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Representation of the Old Believers in Poland in ethnographic photography

Abstract. The Old Believers are a religious and ethnic minority dwelling in the north-eastern part of Poland. That religious group was formed as a result of the reforms within the Russian Orthodox Church, which took place in the 17th century. A large proportion of the Russian community objected to the radical changes introduced by patriarch Nikon, which gave rise to the *Raskol*. The authorities responded with mass repressions resulting in the migrations of Russians abroad, also to Poland. After the Second World War, the Old Believers in Poland attracted considerable interest of both journalists and academics. The post-war period saw a fair number of publications describing the culture of the Old Ritualists that yielded a relatively comprehensive image of that community. The aim of this paper is to outline the mechanism behind the portrayal of the Old Believers through photography, which in the investigations of cultural anthropologists becomes the tool of capturing cultural reality, as well as the object of their research. Here, the analysis is concerned with the collection of ethnographic photographs by Eugeniusz Iwaniec. The author goes beyond the limitations of traditional understanding of ethnographic photography, qualified by virtue of its subject matter, extending the scope of such a notion by integrating the perspective of visual anthropology to reveal additional aspects of the analysed material, including the authors, the concept, the subject and the reception, which later become key reference points for the analysis.

Keywords: Old Believers, ethnographic photography, representation, reception, visual anthropology

Introduction: Who are the Old Believers and what is the origin of their presence in Poland?

The emergence of the religious and cultural group called the Old Believers, whose direct inheritors live today in a broad diaspora dispersed in many countries, including Poland, and on several continents, is directly related to the schism (*raskol*) within the Russian Orthodox Church, which took place in the 17th century. The split was the consequence of radical reforms initiated by Patriarch Nikon, and commenced on the 11 February 1653, when the newly translated psalter had been published. The passages which prescribes that the sign of the cross be made with two fingers (*dvuperstiye*), as well as 16 deep bows be taken during the Ephrem the Syrian's Lent prayer, were left out. Subsequently, just before the Lent, the directive of the patriarch, aimed at unifying Ruthenian texts and rituals with the Greek tradition, was sent around. Among other changes, the sign of the cross made with two fingers (*dvuperstiya*) was replaced with one made using three fingers (*troyeperstiye*), the direction of a procession was altered while the cross would be censed in a direction opposite to path of the sun instead of being aligned with the ecliptic. Spelling of the name of Jesus was changed from *Isus* to *Iisus*. In subsequent years, amendments were made in almost all liturgical books. On 31 August 1655, the new revised version of the missal (*sluzhebnyk*) was published. The far-reaching reforms of Nikon triggered fierce protests across the society, both among the clergy and the laymen attached to the "old beliefs" (Kartashev, 1959, pp. 147–174). The Great Moscow Synod (1666–1667) recognized the changes introduced by Nikon as canonical and anathematized all who objected. Those who defied and challenged the transformation were defrocked by the assembly of the Synod. This prompted the actual schism within the Orthodox church and sparked religious wars which would last for many years to come. Opponents of the reforms were dubbed *raskolniks* (schismatics), a word etymologically stemming from *raskol* (schism) and possessed of negative connotations. On the other hand, the supporters of the reforms were referred to as Nikonians, a designation derived from the name of the patriarch Nikon. The latter's reforms, ultimately reaffirmed and upheld during the council of 1666–1667, triggered apocalyptic sentiments which had been present and growing for years; as well as fuelled the conviction of the imminent coming of the Antichrist (Przybył, 1999).

Actions of the power apparatus targeted the clergy in the main, with the goal of eliminating defenders of the old beliefs by neutralizing their leaders.

