to reach the wider public (Jacobsson 2012: 358)[152]. In 2004, an association called *Empatia* (Empathy) was founded, which promotes ethical veganism and no violence towards animals. In 2012, the *Otwarte Klatki* (Open Cages) was established - a nationwide or-

150 In her book on the short history of the vegetarian movement, Natalia Mętrak-Ruda, asserts that a vegetarian diet, along with an interest in alternative medicine and the practice of yoga, was popular among young Polish people during the communist era. They were seeking a world distinctly different from the rather grim reality of the Polish People's Republic (2022: 239).

151 Animal Liberation Front is a radical organisation founded in 1976 in the UK which opposes industrial animal farming and animal cruelty.

152 Kerstin Jacobsson (2012) describes animal rights activism in Poland arguing that it chooses educational, instead of political, forms of action.

ganisation linking people who want to change the fate of farm animals. *Otwarte Klatki* works closely with *Roślinnie Jemy* (We eat plant-like), a campaign offering professional support for the development and promotion of new plant-based products and dishes. In 2014, Marta Dymek, who in 2019 became an ambassador of *Roślinnie Jemy*, published her first book titled "*Jadłonomia*. *Kuchnia roślinna – 100 przepisów nie tylko dla wegan*" (Vegetable cuisine - 100 recipes not only for vegans), which became very popular "with several hundred thousand copies sold and even translations into other languages"[153].

The connection between vegan food choices and political orientation was also observed outside of Poland and within various disciplines. German economic psychologists Thomas Grunhage and Martin Reuter (2021) described the connection between vegan and left-wing political views within Germany as natural or logical (19), and pointed to the fact that vegan ideology was perceived as a threat to the dominant meat-eating one (24). The correlation between the vegan diet and political leaning was also researched from a sociological perspective. For example, a team of sociologists (Christopher et al. 2018) showed that vegans and vegetarians in the United States exhibit mainly liberal political stances (2) and argued that holistic veganism[154] is "more inherently political" (17) opposing the capitalist livestock industry.

While, based on the popularity and abundance of vegetarian and vegan food places observed in *Trójmiasto*, it seems that vegetarianism and veganism are gaining popularity in some urban circles, the general perception of those dietary choices in Poland is still hostile and often negative[155]. Online forums compile texts

153 Dymek, Marta. From: https://www.jadlonomia.com/czesc/ Accessed on 12th of September 2022.

154 Christopher et al. (2018) distinguish two variations of veganism: health veganism and holistic veganism, where the former is seen as a health-related choice and the latter as an ethical choice.

155 In fact, data from the Central Statistical Office (*Generalny Urząd Statystyk, GUS*) show the increase in deliveries to the domestic meat market. Available at https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ceny-handel/handel/dostawy-na-rynek-krajowy-oraz-spozycie-niektorych-artykulow-konsumpcyjnych-na-

and videos listing comments that vegetarians and vegans hear from meat-eaters around them, some of which include "today vege, tomorrow homo [sexual]", "How will you ever find a husband?", "Real men/real Poles eat meat"[156]. As summed up by Kopczyńska, in contemporary Poland, vegetarianism is still a niche, yet "more and more visible and normalized" (Kopczyńska 2021: 222). Veganism, being a more radical form of a vegetarian diet, proves rarer, yet in some circles becomes increasingly popular and politicised.

While within the early vegetarian and vegan movement in Poland, authors and proponents urged against a violent lifestyle caused by meat consumption, they gave little or no thought to the issue of social equality and justice. It seems that the motivations and principles of a plant-based diet in Poland transformed over the years. While during the socialist period in Poland, the vegetarianism movement subsided, it came back in a new form after 1989 – a form which, as I argue, focuses on social justice and inclusion.

1.3 Contested veganism in contemporary Poland – a look from within

Even though vegan food choices in Poland were linked both to class distinction (see Straczuk 2016)[157] and to political preferences, the community around vegan food has not been thoroughly researched as a social phenomenon, especially with regard to socialization and marketization which happen in online

1-mieszkanca-w-2021-roku,9,12.html. Accessed on 8th of December 2023.

156 A facebook profile of "Living Library Cieszyn" shared a video in 2016 which collects comments Polish vegetarians and vegans hear because they do not eat meat. See https://www.facebook.com/zywabibliotekacieszyn/videos/686555961498570. Accessed on 12th of September 2022.

157 In her study on changes in Polish eating habits, Straczuk argued that some of the global, emerging eating patterns are Western imports, particularly evident in educated urban middle-class settings. According to Straczuk, these patterns reflect distinctive cultural capital and sophistication in culinary choices (2016: 34).

spaces[158]. Media scholar Eliza Kowal (2017) analysed the discourse of vegans and vegetarians in online discussions to research "trends in the construction and negotiation of identity by vegetarians and vegans" (123). Kowal suggested connections between food choices and political (as well as religious and ethical) identity, but her research was based on discourse rather than practice. Cultural scientist Alicja Węcławiak (2019) pointed to a link between vegan and vegetarian food choices and "left-wing political options" (*lewicowe opcje polityczne*) (80), however, she also did not delve into descriptions of specific practices. In her recent publication, sociologist Ewa Kopczyńska attempted to present, among others, a social organisation (*zrzeszenie*) around vegetarian eating, drawing a general representation of the vegetarian movement as a "lifestyle, an option of consumer choice, a type of social, political and religious activism" (2021: 219). It seems that lately the interest in veganism as a socio-cultural phenomenon is rising in Poland[159], however the academic literature on this topic, especially from the perspective of the social sciences, is still limited.

While there are not many sociological publications on the vegan movement, numerous articles dedicated to the topic of vegans can be found on Polish popular science blogs and websites. For example, Polish vegan blogger Dominik Haak (2019) attempted to explain, from a psychological perspective "where do the prejudices against

158 The available academic literature consists mainly of unpublished abstracts of bachelor and master dissertations, which I have found in Jagiellonian University's online repository (unavailable to outsiders) and few academic publications. The repository shows that Polish bachelor and master students have been interested in veganism and studied it as a cultural practice of the Polish middle class (Tyszkiewicz 2016), from a perspective of high-intensity sports (Mazur 2018) or a consumer choice (Rżanek 2019).

159 In April 2019 the Scientific Circle of Comparative Civilization Studies (*Koło Naukowe Porównawczych Studiów Cywilizacji,* for more information see: https://kn.psc.uj.edu.pl/) at Jagiellonian University organized a National Scientific Conference titled "Holy Cow or Steak? Veganism and vegetarianism in socio-cultural terms" (Święta krowa czy stek? Weganizm i wegetarianizm w ujęciu społeczno-kulturowym) where a selection of research was presented. However, none of them was published.

people on vegan and vegetarian diets come from?"[160] He argued that "vegaphobia"[161] pertains to the fact that "conservative people and meat-eaters often believe that non-meat eaters pose a threat to their culture and society – not only that they behave in a nonconformist way (they refuse to do something that most people do), but also do not buy products that are considered in a given culture as traditional or basic (e.g. meat, eggs, dairy products)" (ibid: n.p.).

Indeed, within Polish public stereotypes and the official discourse of some politicians, vegans and vegetarians are placed in a broad category of 'leftist'[162] - those who do not comply with true 'Polish' values and traditions. For example, in 2016 in an interview for the German tabloid *Bild* the then Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Witold Waszczykowski referred to "vegetarians and cyclists" as "fighting against every form of religion" and opposing traditional Polish values. He said:

> "Take the media, for example a certain left-wing political concept was pursued there under the previous government. As if the world had to move automatically in only one direction according to the Marxist model - to a new mix of cultures and races, a world of cyclists and vegetarians who only rely on renewable energies and fight against every form of religion. That has nothing to do with traditional, Polish values."[163]

The words of Waszczykowski suggest that a truly Polish society would be a car-driving, meat-eating, and culturally homogenous

160 Haak, 2019. See the full article on https://vege.com.pl/2019/12/20/144402/. Accessed on 13th of September 2022.

161 "Vegaphobia" is a term referring to a dislike or rejection of people on vegan or vegetarian diets.

