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Adversities and opportunities in the production of "Oscypek" cheese and in the traditional grazing system of Polish Mountain Sheep

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SUMMARY – The traditional grazing system of sheep in the Polish Mountains is mainly aiming at preserving the folkloristic customs and the natural landscape. Sheep pasturing and milking is linked to the hand-made processing of many regional produces. Among them, the "Oscypek" cheese is still produced in a traditional way, unchanging over 500 years. "Oscypek" was the only one produce from Poland which has been showed at the "Slow Food Hall of Taste" (Salone del Gusto). Unfortunately, it did not obtain the European PDO certification. The registration as Protected Designation of Origin brand should help producers to achieve profitable prices and increase the profitability from the sheep production systems in the mountainous regions.

Keywords: Sheep, traditional grazing, "Oscypek" cheese.

RESUME – *"Les problèmes et les nouvelles possibilités en ce qui concerne la production du fromage régional de brebis nommé "Oscypek" et le pâturage traditionnel de moutons polonais de montagne". Le but du pâturage traditionnel est de garder la tradition et de protéger l'environnement naturel. La richesse naturelle de Tatras dépend principalement de la continuation de l'utilisation des pâturages de montagne. Le pâturage des moutons, accompagné par la traite, est lié à la production des nombreux produits régionaux. La production du fromage "Oscypek" se fait depuis plus de 500 ans, toujours de la même façon. A la Foire des produits régionaux "Salone del Gusto", "Oscypek" a été le seul produit présenté par la Pologne. Néanmoins, jusqu'à présent, ce fromage n'a pas obtenu de certificat européen d'AOP. Il est à noter que l'octroi du label d'Appellation d'Origine Protégée permettrait aux producteurs d'obtenir des prix rentables et d'accroître le rendement de l'économie ovine dans les régions de montagnes.*

Mots-clés : *Moutons, pâturage traditionnel, fromage de brebis du type "Oscypek".*

Introduction

In the 1980s, 150 million sheep were on pasture in Europe (Mirek, 2004b). Traditional grazing with local breeds made the basis of the European economy for centuries and at the same time it was a creative factor linked to the culture in many regions. Sheep grazing contributed to the formation of many grassland biotypes, with a large variety of flora and fauna. Pasturing was also strictly connected to material and spiritual culture as reflected in buildings, ceremonies, beliefs, costumes and regional products, which are associated with pasturing.

At present, extensive farming systems exists mainly in difficult mountain regions, which are often outlying from the market. Currently, one of the main purposes of the European Union policy is to support extensively food production. Taking into consideration the protection of regions of great natural and cultural worth, a satisfactory income level has to be secured for herd owners (Kuznicka and Kucharska, 2004).

Shepherding on mountainous regions of Poland

The colonization of the Carpathian Mountains and Tatra Highlands took place during the 11th-13th centuries. Beside the way land was managed, the dominant form of husbandry in that region was sheep breeding, based on pasturing and sheep milk product processing which were the main occupations of highlanders (Kucharska and Kuznicka, 2005). During the interwar period in Tatra

Highlands there was around 6000 head of sheep, which was considered as the upper limit of the grazing potential (Gašienica-Chmiel, 2001a). After the Second World War, 22,000 head of sheep were raised in this region. This means 4 times more than the pasture capacity (Mirek, 2004a). Because of the soil devastation, Tatra Mountain National Park was established in 1954 with compulsory acquisition of land and expropriation, which resulted in cessation of grazing in 1978. Protests of local inhabitants and forest succession as the result of pasturing relinquishment, caused in 1982 the introduction of cultural pasturing in the Tatra Mountains, which protects nature and also the culture and traditions of that region (Mirek, 2004a). Mountainous terrain in Poland comprises only 9% of the country area and has exceedingly valuable natural and landscape advantages, which allow inhabitants to achieve supplementary income from tourism and recreation services (Drozd, 2004).

