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

Gracjasz, A.Z.

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Chapter four.

The changing meanings of fermentation practices: merging elements of rural traditions with the contemporary global context, community building, and critiquing the industrial food system

Introduction

Fermentation and the City

In this chapter, I analyse how the increased interest in food fermentation and attendance of fermentation workshops is a way for Polish middle-class urbanites to create a community within an urban context and to convey messages critiquing the industrial food system. Similar to the case of vegan enterprises, these workshops and the space in which they take place facilitate the formation of critical ideas and thus serve as a form that can encourage civic engagement. While food preservation in general, and fermentation in particular, have constituted a part of the Polish culinary repertoire for many years, during my fieldwork I observed a rising popularity of this practice among urban dwellers, corresponding to a similar global trend²⁰². Based on my analysis of fermentation workshops and on interviews, I suggest that the practices of fermentation merge some elements of the ‘past’ such as local traditions, with some elements of the ‘present’ like contemporary global concerns related to heightened

202 In 2018, a British daily newspaper with an international outreach released several articles on the increasing hype of fermented food consumption in the UK and US and its positive influence on gut health. Available online under: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/jan/29/magical-microbes-how-to-feed-your-gut> and <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/mar/10/fit-in-my-40s-fermentation-gut-health>. Accessed 28.02.2023. More on the rising trend later in the chapter.

environmental, social, and health awareness. Therefore, they should be looked at as practices that have acquired new meanings, including an increased emphasis on health awareness, a degree of environmental consciousness, the quest for community within an urban context, and criticism of the industrial food system. In this way, the studied practices partially resonate with observations made by Czech social and political scientist Petr Jehlička and British geographer Joe Smith (2012, 2013) about food self-production and self-processing in the post-socialist Central and Eastern-European context. The authors argue that self-provisioning constitutes a vital element in shaping people's concept of modernity. These practices place value on historical and cultural references that often face erasure amid the forceful pursuit of 'transition' in Western contexts (2012: 13). Similarly, Polish sociologist Agata Bachórz (2018) researched bottom-up, intra-family food self-production practices among Poles, such as smoke-drying (a food preservation technique). These practices are seen as strategies of resistance to industrialized food systems, serving as a means to regain a sense of control over the quality, safety, and meaning of food (2018). In the following pages I put forward an argument that the revival and increased interest in fermentation is an example of the reinvention of food (Grasseni et al. 2014). Moreover, the collective aspect of workshops suggests a search for different ways of socializing within an urban context. Thus, I argue that both the workshop and the venue it takes place in go beyond the binary opposition of the old and new, traditional and modern, past and present. Rather, they are spaces where these oppositions are transformed and transgressed, creating new, contemporary "urban scenes" (Klekotko 2020) that deal with "communities of practice" (Wagner and Lave 1991) and socialization.

During my fieldwork, I discussed the fermentation hype with practitioners, sociologists, and friends; talked about fermentation with people attending and organizing workshops; frequently visited the venue where the workshop took place, and took part in one fermentation workshop. Fermentation as a topic and as a practice was also present during my fieldwork at food markets²⁰³ and mak-

203 See chapter two of this dissertation.

ing fermented foods was a visible trend among people I met in Gdańsk: professional cooks as well as enthusiasts of the fermentation process, both men and women in their late 20s, early 30s. I interviewed Natalia - the organizer of the workshop I attended and Patrycja – the host and the owner of *Ziemiosfera* (a venue where the workshop took place), as well as Ania and Karolina, two women who attended similar workshops. During the workshop I conversed with the participants and on another occasion, I also interviewed Kasia, a woman who worked in *Ziemiosfera* and was also present at the workshop. In the following paragraphs, I introduce two different perspectives on the fermentation workshops: one from the perspective of the people organizing them and the other from the perspective of those attending. The organizers are driven by higher values of environmental awareness and aim to revive the well-known, common, and perhaps slightly worn-out tradition in a new form. Those who attend are primarily motivated by personal, family, and social benefits. While the main characters of this chapter are women, I do not have the space to discuss the aspect of gender here. Instead, the involvement of women in food networks and the perspective it sheds on the changing position of women in Poland constitutes the topic of chapter five.

This chapter is structured as follows. In part one, to contextualize the topic of fermentation, I discuss the revival and different dimensions of fermentation and I present theories on doing community in the contemporary city. Then, I move on to part two – the ethnography, and part three – the analytical part of the chapter. Part two discusses how fermentation workshops offer an opportunity to articulate ideas about seasonality and locality, rural traditional, and global influences. Part three describes how fermentation workshops are a space for creating new socialites within an urban context where criticism about the industrial food system emerges. By analysing how the meanings around fermentation practices change in contemporary Poland, I argue that they can be interpreted as “reinvention of food”. The previous association of these practices with rural areas and its perception as a means of coping with poverty has been transformed. Fermentation is now being reconceptualised as something ‘fashionable’, aligning with health consciousness and environmental awareness.

Part 1

1.1 The revival of fermentation

Fermentation (*kiszenie* in Polish²⁰⁴) is a unique form of food preparation as it is a natural process during which organic compounds are transformed by microorganisms such as bacteria. Archaeologist Jessica Henty defines fermentation as “a form of microbial metabolism that converts carbon compounds to energy in the absence of oxygen” (Henty et al. 2021: 198). Fermentation differs from pickling because it does not involve adding acids like vinegar. The fermentation process takes place in anaerobic (without oxygen) conditions, for example in closed glass jars or bottles. Interestingly, in Poland, fermented foods are considered tastier, more traditional, and of higher value than pickled ones, a hierarchy which I grew up with and whose existence was confirmed to me during the interviews²⁰⁵.

Due to the only partially controllable workings of bacteria, fermentation is both fascinating and a cause for concern, as people often report a ‘fear’ of things going bad and food turning foul²⁰⁶. From a social science and technology perspective, anthropologists Heather Paxson and Stefan Helmreich (2014) discussed how microbes embody both peril and potential. As the authors argue, microbes can “be full of unexpected, uncharacterized possibility *as well as* [emphasis in text] pliable to cultural projects” (ibid: 168). On the examples of legal changes introduced in the US in regards to the production of artisanal cheese and the exploration of astrobiol-

204 As observed by Polish sociologist of food Agata Bachórz, in Polish language it has been common to use the word ‘*kisic*’ (often wrongly-translated as pickling) to describe food fermentation. Nowadays, the workshops often use the word *fermentacja* which seems to be taken from the English word ‘fermentation’ (private conversation, 10.08.2022).

205 For example, Ania admitted, with a sense of shame, that her mother used to pickle rather than ferment and that fermentation was sadly limited to cucumbers and cabbage.

206 From interviews with Natalia (2.02.2021), Ania (12.03.2021), and Karolina (18.03.2021).

ogy²⁰⁷, Paxson and Helmreich (ibid) described the dual meanings and doings of microbes: on the one hand, microbes are untameable and particular strains can be perilous and cause illness while on the other hand, “they can be enrolled in modelling [sic], and thereby shaping, new food science and politics” (ibid: 173) and their presence can be interpreted as a hopeful sign for extra-terrestrial life, “possible companions to contemporary human cultural projects” (ibid: 179).

Fermentation is one of the oldest food processing practices; it dates back to 4000 BCE (Ray and Joshi 2014: 4). Microbiologist Jashbhai Prajapati and food technologist Baboo Nair (2003) suggest that fermentation originated in India with a surplus of leftover milk, which fermented overnight (ibid: 2). These authors also claim that artefacts suggesting fermentation practices were found in the region of Egypt and the Middle East [sic]. Fermented foods are common around the world and they can be encountered in the majority of cultures from fermented rice-based dishes in India, such as *appam* and *dhokla*, herring in Sweden, miso soup made of fermented soybean paste in Japan or *curtido* – a vegetable dish characteristic to Central American countries. As stated by American writer Sandor Katz—a self-proclaimed “fermentation revivalist”²⁰⁸—fermentation of food is used commonly around the world “to make food more delicious, more stable for storage, more digestible, more nutritious, and less toxic” (Katz 2019: 11). In 2003, Sandor Katz published a book entitled “Wild Fermentation: The Flavor, Nutrition, and Craft of Live-Culture Foods” which started a revival of the popular and scientific interest in the process of fermentation²⁰⁹. Katz is now running fermentation workshops around the world and gives lectures on “The Art of Fermentation” at, for example, Harvard University.²¹⁰ A You-

207 “Astrobiology is the study of life in cosmic and planetary context, with respect to astrophysical and geological processes, whether these unfold on Earth or on other worlds” (Paxson and Helmreich 2014: 178).

208 <https://www.wildfermentation.com/who-is-sandorkraut/> Accessed 29.11.2022.

209 Recent years have seen an increase in micro biology research and dietary food studies on the health benefits of fermented foods (see for example Dimidi et al. 2019, Hutkins 2018, Marco et al. 2017, Melini et al. 2019, Şanlier et al. 2017).

210 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vt-l7eG7fqo> Accessed on 29.03.2021

Tube video titled “The Complete Guide to Fermenting Every Single Vegetable” has nearly 2,5 million views²¹¹, reflecting the fermentation hype.

In recent years, social scientists have looked at fermentation from various perspectives, recognizing the importance of studying the “fundamentally intertwined” relations between human and microbial cultures (Hendy et al. 2021: 197). Anthropologist Danilyn Rutherford observed that “fermentation is a matter of culture” (2021: 193) where ‘culture’ refers equally to a community of microbes as well as “institutions, ideas, and lifeways of people involved in the care of nonhuman groups” (ibid). Fermentation researcher Maya Hay used fermented foods as a tool for studying human-microbes relationships (2017) and argued that humans and microbes share histories and topographies. She saw humans and bacteria as interconnected and stated that “from our guts to the greater ecosystem, human bodies and microbial bodies are inextricably linked, placing our collective wellbeing at stake” (ibid: 81). The role of fermentation was also analysed from the perspective of human evolution. For example, Katherine Amato and her team (Amato et al. 2021) suggested that for our early ancestors, fermentation was a crucial component of surviving the harsh living conditions and contributed to fueling the growth of the human brain.

Other researchers, like social and political scientist Dolly Kikon (2021), focused on the social and cultural aspects of the relationship between humans and fermented foods. In her research on small-scale, non-industrial bamboo shoot fermentation practices in Northeast India, she explored “the impact of fermented food in creating solidarities and networks” (2021: 386) and proposed that “fermenting cultures offer a world of connection, care, [and] palatability”. Kikon observed that the practice of fermentation transforms not only the taste of food but also the relationships within communities, bringing people closer to one another and their local sense of identity.

211 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZghX4Mrg7kw> Accessed on 1.12.2022

While human-microbes interaction is a common topic among social scientists, there is limited literature on the socializing aspect of fermentation workshops. Sociologist Salla Sariola and social anthropologist Matthäus Rest looked at “a collective fermentation workshop as a feminist modality of caring for microbes over time” (2019: 56). However, their work is still focused predominantly on the human-microbes relationship, omitting the larger social implications of the workshops, such as the facilitation of community-creation or providing space for the formation and growth of critical ideas.

Before diving into the ethnographic part, I will first present the context-specific side of fermentation.

1.2 Fermentation within the Polish context

In Poland, *kiszzone ogórki* (fermented cucumbers) and *kapusta kiszona* (sauerkraut) are among the most emblematic elements of Polish cuisine (next to potato dishes and soups)²¹². Polish ethnologist and historian Aleksandra Kleśta-Nawrocka (2011: 831) described how XIX century European travellers frequently reported that Polish national cuisine was known for *kapusta* and *ogórki kiszzone*. These two dishes remained popular and have a strong place in people’s memory, being associated with homemade food and daily meals. Even though fermented foods have a long-lasting presence in Polish culinary tradition, it seems that among urban Poles the interest in fermentation has recently been revitalised, which is linked to the global phenomenon described above.