162 In contemporary Poland, the term 'leftist' (*lewacki*) is frequently used pejoratively and often as a "form of insult" by right-wing groups (Drozda 2015: n.p.) to indicate those who do not respect traditions. The term of a lesser strength would be '*lewicowy*', which might translate as 'left-leaning'.

163 Full interview available online under https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/polen/hat-die-regierung-einen-vogel-44003034.bild.html#fromWall (accessed 28th of December 2020). Translation by myself.

one, without space for difference and diversity (in terms of diet or ethnicity). Based on my observations and in contrast to Waszczykowski's statement, vegans and people belonging to the community around vegan food in *Trójmiasto* challenge this worldview and take actions to create a society inclusive of (certain) minorities, such as vegans and LGBTQ+; a society where diversity is welcomed and cherished. By making concrete food choices, in this case vegan ones, young urban Polish citizens – in a culturally intimate way – manifest their political views and critical attitudes, while at the same time negotiating their relationship to 'Polishness'.

Marketing and wellness researcher Gracie DaSilva and her team (2020: 640), while researching veganism as 'serious leisure' in the context of "liquid modernity" (Bauman 1999), concluded that it can be perceived either as a shared identity or as a way of differentiating oneself from societal norms. Eliza Kowal argued that within the Polish culinary context, choosing a meat-less diet is considered "a non-typical behaviour, which can stand in opposition to tradition, dominant discourse" (Kowal 2017: 122). Not eating meat and choosing to consume vegan dishes, in contemporary Poland, can be seen as a subversive strategy against some of the norms and traditions perceived as backward, narrow-minded, and excluding. Kopczyńska (2021) observed that one of the biggest challenges and sources of conflict for vegans and vegetarians in Poland has, for a long time, been the inability to partake in social events and family dinners. Consequently, the meat-less diet in Poland was "an arena of disputes and even cultural wars over tradition and community" (ibid: 230). In this chapter, I argue that, based on my fieldwork among the community around vegan food in Gdańsk, the self-perception and self-representation as "vegan" functions in both ways, creating a shared identity and a distinction from the social norms while embracing added political identity.

To understand how and what kind of identity is constructed around vegan food in Gdańsk — in the next, ethnographic part — I focus on a concrete example by presenting *Spożyvczak* in more detail. Then, I move on to deciphering what kind of community functions around the shop and how it is constructed and maintained.

Part 2

2.1 "It will never work out" – *Spożyvczak*, a success story

The name *Spożyvczak* is a play on words. The word *spożywczak* (with a *w* instead of a *v*) is a colloquial way to say grocery store. *Spożyvczak* uses the *v* from *vegan* and makes it sound as if it was a local corner grocery store, yet a fully vegan one. Indeed, for many inhabitants of *Wrzeszcz*, especially new ones, who became attracted to this neighbourhood due to its recent (re)development[164], it is one of the main corner grocery stores. Neighbours of the shop make up a big portion of regular customers, who "come by the store in their house shoes"[165].

Spożyvczak was established at a particular time in a particular neighbourhood, which made it an agent of gentrification. The shop was opened in 2014, at the same time when the *Wajdeloty* Street of *Dolny Wrzeszcz* was being revitalised; the street surface and sidewalks were renewed, together with some of the houses[166], and the first building of a large residential project was in construction at the site of an old brewery. The renovation of *Wajdeloty* Street and the opening of the new residential space resulted in the regeneration of the area. Consequently, several new food places were opened, more affluent people moved into the stylish old brewery building, residents of other districts of Gdańsk began to visit, and *Dolny Wrzeszcz* became an attractive living and meeting place.

However, the neighbourhood of *Wrzeszcz* was initially much less welcoming than it might seem to a visitor now. To open the shop, Kasia – the owner of *Spożyvczak*, needed external funds[167]. Neither she nor her husband had ever run a business, nor had they the means to set

164 For more thorough engagement with the concept of urban transformations in *Trójmiasto* see previous chapter.

165 From an interview with Mil, 7th of February 2020, Gdańsk.

166 More on the revitalisation project of *Dolny Wrzeszcz*: https://www.gdansk.pl/inwestycje-miejskie/rewitalizacja-dolnego-wrzeszcza,a,47056 Accessed on 29th of March 2021.

167 While the shop is run by both Kasia and her husband, it was her dream and idea, and she is the main 'boss'.

up a shop. The initial application for a loan from the European Union Fund to support small businesses to open *Spożyvczak* was rejected because *Wrzeszcz* was considered "a district with a dubious reputation"[168]. Eventually, the local *Pomorski Fundusz Pożyczkowy* (Pomeranian Loan Fund) believed in Kasia's business plan and granted her 30 000 *zlotych*[169], which she paid back in the first five years of the shop's existence.

Due to the renovations, the neighbourhood of *Wrzeszcz* became attractive, which was both beneficial and challenging for *Spożyvczak*. On the one hand, it was the first fully vegan shop in *Trójmiasto* and thus over time, it became a community place – all the vegans from the Pomerania region would come there because it provided products which were still, at the time, difficult to obtain. On the other hand, the increased popularity of the neighbourhood led to the opening of several other vegan food places in the close vicinity, thus challenging the position of the shop.

At the moment of writing, *Spożyvczak* has existed for nine years and has built up a substantial community of customers and online followers; it is followed by 7,420 on their Facebook profile and has 1,532 followers on Instagram[170]. (In comparison, *Cannis*, acclaimed "the best restaurant in Gdańsk" by an online news platform trojmiasto.pl[171], has only 4,000 followers on Facebook.) In the rest of the chapter, I use the word *Spożyvczak* to indicate not only a physical shop but also the people who work there, as they often use the shop's name to refer to themselves.

The shop is characterised as being small-scale in several ways. It is physically small (around 20 square meters), has a staff of only three people[172], and fresh fruit and vegetables come either from a local farmer

168 From an interview with Kasia, the owner of *Spożyvczak,* 3rd of July 2020.
169 The value of 30 000 *zlotych* in 2014 is equivalent to more or less 25 000 *zlotych* currently (5,350 EUR). 10.08.2022.
170 Numbers collected on the 29th of December 2020.
171 https://kulinaria.trojmiasto.pl/Gdzie-zjesc-w-Gdansku-10-najlepszych-restauracji-w-Gdansku-kwiecien-2022-Ranking-restauracji-Gdansk-n165445.html Accessed on 29th of July 2022.
172 At the time of writing, it is only two.

or from an organic German wholesaler who is a friend, while many other products are delivered from Polish, Czech or German producers. Contributing to a reduction of carbon footprint is an important aspect of the shop's policy. This environmentally friendly vision is also practiced in the private domain, as the shop owners do not possess a car, and instead use their bicycles to commute to and from the shop. In an interview, Kasia mentioned that for the first few years of the shop's activity, she would transport fresh vegetables using a cargo bike. Seeing a petite woman on a bike loaded with vegetables cycling through the then run-down streets of *Dolny Wrzeszcz* stirred the neighbourhood, perhaps contributing to *Spożyvczak*'s fame[173]. As described in an opening vignette, the members of *Spożyvczak* openly express their political stances online and offline; in the shop, one can find leaflets, stickers, posters, and t-shirts, which promote ideas associated with the political left, such as supporting LGBTQ+ community, welcoming refugees, and mocking nationalistic or ultra-Catholic slogans[174]. Additionally, the team often closes the shop earlier than normal to attend left-wing protests and demonstrations; two of the three members are actively engaged in the local fraction of Samba The Rhythms of Resistance[175], which supports most of the feminist, LGBTQ+, and anti-fascist protests in *Trójmiasto* with their music. They make a lot of noise and when necessary, obscure the loud shouts of possible counter-demonstrations. Many of the clients of *Spożyvczak* are also frequent attendees of those marches.

