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Zgodbe z obrobja

The article analyses the memories published in the collection *The way we lived - life stories of Carinthian Slovenes 1-5* (Klagenfurt 1993-1997). The author dedicates special attention to the sexual and spatial division of labour, pregnancy, delivery, pregnant women`s work, motherhood, children, child care and sexual education. These themes are, however, not discussed in the symbolical language of beliefs, traditions and customs, but in the actual language of the contemporary living conditions.

Summary

Stories from the fringes: the role of Carinthian countryside women in the first half of the 20th century

The article starts with an analysis of the ideas and memories about the role of people in different working conditions and about the division of labour between sexes. Women`s labour in Carinthia was carried out predominantly on private premises, while men`s labour mainly took place in public. Under the influence of the increasing mechanisation the ideal of peasant work started to change in the late 20th century and it was then that a re-evaluation of this ideal began.

As late as the second third of the 20th century women used to bear children until the end of their reproductive cycle and they did not practice family planning; the birth rate was correspondingly high. After the Second World War family planning made the birth rate drop. Every birth used to be accompanied by traditions, customs and beliefs, but the present-day narrators consider them to be obsolete. Their life stories mainly present the actual living conditions in relation to the work carried out by pregnant women, to giving birth at home with the assistance of members of the family and midwives, and to the infant mortality rate. The

stories about birth-giving shed light on the typical mentality of the period, the views of women on life, and child bearing. The women did not engage in family planning or pregnancy prevention because every new life was sacred as it was given by God. Most women continued to bear children until the end of their reproductive cycle. The role of men at the time of the delivery was quite marginal until the 1950s and their only responsibility was to get a midwife. After the birth only few men helped in child care or in the household chores. These were usually carried out by the young mother's mother, her adult daughters, relatives or neighbours.

Women gave birth at home. Hospitals were too remote and in the case of normal births women also considered it unnecessary to go to a hospital. The postnatal rest period was determined economically and socially. Though midwives recommended eight days of bed rest after giving birth, this was something only women belonging to medium-size and large properties were able to observe. Other women used to get up again the second day after giving birth as they were irreplaceable for the everyday jobs. Women who had a difficult delivery or who gave birth to twins stayed in bed a few more days. The ideal of a strong, courageous, hardworking, and efficient peasant woman demanded that she gave birth at home and - as if on the side - performed all necessary jobs because she differed from the ideal housewife of the middle classes, who was supposed to be physically weak, passive, delicate and emotional.

There was no sexual education in the true meaning of the concept, but there was religious education full of prohibitions and rules regarding chastity, purity, virginity and the like. Adults hid from their children their knowledge of sexuality, pregnancy and child bearing, and adolescents therefore got such information from their peers. Most girls were (kept) so ignorant that they were shocked by their first period and did not tell anybody about it, since even naming the phenomenon was deemed indecent. Most women had no knowledge of sanitary towels and most peasant and working class girls used cloths or pieces of torn sheets and washed them. The knowledge about health, reproduction and birth control was of key significance for motivation and for controlling the size of a family. Women acquired this kind of knowledge during their childhood, either from their parents or at school, during adolescence at work, and during their further education either at home or, after r marrying, from their husbands, friends, relatives, and doctors.

The narrators felt that their sexual ignorance when they were young was wrong and harmful, but they also had scruples about today's liberal education, cohabitation before marriage, the process of girls and women asserting themselves in social life, and the emancipation of children.

Sexual education met with much more opposition than any other kind of education. It was influenced by economic factors, in particular the standard of living, social factors including schools, contacts with towns, and by spiritual factors which were however mainly connected with religion and the Church. The interaction of the body, society and an individual's identity was based on cultural ideas, expectations and requirements, and much less a result of biological differences. The impact of the patriarchal, religion-based Carinthian society was such that it was very hard for women to achieve positions and opportunities that were self-evident to men. Socialisation as seen through sexual education remained traditional for a very long time into the latter half of the 20th century. The young women of Carinthia started to free themselves consciously from the constraints of a woman's traditional role as a social imperative as late as the mid 1970s.

Links

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