If a general interest sprouting in different places around the country can be attributed to one person only, it can be said that the increased popularity of fermentation in Poland has accelerated thanks to (or, maybe, it was simply reflected by) the publication of “*Kiszonki and Fermentacje*” (Fermented foods and Fermentations) by the fa-

212 While documenting the lives of Polish peasants, Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak discovered that in the period between the Wars (1918-1945), making preserves was not commonplace. However, almost every household was making *kapusta kiszona* before winter (2023: 238).

mous chef Aleksander Baron²¹³. In 2016, he released a collection of traditional but newly arranged recipes of fermented foods²¹⁴. *Solec 44*, his restaurant in Warsaw, gained popularity quickly. The menu was based on Polish cuisine, emphasising local seasonal products with special attention to fermented foods. Since the book's publication, *kiszonki* (fermented foods) have been re-gaining the hearts of the Polish population and reappearing on their tables.

In the Polish context, there is a scarcity of literature on the social aspect of fermentation workshops and practices as a social phenomenon, especially within urban settings. Anthropologist Joanna Mroczkowska, who researched food transfer between the countryside and the city, noted that *kiszonki* (fermented foods) are perceived by new urban dwellers as products that are challenging to create in a city. The taste of homemade fermented foods, she observed, is deemed irreplaceable compared to store-bought alternatives (2018: 92). In Gdańsk, however, urban citizens get together to learn about fermentation and prepare fermented foods, which they sometimes bring back to their families in the form of reverse-transfer. This practice contrasts with the transport of food from the countryside to larger Polish towns, a phenomenon described by Mroczkowska as 'jars' (*słoiki*). This phenomenon involves the movement of glass jars between 'home', typically situated in rural peripheries, and the city. Individuals who have relocated to larger metropolises for studies or work often carry homemade food in these glass jars when returning to a city from visits to their hometowns. Mroczkowska interprets

213 From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021.

214 Since then, several books on fermentation were written by Polish authors. For example, "*Dzikie kiszonki i inne fermentacje*" (Wild fermented foods and other fermentations, Kaja Nowakowska and Małgorzata Ruszkowska 2018), "*Domowe kiszonki z owoców, warzyw i ziół*" (Homemade fermented fruit, vegetables and herbs, Pieńkos Magdalena 2018), "*Domowe kiszonki które leczą*" (Home-made fermented foods that heal, Magdalena Jarzynka-Jendrzewska and Ewa Sypnik-Pogorzelska 2020), "*Kiszenie i fermentacja z dr Ewą Dąbrowską. Domowe sposoby*" (Pickling and fermentation with Dr. Ewa Dąbrowska. Home remedies, Beata Dąbrowska 2021). "*Zdrowe przetwory. Wydanie rozszerzone*" (Healthy preserves. Extended Edition, Jolanta Naklicka-Kleser 2021).

the transfer of food between the periphery and the centre as “mobile media of local identity, reproducing ties with people who stayed back home” (2018: 77). It also serves as a tool to “uphold bonds and commensality with family as well as with the local community” (ibid). In these jars, people carry not only homemade food but also emotionally charged tastes, memories, and recipes, which they can reconnect with in a new urban environment. Interestingly, urban citizens curious about fermentation transfer their fermented products to their families, bringing back new tastes and ideas and reversing the commonly found direction of the food journey. Even though certain fermented products like cucumbers and cabbage are well known around Poland, fermented radishes or carrots are perceived as a novelty originating within a non-rural and thus more cosmopolitan context. Through fermentation, Polish urban citizens connect both to the local and rural sentiments of their family homes as well as to the global trends encountered in a city.

The way in which *Trójmiasto* urbanites engage with the fermentation workshops can be interpreted as a reinvention of food. A group of anthropologists described the concept of reinvention of food as “the revival of dishes and culinary techniques from generational past [...] shoring up familiar methods and modes of food production so that they remain viable under new political, regulatory, and market regimes” (Grasseni et al. 2014: 1). While fermentation practices observed in *Trójmiasto* link back to people’s memories and tastes, they also offer an opportunity to broaden the scope of knowledge, techniques, and aesthetics regarding food self-preservation based on global trends thus allowing for staying close to certain culinary traditions and participating in the cosmopolitan world at the same time, as I will show in the first ethnographic part of this chapter. Additionally, the collective aspect of fermentation workshops proposes new ways of relating within the neoliberal market economy, as I will elaborate in the following section.

1.3 Doing community in the contemporary city

Social scientists observed that globalization and the structure of modern, post-industrial cities continued, if not strengthened, the adverse effects on social ties and communities which began in

the industrial era. For sociologists Nelson and Copperman (1998), post-industrialization was characterized mainly by the emergence of new organisations and computer technologies, that produced strategies handled by “managers, executives, and administrators” (ibid: 585).

While the authors did not deny the benefits of this new era, such as the growth of knowledge and professionalization of society at large, they suggested that the new technologies also contribute to strengthening social problems, for example by heightening competition and “uncertainty across the institutional order” (ibid: 583). As I explained in the introduction of this manuscript, Gdańsk is an example of a post-industrial city. According to urban studies researcher Douglas Shaw, the main difference between industrial and post-industrial cities is a replacement of heavy industry with diverse types of services “from highly specialized producer services such as corporate law, banking and accounting, to low-paying consumer services” (Shaw 2001: 285). Gdańsk is home to one of the largest Polish shipyards, which is currently still partially used for heavy industry, yet its significant part is turned into hosting social and educational centres (such as the European Solidarity Centre), museums, bars, and new housing facilities.

In the Polish context, sociologist Paweł Starosta suggested that in the “global epoch” (2003: 116) social ties and communities become fragmented and change their meanings, therefore in the modern world we are observing multi-dimensional reconstructions of communities²¹⁵. Polish geographer Adam Górka brings to the fore that, post-industrial Polish cities are also bound to contribute to alienation. Górka attributes the “loosening of interpersonal contacts within the [city] neighbourhood” (2013: 296) to the emergence of new communication technologies, increased mobility and distance between the place of work and the place of living. Furthermore, Górka argues that in post-industrial cities there is a “breaking of traditional social ties” (ibid: 302). Yet, he does not conclude with

215 Starosta differentiates between symbolic, psychological and personal dimensions of reconstructing communities in the global world (2003).

a pessimistic note, rather, based on a field study in Kraków, Górka proposes that the emergence of territorial communities (bound by smaller neighbourhoods) has the potential to facilitate the intensification of interpersonal contacts.

In a similar vein, Polish psychologist Maria Lewicka (2004: 274) observed that “global village awakens the longing towards local and familiar”. Sociologist Agnieszka Michalska-Żyła supported the statement that transformations related to globalization are contributing to the renaissance of the awareness of small local and regional communities and thus to the increased appreciation of, and the need for, such formations (2011: 80). Sociologist Marta Klekotko also wondered if in globalized, hypermobile, and anonymous cities, communities can exist (2020). Based on the research conducted in three major Polish cities—Warsaw, Kraków, and Katowice—she proposed to study community practices taking place within urban cultural scenes (*sceny miejskie*). This approach allowed for the combination of two perspectives on community-creation: one which argues that in modern cities, establishing lasting neighbourhood structures is challenging due to the mobility of residents, and the second one which suggests that physical space is relevant for the processes of bond formation (ibid: 122). Based on this research, she contended that the creation and dynamics of communities are intricately connected to the socio-cultural conditions and opportunities present within a city, a concept she refers to as *sceny miejskie* or urban scenes. Additionally, she posited that “varied socio-cultural opportunity structures encourage community practices” (ibid: 124). Therefore, a broader range of opportunity structures facilitates the emergence of diverse community practices and, consequently, the formation of varied communities within the city. Urban transformations might, yet do not always, prioritise the well-being of a community or facilitate its creation and strengthening. Yet, as I showcase in this chapter, newly emerging places such as *Ziemiosfera* create spaces where community practices can happen. Klekotko underlined that ‘doing community’ is a practice similar to ‘doing class’ or ‘doing gender’ as it can be seen through a variety of everyday practices. In this dissertation, I argue that attendance at fermentation workshops is one of the ways to ‘do community’, a community practice (*praktyka wspólnotowa*) taken up by some Polish urban dwellers.

The activity of collective learning performed by those attending fermentation workshops carries some elements of communities of practice, a concept developed by educational theorist Etienne Wenger and anthropologist Jean Lave (1991), who studied apprenticeship as a learning model. In simple words, communities of practice are “formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning” (Wenger 2011: 1) and are characterized by three features, which include 1) “an identity defined by a shared domain of interest” (ibid), 2) “joint activities and discussions” (ibid), mutual help, sharing information, and 3) a “shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice” (ibid). Polish urbanities attending the workshops share an interest not only in fermentation but, as it turned out, in healthy eating and cooking as well as ecological and sustainable solutions. During the workshops participants discussed which jars and knives are best for their work, exchanged stories and recipes, opinions on sources of vegetables (which food market has the best quality of products and value for money), and one woman asked for help about dinner preparation for her in-laws, receiving a shower of recommendations and empathising smiles.

In the majority of the literature that employs the category of a post-socialist context, food preservation was often studied as a phenomenon belonging to the rural past. For example, in her research on consumerism changes in post-socialist Bulgaria, anthropologist Yuson Jung (2009) observed a decrease in the frequency of making preserves. The practices of “jarring food” were mainly associated with villages, where elders lived and would still produce preserves, which were then brought to the cities for consumption. Instead, the inhabitants of the city had turned to buying industrially produced jarred food available in various grocery stores, signifying shifting notions on social and economic environment.

More recent publications challenge this view. For example, in an aforementioned article by Agata Bachórz (2018), she investigated at-home food production as a continuation of old practices informed by new standards and greater awareness, thus “showing how different layers overlap, shaping a mix of traditional and modern forms” (ibid: 97). Similarly, social scientist Monica Stroe (2018) wrote a chapter on

preserves making and “jarring” in post-socialist Romania. Stroe observed how fruit preservation practices in Romania were transformed into a modern, creative domestic leisure activity for Romanian middle-class consumers, thus becoming “a practice that cuts ties with its functionalist, shortage-driven version of the socialist era” (149).

What I will argue in the next sections is that similarly to the urban middle class in Romania, urbanites from *Trójmiasto* attend fermentation workshops in their free time, seeing leisure as meaningful. Additionally, through attending fermentation workshops, Polish urban citizens equip traditional practices with new, contemporary meanings. Contrary to the Bulgarian case described by Jung (2009) where homemade preserves were substituted by standardized products, Polish urbanites are currently ‘going back’ to these practices, altering their meanings and proposing alternatives to the side effects of capitalism.

In this chapter, I look at the function of collective fermentation workshops in the urban context while exploring the meanings of a renewed interest in fermented foods for contemporary urban Polish citizens. The rest of the chapter is divided into two parts; the first one treats these workshops as spaces which allow for knowledge and techniques of food self-preservation to broaden, based on three dimensions: 1) seasonality and locality, 2) rurality and tradition, and 3) global trends. The second part discusses how fermentation workshops function as urban spaces (Klekotko 2020), which allow for building community, conceptualization of food system critique, and creation of post-capitalist practices.

Part 2

2.1 Meeting around an oilcloth

On the one hand, fermented foods are successfully commodified by some. For example, a *Trójmiasto*-based company dedicated to making fermented products and selling them as ‘superfoods’ called *Zakwasownia*²¹⁶, over a few years became famous

216 More on *Zakwasownia* in chapter two.

around the country, opened a restaurant and was featured in public media (Gracjasz 2022). On the other hand, there is also a perceivable interest in learning how to make your own fermented products. Aside from the aforementioned books by both Polish and foreign authors, there is a growing popularity of fermentation workshops. Workshops are educational events which combine theoretical knowledge with hands-on learning experience in a casual and friendly setting. Their short duration (between a few hours and a few days) and small scale, make them into a leisure activity, accessible on a free day, afternoon or a weekend. What differentiates these workshops from more official and standardized courses is their informality and focus on manual and technical skills. Workshops on food self-processing practices, which include canning, pickling, and fermenting are taking place in larger Polish cities such as Warsaw²¹⁷, Wrocław²¹⁸ or Kraków²¹⁹, as well as in smaller towns such as Gdynia²²⁰ or Sopot²²¹ and, since the COVID-19 pandemic, also online²²². During my fieldwork in Gdańsk, I learned about fermentation workshops happening in various spaces in *Trojmiasto*, including in vegan and ecological shops²²³. On one occasion I also attended one such workshop, which took place in a recently opened ‘zero-waste’ shop-cum-vegan café called *Ziemiosfera*, located in *Wrzeszcz*, a vibrant neighbourhood of Gdańsk. I visited *Ziemiosfera* on several occasions before as its opening was an awaited moment among people interested in the topics of sustainability, eco-

217 See for example: https://www.cookup.pl/p/akcja-fermentacja-czyli-kiszonki-dla-poczatkujacych-1/?attribute_pa_termin=07-05-2021. Accessed on 29.03.2021.