The existing community around *Spożyvczak* shares similar political and ideological standpoints which extend beyond vegan food choices. In the following paragraphs, I explore how this community is built through the use of specific marketing tools, with particular attention to social media, namely Facebook and Instagram. Then, I delve deeper into uncovering the use of friendship and trust as es-

173 From an interview with Kasia, 3rd of July 2020.

174 Some examples include changing the popular slogan "*Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna*" (God, Honour, The Homeland) into "*Bób, Hummus, Włoszczyzna*" (Broad Bean, Hummus, Soup Vegetables) or *Matka Boska* (God's Mother) into *Natka Boska*, where *natka* refers to fresh parsley leaves. These altered slogans are printed on T-shorts available in the shop.

175 More on: https://www.facebook.com/RoRTrojmiasto Accessed on 29th July 2022.

sential elements in the community-building process. This analysis leads me to argue that the community around vegan food in *Trójmiasto* expands the concept of inclusion by extending their group to involve (those) others who, like vegans, used to be on the margins of society (such as LGBTQ+). They do so by clear boundary-making and providing a safe and welcoming space, thus, they contribute to the creation of a diverse and pluralistic society.

2.2 Marketing as a tool for community building

Spożyvczak employs several marketing strategies, such as social media and "friendship" marketing (Rousseau 2012), to help create their image. Online platforms are essential for the shop to present their political and social engagement and, therefore, to attract and connect to customers who share similar values. Signe Rousseau, a researcher on food and social media and an avid cook and baker, proposed the term "branding through 'friendship'" (2012: 70) to describe the use of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook (and in my case Instagram) as a central marketing strategy. Rousseau explained how the distance between celebrities and customers is shortened by their co-presence on social media; the acceptance of requests to follow, or an acknowledgement of retweets. Similarly, on a much smaller scale, *Spożyvczak* is, in some way, a celebrity in the neighbourhood, known by some, initially, only through social media. In an interview, Mil mentioned the effects of this online popularity:

> "*Jesteśmy dosyć popularni na Facebook. Czasami przychodzą osoby, które mówią, że jeszcze tu nie były, ale uwielbiają nasz profil i patrzą na niego. Ja kilka razy na imprezach już poza pracą zostałam potraktowana jak gwiazda, że 'o kurde, to ta dziewczyna ze Spożyvczaka - ty jesteś Mil!'*"[176]
>
> "We are quite popular on Facebook. Sometimes people come by and say that they have not yet been here but they love our [online] profile and observe it. Several times at parties, outside of the work [environment], I was treated like a star, like 'Oh, it's that girl from *Spożyvczak* – you are Mil!'"

176 From an interview with Mil, 7th of February 2020, Gdańsk.

As presented in the opening vignette, the shop sometimes makes use of their keen clients and includes them in their daily Facebook pictures or reshares their posts on Instagram (a process equivalent to retweeting as mentioned by Rousseau). This seemingly little action can mean a lot as being chosen to appear on the official profile gives a sense of being noticed – a fleeting moment of 'feeling like a star'. At the same time, it contributes to the creation of a feeling of acceptance and belonging to the community. As described by marketing and communication researchers Fangfang Li et al. (2021), the use of social media allows customers and sellers to connect in a different way than ever before; it offers new forms of interactions such as communication, observations, and influencing one another (53). *Spożyvczak* seems to understand the power of social media, yet it is not using it only to reach as many clients as possible (an increase in geographical outreach) but also to strengthen personal relations with clients (community growth). Marketing researcher Lawrence Ang called this procedure "community relationship management" (Ang 2011) and used it to describe "how companies use SM [social media] to manage their online communities more effectively and convert SM users to customers" (ibid: 32). "Our Facebook page is very alive" said Kasia when we sat in a back room of the shop for a long-awaited interview. "Customers say that when they get up in the morning and turn on their mobile phones, they check what is new in *Spożyvczak*. Either to laugh or to see if it is worth dropping by" she continued with a sparkle in her eyes [177].

Establishing friendship-like connections is enacted by paying special attention to the cultivation of informal contact with customers. For example, the team of *Spożyvczak* changes the official Mr. and Mrs. to a direct 'you' and addresses customers by their first names[178]. They also build friendly relationships through the use of soft market-

177 From an interview with Kasia, 3rd of July 2020, Gdańsk. Original text: "*Mamy też bardzo żywą stronę na Facebooku. [...] Klienci mówią, że rano wstają, włączają sobie komórkę i patrzą, co tam na Spożyvczaku się zadziało. Albo się pośmiać, albo zobaczyć, czy warto przyjechać.*"

178 In Poland it is common and considered polite to address older people, people in higher positions or those you do not know personally in a formal way using official *Pan* (Mr.) and *Pani* (Mrs.).

ing strategies[179] such as posting photos of customers on their online platforms (like the story described in the vignette) and maintaining a casual atmosphere in the shop. *Spożyvczak* is subverting some norms of hierarchy in the workplace, of distance between the seller/owner of the shop and the clients, which allows for direct contact and for dropping formalities. Running the business in a way that shortens the distance is appealing to the majority of the clients, who enjoy the social and more intimate aspect of shopping, so different to impersonal experiences in supermarkets. Many clients come to the shop because of its holistic vibe, which includes access to rare vegan products, the social aspect, and humorous online and offline self-representation.

> "*… dowcipne teksty, nasza otwartość; to zbudowało taką wręcz rodzinną atmosferę z klientami, więc oni wracają. A że widzą, że co chwilę jest coś nowego, no to są zaciekawieni. Czasami jak długo kogoś nie ma i nagle się pojawi, to ja [...] się pytam, co tam się wydarzyło, że nie ma, bo ja się tym martwię. [...] Ale przyjeżdżają do nas czasami ludzie ze Straszyna czy z okolic Wejherowa, najdalej specjalnie do Spożyvczaka jedna pani powiedziała, że przyjechała z Koszalina. Po jogurt cytrynowy. Tak wegański jogurt cytrynowy sprawił, [dokładniej] zdjęcie.*"[180]

> "… funny texts, our openness; it has built nearly a family-like atmosphere with clients, so they keep coming back. And because they see that there is something new every now and then, they are curious. Sometimes, when someone is away for a long time and then they suddenly show up, I ask what happened that they were not here because I was worried. […] And sometimes we get people from Straszyn or the vicinity of Wejherowo. One woman said she came from Koszalin[181] to visit Spożyvczak, which was the furthest anyone

179 Soft-marketing is commonly understood as marketing in the form of subliminal messages. As stated in one of the website descriptions of soft-marketing strategies "most people do not even realize they are being advertised to." Available at: https://www.streetdirectory.com/travel_guide/16312/marketing/soft_marketing_strategies.html Accessed on 23rd of May 2022.

180 From an interview with Kasia, 3rd of July 2020, Gdańsk.

181 Straszyn, Wejherowo and Koszalin are respectively 20, 45 and around 190km from Gdańsk.

had travelled to visit the shop. She came to get a lemon yoghurt. Yes, a vegan lemon yoghurt made her come, a photo did [to be precise]."

Spożyvczak invests a lot of effort into creating a nice and friendly atmosphere in the shop. They organize special *promki* (a slang way to say discounts) according to specific events (e.g., Christmas, Mother's Day or Valentine's Day) and often also on casual days, emphasising that they do not need a special occasion to make their customers happy[182]. There is a vibrant social life around the shop and I was not the only person who would come for a chat during the day. As soon as the weather turns warm, the team arranges wooden pallets to create a bench outside the shop (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3), which then becomes a chill-out spot for cigarette breaks, chatting with customers, and casual sunbathing.