Thus, the Old Believers were soon forced to face the problem of having no ecclesiastics to care for the congregation, some of whom renounced their orders, sharing the conviction that “the Christ alone would be their guide.” The Old Ritualists were subject to repressions under the subsequent rulers, as edicts of the authorities deprived the Old Believers of numerous rights. However, the ordeal stiffened the resistance instead of suppressing it. The most radical form of demonstrating defiance was self-immolation, which was considered the only way to avoid oppression by fleeing the world that headed towards the rule of the Antichrist. A less radical mode of evading the oppression were migrations of entire groups or villages of the Old Ritualists, who settled down in those parts of the country which were difficult to reach or, in later years, also abroad. Nowadays, the adherents of the prevalent rite before Nikon live in Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Brazil, Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia, Canada, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Uruguay and the USA (Grek-Pabisowa, 2000, p. 12). The very first Old Believers came to Poland before 1779, with approximately 50,000 Old Ritualists living on the present-day territory of Poland (including areas such as Masuria, which formerly belonged to other states) before the Second World War. According to the data of Statistics Poland, the number of the Old Believers in the country in 2011 was 1,006. Most Old Ritualists living currently in Poland are considered to be the descendants of one of the largest groups of the Priestless Old Believers (*Bespopovtsy*), also known as the Pomor community (*Pomorskoye soglasie*). The Old Ritualists have lived in the villages of north-eastern Poland and at present four active religious centres of the Old Believers are to be found in that region, specifically in Wojnowo, Wodзилki, Gabowe Grądy and Suwałki (Jewdokimow, 2014a, pp. 15–20).

Materials and methods.

Depiction of the Old Believers in Poland: creation and research

After the Second World War, the interest of Polish cultural anthropologists and journalists in that hermetic, somewhat obscure and slightly exotic community dwelling in the north-eastern parts of the country began to grow and appears to have endured in the decades that followed. Currently, there are comprehensive resources available which document the culture of the Old Believers living in Poland. The Old Ritualists have been devoted numerous press publications and academic studies, describing their daily practices and religious life, history, their language and customs. The abundant body of sources of indirect knowledge about the culture and history of the Old Believ-

ers in Poland consists of press articles, scientific papers, online resources and photographs. They differ in terms of factual value, originality, subject, approach and the medium used, but the intention behind their creation and attitude of the reader or viewer are the essential distinctive characteristic. Numerous resources devoted to the Old Ritualists offer a portrayal conveying a relatively complete and coherent image which is often multiplied and subject to reconstruction. That very depiction becomes a very compelling object of enquiry. A fair number of separate studies concerned with the creation and variability of the portrayal of the Old Believers in academic literature (Pogorzelski, 2004) and press publications (Jewdokimow, 2014b) is already available. The image of Old Ritualists created by means of photography – an exceedingly interesting one – is the actual object of my further analysis. While doing so, one should keep in mind the constructive potential of photography which, just as written text, not only documents and reflects but also creates a fluctuating and dynamic image of the world. The complexity of the photographic image as a source of knowledge of the world was asserted by numerous researchers in the field and, since *On Photography* by Susan Sontag (1977) or *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie* by Roland Barthes (1980), our notions of photography have radically changed. Now it is impossible to regard it as straightforward and unambiguous representation of the world. Anthropology of images adds to the store of knowledge of this medium and convincingly demonstrates the polysemous, interactive and temporal nature of photography. Hans Belting observed: “medium of gaze—not, in the first instance, our gaze, but the gaze of photographer, which transfers itself onto our gaze when we stand before the finished picture. The symbolic act of perception in front of a photograph consists in an exchange of gazes. We recall the gaze, which is in turn recalled in the photograph. In this sense, photography is a medium between two gazes, and a part of this mediality consists in the time that lies between the recorded and the recognizing gaze. We see the world with the gaze of another, a past gaze, but we trust that it could also be our present gaze. The same world always looks different when it is seen at a different time” (Belting, 2011, p. 154). In the classic text entitled *Understanding a Photograph*, John Berger underlines the intentionality factor embodied in the photographic image. In his view the essence of photography lies in the choice, in giving a certain situation its actual meaning. The viewer of photographs, whose previous knowledge influences how an image is understood, also becomes an active creator of meanings (Berger, 1972). Anthropology of images, a discipline which has witnessed dynamic development in recent years, accentuates the complexity of relations between the subjects participating in the development of meaning in a photograph: an interplay between the photographed and the photographer,

as well as between the photographed and the viewer. The relation between the representation and the represented reality also becomes both significant and at least problematic. The medium of an image, the place where a photograph is stored as well as the manner and context of its display is also important. Recapitulating his observations on photography, Polish researcher Krzysztof Olechnicki speaks of its triple function: “as a method, it is as a way of exploring reality, as a medium – a means of expression, as a subject – the matter of analysis” (Olechnicki, 2003, p. 7).

