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“Respect thy father and thy mother in old age” – on the social determinants of the (in) presence of old age in the space of the Polish family. Reminiscences of representatives of the Baby Boomers generation

Old age is a life stage that is very often analyzed in the context of losses and the many difficulties that an elderly person must face. Dependence or reliance inherent for many seniors make their successful daily functioning require third-party support. Socio-cultural or legal rationales allow us to expect that help for dependent seniors will be provided by the family. However, the reality around us verifies this belief often to the disadvantage of the family environment. Moreover, it turns out that the opinion on the (in)presence of old age in the space of the Polish family, significantly depends on the generational affiliation of those who make an assessment of the state of affairs. This is due, among other things, to the social conditions and the axionormative system in which the socialization process of the representatives of each generation took place.

The submitted article discusses the reminiscences of representatives of the generation of post-war Baby Boomers, i.e. people born between 1946 and 1964. Experiencing childhood and the years of early adolescence in the conditions of the Polish People's Republic, including attachment to the family and religious values of Polish society at the time, are circumstances that cannot be ignored, determining the views of people growing up at the time.

Based on qualitative research conducted in 2022, the text will discuss the recollections of women and men of the Baby Boomers generation regarding old age in the family space during their childhood, as well as opinions on contemporary trends. The author's intention is to convince the reader that religion's function of providing and sustaining a sense of meaning and purpose in existence, especially under the harsh reality of communist times, was not

without influence on the identity and attitudes of the Baby Boomers generation growing up at the time.

Key words: the elderly, Baby Boomers, the church history, family, aging population.

Introduction

Old age is a natural phase of life that follows adulthood. It is an inevitable consequence of the aging process occurring biologically, psychologically and socially. The commonly accepted beginning of old age is 60 or 65 years of age, which is characterized by a gradual imbalance in the daily functioning of the human body due to changes occurring synergistically¹. And while this is a mechanism of inevitable evolutionary progress, medical developments and a steadily improving quality of life have made it possible to delay the effects of progressive aging processes. Therefore, old age, which used to be the privilege of the few, is now shared by the majority. This becomes evident when, among other things, the statistical data showing the structure of our country's population is analyzed.

From the information included in reports prepared after the 2021 National Population and Housing Census, we learn that people in the post-working age group now account for 22.3% of Poland's population, an increase of 5.4% over data from a decade ago. Thus, today, more than every 5th Pole or Polish woman is a person aged 60 or older². The deepening process of demographic aging of Poland's population entails piling up challenges observed at many macro and micro levels. A key issue is the liquidity of the Social Insurance Institution, which is responsible for paying pension benefits. Their amount is reflected in the quality of life of seniors, their health condition, access to medical services or other necessary benefits. The increasing longevity of the elderly is also not indifferent to the functioning of the family, and the widespread presence of grandmothers and grandfathers is transforming its structure. “Today, it is becoming typical to have a “pole-like structure”, which is marked by the proliferation of vertical relationships – between close relatives in successive generations, with

¹ A.A. Zych, *Leksykon gerontologii*, Kraków 2019, p. 165.

² *National Census of Population and Housing 2021. Report on preliminary results*, Warszawa 2022, p. 25.

a concomitant impoverishment of horizontal relationships (between peers) in the wake of declining fertility rates”³.

The increase in the number of aging and old people in relation to the young, heightens concerns about providing the dependent oldest family members with the necessary care and support. This concern is justified, especially if we take into account the overlapping processes weakening the condition of the family. These include, in addition to declining fertility rates, the economic crisis exacerbating the economic migration of the young, the atomization of family life, bonding and attachment crises, anomie of authority figures or a crisis of values. All of them cumulatively impact the traditional family model. In addition, the plural lifestyles of today’s young generations make it increasingly easy for them to decide to be single, to cohabit or to divorce, which is also not without its impact on the functionality of the family. While a certain percentage of seniors today struggles with a lack of funding for health care and social assistance benefits, the state’s helplessness and the increasing inefficiency of the family in its caregiving function, these difficulties are more likely to become more common in future highly individualized generations. Thus, seniors’ fear of being left alone seems justified, and the question resonates in the mind of many of them: Who will take care of me in the final period of life?⁴ The dilemmas in question are in the category of those extremely difficult to solve, because they are rooted in social changes and the transformation of the axionormative order of our society.

