

Polish Legends about the "Blessed" and "Cursed" Trees and the Beliefs Referring to

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It is interesting to trace how folk beliefs referring to trees were supported with motives of the folk literature particularly with legends linked to some biblical events. In Poland, stories about trees offering or refusing shelter are those met most often. A prevalent motif in them is the Holy Family's retreat to Egypt, during which Mary and the Child sought for haven under certain trees. This motif is very popular in the apocryphal literature in the Western and Central Europe. However, the tree in these records takes a slightly different part than that in the Polish tradition. Here, a tree usually bows or leans for little Jesus to pick a fruit.¹ A German folklorist Dähnhardt derives this motif from the East.² It is met in the ancient Indian literature. And so, when Queen Maria was to give birth to her baby she went to the garden where a beautiful tree grew. The tree bowed and the Queen gave birth to Buddha, keeping its branch in her hand.³ We can guess that this archetype was then repeated in the Arabic legends about Christ's arrival.⁴ One of them reads that Mary gave birth to Christ near a bowing palm that was offering her its dates. The other one depicts the Child picking fruit while his and his mother's escape to Egypt.⁵ This motif, too, has its analogues in some Buddhistic tales.⁶ In the medieval European apocrypha we can meet not only palms but other trees as well. For instance, a peach tree, according to the legend, was originally sacrificed to the devil. However, after having been blessed by the Child it became a good tree, able to heal people of diseases. The passage referring to this, found in the "Golden Legend", was repeated after Cassiodor who is supposed to be the first to cite it.⁷ It seems that the motif is of Italian or at least Mediterranean origin since it is in this area that a peach tree was used in curative magic.⁸ An identical version is met in Virgin Mary's biography of the 13th century,⁹ and in *Rozmyślenia Przemyśskie* (Meditations in Przemyśl) of the 15th century.¹⁰ Now it seems quite probable that the clergy in Poland must have used this tale in their sermons, introducing a tree which was of particular importance to the pagan worship. In legends known both in Poland and in other European countries a motif of a transformation of an evil tree into

a good one is missing. However, a motif of a bowing tree is frequently found even in *Rozmyślania Przemyskie*, to say nothing of our folk legends in which it is included in the story of seeking for shelter under a tree by the Holy Persons.¹¹ It appears also in tales about trees stooping to Mary and those about Christ's death up the cross.¹² On one hand, the European folk tradition tells us about the trees which show lack of respect to the Holy Persons, or which are even harmful to them. On the other hand, both these tales and the one about seeking for refuge under the tree from storm or the soldiers of Herod by the Holy Family have not been recorded in written apocryphal sources. In the Polish folklore, we find the story about Mary and the Child escaping the chase. They first tried to hide themselves under an aspen but the tree either trembles with fear or refuses to cover them, or gives Mary and the Child away to their tormentors. That is why an aspen never stops trembling its leaves. Then Mary finds shelter under another tree which envelopes her with its branches and protects her against the eyes of her prosecutors or against a drop of rain. In return for this the tree is given a special blessing and becomes a thunderproof tree (or bush). A hazel is mentioned most frequently here. An example of such a legend has been told by W. Siarkowski of Kielce region.¹³ The most common version is a tale about an aspen which refuses to help the Holy Family, although sometimes it tries to hide them but the trembling of its leaves makes it impossible: "being a half-hearted tree it trembles from fear".¹⁴ Sometimes the Holy Family succeeds in hiding, but rustling its leaves, an aspen tries to give it away to the enemy.¹⁵ In other legends an aspen is cursed for its half-heartedness and cowardice, which makes it trembling for ever.¹⁶ There are however, the tales in which the Holy persons hide themselves under an aspen without refusal or betray on its part. The versions like these are found in both northern and southern Poland.¹⁷ The leaves of an aspen tremble in fear lest Mary and the Child could be found, and here it is clearly a good tree.¹⁸ Sometimes this trembling even helps rescue the Holy Family. "While Christ was on his run from Herod he sought refuge under an aspen ("papla") which was rustling so noisily that Herod could not hear our Lord".¹⁹

In these versions an aspen does have its opposites. It is a good tree. But whenever a tree refuses shelter it is almost always an aspen.²⁰ Among the trees which offer their hospitality to the Holy Family a hazel is met most often. It is the case in the tales all over Poland. Apart from a hazel, a linden is also frequently mentioned. Birch is met too, but rather seldom. While other trees and bushes such as alders, maples, sycomes, spruces, firs, junipers, elders, dog roses, weeping willows and aspens are met only sporadically.