The aim of photography is to capture reality. At the same time, it becomes a research technique as well as the object of research, becoming a domain of inquiry undertaken by cultural anthropologists, who collect documentary material during their field work in order to make it the basis and the substance of their further investigations. According to Sarah Pink, cultural ethnography and visual studies have come to complement each other today: the theory of photography bears on the understanding of the potential of visual media in ethnographic research and representations, whereas ethnographic theories support the creation of visual imagery (Pink, 2013). Photography was promptly taken advantage of in cultural anthropology, yet it was called into question as an objective source of information given its subjectivity, lack of systematization and poor representative capacity. For this reason, it used to be considered secondary to written text, providing solely auxiliary material during field work. This changed in the 1980s in the wake of the ground-breaking concepts advanced by James Clifford, in whose *Writing Culture* ethnographic narratives were referred to as “fiction”. However, he did not mean their falsity, but their constructive nature. According to him, “ethnographic truths” are always “partial – created and uncompleted” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 7). Clifford concluded that an academic text is constructed and “fictional” to the same extent as a visual representation, which allowed photography to be accepted more readily as a source of knowledge and a research method in ethnography.

That very medium is employed in the ethnographic studies concerned with the Old Believer communities in Poland. The photography collection by Eugeniusz Iwaniec, held at the District Museum in Suwałki, constitutes the most significant material.¹ The collection comprises approximately 1,500 negative slides documenting the life of the Old Believers in Poland, which makes it the largest resource of this kind. All pictures were taken between 1964 and 1986, and will provide the object of analysis performed further on

¹ Another body of photographic documentation was created by Knut Olof Falk during the so-called Complex Yotvingian Expedition launched in 1955. The collection is also held at the District Museum in Suwałki.

in the text. As for ethnographic photography, it is most often distinguished by virtue of its subject matter: “The term ‘ethnographic photography’ was commonly used when describing photographs depicting the so-called traditional lifestyles: everyday realities, religious observances and their participants, places where they lived and their material culture, focusing only on the topics such images depicted” (Kubica, 2016, pp. 261–262). This approach seems to be relatively narrow, as it confines the analysis of ethnographic photography exclusively to its subject matter. It may be extended once the perspective of visual anthropology is taken into account, revealing additional aspects of the analyzed material, including the author, the concept, the subject and the reception (Kubica, 2016, p. 262), which later become primary reference point around which the analysis is structured.

Results:

Author, concept, subject and reception

The author of the photographs in the aforementioned collection, Eugeniusz Iwaniec (1931–2019), is one of the key figures of the Polish milieu of researchers who directed their attention to the culture of the Old Believers. He was one of the first to carry out systematic studies and detail the life of that community. His work is the constitutive and fundamental element of the Polish research concerned with Old Ritualist culture. His first encounter with the Old Believers had very much to do with photography indeed. In 1962, Iwaniec as a semi-professional photographer² – was invited by Pantelejmon Jurjewicz, the editor-in-chief of the *Russkiy Golos* magazine, to participate in an expedition to the Suwałki region to make a photographic reportage to be later published in Jurjewicz’s periodical. This expedition marked the onset of long-lasting research by Iwaniec, a scholar at the University of Łódź. Having started in the 1960s, his field work in the Suwałki region and Masuria yielded thorough documentation of the Old Ritualist communities living in those areas. It was the foundation of the first complete monograph dedicated to the Polish Old Believers, entitled *History of the Old Believers in Poland Between the 17th and the 20th Century* (Iwaniec, 1977). Published in 1977, it is still regarded as the most significant and comprehensive study as far as that community is concerned. Many years after its publication, another expert on Old Ritualist

² He graduated from the Photography Gymnasium in Łódź and worked for some time at the Łódź Slide Laboratory but photography was never his main profession; it was rather a passion that he pursued in an expert fashion.

culture, Stefan Grzybowski, observed: "Today, regardless of new discoveries and research on the Old Believers, it is a kind of a stepping stone for the researchers of this religious group and Eugeniusz Iwaniec is rightly considered the initiator of the research and one of the prime experts and interpreters of both the history, culture and the religious thought of the Old Ritualists, not only in Poland" (Grzybowski, 2016, p. 215). Photographs account for a large proportion of the documentation created by Eugeniusz Iwaniec, and a number of images were included in the academic studies which he published. At the same time, they constituted a detailed visual documentation of everyday and religious life of the Old Believers. The purpose of the photography collection which he created was to accumulate research material for his scholarly work. Thus conceived, they reveal their ethnographic characteristics. They were created for research purposes but ultimately they were archived in the museum of the region to which they were related.