The transformation of the Polish state initiated by the events of 1989, resulted, on the one hand, in the democratization of the political system, the introduction of the free market and a series of economic reforms, and, on the other hand, in a change of social mentality and the principles of social coexistence, which from the perspective of nearly 35 years of the new order is evident. The objective assessment of the consequences of the changing profile of Polish society is being carried out by sociologists or historians. However, the individual level is no less important. In this text, the perspective of those born between 1946 and 1964, who are referred to in the subject literature as the Baby Boomers generation, will be examined. The period of the boomers’ childhood and early adulthood took place under the conditions of the Polish People’s Republic (PRL), so the normative order in which their socialization process took place differed significantly from

³ A. Błachnio, *Starość w rodzinie. Opieka nad seniorem wyzwaniem dla dorosłego dziecka czy państwa?*, “Wychowanie w Rodzinie” 2016, vol. XIII, p. 442.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 443.

the current one. This is reflected in the way specific social issues are perceived, including the challenges generated by the progressive aging of the Polish population. It should be noted that since 2006 boomers have been gradually entering retirement age, therefore, firstly, it is reasonable to refer to them as seniors or people on the verge of old age⁵, and secondly, they are familiar with considerations of old age in the environment of the modern family.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the theme of the (non)existence of old age in the family environment based on the results of a survey of people from the post-war Baby Boomer generation. The text will present the recollections of women and men from the Baby Boomers generation regarding old age in their childhood family environment and their opinions on the contemporary trends. The author's intention is to trace the reconstruction of the Polish family as a space in which the last stage of a person's life takes place. While conducting an in-depth analysis of the narratives of interviewees from the Baby Boomers generation, special attention will be given to the numerous social conditions of the interviewees' childhood period (the times of the Polish People's Republic) and contemporary times, which not only affect their attitudes and expressed views, but also constitute an important source of information about the direction and nature of changes, including those concerning the axionormative order, which are occurring within our society.

In order to properly understand the collected content, there is a need to initially sort out the key *differentia specifica* characterizing Polish Baby Boomers and the time of their childhood, so that the interpretation of the stance taken by them towards the subject of this study becomes transparent.

Childhood and youth of the Polish generation of Baby Boomers

Barbara Szatur-Jarowska, having thoroughly analyzed the social biography of Polish boomers, explains that the Baby Boom generation was a compensatory boom occurring in various countries around the world which experienced population losses and/or slowed down population dynamics as a result of World War II⁶. The worldwide crisis

⁵ The Baby Boomers generation includes people who are between 58 and 76 years old today.

⁶ B. Szatur-Jaworska, *Polska polityka społeczna wobec starzenia się ludności w latach*, Warszawa 2016, p. 365.

forced the postponement of marriages and procreation decisions. Yet, the first post-war decade was already characterized by a growing share of children (0-14 years old) maintained in Poland roughly until 1955. The process of “rejuvenating” the population at the base of the age pyramid continued with its inherent dynamics and fluctuations caused by the cohort effect until 1969, when there was a change in the trend toward a sharp decline in the birth rate⁷. Then, what is characteristic of the generation born just after World War II?

B. Szatur-Jaworska's studies show that most of the children belonging to the Polish Baby Boom were born in the countryside, in families with many children, which is an exemplification of the then dominant model of the traditional family (often identified with rurality). Its popularization, *nota bene*, was influenced by the teaching of the Catholic Church, including the program of upbringing in the family contained in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council and postconciliar documents⁸. The qualities of the Catholic family (in opposition to the secular model of relationship) were repeatedly emphasized by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński in his letters and homilies, who argued that the family is, on the one hand, a community called by God, and on the other hand, co-creates the nation which is a “community of families” because “What families will be like, such will the Nation be like”⁹ – Wyszyński wrote. He also added, “When families are compact, faithful, indissoluble – the Nation will not be destroyed by anyone”¹⁰. John Paul II preached similarly in *Familiaris consortio* when he reminded that one of the tasks of the family is the affirmation of life, including the formation of attitudes of respect for life and its protection from the moment of conception until natural death, which, among other things, requires the adherence to the principles of the Ten Commandments¹¹. The perception of the family as an ally of the church in the religious upbringing of the younger generation¹² and an environment that is friendly to each of its members resulted in the fact

⁷ Z. Szweda-Lewandowska, *Pokolenie powojennego wyżu demograficznego i echa wyżu demograficznego (Baby Boomers i Pokolenie Y) – perspektywa starości*, “Polityka Społeczna” 2014, nr 5-6, pp. 18-21.