A birch is a tree which offers hospitality, lowers its branches and envelopes Mary protecting her against rain and cold. That is why a birch has its branches down.²¹

According to what was mentioned earlier, the motif of a tree which offers shelter is widespread in nearly all European countries.²² It not always is connected with the retreat to Egypt. Sometimes the time is not closely identified. In some tales God's Mother takes a rest under a tree or she seeks for shelter on her way to Elizabeth's home. The Child is not even mentioned here.²³ In others adult Christ appears on his run from the prosecutors or seeks for cover against rain.²⁴ The last version is particularly common in the countries in which Protestantism is a dominant or coexisting religion (Sweden, Estonia, Hungary). It is also met in the Orthodox regions such as Ukraine, although it might have been brought in there by the German settlers.²⁵

Apart from Poland, in the western Europe it is usually a hazel which gives shelter to the Holy Family. Among other plants we find also weeping willow (Flanders, Transylvania),²⁶ an aspen (Valony, France),²⁷ a pine or a stone pine (Italy),²⁸ an ash (Italy, Flanders),²⁹ and an elder (Germany).³⁰

The motif of a blessed tree which has the power to protect people against thunderbolts usually refers to a hazel and is frequently met in German legends.³¹ Some German folklorists think that a German god of thunders (among others) – Donar (Thora) was replaced in these tales by Virgin Mary.³² The question is, if also in Poland there was any relationship between the god of thunderbolts and a hazel, and whether this displacement took place here in Poland, or whether this motif wandered to our region from the West in one of the Christian legends. No trace of this motif has been found neither in the East Slavs nor in the east part of the Balcan Slavs. When we compare this to a common occurrence of this motif in Germany, we can draw a conclusion that the tale is of a western origin.

Now let us consider the first element of the legend (the refuse of giving shelter) comparatively. In the western European countries it seems to appear more rarely than the one we discussed earlier. Apart from Poland, it is met only in Latvia, Ukraine and Transylvania.³³ The tree is always an aspen or an poplar (*populus pyramidalis*).³⁴ The opposition of a good vs. an evil tree in the discussed legend is very seldom met outside Poland. Dahnhardt gives the only example of such a legend to appear in Sicily.³⁵

Meanwhile, the opposition a good vs. an evil tree in other legends, for instance the motif of a tree bowing to Christ or to Virgin Mary, or its behaviour in the face of Christ's death is often found outside Poland. As a rule an evil tree is set here against good trees, or vice versa. The composition of the legend about bowing trees is similar to that discussed earlier, although an evil tree is generally put in the first place. One of these tales is cited by Gawelek to be a medieval one but he does not give the source it has been taken from.³⁶ However, the tree species prove that it is not of Polish origin. We can only guess that it is an archetype of this kind of tales both in Poland and in other countries. Good trees are told

about at the beginning of the legend but no species are mentioned. They are all simply trees, except an evil one which is told about in detail since it is (like in legends about trees refusing shelter) cursed and burdened with a set of nasty characteristics. Of course, both types of tales run counter to each other. For example the legend resorted in the eastern part of Lublin region is closer rather to the legends about bowing trees. "An aspen has been rustling its leaves continuously since the Holy Family's escape to Egypt. It was then that all other trees fell silent in fear, while an aspen was rustling on indifferently."³⁷

This opposition of the two trees typical for legends about trees giving shelter is sometimes found also in the tales of bowing trees.³⁸

The version in which the bow of trees refers to Christ's death is relatively seldom found in our region.³⁹ Outside Poland, stories about trees bowing to Christ and Mary who stroll through the woods are quite widespread in the Baltic countries.⁴⁰ On the other hand, tales about trees bowing to dying Christ are frequently met in the Western Europe in Germany, High Austria, France and in Transylvania in the Central Europe.⁴¹ An aspen in these stories in the tree that refuses to bow or which restles its leaves indifferently.

