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THE TEACHER IN INTERWAR SOCIETY: PROFESSIONAL MISSION AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES IN THE TERNOPIL VOIVODESHIP (BASED ON THE MATERIALS OF *ECHO NAUCZYCIELSKIE*)

Abstract. The aim of the study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the professional mission of teachers and the socio-economic challenges that shaped their activities in 1921–1939, based on periodical materials, archival sources, and regulatory legal acts. It has been established that the teaching profession in the Ternopil Voivodeship in the interwar period performed much broader functions than those envisaged by the official educational policy of the Second Polish Republic. The teacher acted as not only a transmitter of knowledge, but also as a key agent of socio-economic stabilization in local communities, combining pedagogical, administrative, and civic roles.

It is researched that chronic underfunding of the education sector, along with the transfer of responsibility for school maintenance to communes, led to the emergence of an informal practice of teachers' financial participation in supporting the educational process. This situation effectively transformed the social status of the teacher, turning him into a "community resource", which undermined the material well-being of teachers' families and contributed to professional burnout.

At the same time, despite these difficult conditions, the teaching profession demonstrated a high level of self-organization and civic activism. The activities of the Society for the Support of Public School Construction indicate that teachers were the driving force behind the modernization of school infrastructure, ensuring the implementation of large-scale construction projects through community mobilization mechanisms. The organization of "Public School Weeks", cultural and educational events, and the mobilization of financial resources of the population indicate the effectiveness of grassroots initiatives in overcoming the structural limitations of state policy.

Keywords: Ternopil Voivodeship, teacher, interwar period, schooling, Second Polish Republic.

The interwar period in the Ternopil Voivodeship was marked by complex transformations in the educational sphere, unfolding against the broader backdrop of state-building processes in the Second Polish Republic. During this time, the formation of the system of public education acquired not only administrative and organizational dimensions but also a pronounced socio-cultural significance. The primary school teacher emerged as a key agent of rural modernization, a bearer of state ideology, and at the same time a mediator between the authorities and the local

community. It was through the teacher that the state sought to integrate peripheral regions into the national space, shaping loyal citizens and disseminating educational standards.

At the same time, the official discourse that portrayed the teacher as a “builder of schooling” and a promoter of civilizational progress sharply contrasted with the actual conditions of their professional and everyday life. The economic instability of interwar Poland, exacerbated by the consequences of the Great Depression, led to chronic underfunding of the educational sector. The transfer of a significant share of financial responsibilities to local self-government bodies resulted in a persistent shortage of resources, which directly affected the functioning of schools in the rural areas of the Ternopil region.

Under these circumstances, teachers found themselves burdened with a wide range of responsibilities that extended far beyond their formal professional duties. They assumed the roles of administrators, caretakers, benefactors, and community activists. Insufficient funding compelled educators to compensate for the lack of material resources with their own financial means, effectively transforming them into “economic donors” of the school system. This practice was not incidental but rather a systemic feature of the region’s educational life, shaping a specific model of interaction between the teacher, the community, and the state.

Particular attention should be paid to the everyday practices of teachers, which included financing school repairs, ensuring heating, purchasing teaching materials, and supporting socially disadvantaged students. Within the framework of the social history of education, these phenomena reveal a profound discrepancy between the formally declared functions of the state and their actual implementation at the local level. At the same time, they demonstrate a high level of professional ethics and civic responsibility among teachers, who, despite material hardships, ensured the continuity of the educational process.

Equally significant was the participation of teachers in public initiatives, particularly in the activities of the Society for the Support of Public School Construction, which became a key instrument for the development of school infrastructure. The active engagement of educators in local self-government, cultural and educational fundraising, and community resource mobilization attests to their role as leaders of social change. Through the organization of public events, participation in gmina councils, and the initiation of new school construction projects, teachers effectively assumed functions that, in a modern state, would typically fall within the competence of public authorities.

Thus, the study of the teacher’s role in interwar society in the Ternopil region not only allows for the reconstruction of the professional status and social challenges of this group but also provides deeper insight into the mechanisms of the educational system functioning under conditions of limited resources. The aim of this article is to offer a comprehensive analysis of the professional mission of teachers and the socio-economic challenges that shaped their activities in 1921 – 1939, drawing on periodical materials, archival sources, and normative legal acts.