⁸ S. Smoleński, *Wychowanie w rodzinie jako przygotowanie do odpowiedzialnego podjęcia powołania chrześcijańskiego*, in: *Wychowanie w rodzinie chrześcijańskiej*, ed. Z. Tyszką, Kraków 1982, p. 73.

⁹ S. Wyszyński, *Listy pasterskie Prymasa Polski 1946-1974*, Paris 1975), pp. 185-186.

¹⁰ S. Wyszyński, *Wielka Nowenna Tysiąclecia*, Paris 1962, p. 48.

¹¹ Jan Paweł II, *Encyklika Evangelium vitae*, 1981, 49.

¹² Z. Tyszką, *Socjologia rodziny*, Warszawa 1979, p. 121.

that the family life in the Polish People's Republic was described in the subject literature as a safe space, protecting the individual from the external, not very friendly social reality¹³. It is no surprise then, that family values are of paramount importance for the representatives of the Baby Boomers generation¹⁴. Furthermore, families in which Polish boomers were raised often experienced poverty, poor housing conditions (overcrowding, low housing standards), as well as difficulties in buying basic goods. Another typical feature of the 1950s and 1960s was the rising wave of internal migration from the countryside to the city, following the country's intensive industrialization under the socialist development program¹⁵. This had consequences for the course of childhood and adolescence of the children of the post-war Baby Boom generation. Those included an increase in women's labor force participation (e.g., between 1961 and 1970, the number of women working in the socialized economy outside agriculture and forestry increased by about 50%), many of whom were the mothers of children from the Baby Boom generation¹⁶. Employment provided those women with an income, the opportunity to enjoy a whole package of social benefits, such as child care, the availability of housing, and trips to vacations organized by the workplace for families or children. Professional active mothers also contributed to the increased assignment of household duties to children as a form of support for working parents. Such an arrangement represented a significant challenge for both adults and children. However, its positive consequence was the formation in the young generation of a sense of responsibility, diligence and perseverance in achieving their goals¹⁷.

The identity formation and civic maturing of Polish Boomers fell during a period of social and political enslavement and stagnation. Struggling with a hostile system and a culture imposing ossified rules, while seeking asylum and an alternative culture, in the formation of which religious values and the activity of the Catholic Church played

¹³ A. Giza-Poleszczuk, M. Sikorska, *Współczesne społeczeństwo polskie*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 201-202; B. Klich-Kuczevska, *Rodzina, tabu i komunizm w Polsce 1956-1989*, Kraków 2015, pp. 54-61.

¹⁴ W. Wątroba, *Transgresje międzypokoleniowe późnego kapitalizmu*, Wrocław 2017, pp. 94-99.

¹⁵ B. Szatur-Jaworska, *Socjalna biografia polskich Baby Boomersów, czyli jak polityka społeczna kształtowała bieg życia tego pokolenia*, "Polityka Społeczna" 2018, nr 9, p. 2-3.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ W. Wątroba, *Pokolenia w społeczeństwach postkapitalistycznych*, Wrocław 2022, pp. 58-60.

a significant role, are, in addition to other social conditions specific for the 1950s and 1960s, an important foundation for the attitudes and values internalized by people growing up during that time. Young boomers grew up in a society of well-established moral and patriotic values, which, among other things, was a consequence of the family's realization of the fundamental and dominant role in the process of transmitting values essential to the preservation of national identity, as well as the church's role as a moral authority in a state of communist lawlessness, including the clergy's upholding of Poles' hopes and resistance to totalitarian power. Thus, there is no doubt that the socio-political conditions in which the socialization process of the post-war Baby Boom generation occurred were not easy. Yet it should also be mentioned that the foundations of a person's identity, especially those built within the primary group, which is family, can be seen in the course of a person's entire life.

Research Methodology

The content submitted in this paper is the empirical material obtained in the qualitative research conducted between January and April 2022. Representatives of four generations were invited to participate in the interviews, whose typology was adopted after Wiesław Wątroba who established the division into the Traditionalist generation (those born between 1918 and 1945)¹⁸, the Baby Boomers generation (those born between 1946 and 1964)¹⁹, Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1980)²⁰ and Generation Y (those born between 1981 and 1995)²¹. The selection of the sample was purposeful, and its criterion, in addition to belonging to the selected generation, was the gender and place of residence of the respondents (city/village). Sixteen representatives of each generation took part in the interviews, taking into account the assumption that each generation should be represented

¹⁸ The Traditionalist Generation are narrators who were 77 and older at the time of the survey.