The subject matter of Iwaniec's photographs tallies with the classic notion of ethnographic photography, as he documented "everyday life: work of the community, other activities, interiors of homes, objects, customs and holidays, people (anthropometric pictures and human types, costumes), characteristic places: general layouts, streets, and buildings" (Grzybowski, 2016, p. 295) (Figs. 1–3). However, he also goes beyond the classic subject matter of ethnographic photography, recording the change resulting from the modernization of the traditional community, which is visible in the attire, architecture and everyday life. It enables him to capture a moment in which the traditional culture of the Old Believers blended with the surrounding secular Polish culture of those times (Fig. 4).

When discussing the author of the photograph, one should draw attention to the relation between the latter and the object of his research, since it determines the degree of accessibility of the analyzed culture and the possibility of documenting the photographer's entrance into the everyday life of the community. This relationship was built for decades, which would suggest that it was variable, dynamic and owed to the general approach of the researcher towards the Old Believers. Iwaniec himself spoke of his close relations with some of the Old Ritualists, as well as his involvement in their everyday and institutional life. The researcher underlined his influence on the community's life, which in his case entailed the expectation that its members would recognize his contribution. From a personal standpoint, he was an active participant and a co-creator of the Old Believer community. He renounced the position of an observer in favour of being a participant; at the same time his being engaged in the constructed relation is tangible. In this context, his role in the establishment of the Board of the Old Believers in Poland cannot

be overlooked. In the conversation with Krzysztof Snarski in 2016, Iwaniec underlined his contribution to the foundation of the Board since, as he stated, it was on his initiative that the meeting of the Polish Old Ritualists with Prof. Leonid Pimonow, an important community activist and an active member of the Old Believer community took place. The meeting, which ultimately led to the formation of the principal public institution of the Old Ritualists, was held on 4 June 1983. According to Iwaniec's account, "Leonid Pimonow consented to lend comprehensive support to the Old Believers, provided that he would be chosen the Honorary Head of the Board of the Old Believers in Poland. It was supposed to ensure more effective representation of the Old Ritualists before the state authorities. Unfortunately, [...] besides the Old Believer elders, devoted to the traditions of their fathers, their political sons became members of the Board as well, seeing its activities as an opportunity to reap their own benefits. They suddenly started to ingratiate themselves to L. Pimonow with flattery and lavish treats. They would tell him: 'We are the native folks, what do we need this Iwaniec for?'" Krzysztof Snarski, recounting what Iwaniec had stated, writes about his severing ties with both the Board of the Old Believers and Leonid Pimonow. Iwaniec came to the conclusion that "the Board is not a place suited for former party activists, especially those who considered themselves non-believers before or even fought against religion because of their functions in the party" (Snarski, 2016, p. 23). Thus, he censured the morals of the Board members. Given the historical revisions of the erstwhile People's Republic of which were taking place in Poland, this assessment is particularly negative. However, it is not associated with any particular examples of political activities or any particular people, as Iwaniec denounces an entire generation of the Old Ritualists. An allegation articulated in this fashion, regardless of its validity, precludes neutral approach of the researcher towards the object of research. Iwaniec's account also betrays the sense of being marginalized as a co-creator of the community's life and, implicit though it may be, an expectation of being recognized by the heads of the institution which determined how the community would develop.

The relation between the photographer and the photographed to which the above refers is crucial in visual anthropology. In addition, this relation becomes even more complex as owner of the image captured in a photograph is involved as well. Thus a picture becomes a point of encounter of many "gazes", which is especially visible in the picture taken in 1977 in the village of Wodziłki, depicting an elderly, bearded man, dressed in working clothes, leaning on a hay sheaf and reading a book (Fig. 5). On the surface – in isolation from the actual context – one sees a person reading a book and the situation depicted in the photograph may be presumed to be a record of a certain