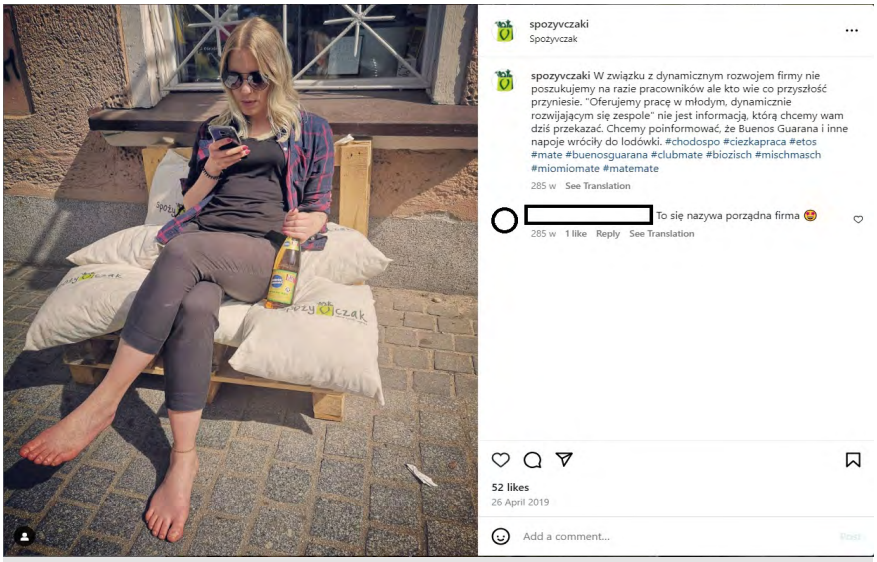

Fig. 2 Barefoot Mil sitting at the improvised bench made from wooden pallets in front of *Spożyvczak*, casually holding a glass bottle of a *yerba mate*[183]- based fizzy drink while looking at her mobile phone.

182 From an unrecorded conversation with Kasia, 18th of June 2020, Gdańsk.
183 *Yerba mate* is a plant typically used in South America for preparing a caffein-rich *mate* drink.

The text next to the picture says: “Due to the dynamic development of the company, we are not currently looking for employees, but who knows what the future brings. ‘We offer work in a young, dynamically developing team’ is not the information we want to convey to you today. We want to inform you that Buenos Guarana and other drinks have returned to the refrigerator.” Followed by a set of humorous hashtags (#), such as “hard work” or “ethos” referring to the fact that Mil is chilling in the sun with her phone while being at work.

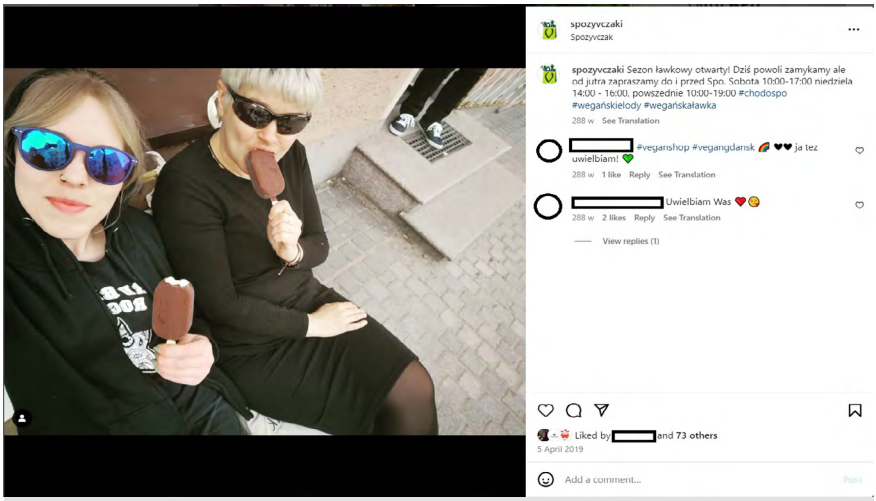

Fig. 3 Mil and Kasia sitting on the wooden pallets bench in front of *Spożyvczak* advertising vegan ice creams. The text announces: “The bench season is open! We are slowly closing today, but from tomorrow we invite you to and in front of *Spo*. Saturday 10:00-17:00, Sunday 14:00-16:00, weekly 10:00-19:00.” The hashtags at the end of the post say “come to *Spożyvczak*”, “vegan ice cream”, and “vegan coffee” alluring clients with a promise of an enjoyable time.

The images above are not only advertising specific products one can find in the shop, such as *mate* drinks and vegan ice cream, but they also convey information about the atmosphere one can encounter when visiting *Spożyvczak*. It seems that product advertisement is placed as if secondary. The images, together with the accompanying humorous texts, function as an invitation for a visit;

they are meant to encourage a person seeing them to come and say hello, sit on the pop-up bench and perhaps buy and eat a vegan ice cream.

Anthropologist Daniel Miller argued for an understanding of consumption as more than merely an act of purchase (1995: 28). Rather, he interpreted consumption as an autonomous mean of self-constructing "individual and social identity" (ibid: 38). The left-leaning customers who shop at *Spożyvczak* use consumption in their own way, to underline their political ideals. In his later work on material culture, Miller proposed that "in many respects, stuff actually creates us in the first place" (2010: 10). While investigating particular attention given to clothing in Trinidad, Miller understood that for Trinidadians "it is the things one chooses freely to do that should define you, not the things you have to do" (2010: 18), such as a job. It is not only what one does for a living that defines us but the self-construction happens intentionally through a selection of stuff, in other words, through consumption. Some Polish citizens (those I had a chance to meet and interview) who choose to buy vegan products (even if they are not vegan themselves) construct their identity in a way that aligns with their moral and political ideals, at the same time differentiating themselves from others and from stereotypes about Polishness (Catholic, traditional, meat-eating). Through buying a vegan ice cream, the community around vegan food defines itself as a group and creates a moment for safe socialization. Eating an ice cream – one of the ordinary moments available to people on a usual diet on a daily basis and an integral part of summer – becomes an important element of group distinction and unity. It is through the consumption of material culture in the form of vegan food, that left-leaning customers of *Spożyvczak* can express their ideological, ethical, and political stances, even if they might be critical of the neoliberal market and capitalism at large.

The suggestion to share a vegan ice cream in the social setting of a shop which has a clear political self-representation, can be seen as an example of small-scale "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld [1997] 2016). For Herzfeld, the concept was useful to describe tensions between "national embarrassments" and decisions of the state about the representation of the country in Greece ([1997] 2016: 1). Within the context of a nation-state, "cultural intimacy" "is that part of a cultural identity that insiders do not want outsiders to get

to know, yet that those same insiders recognize as providing them with a comfort zone of guiltily non-normative carryings-on" (Herzfeld 2013: 491), such as "bribery and bureaucratic mismanagement" (ibid). The inherent quality of 'culturally intimate' behaviours is that they oppose governmental or institutional power while simultaneously contributing to the construction of collective space. In the case of a community around vegan food in *Trójmiasto*, the insiders present themselves as critical of certain traditional Polish norms yet discover ways to find comfort in continuing to participate in the capitalist economy. Their practices are constructed in a way which defies the generally accepted standards of meat and dairy consumption and yet provides a framework to create a collective space. Thus, "cultural intimacy" is not only about national identities but also about group distinction. Within the context of a community around vegan food in Gdańsk, it is through "cultural intimacy" that people define themselves collectively and delineate ways in which they can socialize.

In a 'culturally intimate' way, *Spożyvczak* demonstrates to its customers that it is 'more than a shop', possessing a distinct character and providing a nice, relaxed, and inviting atmosphere. Through such self-representation, the shop is attractive to a specific community which does not only value vegan food but also humour and laid-back personality. In the next section, I will delve more into understanding the community formed around vegan food.