¹⁹ This group of respondents included people who were (at the time of the survey) between the ages of 58 and 76.

²⁰ Generation X are narrators aged 42-57.

²¹ This group of narrators included people who were 27-41 years old at the time of the survey.

by 8 women and 8 men, 8 city residents²² and 8 village residents²³. In total, 64 interviews were conducted. The study used an unstructured interview technique with a standardized list of information sought²⁴. The research topics addressed the issue of old age and the elderly as remembered by the narrators from their childhood, as well as their views on modern old age and today’s senior citizen.

The content of the paper will only cover the answers of one of the studied generations, the Baby Boomers generation, regarding old age in the family environment in the past and now.

The manifestations of the presence of old age in the family environment during the childhood of the Baby Boomers generation

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One of the first questions addressing the issue of old age in the family environment was: *Was there room/space for old age in the family when you were a child?* On hearing it, interviewees gave a positive answer without a moment’s hesitation, arguing that experiencing old age in a family environment was the natural and obvious course of things. This is how one woman described it,

It was very natural. Elderly people, we looked after them. I mean, in my opinion, I didn’t experience it, but I remember that the family was obliged to take care of such a person. And it was such an obligation. Absolutely there was no question of some kind of placement of the elderly in some institutions. There was no question of any other solution. Neighborhood ties were wonderful at that time. It was such a phenomenon of those times. In general, people used to be closer to each other. And this older person, the fact that they had lived through so much, experienced so much, that they were the oldest in the family. This respect for age was great (w, 71 y, CITY)²⁵.

This is the recollection of another interviewee,

²² The city from which the respondents came was Białystok, the capital of the Podlaskie Voivodeship.

²³ The villagers lived in suburban villages (Nowodworce, Porosły) – located no more than 10 km from Białystok, and the village of Trzcianne 60 km from Białystok, where the Author of the research grew up.

²⁴ K. Konecki, *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych. Teoria ugruntowana*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 169-170.

²⁵ Designations used in brackets mean: W – woman, M – man, the next provided information is the age of the interviewee, followed by his place of residence.

Previously, families were multigenerational. There was a grandmother, there was a grandfather, there were parents, there were children. And this grandfather and grandmother lived until death in the family. That was then. And now it has completely changed and it's different (w, 74 Y, CITY).

The multigenerational nature of families was pointed out by another woman as well,

This old age, there were multigenerational families and everyone would take care of parents or an aunt or someone close to them, because there was place for that. And they were looked after until the end of their lives. There were no nursing homes, no social welfare, and, well, the elderly were respected. You came across elderly people every day, you lived with them, you grew up with them from generation to generation, well... People had time for the elderly and for themselves and it was possible to deal with everything. It was possible to arrange it (w, 76 Y, VILLAGE).

The times reported by the woman are probably the 1950s, as the interviewee was born in 1946. It was certainly a time in Polish history that was one of those uneasy moments, as rebuilding the country from the ruins of war posed an enormous challenge. And yet, "everything could be arranged," as the narrator said. It cannot be ruled out that the axionormative system specific to the time, which was reported in more than one scholarly study²⁶, may have provided an important framework for the behavior of Poles and Polish women of the boomers' childhood. The nature of this condition was pointed out by two interviewees. One of them stated, "Of course there was room for old age. As I said, in my opinion it was also a matter of faith" (M, 70 Y, VILLAGE). A slightly younger narrator explained,

Well religiosity very much here had an impact on those people. In this village, everyone went to church. Really everyone! Unless someone was already bedridden or could not make it. I was an altar boy, so I could see where everyone was sitting. I emphasize the religious aspect strongly, because it, as far as the village was concerned, was of great importance. The religious aspect I strongly, strongly emphasize it, because it very much tied everyone together. And thanks to that, there was place for those grandfathers and grandmothers. It was very important back then! (M, 59 Y, CITY).

²⁶ F. Adamski, *Modele małżeństwa i rodziny a kultura masowa*, Warszawa 1970; L. Dyczewski, *Więź pokoleń w rodzinie*, Warszawa 1976; Z. Tyska, *Rodziny współczesne w Polsce*, Warszawa 1982; J. Mariański, *Wychowanie moralne w rodzinie*, "Homo Dei. Przegląd Ascetyczno-Duszpasterski" 1982, 51 (2), pp. 120-128.