social process consisting in the “enlightenment” of the Polish countryside. A completely different, more individualized perception is also viable, as one may see a contemporary Tolstoy, a wise man, who abandoned civilization and is engrossed in his studies in the bosom of nature. How this picture is construed depends to a large extent not only on the author’s purpose, but also on the knowledge and the experience of the viewer, as well as on the context in which the image is situated. The same picture displayed at an exhibition of works depicting the culture of the Old Believers will suggest a typical Old Believer with his inseparable attribute – the beard – who is reading a book during a break in farm work (most Old Ritualists were farmers). The title of the book is legible, so there is no doubt that it is Eugeniusz Iwaniec’s *History of the Old Believers in Poland Between the 17th and the 20th Century*. Hence, the author of the photograph is also the author of the book, while the subject of the book is the same as the subject of the picture. This photograph is often reprinted in publications relating to the Old Believers; it is also to be found on the cover of the commemorative volume dedicated to professor Eugeniusz Iwaniec, attesting to its singular significance. In a number of reproductions of the photograph the figure is depersonalised, being merely “an Old Believer reading the book by E. Iwaniec” (Pogorzelski & Pogorzelska, 2007, p. 80). Nevertheless, it may be argued that his identity is crucial and can tell one much about the “intersecting gazes” which can be identified thanks to visual anthropology. The photograph shows an Old Believer *nastavnik* from the village of Wodziłki, Lazar Novichenko (1883–1982), reading a book written by the author of the picture. The photograph was taken in 1977, the year in which the book was published. A *nastavnik* has a special, virtually essential role in the life of the Old Believer community. Besides, Lazar Novichenko (Snarski, 2015) was a particularly charismatic leader, who in addition demonstrated much openness towards representatives of other confessions. When speaking of his personal relationship with the *nastavnik*, Iwaniec emphasized the open attitude to people of other denominations, manifesting the ecumenical spirit: “One day I came to the molenna [house of prayer] and I saw that it was open, but I didn’t enter at once, just into the awning. I saw father Łazar preparing for the prayer. At some point he turned round and said: ‘if I’m so happy, my son, that you came here. I don’t feel comfortable praying alone.’ ‘But I’m not an Old Believer,’ Iwaniec said. ‘It doesn’t matter. Stand here and I will be praying for all those who couldn’t come, who are sick or old, for all the believers’” (Snarski, 2016, pp. 19–20). It may be presumed that having the *nastavnik* from Wodziłki read his book personally was particularly important for the researcher. The picture is indicative of profound focus and interest in the work of Iwaniec, which in the personal dimension may have resulted

from the interest in how the world known to the *nastavnik* is portrayed and described by the researcher. The awareness of the actual relation between two participants of a certain interaction, the relation going beyond the photograph, reveals mutual respect and interest inherent in the photograph. Reproduced in various contexts, the picture somehow changes the meanings it comprises and the essence of the primary relationship is also rendered. One sees a villager leaning on a haystack and gaining knowledge about his own culture and identity from a book by a researcher who became conversant with and sufficiently described that world. The identity of Lazar Novichenko, whose authority and direct experience were the source of his knowledge, all disappear. There remains only an anonymous, bearded old man, deprived of his voice. The author of the book and simultaneously the author of the photograph becomes the key figure; the entire depiction is dominated by his approach, by the way he sees the Old Believers and their culture. The intermediary intrinsic to the medium of photography becomes its subject matter. The directness of the traditional medium is replaced by the intermediation of the created representation. The ethnographic authority becomes the actual and indisputable source, a guarantor of knowledge about a certain culture, also for its actual representatives.

Discussion.

From a passive to an active viewer

This mode of describing the relation between an ethnographer, a researcher investigating a culture and its bearers, is partly perpetuated and becomes entrenched in the attitude of subsequent generations of researchers exploring the culture of the Old Believers in Poland and, to some extent, in the attitude of the successive generations of the Polish Old Believers as well. Stefan Pastuszewski, a contemporary Polish researcher of the Old Believer culture noted: "They react to all criticism or even more stringent or more insightful analysis culminating in an evaluation or a conclusion stating that it is an attack on the very Old Beliefs." As a proof of his assertion, the author of the foregoing quotes his friend: "The Old Believers, not only in Poland, read studies – especially historical and cultural ones – about themselves more and more thoroughly and they are sensitive about this matter" (Pastuszewski, 2017, p. 26). The above quotations demonstrate that the Old Believers evidently expect uncritical acceptance in the account of their culture, an expectation of complete acquiescence which provokes astonishment when this is lacking. At the same time, the Old Believers assume a critical stance – otherwise referred to as the afore-

mentioned “sensitivity about themselves” – towards the portrayal developed and perpetuated by the researchers and writers. This attitude is indicative of a growing self-awareness of the Old Believers, their recovery from a kind of a crisis which consisted in suspending their own authority in favour of the external authority of knowledge; this self-awareness fosters a critical outlook on the created representation of their own culture. It expresses the belief that they can create and express their identity on their own, without relying entirely on an external authority. That criticism means recovering certain maturity of culture which was subject to a dramatic and continuous regress after the clash with the aggressive urban culture after the war, when the *nastawniks* – the epitomes of traditional religious culture – lost their ascendancy in favour of the secular authority.