We can guess that an archetype of the opposition: a good vs. an evil tree was the dialogue between the two trees boasting about their qualities and usefulness. The motif was already known in the Babilonian literature, and the two trees were a tamarisk and a date palm. The tree which started boasting – lost. These compositions were often repeated in the Renaissance literature. A winner is often the tree which never loses its leaves and is always green and fresh. Sometimes it is usefulness which makes the tree a winner, particularly if it is a source of food or drink, for instance a date palm.⁴²

In conclusion, we can state that our legends about both protective and bowing trees have their numerous counterparts in other European countries. As for their references to the medieval apocrypha, we can find only few of them, and they are limited to having a rest under the bowing branches of a tree. An archetype of the opposition: a good vs. an evil tree can be derived from the Babilonian literature, and it reached us only through the Renaissance literature. It was an anonymous folk tradition to convey and preserve it. Even if we assume that these motifs were applied in sermons, we must admit that the preachers were mostly of rural origin. There is a possibility that the trees which had been of great importance and reverence to the pagan worship were, in the course of time, adapted by the Christian clergy in the form of folk motifs. However, we can also assume a reverse situation in which these trees might have been first depicted in sermons as the devil and cursed plants. But the old sermons have not been studied enough as for their folk elements, so no firm conclusions can be drawn yet. The tales preserved in our folk memory nowadays are mostly one fragments of the mentioned legends, and those which were used to support or to

explain a specific character of a given tree. That we know today the legend about Virgin Mary looking for shelter under a hazel is due to the printed records of this tale widely spread in the 19th and 20th centuries. No later than in the 19th century we could read it in some popular magazines such as *Dziennik Górnośląski* (Upper Silesia Daily) or *Przyjaciel Ludu* (The Friend of Common People).⁴³ It was also included in the collection of poems for common people by J. Gajmert. It received a sub-title *A Silesian Legend*.⁴⁴ Although many of contemporary informants refer to printed sources this does not prove that these legends surpassed to the folk to the folk tradition only in the last century. Many other informants say that the legends have been transmitted to them orally by their parents or grand-parents who, in turn, inherited them from the former generations. Still other source of these legends were so called indulgence songs (*kermis*).⁴⁵ One of them was taken down in the Carpathian Highland in 1964.⁴⁶

Until quite late, i.e. up to the beginning of the 20th century, the contents of those legends stuck firmly in the worship. A hazel was thought to protect people against thunders. It was planted close to a house, and its branches were used in some magic ceremonies which were to prevent storms. On the other hand, an aspen was the tree people feared of. It was not liked and was used in harmful magic, particularly in the east of Poland and among Eastern Slavs, although this tree was also applied in the practices of the opothropeic magic.

These facts speak for the ancientness of the beliefs connected with trees in our folk culture. Even if they were not of our native origin but they managed to root firmly in the folk consciousness, and the legends legitimating them gained a local colour themselves.

NOTES

¹ Dähnhardt, *Natursagen. Eine Sammlung Naturdeutenden Sagen* Bd. Leipzig-Berlin 1909, s. 33.

² Dähnhardt, *op. cit.* s. 9–10, 30.

³ Dähnhardt, *op. cit.* s. 10.

⁴ Dähnhardt, *op. cit.* s. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Dähnhardt, *op. cit.* s. 30.

⁷ "And Cassiodor tells us in his *History in-Three-Parts* – that a tree of peach kind can be seen in Hermopolis and Tebaida. The tree heals the sick if one of its fruits or one of its leaves or a piece of its bark is laid on the neck of the sick. This tree bowed down to the ground and honored Christ in a devout manner while he and Holy Virgin were escaping to Egypt." *The Golden Legend* by Venerable Jacob de Voragine, translated by L. Staff, Warszawa 1942, s. 66.

⁸ P. SEBILLOT, *Le paganisme contemporain chez les peuples Celto-Latins*, Paris b.d.s. 88.

⁹ Vita Beate Virginis Marie et Salvatoris Rhythmica. Hrsg. von A. Vogtlin, Tübingen 1888, s. 83–84. See also: Dähnhardt, *op. cit.* s. 32–33.

¹⁰ *Rozmyślanie o żywocie Pana Jezusa (Meditation on Jesus Christ's Life)* in Greek-Catholic manuscript of Przemyśl Chapter, ed. A. Bruckner, Kraków 1907, s. 75.