Looking after the elderly by family members was also caused by the particular financial situation of seniors at the time. As we know from the aforementioned characteristics of Polish Boomers, most of them spent their childhood in the countryside. The key date for those living in this community was 1975 when farmers became beneficiaries of the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund, which allowed them to gain financial independence and improve their life. However, until the mid-1970s, the social and economic status of seniors was not so obvious. This was mentioned by the respondents.

Well, in any case, there was certainly a dependency – one man recounted – because if someone did not have a source of income at all, well, they were indeed dependent on the children. But families, so to speak, treated supporting the elderly the same way they the treated raising children. To me it seems it was an obligation. This is the way it was (M, 75 Y, CITY).

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The issue of dependence was also pointed out by another interviewee,

This was not felt at all, this dependence. Children’s duty was to look after their parents until their death, whoever was at home, it was a duty. This was not disputable. It was a natural thing, it was natural. Maybe it was when these agricultural pensions appeared and it was just these pensions in ‘75 that divided families. Because that already old grandfather or grandmother started to have money. And these grandchildren were already looking how to get some money from grandma or grandpa when they didn’t give anything. And that’s what started to divide families (M, 67 Y, CITY).

The issue of introducing agricultural pensions was viewed in various ways by the respondents. Several people, like the man quoted above, saw more downsides than upsides of this solution. However, the majority was those who mainly mentioned the benefits of it. The case is similar with looking after the elderly in the family. Besides the above-quoted positive opinions about the practice, there was also such a statement,

Yes, it was maintenance of sorts. And that, in my opinion, was not nice. It looked wrong. I don’t know what these people felt, because I didn’t talk to them. I didn’t ask, because I was even too young for that. But it looked very bad, so sad, unnecessary. Those people seemed withdrawn and as if they were living without any purpose. They were just there, nothing more (W, 60 Y, CITY).

It is significant that only one person expressed such an opinion.

Talking about old age in the family environment, the interviewees also signaled the peculiarities of housing conditions specific to the time

of their childhood. War losses, migration or population resettlement, and, on top of that, the compulsory housing management regulated by the communist authorities, or the lack of independent housing and the distant prospects of obtaining it, posed quite a logistic challenge in the organization of daily life²⁷. It appears, however, that according to representatives of the Baby Boomers generation, uncomfortable housing conditions were not considered an obstacle preventing them from taking care of the oldest member of the family. One man observed the old age of his grandparents living in a rural environment and recalled,

In the countryside it happened naturally. It cannot be said that these flats were bigger, because the house where my mother spent her childhood was a tiny hut, and there were 6 of them. But it was natural for an elderly person to be around the family. The elderly stayed at home, the children took care of them. And this used to be normal. Such were the housing conditions back then" (M, 70 Y, CITY).

However, among the respondents there were some who grew up in an urban environment, but still witnessed similar practices. One of the men said,

Using our stairwell as an example – there were, because now I don't know, I think there is only one, there were very many old women here. Who were they? They were either the wife's or husband's mother after whom the children in the city looked after. They brought them from the countryside and took care of them. There used to be these elderly people here, yes, brought in by the children (M, 67 Y, CITY).

Many representatives of the Baby Boomers generation also mentioned that old age in the family environment used to be a natural state, because old people had no alternatives in the form of, for example, the nursing homes that are popular today. Thus, the question of old age in the family resonated in the consciousness of the respondents, directing their thoughts to modern times as well. Consequently, there is a juxtaposition of the childhood years of the representatives of the surveyed generations and the present times. In fact, such a reference to the issues studied was a frequent practice of the interviewees, which can be taken as a natural consequence of the ongoing conversation. That being said, it is a good idea to investigate the interviewees' statements about modern times.

²⁷ A. Giza-Poleszczuk, M. Sikorska, *Współczesne społeczeństwo polskie...*, p. 201.

Absence of old age in the contemporary family environment and its determinants

People belonging to the post-war Baby Boom generation took a critical stance on the question of the fate of modern old age. With little hesitation, the majority recognized that there is no place for old age in the family today. This is how the narrators argued these points,

There is no place. As long as there is a person who, so to speak, causes trouble in the family, then what is done is put such a person in the circle of older people, that is, in institutions. I know such cases (w, 71 y, CITY).