218 <https://www.facebook.com/events/ulica-%C5%9Bw-wincentego-25-50-252-wroc%C5%82aw-polska/warsztaty-fermentacji/1460447887313642/> Accessed on 29.03.2021.

219 <https://biletyna.pl/inne/Kuchnia-Cheder-Warsztaty-kiszenia/Krakow> Accessed on 18.11.2022.

220 <https://kulinaria.trojmiasto.pl/Fermentacja-jesienne-kiszonki-imp466317.html> Accessed on 29.03.2021.

221 <https://kulinaria.trojmiasto.pl/Warsztaty-kulinarne-kiszonki-i-fermentacja-imp471906.html?imp=471906> Accessed on 18.11.2022

222 <https://empikbilety.pl/wydarzenie/laboratorium-fermentacji-kiszonki-kimchi-zakwas/grudzien-2020>. Accessed on 29.03.2021.

223 <https://www.facebook.com/events/avocado-vegan-shop/warsztat-kulinary-kiszonki-i-fermentacja/300794283904895/> Accessed on 18.11.2022

logical food, and DIY practices²²⁴. The workshop was just one of many carried out by Natalia from *ekosmos*, a one-person business centred around the ideas of sustainable, healthy and environmentally friendly cooking, and food processing. I heard about Natalia before attending her workshop from several people involved in food cooperatives, who had worked with her in various ways. These interpersonal networks constitute the main topic of this chapter. To better understand the workshops and the participants, consider the following vignette.

I park the car and rush to the café. Today is a busy day of fieldwork. I just finished a meeting with a Food Cooperative which took place in the southern outskirts of Gdańsk and barely made it on time for the next event – a workshop on food fermentation. I enter the café in which it takes place and see a group of women sitting around a long table covered with a dark blue oilcloth with white polka dots. Oilcloths, in my mind, belong to the past. They are water-resistant table cloths which were used a lot by my grandma, but never by my mother who appreciated novelty in interior design. I am surprised to see it in this hip place. However, with its elegant pattern, it does not even stand out so much and it is very practical as it protects the wooden table from the knives and liquids used for the workshop.

The women around the table are between 20 and 40 years old. All of them look proper, some a bit more stylish than others. They are wearing light make-up, vintage dresses, short jeans skirts or casual but good quality T-shirts. They are definitely city dwellers. We are in a city after all, in the well-known and upcoming neighbourhood of *Wrzeszcz*.

I put my bags quietly behind the counter trying not to disturb too much, quickly introduce myself and ask consent for taking photos and filming. Natalia – the young woman running the workshop is

224 DIY stands for ‘do it yourself’ and refers to fixing, mending and creating by oneself without the need for a read-made product or professional help. DIY is often associated with an anti-consumerist culture and is an important element of an alternative movement. In the context of “Ziemiosfera”, it relates mainly to making one’s own cosmetics or cleaning agents for the household.

already informed about my presence as I had called her a few weeks earlier to explain my research.

The workshop has already started: all the women are wearing black latex gloves and are cutting vegetables to make a big bowl of *kimchi* – Korean fermented cabbage, which, like many other foreign dishes, has become one of the trendy foods over the last few years, especially among urban, educated, upwardly mobile middle classes (see Domański 2017). This will be the only dish we make together, combining all the spices and vegetables in one big bowl. It is important to let all the ingredients mix and marinate properly at the beginning of the three-hour workshop. At the end of the event, we will distribute *kimchi* to separate jars for each of us to take home. Later, after mixing *kimchi* ingredients, we all receive a set of variously sized jars, cleaned and sterilized already by Natalia. The program of the workshop is to ferment several types of vegetables. Some recipes, like *zakwas z buraka* (fermented beetroot juice), are well known in Polish cuisine and therefore also to the women who are all Polish. Other recipes like *kimchi*, fermented lemons or green salad with mint are unknown and spark much excitement among the participants.

The atmosphere is easy-going and relaxed. Women chat freely about vegetable cutting techniques, discussing whether cutting carrots into sticks, cubes or plasters is best, while exchanging recipes for fermentation they remember from family homes; one woman asks for advice on what to cook for her very demanding mother-in-law. She receives nods of empathy and several recipes for easy and tasty dishes.

Natalia seems passionate about her role as a tutor, sharing plenty of information about the fermentation process, which she learned from her grandmothers and later through her own trial-and-error practice. She shares parts of her career story too, how she started her adventure with fermentation, how she is also baking gluten and sugar-free cakes for several cafes in *Trójmiasto*, how she runs natural cosmetics workshops and how she loves the life of health and self-sufficiency. She is very excited to be able to run workshops like this. The workshop finishes when we all have a set of beautifully looking fruits and vegetables in jars (see Fig. 1). Now we all have to wait up to several weeks, as fermenting needs time.



Fig. 1 The set of freshly prepared fruits and vegetables in jars. From the left: apples and strawberries vinegar, lemon with black cumin and thyme, green salad with mint, sweet green peas with herbs, asparagus with dill and garlic, radish with fennel and black mustard, and fermented beetroot juice with carrots. Picture taken by the author. July 2020.

Based on my ethnographic field notes, the vignette presented above introduces several topics of this chapter, such as fermentation as a symbolically loaded trend of the urban middle class and a collective dimension of the workshops, particularly meaningful in the context of the city.

The fermentation workshop described here took place at the end of June 2020 in *Ziemia* (the Earthsphere: *Ziemia* – earth, *sfera* – sphere). This unique venue, which combines an ecological and zero-waste shop with a vegan café and a workshop space, came into existence in the spring of 2020, challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic and the following lockdown. *Ziemia* is located strategically close to the *Wrzeszcz* train station, allowing for a mix of people to pass by and visit the shop. It occupies one premise in a typical urban building and would not differentiate much from the surrounding buildings, if it was not for the freshly painted walls in warm and elegant peach colour, and nearly two meters high and similarly wide windows with a subtle yet visible logo in white. Plants are placed every morning in front of the entrance. Through the windows, one can see a cosy interior lit by designer lamps,

with shelves and counters made from light wood ornamented with lush green plants, and neatly arranged products. These products range from organic deodorants, bamboo toothbrushes, and plastic-free hygiene items to jars filled with dried cranberries, ecologically produced nuts, seeds, and legumes.

The shop's profile fits the already existing conscious consumerism vibe present in *Wrzeszcz*²²⁵. At the time of my fieldwork, *Ziemiosfera* employed two people, each of them working part-time. At the time of writing, the shop opened another spot in another part of *Wrzeszcz*, also a popular neighbourhood of *Garnizon*, where *Bazar Natury* is located²²⁶. From the start of its existence, *Ziemiosfera* aimed to be “a place where people can meet, and inspire each other. [...] where someone who is not related to the topic [of ecology] can discover a whole new world²²⁷. The official website description says that *Ziemiosfera* “combines three different concepts into one beautiful location: a zero-waste store, a space for eco-workshops and a coffee spot. The goal of *Ziemiosfera* eco-centre is to provide healthy and sustainable alternatives for our day-to-day lives, as well as to share them through learning sessions or around a drink.”²²⁸ In the shop, a majority of the products are sold by weight; one can buy not only organic and local food produce (mainly dry fruits and legumes) but also ecological and natural cosmetics and cleaning products. One can also buy intermediate goods, such as components and ingredients necessary to make one's washing powder or soap. The place promotes a lifestyle of self-sufficiency, one that is made possible if a customer has sufficient cash resources, as the products available in *Ziemiosfera* are not cheap. The variety of paid workshops on food self-processing, making your

225 See chapter three of this dissertation for a discussion on the *Wrzeszcz* neighbourhood and politically oriented food places.

226 See chapter two of this dissertation for more on the *Bazar Natury* food market.

227 Original text: “Miejsce gdzie ludzie mogą się spotykać, wzajemnie inspirować. [...] Gdzie ktoś, kto nie jest związany zupełnie z tematem [ekologii] będzie mógł odkryć cały świat nowy.” From an interview with Patrycja, the co-owner of *Ziemiosfera*. 29th of July 2020, Gdańsk.

228 Available online: <https://en.ziemiosfera.pl/o-nas> Accessed on the 4th of February 2021.

own cosmetics or reusable beeswax wraps fits this ideology. In *Ziemiosfera* there is also a giveaway corner, where one can bring and take anything they want for free, which aims to boost the neighbourhood's circular small-scale economy. The place is designed to be a social and educational hub with an environmental mission, which is emphasised by a thoughtfully designed display window (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 The word “workshops” written on the window of *Ziemiosfera*. Behind the glass you can see one of many plants which fill up the shop. Picture taken by the author. July 2020.

Ziemiosfera is run by a married couple, a Polish woman, Patrycja and a Belgian man, Franek. Both have lived and worked in Belgium, Netherlands and Luxemburg before setting up their business in Gdańsk.

“... ja to odkryłam wszystko tam [w Belgii], tam się dużo mówiło o zrównoważonym rozwoju, o sustainability, to był... to nie był temat dyskusji i debat, na które się chodziło, tylko przy stole normalnie rozmawialiśmy o tym jak może być inaczej.”²²⁹

229 From an interview with Patrycja, the co-owner of *Ziemiosfera*. 29th of July 2020, Gdańsk.

“... I discovered it all there [in Belgium], there was a lot of talk about sustainable development, about sustainability, it was... it was not a topic of discussions and debates that we were attending to, but at the table, we normally talked about how things could be different.”

Patrycja and Franek were not only inspired by sustainability ideas they were exposed to abroad (such as reduce, reuse, recycle) and which they used as a base for their shop's ideology, but also by the omnipresence and casualness of the subject. From Patrycja's perspective, the topic of changing one's habit into more sustainable and thus an environmentally friendly one was not present enough in *Trójmiasto*, as opposed to places outside of Poland, where she had previously lived. Yet, some practices introduced in the shop, such as buying in bulk or re-using cotton shopping bags were not new for *Trójmiasto* customers and quickly found supporters. Other objectives, such as ordering products for the shop in a zero-waste manner, that is, for example, without plastic packaging turned out to be difficult²³⁰. The intention to create something that “will make the world a better place” took shape while Patrycja and Franek were travelling. Eventually, they decided to move to Poland and create a space which could help spread environmental awareness through bringing people together, for example, in the form of practical and thematic workshops.

Luckily for the success of their business, and defying their perhaps slightly negative perception of the lack of environmental consciousness in Poland, there were people in *Trójmiasto* interested in sustainable living and gaining awareness on the topic. The fermentation workshop was organized and run by Natalia (28 years old at the time of the workshop) – the owner and the only employee of *ekosmos*, a one-person company set up in

230 Patrycja communicated a telling story during one of my casual visits to Ziemiosfera. She was disappointed that she could not find a Polish supplier for dry food dispensers who would not use plastic packaging. The difficulty with running her shop in a purely ecological way surprised and disappointed her. From field notes. Gdańsk, June 2020.

2018²³¹. Natalia created *ekosmos* to, initially, teach people how to make natural cosmetics and began to carry out fermentation workshops soon after, when she saw that there was an increasing interest in the fermentation process both around the world and in Poland.