2.3 Friendship, care, and trust - building community through vegan food

In urban, post-industrial contexts, food has been recognized for bringing like-minded individuals together (Desolier 2013). Community around vegan food in *Trójmiasto* centres around shared principles and consists of customers, employers, and some food producers who at times become customers (for example, Mil mentioned that owners of *Atelier Smaku*[184] who deliver their products to *Spożyvczak,*

184 *Atelier Smaku* (Atelier of Flavour) is an original manufacture of gluten-free vegan cuisine based in Gdynia. More on https://sklep.ateliersmaku.pl/. Accessed on 9th of August 2022.

often come by to do their shopping), and also other vegan enterprises. Being neighbours *Spożyvczak* and *House of Seitan* (a popular vegan restaurant located 200 meters down the street) chose to establish an alliance and support each other. For example, in August 2022 the restaurant posted a supportive text on their social media profiles (Facebook and Instagram) accompanied by a picture of Kasia and her husband:

> "You know that we are friends with *Spożyvczak*, which is [located] in our neighbourhood on *Grażyna* Street. You also know what the general situation of 'small stores vs. large chain stores' looks like. In case you do not know, it is pretty shitty for those little shops. Well, the thing is that we would really like those who do not know yet to find out that Maciek and Kasia are on the *Grażyna* street; they have great vegetables that are not lubricated with butaprene[185] for growth – ethical products e.g., avocados which do not contribute to cutting half of the Amazon forest – and a lot of other plant things, such as fake meats, sourdoughs, spices, chemicals, drinks – everything. Most importantly, they have a great family atmosphere, are warm towards everyone, and they have engaged themselves countless times in helping others. So, to cut to the chase – if anyone is in the area, we strongly encourage you to support this place, because only they allow us to be mentally 14 years old in the neighbourhood and they are not angry when we cover their windows with colourful pictures of private parts. As an incentive, from tomorrow, for a week, our pastries will appear as free tasting samples for those who shop there and when you come to us (and vice versa) with a receipt from *Spożyvczak*, you get a 10% discount for dinner. Let this info go further into the world to support cool people, like their FB [profile], because they write the same stupid things as we do, and most importantly, when doing shopping you support these good faces."[186]

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185 *Butapren* is a name for a specific industrial glue known for its toxic effects if inhaled. Here it signifies all kinds of chemicals and pesticides used for increasing vegetable growth.

186 From a Facebook (and Instagram) profile of *House of Seitan.* https://www.facebook.com/pyszniutkie/posts/pfbid07nPbDCKNYPDDtHRSsRRt6C4BdVaCqWF1yfU1bnQrQdeF3DDog5iW3uAaP4zUVXcSl Accessed on 15th of September 2022.

The text is written in the typical style of *House of Seitan*, combining important information with a humorous and nonchalant yet affectionate tone. The sympathy between the two enterprises does not only concentrate on economic profits in the form of discounts and occasional bartering favours but it goes beyond material benefits into the sphere of genuine, fun, and light-hearted expressions of fondness. Consider the following excerpt from my field notes:

> Being still new in the neighbourhood, I found out about the fifth birthday of *Spożyvczak* when one early March morning I passed by the shop on my way home. The shop was not opened yet, but I saw decorations, ribbons and balloons hanging from the signboard together with "*HoS <3 Spo, Happy Birthday!*"[187] written in big letters. Later that day I visited the shop under the pretext of shopping. Before I even crossed the doorstep, Mil greeted me with a big smile and asked if I had seen the surprise *House of Seitan* had prepared for them. I nodded and suddenly heard a voice from the storage room. Kasia was shouting about how lovely it was to have such silly friends in the neighbourhood.

Through this little action, *House of Seitan* manifested their affection towards *Spożyvczak*. The visibility of this expression of friendship is also a clear sign to any passers-by in the neighbourhood that these two places know, like, and support each other. Such showcasing of affinity has the potential to work in two ways simultaneously; it is an expression of friendship and shared identity and it can be a successful marketing tool.

Due to its specialization, *Spożyvczak* has several regular clients, many of who are neighbours and some of who, with time, became friends. For example, one late afternoon a few months into my fieldwork, I called Mil to ask if she wanted to meet and hang out. She said she was not in the neighbourhood but at a small

187 The symbol '<3' is used as a heart. In this context it means "*HoS loves Spo*" were *HoS* stands for *House of Seitan* and *Spo* is short for *Spożyvczak*.

friends-only party at a beach bar belonging to a couple who lived next door to *Spożyvczak*. The couple started from simply being clients and due to their frequent visits to the shop and the mutual affection, members of *Spożyvczak* and the couple became friends. I heard stories like this frequently, both from Mil and from Kasia. A selected group of customers allows for creating and maintaining a friendly atmosphere that, in effect, appeals to certain people who share the values presented by *Spożyvczak*, such as tolerance, equality, and diversity, accompanied by a friendly, informal atmosphere. Mil simply calls these people "nice and open-minded"[188].

Both Kasia and Mil talk explicitly about the overlapping categories of customers and friends. Many clients of *Spożyvczak* were initially friends of Kasia and her husband. Many, like me, became friends over time. In a half-joking way, Mil explains the process of customers becoming friends when she says:

> "*Wczoraj na przykład albo przedwczoraj przez pół godziny z klientem rozmawialiśmy o filmie. Z takim klientem, który na początku wpadał i było 'dzień dobry', potem zaczęło się bardziej przenosić na 'cześć', a teraz jest 'cześć' i gadamy, no, bo... i tak tu jest często. No już i tak jesteśmy znajomymi [bo] przyszedłeś do Spożyvczaka."*[189]
>
> "Yesterday, for example, or the day before yesterday, for half an hour a client and I talked about a film – a kind of client who used to come by at the beginning and there was a 'good morning'. Then it started to move more to 'hello', and now there is 'hello' and we talk, because… it is often like this here. We are friends now [because] you came to *Spożyvczak*."

The boundary between who is a customer and who is a friend is blurred and porous. Such a process takes time. Mil explains that 'befriending', the changing of the status from a client to a friend, happens gradually. Kopczyńska (2017) observed that a similar phenomenon of establishing acquaintance between clients and sellers takes place at food

188 From an interview with Mil, 7th of February 2020, Gdańsk,
189 From an interview with Mil, 7th of February 2020, Gdańsk.

markets and cooperatives in Poland. For example, at food markets, acquaintance translates into developing trusting social relationships between sellers and customers. Sellers are willing to perform small acts of service (such as lowering prices), which showcase care for relationships with customers and open the possibility for building informality and friendliness, thus ensuring "successful transactions" (ibid. 17). Customers, on the other hand, are more likely to trust the origin of the products (and therefore purchase them) from the sellers with whom they established an acquaintance. I have also observed similar acts of gaining customers' loyalty during my fieldwork at the open-air market called *Bazar Natury*[190]. As I explained in the previous chapter, the added attention to customers is an integral element of *Bazar Natury's* marketing design and strategy. I was myself a witness to such 'caring' acts performed by Sławek (a farmer with whom I worked) towards his clients; he would often put aside some products because he knew that there were customers who could only come later in the day and he wanted to ensure that they would get what they needed. In a like manner, *Spożyvczak* enacts meaningful favours for their clients. For example, it is a common practice that customers ask, either online or via phone, to reserve some of the most popular products, as they are unable to pick them up on time. Kasia consciously responds to customers' needs and she often offers to put aside some products, so the clients can collect them when they have time, without fearing they will be sold out.

> "*Jeżeli ktoś chce zamówić coś przez telefon, to my odłożymy. Coś przyjeżdża, jest chwytliwe, my robimy listy zakupowe i można sobie u nas przyjechać i odebrać wtedy, kiedy pasuje."*[191]
>
> "When someone wants to order something via phone, we put it aside. When something popular arrives, we make special shopping lists and people can come and pick it up when it's convenient for them."