Another interviewee shared a similar observation, as they said that the family situation becomes more complicated when the illnesses and weakness typical for the final phase of a person's life occur.

This is such a difficult question. – explained a woman – It seems to me that it is much easier find a place in the family for an elderly person who is healthy and is able to help the family. Such a person devotes 100% of their time to the family. If a person is already ailing, however, they kind of mess up the family, this is my impression. I've seen this. And then the family usually tries to put such a senior citizen in some kind of nursing home, at least in most cases they want to. It's a burden and they want to get rid of it. I know such cases (w, 60 y, CITY).

There is a similar comment from a slightly older representative of the Baby Boomers' generation,

Now, well, whatever happens, they seek social care and a nursing home somewhere, because work, because they have their own children, because they have many responsibilities and then there's no time for the elderly. If the elderly are able to function on their own, then it's not so bad and children accept to look after them. But if an illness strikes and they need round-the-clock care, well, then there is no space for old age in the family. It used to be that in the West, in the States, they didn't keep the elderly at home, they just handed them over to social care and so on. In our country, when you were 20-30 years old, it was unacceptable. Well today it has already become the norm (M, 75 y, CITY).

The man's pertinent observations are an indication of the family model that was spreading in Western societies (in the 1960s and 1970s), which was characterized by the individualism of its members in which the welfare of the individual is placed above the common interest. This has obvious consequences especially for the situation of dependent people, including the elderly. Social changes initiated by the 1989 transformation contributed to the fact that the model of the Polish family is gradually shifting towards the individualism of its members.

Besides the growing popularity of nursing homes, the narrators also recognized other threats of modern times. One woman said,

In a busy world, where they both work and, the mother, the grandmother, stays home alone all day and is not taken care of in any way (...) because they are not able to secure care, nannies, nurses, and it doesn't at all necessarily flow from the fact that they don't want to. Sometimes it's just the way things are. On the other hand, if someone does this, and you hear, I've heard this situation many times, that it's Christmas time, Easter, or God forbid the vacations, and just like a pet is left in the woods, a parent is left in the hospital, at least for this period, well, I am outraged. Well I think it all depends on what is here, in the heart. Such a thing is unimaginable for me (w, 63 Y, VILLAGE).

The quoted woman's outrage was not an isolated incident. Another interlocutor, who works as an ambulance paramedic, recounted,

Today, old age in the family is that they will call an ambulance because they want to send either the father or the mother, not to mention the grandparents, to the hospital. And do you know why? Because they're flying on vacation. These situations happen. They really do. Often, really often (M, 56 Y, VILLAGE).

The placement of an elderly person in a nursing home or hospital seems to be a final and very tough solution. The respondents' narratives also named other insights suggesting that the list of evidence for the absence of old age in the modern family is longer than those aspects already mentioned. One woman said,

Old people's homes, I think that's mostly what old age looks like today. I can't imagine such old age, such an existence. (...) For now I don't think about it and I'm afraid, afraid. (...) Well I'm afraid, because today you know the youth, the younger generation, as well as my children, well I know they have to work and just, I don't know sacrifice like people used to? Is it possible? Well people used to be able to devote themselves more to that sick person at home, that elderly person. Today people have concerns whether they will be able to do that, because simply the work situation is changing and all that. There is no such certainty today that someone will take care of you. We don't know whether someone will do it with eagerness. But should we burden children so much again? Well, children, you know, would come and bring the groceries, maybe clean the apartment. And they would go to their own place. After all, they wouldn't be here with you 24 hours a day (w, 65 Y, CITY).

The woman's thoughts are, on the one hand, an indication of uncertainty about the possibility of experiencing today's old age with loved ones, and on the other hand, the final part of her statement mentions

elderly people living alone. This was pointed out by another respondent as well, who described the implications more broadly.

There is no, I think, there is no place – she said – I mean, I know that if we needed it, the children would help us. But, unfortunately, we don’t live together, so a little bit has changed. It seems as if there is a distance between the youth and their parents. What I mean by that is that in the past the young also had their own families, but the families were multigenerational, there were grandparents and they lived together with the young. I even now notice elderly people that are alone in our residential area. Sons and daughters come to visit, they even hired someone to take care of their parents, because they care, but still the seniors are alone. There is no one to be at home, only children come and go. There are a lot of seniors who are alone. This is somewhat the result of younger generation’s need of comfort. Unfortunately, there are no multigenerational families as there used to. Now if the parents need it, surely these young people will help, but the thing is that at home there are no grandchildren, no children. Now. We say now. It used to be different, living together was good (w, 74 y, CITY).