- ¹¹ J.I.S. Gulowski, *Von einem unbekannten Volke in Deutschland* Berlin 1911, s. 117. My own survey in Lublin and Kielce regions.
- ¹² Łopuszna, Nowy Sącz region, The Archives of Ethnographical-Museum in Kraków, inv. 372: A. Fischer, *Drzewa w wierzeniach i obrzędach ludu polskiego* (Trees in Beliefs and Rites of the Polish Folk People), *Lud* t. 35:1937, s. 73. Z. Wierzhowski, *Materiały entograficzne z pow. tarnobrzezkiego i niskiego* (Ethnographical Materials of Tarnobrzeg and Nisko Regions), *ZWAK* t. 14:1890, s. 214. Gulowski, op. cit. s. 177.
- ¹³ W. SIARKOWSKI, *Materiały do etnografii ludu polskiego z okolic Kielc* (Materials to Ethnography of the Polish Folk People of Kielce region), *ZWAK* t. 3:1879, s. 177.
- ¹⁴ W. SZULCZEWSKI, *Der heiland und die Pflanzenwelt, Aus dem Posener Lande*, Bd. 3:1908, s. 577–572.
- ¹⁵ Cross survey, The Archives of Ethnography Institute NCU in Toruń: Wiżajny – Suwałki region and Warszawa region.
- ¹⁶ My own cross survey: Bączków b. Kielce region, Terawa Solna – Krosno region. The archives of Ethnography Institute NCU: Ostaszewo Toruń region.
- ¹⁷ My own cross survey: Radkowiec – Kielce region, Chałupki and Góry – Kielce region, Brzeźna – Nowy Sącz region. The Archives of the Ethnography of Slavs UJ: Mała – Rzeszów region, Inv. 1391, s. 12. The Archives of Ethnography Institute NCU: Jabłonowo – Toruń region, Chrostkowo and Rakutowo – Włocławek region, Sliwiczki – Bydgoszcz region.
- ¹⁸ My own cross survey: Chałupki – Kielce region. S. Ciszewski, *Lud rolniczo-górnicy okolic Sławkowa w pow. olkuskim* (Farmers and miners, of Sławkowo-Olkusz region.), *ZWAK* t. 10:1886, s. 52.
- ¹⁹ Cross survey materials in The Archives of Ethnography Institute NCU: Sliwiczki – Bydgoszcz region.
- ²⁰ In Obidowa – Nowy Sącz region this tree is exceptionally a spruce. The Archives of the Ethnography of Slavs Institute UJ, mat. of cross survey.
- ²¹ Cross survey materials of Lublin region. Skuszewo – Siedlce region, cross survey materials of A. Szyfer.
- ²² Dähnhardt, op. cit. s. 36–41.
- ²³ Dähnhardt, op. cit. s. 36–41.
- ²⁴ Dähnhardt, op. cit. s. 41, 43. C. Russwurm, *Eibovolke oder die Schweden an den Küsten Esthlands und auf Runo*, Bd. 2, Revel 1885, s. 186.
- ²⁵ A. Marcinkowski (Nowosielski), *Lud ukraiński, jego pieśni, bajki podania, klechdy* (Ukrainian Folk People, their Songs, Legends, Folk Stories), T. 2, Wilno 1875, s. 143.
- ²⁶ Dähnhardt, op. cit. s. 41. P. Schullerus, *Pflanzen in Glaube und Brauch der Siebenbürger Sachsen*. In: *Archiv des Vereins für Siebenbürgischer Landeskunde*, Hermannstadt N.F. 40 (1916–23) s. 132.
- ²⁷ P. SEBILLOT, *Le Folk-lore de France*, t. 3, Paris 1910, s. 382. A. Gubernatis, *La mythologie des plantes ou les legends du regne vegetal*, t. 2, Paris 1878, s. 291.
- ²⁸ Gubernatis, op. cit. s. 291.
- ²⁹ Dähnhardt, op. cit. s. 41.
- ³⁰ E. H. Meyer, *Badisches Volksleben im XIX Jahrhundert*, Strassburg 1900, s. 382.
- ³¹ *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, Bd. 3, Berlin-Leipzig 1930–31, s. 1532.
- ³² K. Weinhold, *Über die Bedeutung des Haselstrauches im altgermanischen Kultus und Zauberwesen*, *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* Bd. 11, 1901, s. 5–6. A. Marzell In: *Handwörterbuch des Deutschen Aberglaubens* Bd. 3, s. 1532 s.v. Hasel.
- ³³ Schullerus, op. cit. s. 136, 138–139. Marcinkowski, op. cit. s. 143, F.F. Communications t. 66, s. 94.
- ³⁴ That last one in Transylvania, Schullerus, op. cit. s. 136.
- ³⁵ Dähnhardt, op. cit. s. 34.