The reduction of state revenues during the interwar period, combined with the delegation of a significant share of financial responsibilities for maintaining the school network to local self-government bodies (gminas), resulted in a systemic shortage of resources in the field of public education. Consequently, a considerable number of educational institutions operated under conditions of insufficient or virtually absent funding. Under such circumstances, teachers were compelled to compensate for the institutional incapacity of local authorities by assuming the role of informal financial donors to the educational system. This phenomenon was обусловлено, in particular, by the chronic failure of gminas to fulfill their budgetary obligations toward schools. A

widespread practice involved delays in the payment of housing allowances to teachers, with these funds effectively redirected to cover current school expenses, including the purchase of fuel (Nieco o samowystarczalności szkoły, 1934. 10: 401-404). Thus, the maintenance of educational institutions was often carried out at the expense of teachers' personal resources. According to available sources, the scale of private expenditures by teachers on school needs ranged between 100 and 200 zlotys and, as a rule, was not reimbursed (Głosy z terenu kto – i kiedy załatwi tę sprawę?, 1934. 3: 90-91).

An analysis of the source base indicates the presence of significant dysfunctions in school management, manifested in the lack of adequate financial and material-technical support (Głosy z terenu budżet szkolny, 1938. 4–5–6: 67-68). In these conditions, teachers were forced to independently cover a wide range of household and operational expenses necessary for maintaining the functioning of educational institutions. In particular, they financed the repair of school premises, including the purchase of construction materials (such as glass and lime), the restoration of infrastructure (windows, fences), and the implementation of sanitary and hygienic measures. In cases where gminas failed to provide schools with fuel, teachers purchased firewood or coal at their own expense in order to prevent interruptions in the educational process during the winter period. In addition, they incurred costs related to the remuneration of auxiliary staff (notably caretakers) and ensured the provision of essential equipment and maintenance supplies for schools (Sprawy organizacyjne, 1936. 1–2: 25-26).

The absence of stable budgetary allocations for the administrative needs of educational institutions necessitated the financing of office-related expenses from teachers' personal funds. School administrators were required to independently procure paper, ink, writing materials, and postage for official correspondence. Even subscriptions to official publications, such as «Dziennik Urzędowy», were frequently paid for out of the teachers' own pockets (Na marginesie. Zbędni korektorzy, 1934. 6: 252-253).

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the financial involvement of teachers was not limited to meeting the institutional needs of schools but also extended to supporting pupils, especially those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In conditions of insufficient state funding, teachers produced teaching aids and visual materials on their own, investing personal resources in the process (Dlaczego tylko i jedynie nauczyciel jest narażony na różne bolączki z tytułu swojego zawodu?, 1934. 3: 92-93). At the same time, they provided children from low-income families with textbooks, notebooks, and other learning materials (Na marginesie to pono „Nieaktualne“, 1937. 5–6: 152-154.). In certain cases, such assistance assumed a broader social dimension, encompassing the provision of food and clothing, which indicates a transformation of the teacher's role from a purely educational function to a socio-custodial one (Przedruk z broszury Z. N. P: „O właściwy stosunek do pracy nauczyciela“, 1937. 1–2: 1-4).

Thus, the financial and economic activities of teachers in the interwar period extended far beyond their formal professional duties, reflecting both deep structural deficiencies in the functioning of the educational system and a high level of social responsibility within the teaching profession.

In addition to direct expenditures related to maintaining the functioning of educational institutions, teachers bore a significant financial burden associated with their professional and civic engagement. In particular, compulsory forms of professional development—such as training courses, conferences, and other activities aimed at improving qualifications—were largely financed by the teachers themselves (Głosy z terenu, 1934. 4: 149-150). The absence of compensation

mechanisms for travel expenses and per diem allowances indicates the transfer of part of the state's institutional obligations onto employees within the educational sector.

An important component of this financial burden was also the participation of teachers in state and public initiatives. Within the Ternopil Voivodeship, educators actively contributed to fundraising efforts for the National Defence Fund, which entailed regular deductions from their salaries (Kronika, 1937. 3: 58-61).

The cumulative effect of these factors resulted in the systematic physical and moral exhaustion of teachers. Low wages, combined with the necessity to finance both educational and public needs, compelled educators to sacrifice the well-being of their own families. Sources indicate the emergence of a specific social perception of the teacher as a "public resource," whose private time and financial means were regarded as available for collective use (Na marginesie, 1937. 3: 65).