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Both interviewees mentioned different generations living together, which is one of the components of the old age in the family environment. An in-depth examination of this issue will be made, as it has been reported in different ways.

Living separately is a convenient solution, which allows people use the space as they desire and guarantees quiet. The living together of many generations, in turn, requires a reciprocal effort by the younger and older generations to develop rules of harmonious coexistence. Thus, as long as there is willingness to compromise between household members, it is a good practice. Nevertheless, this dependency element is a not insignificant condition in this regard. This is how one of the men described it,

In my opinion, living together is more beneficial provided that there is an understanding between the residents. Because if it was only to aggravate the situation, well... I think you would have to decide from an early age to live together because moving in together at an older age is rather pointless. Everyone wants to become independent, everyone wants to have their own way, and it simply creates more conflicts. That is why you need to think ahead. For example, at the time when a son or daughter start his or her own family, then they should already start to live together with their parents, so that they learn what it means to do that (m, 75 y, CITY).

The narrator’s deliberations provide an interesting contribution to the discussion expressing the desired state and/or the ideal state.

However, the reality is sometimes quite different. People from the Baby Boomers generation unanimously expressed the opinion that multigenerational households are rare today,

In the neighborhood, not counting us of course, because the children don't live with us, I don't see any families with many generations living together – one of the men explained – and we have practically no such acquaintances, we don't (M, 67 Y, CITY).

Another opinion,

These multigenerational homes have become, in my opinion, much rarer. I guess it still depends on the illnesses, too. Well, let's not hide the fact that if someone who is older than seventy or even nearing eighty, then these illnesses might mean, for example, Alzheimer's, which can be unpleasant and burdensome, especially if these earlier generation also continue to work. Probably many people, here I do not want to make excuses for anyone, do not have, let me put it this way, necessary conditions to offer to take care of an elderly person (M, 70 Y, VILLAGE).

Thus, in addition to the health ailments mentioned by the interviewee, the housing conditions of potential caregivers of the elderly are also important. The narrators from the post-war Baby Boomer generation also raised the issue of the younger generations becoming independent quickly, while one person mentioned the situation of joint intergenerational sharing of living space against the will of the oldest tenant. These are examples of statements illustrating both approaches.

Today, well it's different, people mostly want to live separately, because we want different things and they want different things. If they have the conditions to do so, of course, because it's necessary to have conditions to somehow secure this grandmother or grandfather who live separately. As long as the grandmother or grandfather are alive, they are still able to function on their own, then they decide to live separately, because they want to have their own life. And that's good in a way. Everyone has time to do the things need or want (W, 63 Y, VILLAGE).

Another opinion,

Today old age, I know, is associated with loneliness. Because everyone wants to be independent from a young age, and later this independence stays with them. Then, when they are elderly they start to complain that there is no one to talk to, as there no people close to you, because everyone is busy with their own affairs (M, 75 Y, CITY).

That man's statement makes one realize that people shape the look of their old age throughout their whole life. These are reflections of another representative of the Baby Boomers generation, in which

between the lines one can notice nostalgia for the disappearing model of multigenerational homes,

Now the young want to be independent. They cut themselves off from their family, well they don't do it literally, but they want to have their own apartment, they want to be alone with their wife, with their children. I, for one, believe that many elderly people are lonely and they need some warmth, some interest from loved ones. And they are far away. Some even had to go abroad to make a living, they're out there in the world somewhere. Then, this mother will only hear the voice of those grandchildren of hers, her daughter or son on the phone even if they are here in Poland too. The young are distancing from their parents (w, 74 y, CITY).

Although there are times when the opposite is true as well. One woman reported the following situation,

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Among my neighbors I have a friend who lives on the fourth floor. A person just like me, single. She has an educated daughter. Her son-in-law is also educated, he was a pilot. And so to speak, they moved in to her without her consent. And they rule her in such a way that when she comes to me, she says, *You don't say anything to me, I'll just sit at your place.* I say, *Dorothy, why do they treat you like this? The daughter for whom you would give your life.* Because really she washes, cooks, runs to get groceries, even though she has a serious heart disease. I say, *Why does she treat you like this?* She says, *I don't know.* And you can't help her. Because what do you tell her? Kick them out? Well, no, because it is clear you will not kick them out, and they won't leave. Sometimes I think to myself: *Dear God, it's good that I live alone.* I can lie down whenever I want, I can get up whenever I want, or I can eat whenever I want. The old age of such people is cruel (w, 77 y, CITY).