The advisable approach towards the portrayal of the Old Believer culture created by generations of Polish researchers mentored by Eugeniusz Iwaniec should be both conscious and critical, with the necessary rectifications and supplements. A synergy of the two approaches is exemplified in the exhibition created by Piotr Malczewski and Krzysztof Snarski at the private gallery of the former in the village of Buda Ruska in north-eastern Poland. Piotr Malczewski’s gallery of photography is located in a former farmhouse of the Old Believers. The space is open to visitors, some of whom include the Old Ritualists themselves, who have the opportunity of recognizing their family and friends in the displayed photographs. The moments of recognition are captured by the author of the exhibition enabling personalization of the photographs (Fig. 6). The majority of the exhibited images originate from the aforementioned collection of photographs by Eugeniusz Iwaniec. The space of their public display becomes a juncture of viewpoints of the author and the spectator, activating the relations between the mediatic image of a photograph and the mental image of experience, a feeling or a memory, rendering the space of photography dynamic, enabling it to link different temporal dimensions of the past and the present. Consequently, a viewer actively partakes the reality captured from the standpoint of the photographer, as opposed to being a passive recipient of its ossified representation.

I would like to thank the District Museum in Suwałki for making the photographs of Eugeniusz Iwańc available and for permission to publish them.



Fig. 1. A family of Old Believers (the Moskalov family), Sztabinki, 1979
 Photograph by E. Iwaniec, property of the District Museum in Suwałki.



Fig. 2. Funeral in Wodzilki, 1982
 Photograph by E. Iwaniec, property of the District Museum in Suwałki.

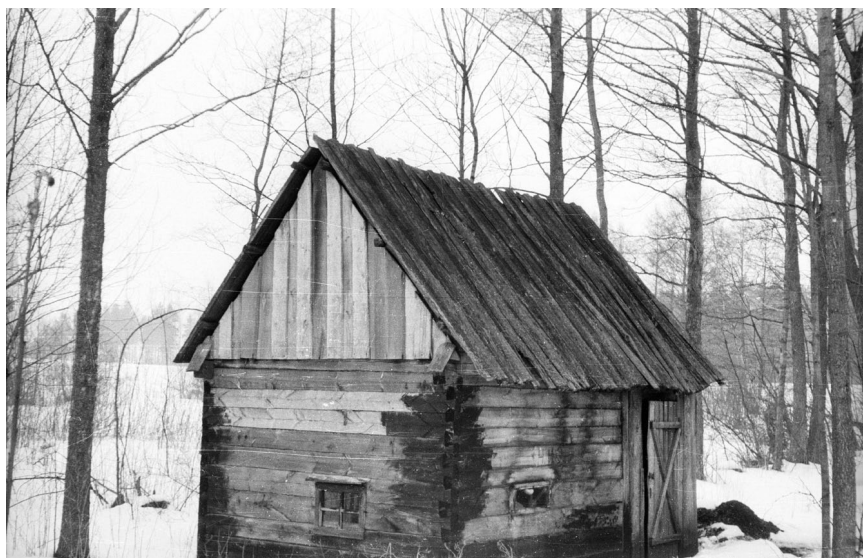


Fig. 3. *Banya* [Steam bath]

Photograph by E. Iwaniec, property of the District Museum in Suwałki.



Fig. 4. A mother with her daughters, Wodzilki village, 1964

Photograph by E. Iwaniec, property of the District Museum in Suwałki.