“Właściwie *ekosmos*, od początku, zanim jeszcze ta nazwa, która na początku była dla tych [naturalnych] kosmetyków zarezerwowana, to właściwie te warsztaty kulinarne się zaczęły od kiszonek. Ponieważ, to nagle zaczęło być bardzo modne. I zaczęła się ta moda [też] w Polsce...”²³²

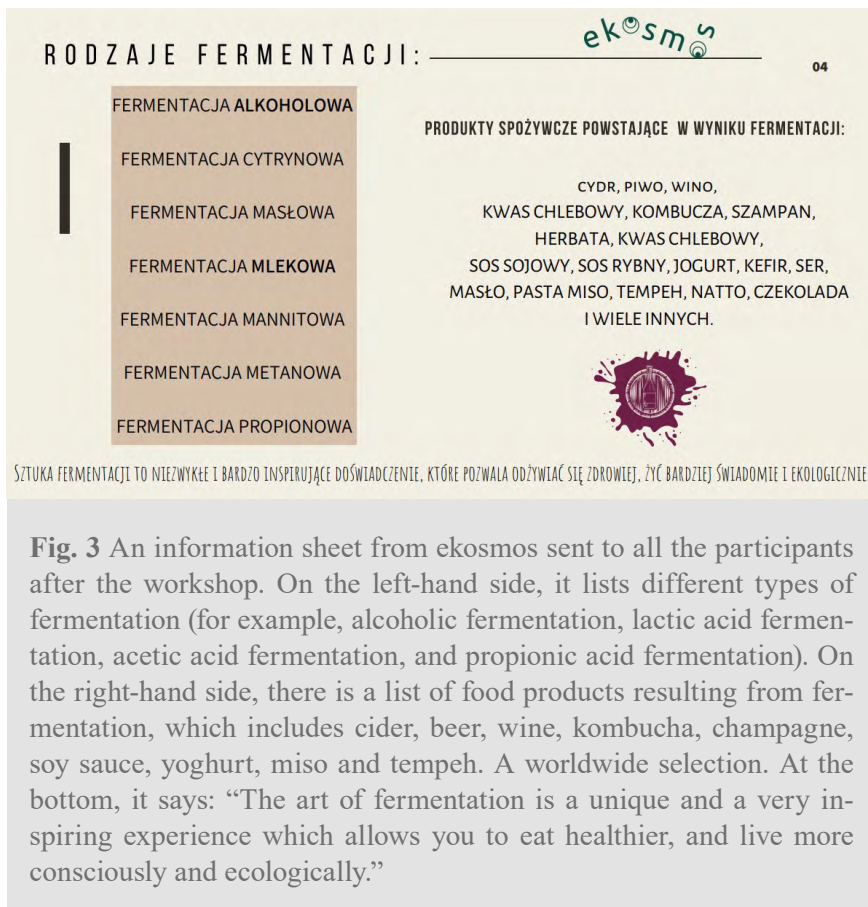
“Actually *ekosmos*, from the very beginning, even before the name, which at the beginning was reserved for these [natural] cosmetics, these culinary workshops actually started with fermented foods. Because it suddenly became very fashionable. And this fashion [also] began in Poland...”

While Natalia enjoys cooking in general, she says that she would not like to spend her days cooking in isolation, rather “*potrzebuję spotkań z ludźmi, wymiany*” (I need to meet people, exchange)²³³ – she said. Therefore, she decided to establish workshops, a teaching format in which her (and other’s) social needs could be met. Both *Ziemiosfera* and *ekosmos* are not only conscious and proactive about environmental issues, but they also create and sustain an environmentally-aware community. The environmental aspect and benefits of fermentation practices are conveyed in, for example, the digital leaflet created by *ekosmos* and distributed to all the participants after the end of the workshop (see Fig. 3). The file with the in-depth information on fermentation processes clearly states that “*sztuka fermentacji [...] pozwala [...] żyć bardziej świadomie i ekologicznie*” (the art of fermentation [...] allows [...] to live more consciously and ecologically).

231 More on *EKOsmos* and Natalia in chapter five of this dissertation.

232 From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021. Online.

233 From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021. Online.



The fermentation workshops organized by Natalia are advertised as driven by “connecting traditional recipes and regional products with exotic inspirations and contemporary scientific research”²³⁴. Throughout the workshop and in the materials shared afterwards, Natalia often repeated how healthy and fascinating fermentation is and how one can use it as a way to reduce food waste in their homes,

234 Original text: “prowadzę roślinne warsztaty kulinarne i kosmetyczne. Przyświeca mi idea łączenia tradycyjnych receptur i regionalnych produktów z egzotycznymi inspiracjami i współczesnymi badaniami naukowymi.” From a Facebook event description. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/events/ziemiosfera/warsztaty-kulinarne-kiszonki-i-fermentacja/295184351877655/> Accessed 22.02.2023.

by turning sad and old vegetables into fermented products. Conversations about reusing jars and improvising with spices and herbs that were available at the moment (to avoid buying unnecessarily) were also frequently picked up during the workshop.

The workshop, as described in the vignette, took place inside, around a big table. Natalia began by giving a brief explanation of what fermentation is, repeating information she posted prior to the event in its online description: “*Kiszonki* are famous for their probiotic, cleansing and strengthening properties. They are an excellent source of vitamins, minerals and beneficial bacteria. They support immunity, regulate digestion and – they taste amazing! The fermentation phenomenon occurs #naturally, we just need to provide the bacteria with the right conditions for development.”²³⁵ Then, she offered participants an opportunity to taste some of her recent fermented products, such as rose vinegar, kimchi with pineapple, fermented garlic, and fermented chilli sauce, thus intriguing everyone in the room with unusual taste combinations and the possibility of fermenting so much more than commonly known vegetables, such as cabbage and cucumbers.

The attendance at workshops is usually limited and it changes depending on the space in which they are organized. The workshop in *Ziemiosfera* could host a maximum of eight people. To take part in the workshop a person had to enroll by sending a direct email to Natalia. The event lasted three hours (from 18 to 21) and it required an investment of 180zł²³⁶, which covered the materials (jars, cutting boards, knives, plastic bucket for mixing kimchi, and an oil cloth) and the vegetables Natalia brought. The participants paid for an evening of

235 Original text: “*Kiszonki słyną ze swoich właściwości probiotycznych, oczyszczających i wzmacniających organizm. Są doskonałym źródłem witamin, składników mineralnych i dobroczynnych bakterii. Wspierają odporność, regulują trawienie – a do tego - smakują obłędnie! Zjawisko fermentacji zachodzi #naturalnie, musimy jedynie zapewnić bakteriom odpowiednie warunki do rozwoju.*” From a Facebook event description. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/events/ziemiosfera/warsztaty-kulinarne-kiszonki-i-fermentacja/295184351877655/> Accessed 22.02.2023.

236 Around 38 EUR at the time of writing.

learning and they left home with eight jars of fermented foods, a digital folder with information and recipes sent after the workshops (see Fig. 3), and the possibility to contact Natalia with questions and doubts, which frequently arose in the subsequent months. During the workshops people cut their vegetables and fruits and then squeeze them into jars, closely following the words and actions of Natalia. They add spices and herbs, creating combinations they had never heard of before. They mix water with salt which then they pour into jars. Later, they set the jars aside, admiring the colours and sharing the excitement of having created something themselves (see Fig. 3-6)²³⁷.



Fig. 4 Participants cut vegetables for fermented foods at the oil cloth-covered table. Picture taken by the author. July 2020.

237 Capturing the process of making colourful jars of fermented fruit and vegetables was particularly enjoyable for me as a photographer who is attentive to shades, hues, and motifs. As you can see in the presented pictures, the surroundings abounded with colours and patterns, evoking a lively, summery day. At the same time, following the hands and gestures of the participants, who peeled and cut the vegetables, passed jars to one another and stuffed them with cut pieces, gave birth to action shots which reflect the busyness, engagement, and diligence of the people attending the workshop.

Fig. 5 One of participants showing me a jar filled with pieces of lemon. Black cumin and fresh thyme are neatly placed at the bottom of the jar and will start floating around once the salty water is poured inside. Picture taken by the author. July 2020.



Fig. 6 Women preparing products for fermentation and passing jars to each other. Picture taken by the author. July 2020.



Fig. 7 One of the participants takes a picture of a freshly prepared beetroot juice. Picture taken by the author. July 2020.

As shown above, *Ziemiosfera* and *ekosmos* combine an environmental approach with health awareness and a mission to educate others. Following already mentioned studies on food self-preservation by Bachórz (2018), Jehlička and Smith (2012, 2013), and Stroe (2018), I interpret their practices as an interplay between the categories of old (traditional skills), new (unusual recipes), local (using locally sourced vegetables), and global (international sentiments about environmental and health awareness related to fermentation), as they navigate a continuum of practices and economic and political situations. The official description of *ekosmos* on the Facebook profile says: “We would like to introduce you to the magic of seasonality and locality, remind you of traditional food processing techniques and take you on a culinary trip around the world.”²³⁸ In the next paragraph, I explore how these three dimensions are achieved through the workshops.

238 Available online: https://www.facebook.com/pg/EKOsmosVEGE/about/?ref=page_internal Accessed on the 2nd of February 2021.

2.2 Seasonality and locality as food values

In the context of fermentation workshops, the aspects of seasonality and locality relate to a physical space, the origin of a product, or the historical location of a practice. In this regard, the workshops bear a resemblance to alternative food networks that prioritise place and locality as their relevant principle and, frequently, a most important building block. Localism is often interpreted as a means to sustain rural livelihoods or a counter-hegemony to the hurtful logic of global capitalism, as highlighted by several food studies researchers, for example, Jonathan Murdoch and Mara Miele (1999)²³⁹, Jonathan Murdoch et al. (2000)²⁴⁰, E. Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman (2005)²⁴¹. In the description of the workshop posted online and presented during the workshop, Natalia emphasised these aspects stating that summer and early autumn are the best seasons to prepare fermented products²⁴². Not only because at this time of the year fruits and vegetables are the tastiest, but also because it is possible to use local produce grown in the region. Indeed, for the workshops, Natalia tries to procure all the vegetables from a local food cooperative

239 Murdoch and Miele (1999) conducted research indicating that the predominant development trajectory in the food sector was not leaning towards globalized and standardized production but, rather, was moving towards a fragmentation of production processes.

240 In this article, Murdoch et al. (2000) explored how, within food production and consumption, the value of “quality” is intricately tied to ‘nature’ and the ‘localized embeddedness’ of supply chains.

241 While DuPuis and Goodman maintain the belief that global industrial food systems contribute to a sense of food ‘placelessness’ they also draw attention to the fact that ‘unreflexive’ localism within alternative food systems can have negative consequences. This may result in problematic social justice outcomes and can make these systems susceptible to corporate co-optation.

242 “You can ferment all year round, but June is special because the raw materials are young, fresh, firm and very aromatic” (original: “*Kisić można przez cały rok, ale czerwiec jest wyjątkowy ponieważ surowce są młode, świeże, jędrne i bardzo aromatyczne*”). From an online description of the workshop. Available at https://www.facebook.com/events/ziemiosfera/warsztaty-kulinarne-kiszonki-i-fermentacja/295184351877655/?paipv=0&eav=AfZRrUBVlAgAW0z7HoNqEqbU5dwB-A3yA1ypfbhKqRkkiDy5V0R2dQVx-qbXFU4jxHRk&_rdr. Accessed 06.03.2023.

Eko-Box²⁴³ and if some products are not available locally, she finds other ways to procure them ethically²⁴⁴. It is important for Natalia to support local farmers when she can, rather than promote the industrial food system, which she deems unethical²⁴⁵. Additionally, Natalia believes that the quality of the locally procured vegetables is better than the supermarket bought and the source is more trusted because of the direct connection with farmers and the possibility to, when needed, visit the farm and judge the conditions for cultivation oneself. In an interview with Ania, one of the women attending Natalia's workshops, she emphasised if possible, she always makes fermented foods using vegetables collected at her parent's farm as she finds them healthier and of better quality²⁴⁶.