- ³⁶ F. GAWELEK, Palma, jajko i śmigus w praktykach wielkanocnych ludu polskiego (Palm, Egg and Water Dousing in the Easter Ceremonies of the Polish Folk People), *Lud* t. 18, 1912, s. 23–24.
- ³⁷ O. KOLBERG, Chełmskie (Chełmno region), t. 2, Kraków 1891, s. 2, 60.
- ³⁸ Siarkowski, op. cit. s. 117.
- ³⁹ It is known in Małopolska, Silesia and Pomerania. See ref. 12.
- ⁴⁰ U HANS, *Rugensche Sagen*, 1981. C. Russwurm, *Sagen aus Hapsal 1867*; cit. after *Handwörterbuch des Deutschen Aberglaubens* Bd. 2, 1929–30, s. 1020. Dahnhardt, op. cit. s. 38.
- ⁴¹ F. PANZER, *Beitrag zue deutschen Mythologie* Bd. 2. München 1848, s. 201. K. A. Gloning, *Oberosterreichische Volkssagen*, 2, Aufl. Linz 1912, s. 108. Schullerus, op. cit. s. 138. E. Rolland, *Flore populaire ou historie naturelle des plantes dans leure rapport avec la linguistique et le folklore*, Paris t. 2, s. 5.
- ⁴² *Wiener Zeitschrift fur Volkskunde* Bd. 34, 1929, s. 116.
- ⁴³ *Dziennik Górnośląski* (Upper Silesian Daily) 1849, no 94. *Przyjaciel Ludu* (The friend of Common People) t. 2, no 22 1936/37.
- ⁴⁴ J. GVAJNERT, *Legendy, powiastki i pieśni* (Legends, Tales and Songs), Warszawa 1893, s. 22–25. *Osiczny i leszczyna* (An aspen and a Hazel) A Silesian Legend. Grajnert could have known it from Lompa's edition.
- ⁴⁵ The archives of the Ethnography of Slavs Institute UJ: Lubatowa – Krosno region.

POLSKIE LEGENDY LUDOWE O DRZEWACH "BŁOGOSŁAWIONYCH" I "PRZEKŁĘTYCH" ORAZ ZWIĄZANE Z NIMI WIERZENIA.

Streszczenie

W ludowych wierzeniach związanych z drzewami widzimy często nawiązania do legend mających źródło w wydarzeniach biblijnych. Częsty jest motyw skłaniania się drzew wobec osób świętych – głównie Świętej Rodziny podczas ucieczki do Egiptu, Matki Boskiej lub samego Jezusa, przez co drzewa te uzyskują status drzew "błogosławionych", świętych. Niektórzy autorzy zachodni ten motyw skłaniania przed drzewo gałęzi wywodzą z mitologii indyjskiej. Potem spotykamy go w europejskiej literaturze średniowiecznej. Być może w Polsce duchowieństwo przekazywało go poprzez kazania odnosząc go do drzew, które miały szczególne znaczenie w kultcie pogańskim, by schryścianizować ten kult. Spotykamy jednak często w folklorze europejskim motyw drzewa okazującego brak szacunku dla osób świętych lub nawet szkodzącego im swym zachowaniem. Drzewo takie występuje często w opowieści biblijnej, w której Święta Rodzina chroni się pod drzewem podczas ucieczki do Egiptu przed siepaczkami Heroda. Jedno z drzew odmawia schronienia na skutek czego zostaje przeklęte – drugie tego schronienia udziela przez co staje się drzewem "błogosławionym". Tego rodzaju opowieść nie znajduje odpowiednika w literaturze apokryficznej pisanej. Krzewem używającym schronienia jest w Polsce najczęściej leszczyna, na skutek czego obdarzona szczególnym błogosławieństwem ma ona chronić od pioruna, drzewo odmawiające pomocy to przeważnie osika. Następstwem jej chłodliwej odmowy ma być ustawiczne drżenie jej liści. W innych krajach Europy motyw drzewa udzielającego schronienia wiąże się często z innymi wydarzeniami z życia Matki Boskiej czy Chrystusa. Występuje tam też różny gatunek drzew. Natomiast pierwowzoru przeciwstawienia sobie drzewa dobrego i złego możemy dopatrywać się w starożytnej literaturze babilońskiej który to wątek mógł do nas dotrzeć poprzez kazania. W XIX wieku legendy o osicie i leszczynie mogły docierać na wieś na skutek rozpowszechniania ich w czasopiśmie dla ludu, czasem nawet w formie wierszowanej. Do początków naszego stulecia

treść tych legend była silnie podbudowana aspektem wierzeniowym. Leszczynę chętnie sadzono w pobliżu domu jako krzew chroniący od pioruna, natomiast osika bała drzewem, którego na ogół się obawiano, traktowano z niechęcią, używano w praktykach z zakresu magii szkodzącej.