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A folk mystic - Cunegonde Siwiec from Stryszawa¹

The speech contains available historical, ethnographical and theological materials which gave the basis for the presentation of a story of mountains, highlanders and, especially, a highlander from Siwcówka in Stryszawa – the Servant of God, Cunegonde Siwiec. Moreover, I am using the results of my own field research performed in Siwcówka as part of a grant for young scientists titled: *Origins and development of new places of religious cult in contemporary Poland with reference to the village of Stryszawa*, carried out in 2014 at the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology of Culture of the Nicolaus Copernicus University.

Biography

Cunegonde Siwiec (Kundusia for short) is a historical figure inscribed in the history of the land of Stryszawa. She was born in late nineteenth century. Her grandparents were the founders of a new rural settlement and her father owned a considerable amount of land and had a reputation of being a good landholder. The house in which she was born and died did not stand out from other ones. In the same way, Cunegonde fitted the ordinary landscape of life of the people from Siwcówka.

The rhythm of life at that time was built around the necessity to work, with breaks only for sleeping and holiday resting. The Siwiec family were considered to be decent, peaceful and hardworking (Zieliński 2010: 41). In the area of Stryszawa there were several inns providing services to the inhabitants, but the Siwiec family did not use them. They lived in a deep religious atmosphere. The Siwiec family belonged to a group of believers who showed more lively interest in the matters of the Church. They read a lot of newspapers and Catholic books, which was unusual among people living in rural areas. Kundusia was half

¹ Text was a basis of my speech which I gave at the University Collage Cork on 24.09.2015.

illiterate, so it was usually Michał, Kundegunda's younger brother, that was reading, while others listened and later shared their reflections².

Undoubtedly, Kundusia got her first religious education in her family home. The everyday atmosphere of Siwcówka also taught her higher values, *because her faith in God, in His truths and laws was at the same time the basis of the whole philosophy of life and the standard of behaviour*, stated Bronisław Bartkowski Kundusia's confessor (Bartkowski 2008: 16). The general faith in God's protection was common in the village and a large number of inhabitants participated in religious practices. But this wasn't enough for Cunegonde, that is why she made a private vow of chastity and, as a consequence, she remained unmarried. The decision to remain unmarried in order to lead a more devotedly religious life was probably made at the age of twenty. The inhabitants of Siwcówka accepted the unusual choice of Kundusia and, what is more, treated her with respect. She had courage to tell highlanders the truth and maintain respect at the same time.

She led an ordinary life, but She also was a mystic, a folk mystic. In Kundusia's lifetime, her extraordinary experiences were known only by her household members, nuns with whom she maintained closer contact and Father Bronisław Bartkowski, Kundusia's confessor. The priest provided Cunegonde with spiritual assistance until her death on the 27 June of 1955. During this time, he observed the spiritual growth of the penitent, whose clearer and clearer mission was to pray for sinners and co-suffer with Christ. After a period of intense verbal apostolate among highlanders, Kundusia entered the path of expiation. First, she lost sight in her right eye as a result of trachoma³. Then, more and more frequent pains in her limbs revealed the bone cancer, which had made it completely impossible for her to leave home since 1948. Because of pain, Kundusia was not able to turn over or sleep (Bartkowski 2008: 22).

Although She couldn't walk, She would give to a priest a mystic massages which she would receive from heaven. The notes written down by her confessor contain the testimony of supernatural character of Cunegonde's experiences. The highlander did not know that notes would ever be made public. On the other hand, Father Bartkowski did little to spread the materials. As a consequence for many years, the text had been shared among only a handful of people, especially nuns. The publication of the notes, for the first time in 1995, met with

² Among the books read at their house were ones requiring careful and reflective recipients, for example works of Carmelite saints.

³ Trachoma - bacterial inflammation of the conjunctiva and cornea - T.K.

keen interest of clergy and lay people, who in 1996 initiated the efforts to raise Kundusia to the honours of the altar. In December 2007, the Metropolitan of Cracow, Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, officially opened the beatification process, which is still in progress.

Narration

The content of Cunegonde's dialogues with Jesus, Mary and other saints is consistent with the so-called "little way of spiritual childhood", which was initiated by a French saint, Therese of Lisieux. Kundusia's conversations with Christ and saints relate to the aspect of trusting God's mercy, which was the basis of Little Therese's spirituality. Similar to the French saint, Kundusia also made her life an uninterrupted act of love and trust.

In Poland, the meaning of the Divine Mercy became more important owing to Saint Sister Faustina Kowalska, who lived in the times of and near Cunegonde - in Cracow Łagiewniki. Struck by the profound awareness of God's goodness on the one hand and human sin on the other, Faustina encouraged to trust in the Divine Mercy.

We can observe traces of these spiritualities (Therese's and Faustina's) in the life of Kundusia. This correspondence of fates and thoughts was noted by theologians and by pilgrims. One of my respondent said: *As one reads the revelations of Kundusia, they can find lots of expressions which are identical or nearly identical to the "Diary" of Saint Faustina and the same profound simplicity: "talk to me", "beg, love", etc. Lots of thoughts expressed literally in the same way* (source: a 52-year-old woman from Wrocław).