The aspect of locality also refers to the historical location of those practices and their shifting meanings within the region and their shifting meanings. Social scientists of Eastern European origin, most notably Petr Jehlička, observed that the large majority of academic articles on food self-production and self-processing in Eastern Europe frame such practices as “stories of survival, coping, hardship, poverty and underdevelopment”²⁴⁷. Indeed, some (West-

243 More on the cooperative Eko-Box and the interconnections between various networks in chapter five of this dissertation.

244 For example, the lemons used for fermentation workshops are not local Natalia orders them from a Sicilian farmers cooperative. More on this cooperative and the connections between different food procurement networks in chapter five of this dissertation.

245 From an unrecorded conversation with Natalia. Fieldnotes, June 2020.

246 From an interview with Ania. 15.03.2022.

247 From a webinar entitled “Outside the axis of knowledge production: Exploring the representation of East European informal food practices in Western academia” by Petr Jehlička. It was part of a webinar series on informal food production and sharing hosted by the “Spaces of quiet sustainability: self-provisioning and sharing” project. Attended on the 16th of December 2020. See also Smith and Jehlička (2017) on food self-provisioning in Poland and Czech Republic as examples of sustainability practices and Jehlička et al. (2020) on how the practice of food self-provisioning in Eastern Europe are compatible with main tenets of alternative food networks and, moreover, Eastern Europe “is a source of critical and innovative thinking about AFNs” (ibid: 286).

ern) social scientists see economic conditions and the inability to fit into the new ‘post-transition’ reality for the comeback of these practices. For example, social scientists Alber and Kohler (2008) compared the prevalence of informal food production in countries they described as post-socialist, with “traditional market economies” (ibid: 113). The authors argue that such practices are more common in the former Soviet Block and are typically a coping strategy, “predominantly done by poor people” (ibid: 125). However, Petr Jehlička, Joe Smith and Tomáš Kostelecky noticed that the economic reasons are far from the most important, often overshadowed by the pleasure and health benefits that food self-production delivers (Jehlička and Smith 2012; Smith and Jehlička 2013; Smith et al. 2015). My findings support this observation, as those attending the workshops do not feel economic pressure. Following their research on everyday sustainability practices found in Central Eastern Europe Jehlička, Smith, and Kostelecky (2013, 2015) proposed the term “quiet sustainability” which refers to “widespread practices that result in beneficial environmental or social outcomes and that do not relate directly or indirectly to market transactions, but are not understood by their practitioners as being driven by explicit environmental or sustainability goals” (2013: 148). I argue, however, that some contemporary urban customers from *Trójmiasto* are no longer ‘quiet’ in their practices of sustainability. Rather, as I elaborate on the example of my case study, through food self-processing practices, these urban citizens combine elements of tradition, recognized by Smith, Kostelecky and Jehlička (ibid.), with an environmental awareness and a critical attitude towards the global, industrial food system.

The ‘local’ and ‘seasonal’ aspects of fermentation workshops are manifested twofold. Firstly, by using seasonal vegetables sourced as much as possible from the vicinity. Secondly, by situating the practice of fermentation as a regional and rural tradition, which, however, can be interpreted as driven by pleasure and equipped with an environmental awareness, rather than solely as a survival strategy. The meanings associated with fermentation practises are being re-defined, shifting from pragmatic and economically motivated to health-oriented and ideologically informed, reflecting larger changes towards heightened environmental consciousness among the Pol-

ish population²⁴⁸. The second aspect of the workshops, the traditional and rural dimension connects with the locality of these practices as it draws on common culinary memories. I analyse this aspect in the next paragraph in the context of merging the past and present and the rediscovery of culinary skills in Poland.

2.3 Rediscovery of traditional culinary skills

Both *Ziemiosfera* and *ekosmos* interweave the past with the present, the rural with the global, and the traditional with the new. The past is used as a basis to construct redefined food habits, which are informed by traditional expertise. In the case of fermentation, Natalia appreciates aspects of both - past knowledge, inherited from her grandmothers and contemporary theories gathered from foreign and Polish literature on fermentation, cookbooks, travels, and the internet.

“Ja w ogóle z domu wyniosłam totalnie przetwarzanie, my to wiesz, na wanny robiliśmy u jednej babci, u drugiej. Obie moje babcie pochodziły ze wsi i tam całe lato były słoiki. I ja tam spędzałam całe lato i robiliśmy różne rzecz, kiszonki, pikle, wszystko.[...] Z domu wyniosłam kilka rzeczy, jak tam ten zakwas buraczany, ale robię go teraz na swój sposób zupełnie [...] zaczęło się od tego, że dużo z babcią rozmawiałam, a później czytałam sobie książki Sandora Katza, patrzyłam gdzie, kto co robi na świecie. No i później to już zaczęłam eksperymentować sobie tak bardzo, bardzo swobodnie.”²⁴⁹

“I took food processing from home, totally. You know, we did it in the bathtubs at both of my grandmothers’ places. Both my grandmothers came from the countryside and there, throughout the whole of summer, there were jars. And I spent all summer there and we

248 In 2020, Public Opinion Research Center (*Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej*, CBOS) carried out a survey on ecological awareness of Poles and found a 20% increase in awareness about the state of the environment around the world, with 70% of participants expressing their environmental concerns. Available at https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2020/K_163_20.PDF. Accessed 06.03.2023.

249 From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021. Online.

did various things, fermented foods, pickles, everything. [...] I took a few things from home, like this fermented beetroot juice, but now I make it my own way [...] It started by talking a lot with my grandmother, then I read Sandor Katz's books, and I looked at who was doing what in the world. And then I started experimenting myself very, very freely.”

Natalia recalls her youth spent in the countryside where food self-processing was part of daily life governed by changing seasons. Fermented and pickled foods constituted an important part of people's diet and filled up a large part of the household pantry. Natalia explains how the knowledge she acquired as second nature as a child was then broadened by intentional research using books and the internet. Finally, through experiments, she found her personal way of relating to fermented foods and felt the need to share and inspire others, which took the shape and form of workshops.

Natalia's personal story of rediscovering the process of fermentation should be placed in the context of a recent reevaluation of culinary tradition in Poland. For example, Polish historian Jarosław Dumanowski dedicates his work to critically reviewing historical Polish cookbooks, bringing renewed attention to traditional foods (see for example Dumanowski and Jankowski 2011; Dumanowski et al. 2017; Dumanowski 2019)²⁵⁰. Moreover, together with other scholars, Dumanowski researches a revival of Polish traditional products and recipes such as juniper beer, once a common beverage in central and north-eastern Poland and currently produced as a regional speciality (Madej et al. 2014). Food scholar Fabio Parasecoli and ethnographer Mateusz Halawa describe this renewed interest in traditional and local foods in Poland as “novel expressions of

250 Jarosław Dumanowski founded the Center for Research on the History and Culture of Food (*Centrum Badań nad Historią i Kulturą Wyżywienia*) at the Faculty of Historical Sciences of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Wydział Nauk Historycznych UMK w Toruniu) and cooperates with the Museum of King Jan III's Palace in Wilanów, which publishes sources and studies on Old Polish cuisine and table culture. See more at https://www.wilanow-palac.pl/seria_wydawnicza_monumenta_poleniae_culinaria.html. Accessed 13.03.2023.

cosmopolitanism” (2017: 37). In the research project description, based on a preliminary investigation, Parasecoli and Halawa argue that the Polish urban, upwardly mobile, educated middle classes no longer convey food cosmopolitanism through the practice of “omnivorousness” (the consumption of global foods, such as pizza or sushi) described previously by Domański (2017)²⁵¹ but through a shift towards “Polish local and traditional foods that operate as antidotes to mass-produced, commodified, and delocalized food, such as McDonald’s or Chinese instant noodles” (Parasecoli and Halawa 2017: 37). The increased production and consumption of fermented products observed in *Trójmiasto*, which links traditional skills with urban reality, constitute an example of such novel cosmopolitanism. The women attending the workshops are city dwellers, many of whom have memories of life in the countryside, and through fermentation, they might find the connection with that part of the past and rediscover culinary skills associated with rurality. Like Natalia, the women I interviewed who participated in the workshop, also remember some things about fermentation from their childhood. For example, Ania recalled how she used to help her parents and grandparents in the long and tedious process of preparing cabbage for fermentation. Yet, she did not continue this culinary practice once she left home, perhaps because her main memory that “with cabbage, there is an awful lot of work, a mess, a barrel and all that”²⁵², served more as a discouragement than inspiration for making fermented foods. It was only when she attended Natalia’s workshops that she rediscovered fermentation as a useful, healthy, and tasty form of preserving food that does not have to be a tedious chore but can be a fun activity. Similarly, Karolina remembers that she used to ferment vegetables with her mum when she was still living at home, but she stopped when she started living alone in a new city.

251 Polish sociologist Henryk Domański (2017) describes eating patterns and preferences of tastes in contemporary Poland and concludes that omnivorousness in eating pertains to “higher managers and specialists” (ibid: 299) and thus is a marker of cultural and class distinctions.

252 Original text: “do kapusty strasznie dużo roboty, bałaganu, beczka i to wszystko”. From an interview with Ania. 15.03.2022.

The majority of people who come to Natalia's workshops have some memories of the fermentation process or fermented products from their childhood. Natalia says that people coming to workshops usually "remember something" related to fermentation, yet this memory is somehow blurry and not sufficient to encourage them to make preserves by themselves.

*"...przychodząc na warsztaty, [ludzie] czasami coś tam pamiętają, jakby wiedzą, ale tego nie robią, bo się, nie wiem, boją, że im nie wyjdzie [...]. Bo to też tak jest, bo z kiszonkami ludzie nie wiedzą czy to jest zepsute czy to jest ukiszone, ale później na przykład łapią tą różnicę, czasami właśnie, dlatego mogą do mnie dzwonić. [...] A często to są jakieś tam wiesz kożuszki, osady, bo to jest naturalny proces, więc się wytrącają jakieś tam fragmenty stałe no i ludzie się po prostu boją, że się otrują."*²⁵³

"Coming to the workshops [people] sometimes remember something, as if they know, but they don't do it because I don't know they are afraid that they won't succeed [...]. Because it is like this too, that with fermentation, people don't know whether it is spoiled or fermented, but later, for example, they catch the difference, that's why they can call me. [...] And often there are some kinds of coatings, deposits, because it is a natural process, so some solids precipitate out and people are simply afraid that they will get poisoned."

The hazy memories of fermentation practices emerge frequently and with more clarity during the workshops. Some of those memories were forgotten over time and the practices were considered as belonging to the past. Consequently, an intimate knowledge of the fermentation process perished and people became uncertain whether what happens in a jar is 'good' or 'bad'. By engaging in fermentation within a supportive circle and with Natalia's availability for doubts and questions, participants reconnect with preservation practices and memories. The format of making jars of fermented foods is adjusted to the context of the city, such as the spatial limitations of urban kitchens. Natalia shows that it is not necessary to use a barrel or

253 From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021. Online.

a bathtub to create fermented products and that those processes can be done on a small scale and with less effort. During the workshops, people rediscover and remake some culinary traditional skills that now fit the demands of a new, urban reality.

As explained, fermentation workshops organized by *ekosmos* expand the meanings of these practices by drawing on global culinary trends. Yet, the workshops do not merely imitate the West, but draw on certain elements of the local past. They enable Polish urban citizens to reintroduce an essential cultural aspect from the past into the present. People connect over a shared past that has become distant due to socio-cultural transformations. Natalia interprets those lifestyle changes as related to the abandonment and a return to fermentation practices.