A key mechanism of the civic-driven modernization of educational infrastructure was the participation of teachers in the activities of the Society for the Support of Public School Construction. Teachers functioned as the principal organizational and ideological force of this institution, ensuring its operation largely on the basis of voluntary, unpaid labor. An important tool for resource mobilization consisted of annual campaigns, particularly the "Public School Week," during which fundraising activities were conducted, educational initiatives were promoted, and local populations were encouraged to join the organization (Komunikat Towarzystwa popierania budowy publicznych szkół powszechnych, 1937. 7: 163-165).

The effectiveness of these efforts is evidenced by tangible results: in 1937 alone, within the Ternopil school district, 13 new school buildings comprising 70 classrooms were constructed (Z terenu Podola, 1937. 7: 191-192). The implementation of such projects became possible through the combination of community engagement and the organizational capacity of the teaching profession.

A significant area of teachers' civic activity was the struggle to eliminate the widespread practice of operating schools in unsuitable rented premises, particularly in peasant houses with so-called "zakhata" (straw insulation). Within the Ternopil Voivodeship, more than a quarter of educational facilities were located in conditions that failed to meet basic sanitary and hygienic standards. High humidity, insufficient lighting, and low temperatures posed serious risks to the health of both pupils and teachers (Godło w zahacie, 1937. 3: 41-43).

Teachers actively integrated into local self-government structures, seeking to influence the formation of school budgets and decision-making processes. Securing mandates in gmina councils was perceived as an effective instrument for protecting the interests of the educational sector at the local level.

At the same time, cultural and educational fundraising initiatives played an important role. Teachers organized amateur theatrical performances, choir concerts, festivals, and other events, with the proceeds directed toward the development of educational and cultural infrastructure, including the construction of schools and "People's Houses." A representative example is the construction of a school building in the village of Yablunivka, achieved through the combined efforts of the local community and the initiative of teachers (Uroczystość poświęcenia budynku szkolnego w Jabłonówce WSI, 1934. 9: 383-384).

An additional mechanism for resource mobilization involved proposals to utilize state financial instruments, particularly government bonds of the "National Loan," directing these funds toward the construction of new educational facilities (Głosy z terenu sprawa zużytkowania

obligacji pożyczki narodowej, subskrybowanej przez szkoły, 1934. 8: 329-330). Such initiatives demonstrate a high level of financial awareness and organizational capacity among teachers, who sought to effectively integrate available resources into the development of the educational sphere.

The conducted study provides grounds to assert that the teaching profession in the Ternopil Voivodeship during the interwar period performed significantly broader functions than those envisaged by the official educational policy of the Second Polish Republic. The teacher acted not only as a transmitter of knowledge but also as a key agent of socio-economic stabilization within local communities, combining pedagogical, administrative, and civic roles.

It has been established that chronic underfunding of the educational sector, along with the transfer of responsibility for maintaining schools to gminas, led to the emergence of an informal practice of teachers' financial participation in sustaining the educational process. Expenditures on building maintenance, heating, the procurement of teaching materials, and even the support of pupils from low-income families became an integral component of teachers' professional activities. This situation effectively transformed the social status of the teacher, turning them into a "community resource," which undermined the material well-being of teachers' families and contributed to professional exhaustion.

At the same time, despite these challenging conditions, the teaching profession demonstrated a high level of self-organization and civic engagement. The activities of the Society for the Support of Public School Construction indicate that teachers were the driving force behind the modernization of school infrastructure, ensuring the implementation of large-scale construction projects through mechanisms of community mobilization. The organization of "Public School Weeks," cultural and educational events, and the mobilization of financial resources from the population testify to the effectiveness of grassroots initiatives in overcoming the structural limitations of state policy.

Particular emphasis should be placed on the efforts of teachers to improve learning conditions, especially in combating the widespread practice of operating schools in unsuitable premises. Initiatives aimed at constructing proper school buildings with residential facilities for teachers reflect not only the desire to enhance the quality of education but also to affirm the social dignity of the teaching profession. The participation of educators in local self-government bodies further demonstrates their intention to institutionalize their influence on decision-making processes in the field of education.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the civic initiatives of teachers in the Ternopil region in 1921 – 1939 became a key factor in the functioning and development of the primary education network under conditions of limited resources. Teachers acted not merely as objects of state policy but as active agents of social change who compensated for the deficiencies of the institutional system. The experience of the interwar period demonstrates that the effectiveness of an educational system largely depends on the degree of involvement of the professional community in decision-making processes and its capacity for self-organization. This, in turn, opens перспективи for further research into the social history of the teaching profession as an important factor in modernization processes in Eastern Europe.

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