190 Such as setting aside products for some customers, giving discounts or adding a free product. For an in-depth analysis of *Bazar Natury* see chapter two.

191 From an interview with Kasia, 3rd of July 2020, Gdańsk.

Spożyvczak recognizes the importance of how creating caring and friendly relationships with their customers contributes to establishing trust and loyalty and vice versa. The shop is not only a place where – with the help of added attention – customers become friends, but where vegans can feel welcomed and trust that everything is 100% plant-based. During our interview, Kasia, with pride in her voice, recounted a little story of a client who was rummaging through the shelves in the shop when another person popped in and asked, "are there any eggs?" The client in question rapidly responded: "no. There are no eggs and there will never be!"[192] Kasia felt that the main objective of the store had been achieved, and customers could shop there without having to check every product to determine whether it was truly vegan. Thanks to *Spożyvczak*'s efforts, many people can, for the very first time, feel safe buying vegan products. Due to the limited availability of these products, it was not easily enjoyable to be a vegan in the early 90s in Poland (Kopczyńska 2021: 230). By becoming a trusted place, *Spożyvczak* allowed local vegans to partake in the act of shopping, and to enjoy it. The shop not only started to provide vegan food products difficult to obtain for Polish vegans until now but also gave many vegans, who have had the experience of social exclusion, a sensation that someone is catering for their needs. At the same time, the answer given to a person looking for eggs in a vegan shop suggests a clear boundary-making, drawing a visible line between the group that does not consume animal products and the one that does. *Spożyvczak* has become a place where those who were excluded from the social aspect of food shopping due to their dietary choices, can now feel included. Conversely, those who do not eat vegan are not able to do their usual shopping in the shop; here they are not able to find the basic food products they are used to consuming (such as butter, milk, and eggs), and by asking the wrong question they can be made to feel out of place.

As I explained, *Spożyvczak* serves various functions. On the one hand, it is a place of community making, where through strategies of added attention customers are made to feel safe and trusting.

192 From an interview with Kasia, 3rd of July 2020, Gdańsk.

On the other hand, the owners (and the clients) are happy to draw boundaries of distinction which by excluding others allow this minority to feel included. Yet, non-vegans visit the shop frequently too; those who do not feel threatened by the clearly marked difference. They are attracted to the shop's atmosphere and its moral and political stances, and constitute a large part of the customer group. They too belong to the community around vegan food in *Trójmiasto* even if they do not eat and shop (fully) vegan. It is a community which defines itself not only through dietary choices but by moral and political standpoints.

It seems to me that *Spożyvczak* has taken the concept of inclusion a step further and expanded it to embrace people other than vegans, (those normally excluded by the dominant world), namely minorities such as the LGBTQ+ community. In the next section, I expand on the different, less obvious form of inclusion observed within the community around vegan food in *Trójmiasto.*

2.4 Expanding community through expanding inclusion

Apart from establishing a community centred on vegan food and a form of friendly relationship between *Spożyvczak* and its clients based on trust and, perhaps, a shared understanding of a common struggle, the shop extends the concept of inclusion to involve other marginalized groups. As explained in the opening vignette, its wall and the main window feature stickers promoting openness towards refugees and an acceptance of a variety of sexual orientations. Not everyone who comes to the shop is vegan; some people come to hang out, chat, and say hello because they feel welcomed and accepted. The shop does not (simply) exclude non-vegans. Rather, it is open to those who, like vegans, were or still are at the margins of contemporary Polish society. *Spożyvczak* has become a place of social inclusion, which is visible through the presence of posters and stickers, their self-representation online, which openly supports certain minorities, as well as actual actions such as attendance at political left-leaning demonstrations in favour of the LGBTQ+ community, right to safe abortion, and openness towards refugees (see Fig. 4). In this way, *Spożyvczak* can be viewed as a place that fosters civic participation.

Fig. 4 Mil and another member of *Spożyvczak* team promoting vegan ice cream. The text says: "Pinkwashing continues! We are sending greetings to @milenque [Mil], who bought herself a blouse with a rainbow on it, to wear during pride, but got sick and is lying in the (hospital) room. By using a strawberry-vanilla ice cream, available at #grażyny12wrzeszcz, we would like to remind you that on Saturday we will be open only until 1:00 p.m. so that we do not have to bother with shopping or work afterwards, but that we can march around Gdańsk with pride." Followed by hashtags loosely translated as "come to *Spożyvczak*", "come to the pride", "first equality then intersectionality", "what is this politics for?" And a sarcastically used slogan "today vege, tomorrow homo".

Both online and offline, *Spożyvczak* openly presents their ideological stances, which, in contemporary Poland, are also political because of their contested nature and the wide coverage politicians and popular media give them. On their social media pages, *Spożyvczak* does not only promote vegan products and the shop as a place to visit and hang out, but also invites customers to attend the Pride parade, an event highly disputed in contemporary Polish society (Kubica 2009; Graff 2010)[193]. The team

193 Anthropologist and sociologist Grażyna Kubica gives an account of the March for Tolerance which took place in Cracow on the 7th of May 2004 and shows the division in Polish society with regard to the presence and visibility of LGBT [*sic!*] community in public spaces and in Polish culture in general. Furthermore, Polish gender studies researcher Agnieszka Graff reports on how homophobia has been politicised since 2004, during the rule of increasingly right-wing governments in Poland.

of *Spożyvczak* also regularly attends and supports feminist demonstrations, such as *Manifa* (a feminist march that happens annually on the 8th of March in Poland) or protests in solidarity with Women Strike[194]. Similar to *Spożyvczak*, *House of Seitan* conveys politically charged messages in between their posts advertising vegan meals. The restaurant directly comments on the political situation in the country on its Instagram and Facebook profiles, sometimes through funny memes or blunt messages. For example, in October 2020 when the Polish government accepted legislation tightening abortion law, *House of Seitan* made an official critical commentary about this decision (see Fig. 5).

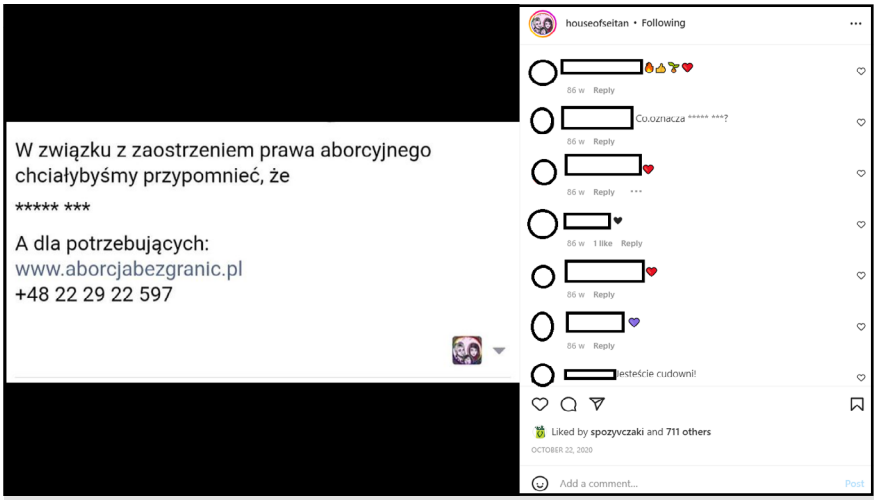

Fig. 5 The official statement *House of Seitan* posted says, "in relation to the tightening of the abortion law, we would like to remind you that ***** *** And for those in need [website and a phone number]." The series of eight asterisks is a censored slogan meant to mean "fuck *pis*[195]" while the email address and the phone number underneath are contact details for an abortion group in Poland.

194 All-Poland Women Strike (Ogólnopolski *Strajk Kobiet*) is a women's rights social movement in Poland, established in September 2016 as a result of the tightening of abortion laws by the Polish government.