“Chyba się zrodziła w ludziach taka bariera i faktycznie, jak ja sobie to analizuję, to gdzieś tam nasze babcie to robiły [kiszonki], później to pokolenie, które w latach 90tych było dorosłe, oni to stracili, bo się dużo ludzi przeprowadziło ze wsi do miasta i tak jakby chciało skasować wiejskie epizod życia, chciało żyć po prostu jak w mieście i eee nie wiem, przestali robić sos pomidorowy na zimę a zaczęli kupować.”²⁵⁴

“I think a barrier was born in people and in fact, when I analyse it, our grandmothers used to do it [fermentation], later the generation that grew up in the 90s, lost it because a lot of people moved from the countryside to the city and as if they wanted to delete this rural episode of their life, they just wanted to live in the city and, uh, I don't know, they stopped making tomato sauce for the winter and started buying it.”

Natalia linked the general lifestyle changes connected to migration to the city with the lost interest in, and skills of, food self-preservation. She suggested that the transition from rural to urban, where the pace is faster, social ties fragmented (Starosta 2003), and the majority of products available, contributed to a rejection of practices associated with peasant ways of life.

254 From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021. Online.

Anthropologist Frances Pine describes how, during socialism, the Polish countryside was placed in opposition to the modern city and was considered backward, although (or because of being) characterized by close kinship relations and inter-household exchanges (2007: 187). Socialist modernity meant mechanized production on a large scale while domestic production “was associated with a smallness of scale that was somehow antithetical to modernity” (ibid: 186). In her research carried out in the rural south of Poland in the 1990s, Pine observed that villagers perceived modernization in the form of increased use of agricultural machines as disturbing the social aspect of village life and work. One of her respondents clearly stated that working in the fields is a social time and “it would be impossible for us to work that way, with machines instead of people” (ibid: 194). From Pine’s account, it seems that rurality in Poland was, until recently, characterized by strong kinship relations, both in the private domestic sphere and through shared labour. On the other hand, modernization ripped this social fabric creating distance and emptiness. Regarding the issue of skilling, moving away from the rural can also mean moving away from the social from parents and grandparents who possess knowledge about rural practices. Such moving away contributes to the feeling of being lost and accounts for the emerging uncertainties in the process of making preserves. Under the watchful and knowledgeable eye of Natalia, who is then available in moments of doubt, people learn collectively by exchanging fears, concerns, and tips. Through the fermentation workshops, which provide theoretical information and practical experience, as well as a social component, the participants can reconnect with the knowledge and skills, which seemed to belong to the past. The aspect of rurality is strongly linked with tradition. Through fermentation workshops the participants can reconnect with the images of the past and with rural skills which initially did not suit an urban context, due to the fast pace of work and life and already mentioned limitations of urban kitchens. In the next paragraph, I show in what ways the fermentation workshops also combine the elements of the global present and function as new forms of cosmopolitanism.

2.4 Connecting with the global world

As shown in the section above, food preservation is not entirely new to people coming to workshops, yet they seek an opportunity to learn and understand it better; to get over their fears related to the slightly enigmatic fermentation process. Engaging in the fermentation hype reminds them that they know it, and the workshops equip them not only with the knowledge to understand these processes better, but also with confidence and inspiration, broadening their culinary scope. Then, like Ania, they feel freer in making jars of fermented foods and experimenting with different combinations and recipes.

“... do tamtej pory ja myślałam, że kiszenie to tylko kapusta i ogórki, nie miałam pojęcia, że można kisić wszystko oprócz pokrzywy tak naprawdę. I to było dla mnie fascynujące, że rzodkiewkę można zakisić, kalafiora [...] Natalia otworzyła nam oczy.”²⁵⁵

“Until then, I thought that fermenting was just cabbage and cucumbers. I had no idea that you can ferment everything except for nettles, really. And it was fascinating to me that radishes can be fermented, cauliflower [...] Natalia opened our eyes.”

As Ania underlines and other women also mention, during the workshops they learned that fermentation is much more than what they knew and remembered from family homes. Natalia reintroduced the local tradition and mixed it with global trends by using uncommon flavour combinations. The recipes used during the workshop are a combination of traditional, familiar ingredients procured locally with foreign inspirations. Pickled lemons with black cumin blend culinary influences from Indian and North African cuisine, while apple vinegar with strawberries is a local, somewhat unusual variation of a typical recipe.

The novelty aspect was particularly fascinating for the women interviewed as it challenged their association with fermentation,

255 From an interview with Ania. 12.03.2021.

opened up new possibilities and provided inspiration for culinary explorations. Consider the following interview excerpt:

“Ania: Nigdy mi nie przyszło do głowy, że kapustę można zakisić w słoiku! (Śmiech) Nie trzeba wiesz, beczki stawiać w domu.

Ja: I teraz, jak kisisz to masz swoje własne przepisy, czy podążasz za jakimiś, które znajdujesz?

Ania: [Robię to] Na oko. Na pewno lubię [robić] kiszone pomidorki koktajlowe, marchewka mi bardzo smakuje kiszona.

Ja: I dodajesz przyprawę do nich?

Ania: Zależy, od dnia, od natchnienia, od tego, co tam jest w przyprawach... curry, chilly... to moje ulubione są. No a poza tym, zależy od dnia i od zawartości szafki.”²⁵⁶

“Ania: It never occurred to me that cabbage can be pickled in a jar! (Laughs) You don’t have to put a barrel in the house.

Me: And now when you pickle do you have your own recipes or do you follow some that you find?

Ania: [I do it] By eye. I definitely like [making] fermented cherry tomatoes and I like fermented carrots too.

Me: And do you add spices to them?

Ania: It depends on the day, on inspiration, on what spices I have... Curry, chilly... Those are my favourites. Besides, it depends on the day and what’s in the cupboard.”

Thanks to the workshop, which provided new associations, Ania rediscovered an already-known process of fermentation and gained the confidence to experiment with vegetables and spices in a way she never thought was possible. By learning new recipes, she became more liberated in her preserves-making endeavours. With her “eyes opened”, she discovered that the world of fermentation goes beyond cucumbers and cabbage. It appears that fermentation workshops can make people feel empowered in familiar yet partially forgotten practices.

Since fermentation is both familiar and part of an international trend, the workshops combine the local/traditional with the global/

256 From an interview with Ania. 12.03.2021.

new, thus reflecting the unique dynamics of the Polish urban context. While reconnecting with the past the women are also able to connect with the cosmopolitan present. In the organisation of her workshop, Natalia openly takes inspiration from the ‘global’ by using new recipes and unusual spices available—thanks to the cosmopolitan market economy—and access to international knowledge through books and the internet.

The fermentation workshops facilitate the reinvention of fermented foods, understood as giving “new form and significance to food substances, senses, and practices that may seem reflexively familiar to some, while curiously exotic to others” (Grasseni et al. 2014: 1). None of the women during the workshop was surprised by Natalia’s proposition to make fermented beetroot juice, yet many of them found the combination of lemons with black cumin an alluring novelty. Important to add, this is a curiosity they embraced with an openness typical to cosmopolitan upper-middle class omnivores (Domański 2017). Urbanites who attend fermentation workshops do not simply want to return to the practices of fermentation as they know and remember them (such as the time and energy-consuming fermentation of cabbage in a wooden barrel Ania mentioned). Instead, by taking part in an event in a progressive and fashionable place (*Ziemiosfera*), they expand their culinary repertoire, and reinvent fermentation practice, which gains new meanings and allows them to connect with tradition as well as with global trends. The reinvention of fermenting practices is different from the performance of the past and tradition as Smith and Jehlička (2007: 400) described it with the example of a Polish restaurant chain called *Chłopskie Jadło* (peasant’s grub). This imitates Poland’s farming heritage in a particularly aesthetically kitschy and essentialised way. How Natalia and the others engage in fermentation practices is not an imitation of traditional tropes, nor does it essentialise Polish culture. Instead, the workshops give a new shape to something slightly forgotten, a global touch reflecting an openness of the contemporary Polish urban middle class to the different and the unknown. They can simultaneously be global citizens, aware of and partaking in trends while staying close to their roots.

As shown in the paragraph above, during her workshops Natalia builds upon some shared memories of the past; those elements of childhood that are still alive although somehow blurry. Moreover,

she adds new, fashionable meanings, suiting the urban middle-class, such as health awareness or a ‘cosmopolitan touch’. She offers help with rediscovering past knowledge and with reconnecting to specific culinary tradition, yet this tradition is now equipped with contemporary meanings, such as health awareness and, to a certain extent, environmental consciousness. Through combining the three elements of locality, rurality, and globalism, Natalia allows for an expression of a novel style of cosmopolitanism, which combines these elements

In the next part of the chapter, I explore the collective aspect of the workshops as a new form of socializing in an urban context, which allows for expressing common fears related to an industrial food system.

Part 3

3.1 Workshops as a technique of socialization: new forms of community making in the city

While many people enjoy discovering new recipes for fermented foods, for some it is the practical format of skills-acquisition the workshops provided that is alluring. For example, Karolina emphasised the importance of experiencing hands-on learning.

“Kiszonki bardzo lubię i miałam jakieś podejście gdzieś tam, śledząc jakieś profile na Instagramie czy Facebooku, które gdzieś tam o kiszonkach mówiły, ale jak sama robiłam kiszonki w domu, sama, od zera, to byłam ich bardzo niepewna.”²⁵⁷

“I like *kiszonki* very much and I attempted to make them at some point, following some profiles on Instagram or Facebook which talked about fermentation, but when I made *kiszonki* at home, alone, from scratch, I was very unsure of them.”

Karolina points out that while trying to ferment food, she was insecure about judging the fermentation process and consuming her

257 From an interview with Karolina, 18.03.2021.

products. Workshops are a space where fears can be calmed down; where information can be exchanged and knowledge transmitted. The women who gathered for the workshops have a shared interest in making food preserves by themselves. They feel a certain satisfaction, which stems from having created something:

“Sprawia mi przyjemność przygotowanie czegoś, co będę wiedziała, że jest zrobione przeze mnie i innym też smakuje.”²⁵⁸

“It gives me pleasure to prepare something that I know I made and others too like.”

Natalia also highlighted that learning concrete things and being able to create something tangible was one of the main parts of the workshops that contributed to people’s interest:

“No ludzie po prostu pokochali ten warsztat, bo oni robili coś, z czym wychodzili, wiesz, później to obserwowali.”

“People just loved this workshop, because they made something that they could then take home, you know, and later they could observe it.”

Sociologist Agata Bachórz made a similar observation in her recent article on “career-changers”, referring to individuals who transition from corporate positions to ventures in the food world. Bachórz argues that one of the driving dimensions for this change is the pursuit of tangibility and productivity in the material sense. Individuals undergoing this career shift derive greater satisfaction from tangible outcomes, contrasting with the perceived alienation associated with abstraction experienced in previous jobs (2023: 77).

While Polish urban middle-class women do not know each other prior to the workshops, they meet to cut, spice, and mix vegetables together that will then be fermented. They also meet, in part, to share their fears and criticism of the industrial food system. Through attending workshops around the shared topic of mutual

258 From an interview with Karolina, 18.03.2021.

interest, these women establish new links within an urban environment. The workshops are thus not limited to the few hours spent together at a certain location, but expand into the homes of participants, as they take home colourful jars of fermenting foods and some, with time, start to experiment on their own. Some of the women initially fear fermentation, yet all find it fascinating and anxiously observe, as well as prepare, and the process works as a unifying activity. Together, they not only create the possibility for new microbe cultures to emerge but also for new potential personal connections to spark.

The fermentation workshops, as explained earlier, teach a craft; people can make jars with fermented products, take them home or share with friends and family. Thanks to the workshop they acquire practical knowledge on food self-preservation. In addition, apart from the focus on manual skills, the workshops provide a unique, collective space in the individualized city context. Consider the following anecdote:

In between cutting vegetables and filling in the jars, Natalia bursts with a smile:

- “It’s like we are making a circle of urban housewives!” (*kolo gospodyń miejskich*) – I smile too. The term “circle of urban housewives” is a pun on the well-known term “circle of rural housewives” (*kolo gospodyń wiejskich*), associated with women-only, self-organized rural groups; for whom one of the main activities is learning and perfecting food self-production and processing. Other women join in with laughter, their eyes are alight, facial expressions curious and focused.