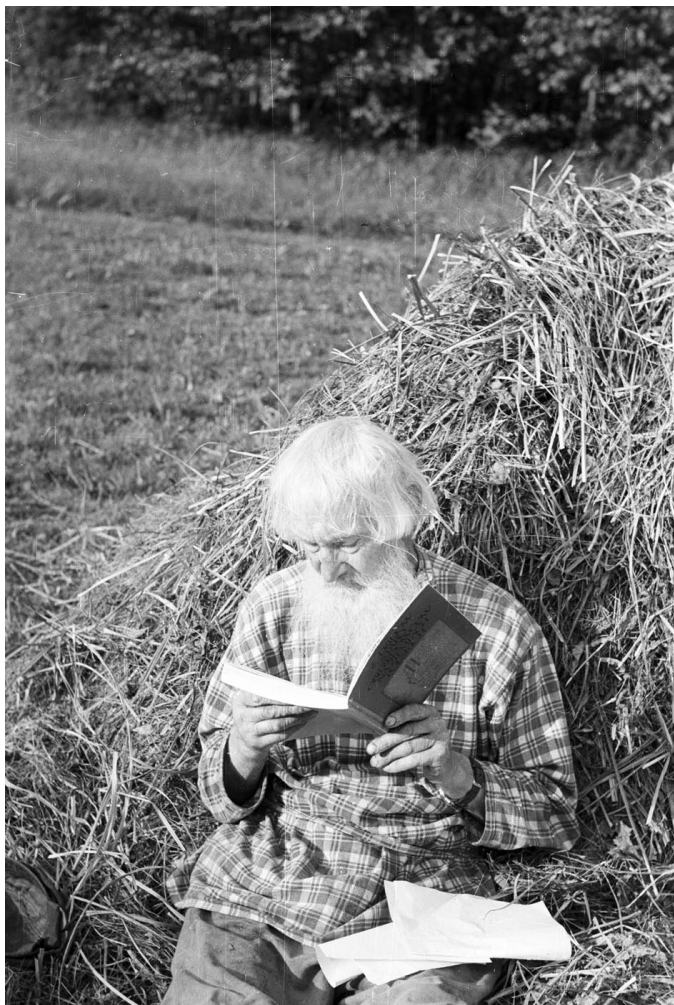


Fig. 5. *Nastavnik* Łazar Nowiczenko, Wodzilki village, 1977

Photograph by E. Iwaniec, property of the District Museum in Suwałki.

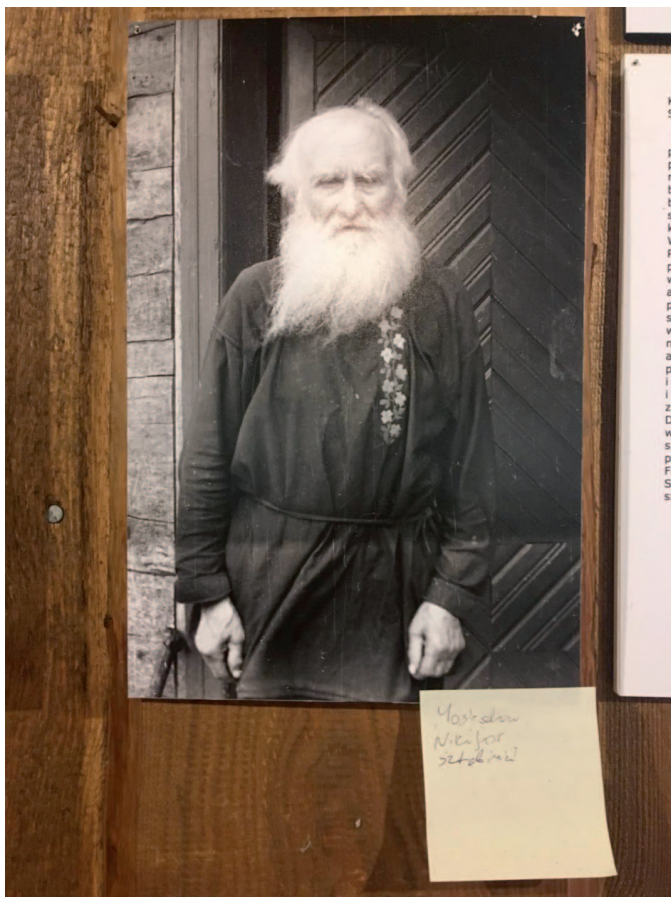


Fig. 6. A photograph with comments at an exhibition
in the gallery of Piotr Malczewski "Old Believers – worlds drifting away," 2019
Text of the comment: Moskalow Nikifor, Sztabinki [village].

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