As I was performing my field research I could observe an ambiguous attitudes towards Kundusia, ranging from personal devotion to whispered criticism. For the majority of persons remembering Kundusia, she was a pious and good old Lady, who did not differ from others in terms of appearance: *There were lots of Kundusias there, lots of such old women wandered, but this one was kind of a real one, she went to church on Siwówka. I was about 15 years old at that time, so I did not waste my time on old crippled women* (source: a 80-year-old man from Stryszawa). A woman from the neighbourhood states: *She was so, so... kind-hearted. Even her close relative says that kids would go under her window and sing such naughty songs, and Kundusia would give them a candy. She was so warm to interact with; you could talk to her like to a good granny* (source: a 74-year-old woman from Stryszawa). Another respondent says: *Personally, I cannot say a bad word about Kundusia, as she was a*

good woman; she prayed in such a way that probably no nun here can pray like her. (source: an 82-year-old woman from Stryszawa).

What are the negatives? Negative opinions mainly relate to the fact that Cunegonde donated a plot of land to the benefit of the convent. One of the interlocutor trying to explain this said: *Because people here are so land-oriented and don't understand how it is possible to give away the land to someone outside the family* (source: a 88-year-old woman from Stryszawa). One of the women looks at negative opinions taking into account the sphere of the *sacrum* and the perspective of spiritual combat: *Where there is good and the sacred, there are always lots of evil spirits around. People in the village were jealous of them [of the Siwiec family - T.K.], because they had everything. There were lots of them in the house and they grew wheat and potatoes, and had a lot of cattle* (source: an 82-year-old woman from Stryszawa).

A change in the social structure in the village, a generational change and progress in the beatification process of the Servant of God Cunegonde Siwiec result in the domination of positive opinions. A respondent stated: *People didn't know Kundusia and now it is changing because of books* (source: a 74-year-old woman from Stryszawa). *Now people's attitude is to think that there was something going on here. When there are natural disasters around, like storms or fires, and nothing happens here on Siwcówka, even local people who remember Kundusia say that it is because of her taking care* (source: a 59-year-old woman from Stryszawa). It wasn't so common before, that people from Stryszawa would willingly identify with Kundusia (source: an 88-year-old woman from Stryszawa).

Siwcówka - a village lost in the mountains, located on the former Austrian-German border, cumulates various feelings. Pilgrims whom I asked about this claim that *this place is amazing and, above all, one can feel that it is a place of prayer* (source: a 52-year-old woman from Wrocław). A woman from Cracow who has regularly visited this place for 40 years and a man living for several years in Silesia Province was convincing me that being in Siwcówka is *like being in a fairy tale* (source: a 72-year-old man from Ruda Śląska). This confirms the opinion of the chaplain who makes a claim that *this area is a kind of «genius loci», in many ways related to various religious events from the past and presente* (source: a 68-year-old man from Stryszawa).

When I asked Mother Superior of local convent how to explain this spiritual richness of the place, She answered: *If you take, even in Poland, some places of revelations, it turns*

out that they are all on the hills regardless of whether the place is a village or a city. Take Saint Faustina, the first revelation of Jesus took place in Plock, a city located on a hill and here too is a hill, silence, seclusion. I have already been wondering about this a few times, because it is something of essence. Lord Jesus went uphill to pray. All important events in the life of Jesus, and contemporary events too, take place on a hill, in private. Being uphill is like being closer to God. You could look at it from different perspectives, but we also have to take into account the fact that poor God-reliant people are closest to Him. As you can read or hear from different sources, Kundusia's family could be wealthy, but they would share everything with others. E.g. They helped the priest reach priesthood - they paid for his studies with the money they got from selling milk, cheese or eggs⁴. When the nuns came, they looked after the poor girls and again it was Kundusia's family that provided everything. This family left everything behind. They were poor, closer to God. We must also analyse it from this point of view (source: a 59-year-old woman from Stryszawa).

Mountains dominating in the natural landscape gained a strong symbolic meaning. They were a popular motif in mythologies of different cultures and they were part of their vision of history. Ambivalent concepts and feelings related to the perception of mountains, their horror and beauty, are parallel to numerous stories about different creatures living in the mountains, such as gods, demons and saints. The presence of people and especially saints in human-unfriendly places, which were considered to be evil-haunted, resulted in the domestication and sanctification of such places. In this context, the example of Cunegonde Siwiec is very meaningful. A god-fearing highlander from Siwcówka was famous for, among others, her beneficial influence on the surroundings. The witnesses remember that one of her abilities was to tame the fiery nature of the inhabitants and pacify frequent arguments. Most of the people from Siwcówka believe that Kundusia protects this area. The chapel located on the outskirts of Siwcówka reminds them of the prayers of the extraordinary neighbour. When the whole village was in danger during the war some miracle happened owing to Kundusia's prayer. The bridge along which German's soldier drove suddenly collapsed and they had to turn back.

⁴ It was Cunegonde's friend, Father Józef Czarnecki (1894 - 1949) - T.K.