Women preparing food together is, in the Polish context, commonly associated with the countryside, yet we are urban dwellers in a newly opened, progressive store in one of the most popular districts of Gdańsk. By calling us a “circle of urban housewives” Natalia points to a symbolic meeting of rural practices and urban context. Circles of rural housewives (*kola gospodyń wiejskich*) are one of the oldest forms of social organisation currently operating in Poland (Biejat and Wójcikowska 2015). Joanna Warecha, a Polish journalist and social activist concerned with the Polish countryside,

underlined in an interview Monika Tutak-Goll (2020) conducted for the Polish magazine *Wysokie Obcasy*, that one of the first circles (*kolo gospodyń wiejskich*) was established in 1877 by the socialist activist Filipina Płaskowicka. While the significance and the number of *kola gospodyń wiejskich* changed over the years – they flourished significantly during the time of the Polish Peoples Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*), between 1952 and 1989, and diminished again in the early 1990s (Grzebisz-Nowicka 1995). Joanna Warecha observed that currently, there are over 20,000 *kola gospodyń wiejskich* in Poland, which have nearly a million members (Tutak-Goll 2020). According to politician Zofia Grzebisz-Nowicka (1995), *kola gospodyń wiejskich* had access to knowledge in the fields of hygiene, health, and nutrition, thus their role was to provide education to members and support the development of rural areas. A team of researchers, Milczewska, Mencwel and Wiśniewski (2014), published a report analysing the recent reactivation of *kola gospodyń wiejskich* in the Polish countryside and observed that each such informal organisation “defines its own mission and type of activity” (ibid: 3). Journalist Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak in her book “*Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach*” (Peasant women: a story about our grandmothers), described how *kola gospodyń wiejskich* were an agent of change in the Polish countryside, introducing new recipes and teaching simple villagers how to make more “more sophisticated, tastier, and healthier” dishes (2023: 253). Conversely, in media (and thus in popular imagination), *kola gospodyń wiejskich* are presented as groups, focusing on maintaining local traditions through cooking regional foods and practicing folk crafts²⁵⁹. Sociologists Magda Biejat and Katarzyna Wójcikowska argue that even though these groups are self-organized spaces for women’s activities, they are also culturally obliged to follow traditions (2015: 107). Contrary to that, Joanna Warecha underlined that the activities and the needs of their members have changed because the structure of the countryside has also changed (Tutak-Goll 2020). In a different context, anthropolo-

259 For example, an information website about agriculture and breeding *agrokurier.pl* describes *kola gospodyń wiejskich* as groups that “...often present local folklore, e.g., by sewing traditional costumes, singing folk songs or by doing handicrafts”. <https://agrokurier.pl/kolo-gospodyn-wiejskich-czym-zajmuje-sie-organizacja/> Accessed 13.12.2022.

gist Tomasz Rakowski (2016) described how the changes in Polish rural structures, which followed the socio-economic transformations of 1989, affected certain skills that were useful and relevant within the communist reality²⁶⁰. The privatisation and deindustrialization of the countryside resulted in the closure of specialized factories where people worked – sewing, making dairy products, or tanning leather (ibid: 28). Rakowski provided accounts of villagers who did not benefit from the new system, and whose manual abilities lost importance and value, thus forcing them into poverty and the need to establish new ways of getting by.

The rural women collectives are a reference point for women in *Trójmiasto* and for the popular imaginary as sources of knowledge and a link with the past and with tradition. Some people engage in the changing aspect of those formations, which reflect the socio-economic changes of the Polish countryside, through artistic collaborations. For example, Polish multidisciplinary artist Alicja Rogalska worked together with a group of women from a Southern Masovia region on remaking a folk song into a commentary on the difficult reality of the Polish countryside. In the video, elderly women wearing colourful traditional outfits, are standing in the middle of a grassy field and singing about the downfall of rural life, such as overgrown fields, low numbers of livestock, high prices, unemployment and migration to the city, attributing these changes to, among others, the insufficient subsidies from the European Union (Rogalska 2011).

In her interview, Joanna Warecha described that nowadays, on top of cooking and making crafts, women from *kola gospodyń wiejskich* focus on themselves. They recognize that “the most important thing for them is to leave the house, to take a moment for themselves. [To] breathe” (Tutak-Goll 2020: n.p.), which does not mean they do not cook together. Apart from sharing recipes and perfecting certain dishes, it is the communal aspect provided by these circles that seems to be of most importance to those women. It is through being together that they gather energy to be active in other fields (ibid: n.p.).

260 For a more in-depth discussion on the changes in skills on the example of food markets, refer to chapter three of this dissertation.

While *koła gospodyń wiejskich* came into existence to unite village dwellers, *koła gospodyń miejskich* (circle of urban housewives) is a format taken from a rural setting and transplanted into the urban one. Literature review demonstrates that no work has been done on the *koła gospodyń miejskich*, revealing that it is either relatively new, or a niche phenomenon, as opposed to the academic interest in *koła gospodyń wiejskich*, which has been studied extensively at least since the 1990s²⁶¹. Yet, *koła gospodyń miejskich* exist and they aim to empower women by equipping them with self-sufficiency skills. For example, journalist Natalia Marciniak-Musiał (2020) describes a *koło gospodyń miejskich* in Włodawa (a town of 13,500 people in eastern Poland), and points to the fact that the *koło gospodyń miejskich* was the inspiration for the self-organisation of these women and for the format and types of activities they normally performed.

Fermentation workshops are indeed a type of event that a *koło gospodyń wiejskich* would organize. In essence, it is a meeting predominantly attended by women²⁶², focusing on practical skills to spread knowledge and empower them as agents of their own and family's health. These workshops also serve to increase environmental awareness and provide social opportunities. As Warecha said, *koła gospodyń wiejskich* are “spaces of thought exchange and education”²⁶³ (Tutak-Goll 2020: n.p.). The workshops offer an excuse for strangers to meet and be together while focusing on something else than one another. It is not only Natalia that notices the social aspect of the workshops but also the women who attend them. “The very fact of sitting like this, cooking together, is so pleasant”²⁶⁴ – said Karolina when asked about what she likes about these workshops. Later she added:

261 See already mentioned works by Zofia Grzebisz-Nowicka (1995) and Magda Biejat and Katarzyna Wójcikowska (2015), but also Iwona Matysiak (2005, 2009), which talk about the contemporary functions of *koła gospodyń wiejskich*.

262 Natalia admitted that initially the workshops attracted only women, but with time more and more men started to attend, mainly chef cooks. From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021. Online.

263 Original: “miejsca wymiany myśli i edukacji”.

264 Original: “sam fakt takiego siedzenia, wspólnego gotowania, [to] jest jednak takie przyjemne”. From an interview with Karolina, 18.03.2021.

“Wiadomo, fajnie się czegoś nauczyć, ale jeśli to się robi bardziej takim spotkaniem towarzyskim, z ludźmi, których tak na prawdę się nie zna, ale gdzieś tam jest to jednak jakieś spotkanie towarzyskie, no to milej się to wspomina i chętniej się do tego wraca.”²⁶⁵

“You know, it’s nice to learn something, but if you do it more like a social meeting, with people you don’t really know, but somehow it is still a social meeting, well, it’s nicer to remember and you’re more likely to come back to it [...].”

Workshops offer a collective space to do things together in a city and relate in a new way, outside of the work environment. Karolina appreciates learning collectively with strangers as a way to create connections. It is particularly important in the context of a large migration from rural areas to the cities, which is often accompanied by leaving primary communities behind. From the perspective of an organizer, Natalia reflects on that aspect when she says:

“Zauważyłam, że ludzie zupełnie inaczej ze sobą rozmawiają jak na przykład [...] razem coś gotują i się nie znają. To jest taki... Taka cudowna sytuacja żeby znieść tę barierę, że na przykład czujesz, że ktoś Cię ocenia, a po prostu coś tam robisz, jesteś skupiona na tej czynności a przy okazji się toczą rozmowy. I to jest niesamowite. Czasami, o czym ludzie ze sobą rozmawiają, jak ja tego słucham to jest piękne, jak taka jedna wioska trochę. I super, super to są momenty, bo ludzie gdzieś tam się uspokajają... Lubię, lubię z nimi wtedy przebywać.”²⁶⁶

“I noticed that people talk to each other in a completely different way when [...] they are cooking something together and do not know each other. It’s such... such a wonderful situation to break this barrier that, for example, you feel that someone is judging you, but you are just doing something, you are focused on this activity and conversations are taking place as if ‘by the way’. And it’s amazing. Sometimes when I listen to what people talk about, it’s beautiful;

265 From an interview with Karolina, 18.03.2021.

266 From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021.

a bit like [we are] one village. And it's great; these are great moments because people calm down somehow. I like it; I like being with them then."

Through offering these workshops, Natalia also facilitates a unique way of meeting and connecting while spending time together engaging in practical activities. By focusing on learning in an informal and relaxed manner, people might let go of some protective barriers and connect differently than in an often demanding work environment. To some extent, these workshops can be seen as contributing to the creation of communities of practice (Wenger and Lave 1991) because they constitute a space of collective learning based on shared interest which facilitate discussions, exchange of information, and mutual help (Wenger 2011). On the other hand, it is unclear to me whether, apart from contacting Natalia in moments of doubt and uncertainty in regards to the process of fermentation, these women stay in touch. Differently to *kola gospodyń wiejskich*, the women attending workshops are not joining an organized group which meets regularly. Rather, they constitute a one-off event, which might be an inspiration or a door opener for such meetings. Karolina mentioned that after attending Natalia's workshop she enjoyed the collective atmosphere so much, that she started organising collective dinners with her friends, where they all cook together²⁶⁷.

One of the reasons why workshops as a format of passing knowledge blossom and thrive might be that within an anonymous city context, there is a growing need to meet, be, and do something together. For the women interviewed, the intimacy and informality of the workshops were an important part of feeling more comfortable. Karolina said that knowing she could reach out to Natalia afterwards with doubts and questions or look into the material provided gave her a sense of being taken care of²⁶⁸.

The social aspect of workshops was also one of the main reasons why Natalia decided to organize them. After graduating

267 From an interview with Karolina. 18.03.2021. Online.

268 From an interview with Karolina. 18.03.2021. Online.

as a pedagogical therapist, and before setting up *ekosmos*, Natalia worked as an educator in a Cultural Centre in her home town east of Gdańsk. It was only after arriving in *Trójmiasto* that she started to develop her interest in culinary themes more professionally, but she never wanted to work in gastronomy, as it lacked the collective dimensions she needed:

*“ja chciałabym robić coś, około-kulinarne ale wiesz, nie w izolacji.”*²⁶⁹

“I wanted to do something culinary but, you know, not in isolation.

Natalia sees her job of running workshops as an alternative to the typical work in gastronomy, which allows her to meet new people, exchange ideas and share her knowledge in the way that suits her.²⁷⁰ By combining social and educational aspects, the pickling and fermenting workshops are a form of leisure time activity for urbanites. Natalia attributes it to the internal human need for closeness and socializing while doing manual labour, a form of counter-action to the prevailing computer-bound work.

*“Jak się spotykamy razem, żeby coś razem stworzyć, wymienić wiedzę, doświadczeniem, [...] jak tam kroimy, to się w ogóle o czymś innym rozmawia, [...] to otwiera się w nas jakaś inna jakość, jakaś inna przestrzeń. Mamy jakby to koło, ten krąg, że coś nas na dany moment łączy i wiesz, wyłączają się takie te wszystkie sprawy, które gdzieś tam gonią nas do przodu i na chwilę jesteśmy, wiesz, razem i robimy coś razem. I to jest moim zdaniem coś, do czego ludzie wracają, no, bo nie możemy się tylko spotykać razem w knajpach. Moim zdaniem, elementem zdrowia psychicznego jest to, że ludzie mają kontakt z innymi ludźmi i coś robią.”*²⁷¹

“When we meet together to create something together, exchange knowledge, experience, [...] When we cut (vegetables), we talk about

269 From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021. Online.

270 From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021. Online.

271 From an interview with Natalia. 02.02.2021. Online.

something else, [...] Some other quality opens up within us, some different space. We have something like the circle; this circle connects us at a given moment and you know – all those things that are chasing us ahead are turned off and for a moment we are together and we are doing something together. And in my opinion, this is something people keep coming back to because we can't just meet together in pubs. In my opinion, part of mental health is that people interact with other people and do something.”