Therefore, multigenerational homes are a complex issue, which is not so frequent in modern families. An excellent summary of the circumstances of this state of affairs is the following comment from one of the interviewees,

Many generations living together in a house is rare today, and what is the reason for this? Firstly, it is due to changing customs. Children leave home quickly, they become independent fast. Even if there are housing conditions, there is a large house, it is often the case that the young quickly move out, they do not want to live together with their parents. They think that as long as there is no need to take care of an elderly person, an elderly parent, there is no point in living together. Today the world is completely different, because consumerism is everywhere. It is a completely different world. But the fact that parents and children live separately does not necessarily mean that the ties are

weak. Sometimes this house is the center of the family. Yet, there are also times when these elderly people, very often till the very end, try to be independent in order not to burden their loved ones with the need to care for them. Thus, the issues of upbringing and relationships in the family are important in this case. Thirdly, the housing conditions also play a role in determining whether many generations decide to live together or not (M, 70 Y, CITY).

The content presented raises a reflection as to the ambiguous position of the interviewees on the topic of generations living together. The presented responses lead to a reflection that the interviewees have an ambiguous attitude towards multigenerational living together. Although many seniors recognize the advantages of this phenomenon known in the subject literature as singularization of old age (elderly living alone)²⁸, the tone of some seniors' statements expresses sadness at the decreasing prevalence of such a state of affairs.

Conclusion

The image of dignified old age, established on the pages of scientific literature, customs, or in the memoirs of representatives of the Baby Boomers generation, manifested in the fact that the elderly naturally fit into the space of the daily functioning of the family, while being the transmitters of traditions, norms and values in the spirit of which the younger generations are socialized, teaching the prayer or telling about the war times, is gradually weakening in the space of Polish families²⁹. However, it is also true that nowadays the profile of old age in the family environment is more a matter of choice than of fate, which was common in the childhood times reported by the interviewed Boomers. Society-wide changes cannot be stopped, but it is possible to make an effort to accommodate to them.

The opinions expressed by representatives of the Baby Boomers generation concerning the absence of old age in the modern family, with nursing homes becoming the main place for old age, are a manifestation of their fear or uncertainty about their future fate. The narrators are aware that the way of experiencing old age in the family environment, rooted in their memories, is increasingly unrealistic, and

²⁸ P. Błędowski, *Starzenie się jako problem społeczny. Perspektywy demograficznego starzenia się ludności Polski do roku 2035*, in: *Aspekty medyczne, psychologiczne, socjologiczne i ekonomiczne starzenia się ludzi w Polsce*, eds. M. Mossakowska, A. Więcek, P. Błędowski, Poznań 2012), p. 17.

²⁹ M. Marody et al., *Spółeczeństwo na zakręcie. Zmiany postaw i wartości Polaków w latach 1990–2018*, Warszawa 2019.

this can naturally raise concerns. However, seniors’ opinions about today’s multigenerational living together have not been unanimous. The solution has its supporters and opponents. Thus, what is needed is a wise direction of what old age in the family space can/should look like today. In fact, this is the very choice specific to our times, which is the subject of decisions by both young and older generations. This is because a separate apartment does not at all exclude showing respect to an elderly father or mother, giving them support, necessary assistance, creating space for the presence of grandmothers and grandfathers in the lives of grandchildren, for example, in the role of transmitters of values. However, consensual coexistence requires that seniors also allow younger generations to make choices about the shape of old age in the space of today’s family, and this includes allowing them to implement the “together but apart” model. After all, such a model also fits in with the recommendation that John Paul II made in his letter *To the Elderly*, “The natural environment for experiencing old age remains that in which an elderly person feels «at home», among relatives, acquaintances and friends”³⁰. Moreover, accommodating to today’s reality also requires seniors to decide the “fate” of the image of old age in the family space which is deeply rooted in their memory. It is because one can lament the absence of the vision of old age characteristic to the times of their childhood. However, one can also update this vision, reinterpret it taking into account today’s circumstances.

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