The number of head of sheep in the Polish Mountain is only 13% of all country sheep population but for common Polish citizens sheep-farming is associated with the mountains. Many tired tourists could find shelter in shepherds' huts and the views of sheep grazing on mountain pastures are mixed with picturesque landscapes. In 2003 on an area of 153.27 hectares within the Tatra Mountain National Park, there were 1470 head of sheep on pasture. The average stocking rate was 7 head per hectare, which is the optimal rate (Gašienica-Chmiel, 2001a). The shepherds who want to take their sheep to graze within the Tatra Mountain National Park have to sign an agreement for a period of 4 years. The pasturing can start when grass is 8 cm high and ends not later than 30th September. The shepherds have to wear the regional mountaineer's costumes, use traditional equipment and its characteristic nomenclature, local dialect as well as comply with rituals related to shepherding. Cultural pasturing also requires the manufacturing of traditional sheep milk products according to long-standing technologies (Gašienica-Chmiel, 2001b). The problematical case seems to be the charge paid for pasturing in the Tatra Mountain National Park. The payment is calculated as an equivalent to 0.5 quintals of rye (5 Euro) for 1 hectare of rented land. Conversely, in other countries landscape conservation through the use of sheep is recognized as a service activity and for this reason it receives public funding. The income increase obtained this way might stimulate the conservation of sheep flocks (Van Beek, 2002). The majority of shepherds are in retirement age. For instance, the oldest shepherd is more than 70 years old. They work following their sentiments, without thinking in any economic considerations. During the 5 month pasturing period they stay out of the house in shepherds' huts without electricity or running water. The only wages that they get from that difficult work are the revenues obtained from selling sheep milk products. It seems that financial support is necessary to make this important tradition more attractive for young people.

Cheese production from sheep milk and adversities with the sheep cheese Oscypek

As already mentioned, cheese production in the Tatra region dates back to the 15th century. The manufacturing procedure of Oscypek cheese and its associated produce is specified by traditional and not written rules kept invariable for over 500 years.

Oscypek cheese gained popularity and acknowledgement at the end of the 19th century when Zakopane came into vogue, becoming one of the major symbols of the region.

Unfortunately, its popularity prompted the production of many counterfeits in the local market with cow's milk being added or without sheep milk at all, where the smoking process was replaced by soaking in coffee or tea (www.nt.nowotarski.pl). To protect Oscypek's reknown name before the Patent Office the concerning protection laws and trademark of Oscypek and associated products, like Bundz (cottage cheese type) and Zentyca (whey) was consigned (<http://www.slowfood.pl>).

In 2003, Oscypek, Bundz and Zentyca obtained the national brand of origin. The certification made it possible to sell these products from raw sheep milk in the official retail networks, otherwise impossible. The quality standards for the original Oscypek has also been defined. The fat content in dry matter should be about 31% on average, the shape of spindle, cylindrical middle of 6-10 cm in diameter with characteristic convexed and conceived patterns. The Oscypek's coating should be smooth, elastic, with colour ranging from light yellow to brown. The taste and smell of smoking – spicy alternatively a little salty. The flash resilient, slightly soft, slightly firm, slightly crispy (www.slowfood.pl, Drozd, 2001).

In order to increase the promotion, the Oscypek was the only one product from Poland showed at the Slow Food "Hall of Taste" ("Salone del Gusto") in 2003.

When Poland joined the European Union the national mark of origin for Oscypek expired. Moreover, the Slovaks, which at the other side of the Tatra Mountains produce sheep cheese with an identical method applied for the rights for this designation.

At present, the certification for Oscypek has not been obtained. The simplification of registration procedures for regional products by the European Commission (from April 2006) and the negotiations taking place with Slovak's government are doing well towards solving the troublesome situation.

The registration of the protected produce may raise the prestige and price, and it may enable differentiation on the market and may boost the attractiveness of the region. As a matter of fact, almost all tourists who visit Zakopane buy Oscypek. That is why the PDO registration is such a crucial factor.

Conclusion

The Oscypek cheese is one of the best known and popular regional produce in Poland. Its reputation should produce profits for the local system of production, which has been able to maintain the long-standing traditions of sheep grazing and manufacturing sheep milk produces. The system of protection and promotion of regional and traditional products is one of the most important factors influencing a sustainable development of rural areas. It contributes to reach employment differentiation in the rural areas by creating non-agrarian earning sources and increasing farmers' profits.

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