195 *PiS* (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, Law and Justice) is a Polish political party which was in power between 2015 and 2023; it is during their governance that the abortion law became tighter in 2020.

Similar to *Spożyvczak, House of Seitan* presents itself as a place which is about "more than food" (Reszkowska 2020: n.p.). In an interview for *ofeminin* (a feminist online platform) carried out by journalist Karolina Reszkowska, *House of Seitan* claimed to be not only an eatery but a place "without divisions", where "everyone is welcome" (ibid: n.p). Two of the *House of Seitan* founders said:

> "*House of Seitan to przede wszystkim ludzie, którzy go tworzą. Dzięki nim powstaje nasze jedzenie, nasze flow, nasza knajpa i pomysły, które staramy się realizować, żeby coraz więcej osób mogło przyjść do nas i powiedzieć 'to jest moje miejsce, tu czuję się po prostu dobrze*'".[196]
>
> "House of Seitan is primarily the people who create it. Thanks to them, our food, our *flow* (italics in original), our eatery and ideas are created – which we try to implement so that more and more people can come to us and say 'this is my place; here, I just feel good'".

The narrative used by both enterprises to present themselves is not just a playful marketing strategy. Rather, it also reveals how certain Polish citizens, namely socially oriented vegan food entrepreneurs, position themselves versus the normative and stereotypical aspects of society. In the last part of the chapter, I explain and analyse ensuing tensions experienced by the members of the community around vegan food. I do so by focusing on specific foods, through the lens of "cultural intimacy".

Part 3

3.1 Managing tensions in culturally intimate ways: participation in tradition through vegan foods

Practices of inclusion enacted by vegan enterprises are framed as a political issue. For example, similar to *Spożyvczak*, when entering *House of Seitan* one notices stickers supporting the LGBTQ+

196 Excerpt from an interview (in Polish), available at: https://www.ofeminin.pl/swiat-kobiet/kariera/w-moim-interesie-o-sukcesie-house-of-seitan-rozmawiamy-z-tworczynami/4nfcjsj. Accessed on 6th of January 2021.

community, refugees, feminist movement, and animal rights groups. It seems that, in the case of the community around vegan food in Gdańsk, through consuming vegan one can form her identity around certain political stances, like the ones just mentioned. Bear in mind the quote from Waszczykowski, a Polish politician who suggested that being vegan and a cyclist poses a threat to traditional Polish values.

The idea of "feeling good" at one's place and being accepted for who one is – both principles mentioned in the interview with *House of Seitan* – corresponds with a set of values associated with left-wing ideals such as tolerance, diversity, and acceptance of minorities. Indeed, a team of Polish researchers from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw described that since 2015 the Polish left has been characterized mainly by a preference for the separation between state and church, right to abortion, integration with the EU, and openness towards refugees (Kwiatkowska et al. 2016).

As suggested earlier in the chapter, in the Polish context, choosing to be vegan or to support vegan businesses means questioning Polish cooking tradition – widely understood as meaty, whose trademark dishes include chicken soup (*rosół*) and pork cutlet (*kotlet)* – the main components of a typical Sunday family dinner. The category of vegan extends itself to represent an opposition to 'traditional' values, a challenge to the generally accepted 'normality' (which includes supporting traditional family vs LGBTQ+ and favouring the Catholic Church's presence in politics vs rejecting it[197]). According to Kasia, to choose

197 The Catholic Church is the largest religious community in Poland. Despite the Constitution of the Republic of Poland which states in the Article 25 that public authorities "shall be impartial in matters of personal conviction, whether religious or philosophical" (sejm.gov.pl), the Catholic Church has a significant influence on Polish politics. The Church hierarchs frequently make appeals to members of Polish government with regard to legislations on same-sex partnership or issues of in vitro and abortion. In January 2013, Polish bishops expressed their thanks and appreciation to Polish MPs for rejecting the law on homo-sexual partnership (TVN24, 2013). The same year, "danger of gender ideology" was a topic of a yearly pastoral letter written by the episcopate and read on the first Sunday after Christmas in all Catholic Churches in Poland. Questioning Polish traditions involves questioning the role of the Church in Polish politics (episkopat.pl).

vegan food is to object to cultural habits "programmed in us from a very early age", such as "that the cow gives milk. Well, she doesn't, it is taken away from her!" Said Kasia with a stern look[198].

As presented above, I observe a double form of inclusion enacted by *Spożyvczak* and *House of Seitan*. On the one hand, vegan enterprises allow those who used to be on the margins of society due to their non-standard diet and rejection of the consumption of symbolically loaded meat (so, simply, vegans), to partake in shopping (and in the social side of eating) in a safe and trusted atmosphere. On the other hand, these places are welcoming to some of those who are still on the margins of Polish society and those who have a hard time belonging in it, such as the LGBTQ+ community and refugees of colour. Vice versa, the community around vegan food is marking their distinction from people who do not embrace those differences and verbally marking group boundaries. A case in point is the already mentioned situation in which one of the customers responded in a raised voice that "this shop does not sell eggs and will never do so"[199].

Following the words of Deborah Lupton, the "food preferences or habits which appear different, strange or vulgar may be integral in the process of distinguishing oneself or one's cultural group from others" (1996: 94). Yet, the community around vegan food creates this distinction by reinventing its relationship towards Polishness, not by excluding itself completely. Vegans and those choosing vegan foods attempt to simultaneously subvert and engage in tradition through culinary actions.

This is evidenced by the fact that despite their critical point of view on certain 'traditional' Polish values, both *Spożyvczak* and *House of Seitan* offer vegan food options which relate strongly to traditional Polish food. Choosing to recreate familiar dishes in a meatless and dairy-free manner is a common and proven tactic to secure a wide range of customers. Yet these places openly display their left-leaning political standpoints which expose uncomfortable or dated symbols of Polishness, while simultaneously promoting some of them. In the next paragraphs, I focus

198 From an interview with Kasia. 3rd of July 2020, Gdańsk.
199 From an interview with Kasia, 3rd of July 2020, Gdańsk.

on particularly symbolically charged foods sold by vegan food places. Every year, the whole country becomes obsessed with one particular sweet. People queue since early morning hours in front of their favourite bakeries to get a calories-fat-and-sugar-loaded fried bowl of dough. I am talking about *pączki* – a Polish doughnut with, traditionally, rose marmalade filling which earned its own National Day, the *Tłusty Czwartek* (Fat Thursday). Although it is originally a Christian tradition marking the last Thursday before Lent, both believers and non-believers celebrate it throughout Poland. *Pączki* is a traditional sweet, available in bakeries around the country and consumed in large quantities throughout the year, especially on Fat Thursday (on this day, common entertainment includes betting and boasting about who can eat more of those sweet and oily balls of pastry). The traditional recipe for *pączki* is based on milk, eggs, butter, and sometimes lard used for frying, making it impossible for vegans to consume. Since the development of a vegan market in Poland, *Spożyvczak* makes sure to have a big load of vegan *pączki* delivered in the morning of every Fat Thursday (See Fig. 6).