Similar to Kikon's observation (2021) on the importance of fermented foods in creating solidarities in Northeast India, it seems that also in Poland fermentation practices (or any kind of food-related and cooking activities) have become an excuse to be together and the workshops allow people to find a new community. Sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh (2009) argues that a group of people engaged in a similar manual activity poses a challenge to the vision of isolated and disconnected city dwellers and creates a real-life community. In his article for the New York Times, Venkatesh attributes the impersonality of the modern city to isolating technology saying that “in today's cities [...] technology separates us and makes more of our communication indirect, impersonal, and emotionally flat” (ibid: n.p.). The fermentation workshops can be, however, interpreted as *sceny miejskie* (urban scenes, Klekotko 2018) – spaces that facilitate the creation of community, or in Klekotko's words “doing community”. “Urban scenes create structures of socio-cultural opportunities for the development of specific community practices, becoming at the same time a platform and a tool for community-building processes in the city” (ibid: 124). Furthermore “in the large and anonymous space of the city, they [urban scenes] allow individuals with similar identities to find themselves, facilitate social interactions, create a sense of ‘being in one place’, ‘at home’, ‘among your own people’” (ibid: 136). Building new connections extends beyond the creation of physical spaces for urban dwellers to gather, exchange ideas, and learn together. The workshops not only establish links through shared past experiences but also evoke a sense of home by tapping into people's familiarity with *kiszonki*. Connecting with fellow city-dwellers who share similar interests and a mutual understanding of traditional and healthy food further strengthens this sense of belonging.

Through attending fermentation workshop, people show their needs and also their dissatisfactions. In the next section, I examine how attending fermentation workshops can also be an expression of a critical perspective towards the industrial food system based on fears and certain, context-specific understanding of healthy foods and how engaging in preserves-making can be seen as an act of countering food fears.

3.2 Fermentation as criticism

While Jehlička, Smith, and Kostelecky (Jehlička and Smith 2012; Smith and Jehlička 2013; Smith et al. 2015) observed that pleasure and health benefits drive practices of food-self production (which include preservation) in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. I argue that the increased interest in them is also an expression of criticism of the industrial food system. My perspective aligns with that of Bachórz (2018), who described various practices related to home food production as a strategy of resistance to industrial food production. However, I expand Bachórz's observation by focusing specifically on fermentation practices.

The lack of control over ingredients in food is one of the typical features of the risk society described by Ulrich Beck (1992). Beck observed that late modernity is characterized by the increased awareness of risks, fueled by heightened reflexivity and continuously revised expert knowledge (Beck 1992). Polish sociologists observed that food fears are present in contemporary Poland, and they influence the criticism of the food system while contributing to the preference of certain food procurement practices. For example, anthropologist Justyna Straczuk (2016, 2018) noticed that the fears stemming out of the new modernity brought by the 1990s' "transformation", combined with a generally low level of social trust towards public institutions inform Polish customers' experience of a lack of control over their foods (see Sztabiński and Sztabiński 2014)²⁷². Straczuk describes how people blame "the abstract system that conceals the production processes

272 Paweł Sztabiński and Franciszek Sztabiński (2014) showed that in comparison to other European countries, Poles show a significantly lower level of social trust, especially towards public institutions.

from consumers” (2018: 67) for new sicknesses and allergies. Sociologist Ewa Kopczyńska (2018) analysed shopping practices at farmers’ markets in *Małopolska* Voivodeship (Lesser Poland) and found that food fears among customers are mainly related to chemicals in food and processed food. Kopczyńska interpreted food-related anxieties as “a kind of criticism and resistance towards the changes in the food system” (ibid: 94). According to Kopczyńska, by choosing shopping at the food market over shopping in the supermarket, Polish consumers intentionally withdraw from the practice of mass consumption and undertake “shopping at the market as a resistance strategy” (ibid). Similarly, I see that practices of fermentation and specifically workshops have the potential to gather people who revive, create, and share knowledge about the benefits of food self-processing and its potential to challenge the adverse sides of the free market economy.

The distrust towards contemporary goods was also observed by anthropologist Yuson Jung in the context of post-socialist Bulgaria. Jung described how increased consumer anxiety emerged as a result of new and unfamiliar “public utilities and infrastructure” (2019: 2). The collapse of state socialism in 1989 brought an influx of unknown goods, which Bulgarians often deemed as “of inferior quality and possibly unsafe” (ibid: 1), as they did not provide a set of reference points on which to build trust. A concept used to describe these uncertainties was *mente* (fake), employed as “a shorthand for everything that was not right in the aftermath of socialism, from shoddy consumer goods to corrupt politicians, greedy businessmen, and broken systems” (ibid). Bulgarian citizens were often disappointed by the new reality, and *mente* served as a term conveying “sociocultural critique against new forms of power, both domestically and internationally” (ibid: 14).

In the context of fermentation workshops, making preserves oneself²⁷³ and thus having control over what is in the jar seems to be

273 Within Polish food studies literature, the category of “own” (“*swoje*”) produce or “self-made” (“*wlasnej roboty*”) food has been associated with traditional cuisine and is “synonymous with good taste, health and naturalness” (Straczuk 2016: 39). Similarly, anthropologist Joanna Mroczkowska describes the category of “own” (“*swoje*”) food as connected with countryside, locality, and family (2018).

one of the important motivations to attend workshops and a relevant element of counteracting food fears. Anthropologist Mary Douglas ([1985] 2013) provided the basis for understanding risk perception from a social scientific perspective and argued that risk is not a private matter; rather it is shaped by culture, has its own social dimension, and is linked to the issue of credibility. Douglas asserted that cultural factors, as well as moral judgements, influence how people perceive and evaluate risks. Workshops on making food preserves oneself can be seen as equipping people with tools for resisting the risk society, the concealed industrial food system, and chemical additives – so distant from the image of the rural idyll (Goszczyński and Wróblewski 2020) which informs people’s food choices and ideas of health. Women who attended fermentation workshops underline that by learning how to prepare preserves, they know what is in their food and what they are feeding their families. By gaining a certain level of control over preserve making, they are gaining trust towards, the now more familiar, fermentation process. For example, during our phone conversation, even though acknowledging that fermenting foods can be a process filled with insecurity, Ania firmly said that “there is more confidence in what you prepare by yourself”²⁷⁴, suggesting that store-bought products might not always be trusted.

For Ania, the distrust towards the larger system started with realising that some of the anti-asthmatic medicine she was supposed to give to her child included an ingredient she believed to be a neurotoxin²⁷⁵. She, therefore, began to explore other alternative and more natural methods of treating her asthmatic child, which led her to enrol in an herbalism course. Ania expressed a preference for ‘natural methods’ of healing and considered *kiszonki* an excellent addition to her family diet, especially because of their health benefits, believed to boost the immune system²⁷⁶. She prefers to prepare fermented products herself

274 Original: “większe jest zaufanie do tego, co się samemu robi”. From an interview with Ania. 12.03.2021.

275 Neurotoxins are toxins that damage nervous system.

276 For example, journalist Callan Boys (2020) reported that references to “gut health” and “fermented foods” on social media have increased significantly in recent years. <https://www.goodfood.com.au/eat-out/news/how-the-godfather-of-fizzy-cabbage-made-us-all-love-sauerkraut-20200130-h1lfvs> Accessed 13.12.2022.

instead of buying them, as in this way, she knows what she is feeding to her children²⁷⁷. My observations based on interviews with people attending fermentation workshops support the findings of Straczuk, who notices that among Polish consumers, there is a perception of a “lack of control over what we eat, and a lack of trust in profit-oriented economic systems and agents in the food distribution chain that sells food, whose journey from the field to the consumer’s plate is far too long” (2018: 65). I conversed with all of the workshop’s participants, engaged in conversations with customers, workers, and owners of ‘Ziemiosfera’, and interviewed the organizer of the workshops – they all expressed their concern with the health aspect of industrial foods and shared preference for home-made products. They all shared a belief that being able to trace the origins of the ingredients and home production can be controlled, therefore better, healthier, and more just.

The fermentation workshops which awaken memories of the culinary past familiarize people with the somewhat ambivalent process of fermentation, thus allowing them to gain control over food production. By regaining skills, participants grow trust in their own abilities and can counter food fears based on the distance from and critique of the industrial food system.

Through learning about, and engaging in food fermentation practices facilitated by these workshops, Polish women urbanites combine elements of tradition with health benefits, pleasure, and a search for an alternative to individualistic urban lifestyle. Furthermore, preserves-making can be seen as a mode of resistance of middle-class consumers to the contemporary Polish foodscape and the effects of the transition to the neoliberal economy, convenience foods, and standardized food production.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the changing meanings around fermentation practices through the analysis of a workshop organized by *ekosmos* in *Ziemiosfera*, a newly established ‘zero-waste’ shop-

277 From an interview with Ania. 12.03.2021.

cum-vegan café in *Wrzeszcz*, Gdańsk. I situate this workshop within the global revival of fermentation and, in particular to Poland, a renaissance of interest in the national culinary past. Based on participation in the workshop, interviews with organizers, participants and workers of *Ziemiosfera*, as well as several unrecorded conversations with people interested in fermentation, I argue that the hype around it can be considered a reinvention of food. In other words, what once was primarily associated with rurality and considered a tool for managing poverty is now being recast as ‘fashionable’ and responding to the health concerns and environmental awareness of urban citizens.

My argument in this chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, I outline how fermentation workshops articulate concepts of locality, tradition, and globalism. Locality is conceived here as the physical provenance of products, which come from the region and are seasonal. Tradition refers to rural culinary skills, which are being rediscovered and re-invented. Finally, the global aspect is expressed through an increasing engagement with foreign inspirations, casting fermentation practices as a form of cosmopolitanism. Therefore, based on my analysis, I propose that the increased interest in fermentation allows for a merging of the past/traditional with the present/cosmopolitan and showcases how sustainability practices in Poland are becoming more popular. In this way, I expand on the argument made by Petr Jehlička, Joe Smith, and Tomáš Kostelecký (Jehlička and Smith 2012; Smith and Jehlička 2013; Smith et al. 2015), who argued that food preservation and self-production in a post-socialist context constitute “quiet sustainability”. On the one hand, fermentation workshops imitate Western trends and foreign recipes – the workshops I attended began with making *kimchi*, the Korean cabbage. On the other hand, through these workshops people can reconnect to the rural past, skills, and memories, often forgotten within the modern urban context.

In the second part, I focus on analysing to what extent the format of the workshops can be understood as an example of an “urban scene” (*scena miejska*) (Klekotko 2020) and a community of practice (Wagner and Lave 1991). Being a form of collective learning, the fermentation workshops allow for the creation of community in the urban context, even if temporary, where new human and microbial

connections are forged. Furthermore, I place the fermentation workshops in the context of migration to the cities, the changing Polish countryside, and a damaged social fabric, to show how certain rural skills once forgotten are being brought back to life in a new social form, suiting the demands of the urban environment. In doing so, I extend the argument that Poland is a continuously evolving country ‘in transformation’, rather than one confined to a ‘post-socialist’ past. Additionally, fermentation workshops constitute a space where food fears about the industrial food system are expressed. They showcase the practice of fermentation as a way to combat these fears and regain a level of control over their food.

In the next chapter, I argue that it is mainly women who engage in these collective forms of knowledge exchange and acquisition. While their motivations vary, their interests overlap and include health and caretaking – those elements which traditionally belong to a private sphere. However, I also show that the engagement of women in CFP networks has a public dimension.