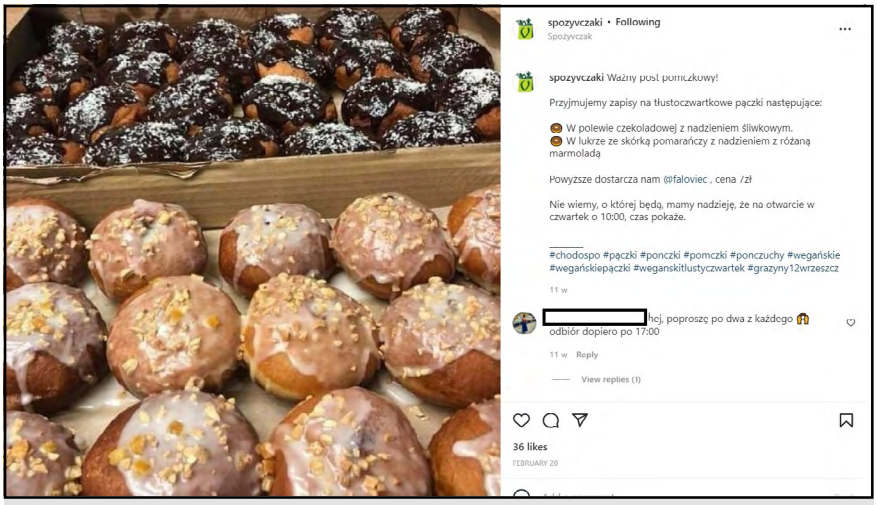

Fig. 6 This Instagram post announces that the reservation list for *pączki* just opened and people can put their name on it. The *Pączki* in the picture are delivered by *Faloviec* a vegan restaurant, and friends of *Spożyvczak.* There are two kinds of *Pączki*: one covered in chocolate with a plum filling and the other, more traditional, filled with rose marmalade with icing sugar and candied orange peel.

Usually, *pączki* do not need much advertising as they disappear immediately. For this reason, *Spożyvczak* opens a special reservation list, where people can book themselves a *pączek*. Additionally, they promote *Faloviec* – a vegan restaurant located in the *Przymorze* neighbourhood.

Apart from traditional *pączki* in a vegan version, *Spożyvczak* sells another symbolically loaded traditional Polish cake – *kremówki* (cream pie). *Kremówki* consists of two layers of puff pastry with a cream in-between. Like *pączki,* traditional *kremówki* are laden with dairy ingredients, so for a long time they were unavailable for vegans to consume. Interestingly, *kremówki* also have church-related associations as Polish Pope John Paul II mentioned them during the last visit to his hometown, which spurred the incredible popularity of these sweets. Around Poland, *kremówki* is now associated exclusively with the Pope and his hometown[200]. Perhaps, by selling vegan versions of *kremówki, Spożyvczak* reclaims a once secular cake and makes it possible for vegans to partake in the shared experience of eating a creamy dessert that is famous nationwide.

House of Seitan also uses a culturally relevant element of Polish cuisine in their marketing, namely potatoes. Potatoes are a staple food for the majority in Europe. The plant arrived in Poland in the XVII century and gained country-wide popularity. In the 1930s, Poles were the biggest consumers of potatoes in Europe, second only to Nigeria on the world scale (Kuciel-Frydryszak 2023: 195)[201]. By the 1960s, Poland had become a global centre for potato cultivation

200 The popularity of *kremówki* is so significant that when I was in Gdańsk, I met a woman whose teenage son, along with his friends, decided to take an overnight train to the other side of the country just to try the famous cake in the Pope's hometown, Wadowice (around 700km away from Gdańsk).

201 The high consumption of potatoes in the 1930s was not a sign of prosperity but rather an indication of the severe poverty prevalent in the Polish countryside. Journalist Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak cites accounts from Polish peasants of that era who, in many instances, retained rotten potatoes for personal consumption, as the good ones had to be sold to earn money (2023: 234).

(Nowacki 2017). To this day, potatoes are an important element of Polish cuisine, an essential part of a typical Sunday meal (alongside pork cutlet). Potato is a familiar and domesticated plant, much more than seitan (used in the name of the restaurant), which is originally more common in Asian cuisine.

House of Seitan serves vegan *pyzy* (a type of dumpling based on culturally symbolic potatoes) but also meat-less s*chabowy* (pork cutlet) and vegan *rosół* (chicken soup), considered a staple of a typical Polish dinner. *Spożyvczak* makes sure to be equipped with traditional Polish sweets, such as *pączki* and *kremówki* making it possible for their customers to celebrate national holidays such as Fat Thursday.

House of Seitan choosing potato as a trademark and one of the main elements of their menu and *Spożyvczak* equipping itself with vegan versions of *pączki* and *kremówki,* are both playing on cultural associations, connecting people with what they know and are familiar with. To an average non-vegan customer, a sort of uninformed outsider, the food served by *House of Seitan* resembles a traditional, Polish, and home-made meal. Both places offer common Polish flavours in vegan variations, thus working together with people's "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld [1997] 2016). In general, the concept of "cultural intimacy" refers to the collective space of individuals who share some inside knowledge. It attempts to encompass the informal cultural content, the 'backstage' of socio-cultural reality and meaning-making. As Herzfeld defines it, "cultural intimacy" is "the recognition of those aspects of an officially shared identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality" (ibid: 7). The concept is particularly fitting here as there seems to be a tension or a conflict between the way the vegan enterprises oppose various dimensions of Polish traditions (such as meat-based traditional meals or traditional family configurations), while at the same time, they create and sell dishes which are 'traditionally' Polish but remade in a vegan version.

Simultaneously, through their online and offline self-representation, vegan enterprises reject stereotypical elements of Polish culture and want to partake in culinary traditions on their own

terms. All researched vegan food places openly criticize certain aspects of the Polish socio-cultural landscape, including politics and stereotypical habits, while simultaneously creating an alternative which allows for fuller participation in culturally grounded social and culinary life. The concept of "cultural intimacy" sheds light on how some urban Polish citizens make sense of those tensions. In the context of the niche place of vegan dishes in Polish cuisine, where vegetarianism and veganism are criticized, feared, marginalized, and seen as outside of the 'norm', these people are trying to reinsert themselves into the Polish food culture by remaking traditions in terms of vegan polish food and carving out spaces of diversity and inclusion, both in a physical and online space.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reflected on how vegan food places in Gdańsk become spaces of inclusion and foster community around vegan food with the help of social media (such as Facebook and Instagram) and through "friendship marketing" (Rousseau 2012). *Spożyvczak* and *House of Seitan* offer more than food; they are spaces where social and civic awareness can grow and take new shapes, much like the sweet vegan *pączki* buns. I focused specifically on *Spożyvczak,* the first vegan shop of *Trójmiasto*, and a neighbouring vegan restaurant *House of Seitan* and observed that its inclusivity is not limited only to historically marginalized vegans and vegetarians, but extends beyond to involve other minorities, such as the LGBTQ+ community. Using specific self-representation online and offline and through eager involvement in activist actions, namely demonstrations and marches, *Spożyvczak* and *House of Seitan* became politicised. Through their outspoken manner, they construct themselves as civic actors. Situated within the historical overview of the position of meat in the Polish culinary and cultural sphere, veganism constitutes a challenge to a larger socio-cultural reality of Poland – by choosing or supporting veganism, the community subverts traditional family, lifestyle, and culinary models. At the same time, the vegans of Gdańsk negotiate their relationship to Polishness, establishing its new form by redefining traditional dishes in a vegan form. They do so in a culturally intimate (Herzfeld [1997] 2016) way, which means they use symbolically loaded cultural tropes to manage the tensions

resulting from combining a critical outlook on Polish culture and society with the need for belonging. The case studies presented in this chapter portray veganism as more than a diet; rather, it is a lifestyle and a form of political activism specific to the Polish context. Urban Polish citizens, through their food choices, express approval of certain political standpoints and take action to create an inclusive society centred on vegan food. Following Lupton's (1996) argument, food choices here become a means of distinction and group formation simultaneously. In the next chapter, I explore a different approach to community building within *Trójmiasto* based on a collective fermentation practice learned during practical workshops. As I will show, this approach also provides a platform for expressing political criticism. In chapter four I analyse ways in which Polish urbanites can convey critical attitudes about the changing socio-cultural landscape through a reinvention of their culinary tradition. Reflecting, once more, that contemporary Poland has moved beyond the stagnant category of a post-socialist country and should be perceived as a country 'in transformation'.