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**THE VIEWS OF REVEREND EUGENIUSZ OKOŃ
AS PRESENTED AT SEJM USTAWODAWCZY
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Reverend Eugeniusz Okoń (1881–1949) was a clergyman, a popular activist, a press polemist and a defender of the poorest strata of the population, especially the ones living in rural areas. He nicknamed himself a „peasants’ priest”. He was born one of the many children in a peasant family in Radomyśl on the San River (in the Tarnobrzeg district). He became a priest in 1906. Between 1908 and 1912 he studied philosophy and Polish philology at the Jagiellonian University. Initially, he was associated with Narodowa Demokracja [National Democracy]. However, in 1913 he was elected a deputy to Sejm Krajowy Galicyjski [Galicia State Parliament] representing the Kolbuszowa constituency as an independent member of parliament (MP). During that election he was arrested for the first time because of his radical political speeches made at pre-electoral meetings. He was released from the prison in Rzeszów after winning the mandate of a deputy. At the end of WW I, he became involved with the Polish peasant movement. In November of 1918, he and Tomasz Dąbał became leaders of so called Republika Tarnobrzaska [Tarnobrzeg Republic]. On 6 January, in 1919, he was arrested during a pre-electoral meeting at Baranów (in the Mielec district). On 26 of January in 1919, he was elected a deputy to Sejm Ustawodawczy [Constituent Assembly] from an electoral list of PSL-Lewica [Polish Peasant Party-The Left], representing the 44th constituency (i.e. the districts of Tarnobrzeg, Kolbuszowa, Mielec and Nisko) – the peasant party won 5 in 6 mandates available there (for more on the issue see: Rek 1962; Stankiewicz 1978: 698 and ff.). However, Okoń belonged to Klub Poselski PSL Wyzwolenie [Parliamentary Club of the Polish Peasant Party-Liberation] from the start of Sejm Ustawodawczy (SU) until 19 December of 1919 when speaking at SU he declared that he would form his own, radical „peas-

ant group” (cf. Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 19 XII 1919, łam 24). Subsequently, together with T. Dąbal he created Chłopskie Stronnictwo Radykalne [Radical Peasant Party] which published „Jedność Chłopska” [Peasant Unity], a press organ whose lead slogan read: „Żądamy całkowitego wykonania reformy rolnej uchwalonej przez Sejm natychmiast!!” [We demand that the land reform adopted by the Parliament be executed in full and immediately!!].

Dąbal was the closest collaborator of Reverend Okoń in the period 1918–1920. Following their being elected deputies, their cooperation waned despite the fact that both of them (briefly, i.e. from 10 February to 13 March in 1919) belonged to Klub Poselski PSL Wyzwolenie. Later they resumed their cooperation and – as already mentioned – they founded Chłopskie Stronnictwo Radykalne (ChSR). However, the political careers of Okoń and Dąbal started to diverge in the middle of 1920. Dąbal left ChSR and became a member of Komunistyczna Partia Robotniczej Polski [Communist Party of Workers’ Poland] (for more on the issue see: Cimek 1993: 74 and ff.).

Reverend Okoń took the floor 54 times at Sejm Ustawodawczy, sometimes even when not granted the right to speak by the Speaker (i.e. Marshal chairing Sejm sessions). He often formulated postulates in the conclusions of his speeches. Moreover, he filed around forty interpellations and deputy interventions, pertaining to mainly local affairs. He was the most active in 1919 (he took the floor 24 times) and in 1920 (he took the floor 21 times). The Sejm Marshal reproached him six times and excluded him from five Chamber’s sessions altogether. In addition, he was three times brought to court by the Sejm authorities; at one time he refused to vote „yes” for the motion that was related to the punishment of this kind. It needs to be stressed that he was never found guilty by court of the charges pressed by the prosecutor¹.

The Sejm speeches made by Reverend Okoń were frequently very emotional, which was evidenced for example by the fact that he would be reproached by the Speaker for his presumably inappropriate behavior. The speeches almost always provoked protests on the right side of the Chamber. The protests, voiced sometimes by other priests as well, were often rather vehement. His utterances could also provoke hilarity or rage, giving rise to sarcastic comments shouted at Okoń. By contrast, the parliamentary left usually, albeit not always, reacted to Okoń’s speeches positively. The Reverend tried to participate in discussions

¹ Skorowidz osobowy do sprawozdań stenograficznych... 1965: 348 and ff. The author took also into account his own calculations.

concerning as many issues debated by Sejm as he could, although sometimes he was blocked by the Speaker. His interventions focused on issues such as the agrarian reform, the Constitution, the state borders and the war between Poland and Russia but first of all on issues related to rebuilding the country that had been destroyed during the war and to issues that concerned the material situation of the poorest strata of the Polish population. Moreover, he was interested in issues such as: food provision, education and relations between the state and the Church in Poland.

As far as the issues of the political regime were concerned, Reverend Okoń's stance most frequently differed from the stance taken by the other priests-deputies – in June of 1919 there were thirty four of them altogether. Half of them belonged at the time to the club of Związek Sejmowy Ludowo-Narodowy [The Sejm Popular-National Union] (Cimek 2008: 136–137). Those differences in their views were *inter alia* reflected in their attitudes to the details of the agrarian reform. Okoń was the only of the priests-deputies who opposed the regulation stipulating that the use of the Church land for the purpose of the agrarian reform would be dependent upon permission granted by the Holy See. This view was also shared by Reverend Kazimierz Kotula, who was at the time a member of Klub Poselski PSL Piast [the MP club of the Polish Peasant Party Piast], being the other of the two priests-followers of the Peasant Party at Sejm Ustawodawczy. Okoń believed that the agrarian reform (land reform) constituted a most significant economic, political and social problem. He attacked the clergy because they took for instance „an indecent advantage of religion and sermon” in their fight against the peasantry. He did not attack Reverend Stanisław Stojałowski, however, whom he called „the first peasant prophet” and „the first «awaker» [„budziciel”] of the popular masses” (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 26 VI 1919, łam 33).

Reverend Okoń was also in favor of the proposal leading to forced expropriation of big landowners. As much as Chancellor Jan Zamojski – as he used to say – believed in the second half of the XVII century in the „noblemen's nation”, the peasant movement members had the right to believe in a „peasant nation”. This was why Okoń postulated that the agrarian reform covered not only land estates exceeding the area of 300 *morgs* (a rough equivalent of acres) (the ChSR's programme of July 1922 mentioned 100 *morgs*), but also included so called dead hand estates [„dobra martwej ręki”]. He claimed that the clergy could not be both good shepherds of people and good farmers. He proposed that „parish

priests and cloisters were left few acres, while the remaining land was distributed and given out to peasants, while the clergymen were to be granted adequate and handsome benefits („po kilka morgów proboszczom i klasztorom, resztę chłopom rozparcelować, a duchowieństwu wyznaczyć odpowiednie przyzwoite pensje” – Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 26 VI 1919, łam 34, 37). According to him, the arable land was to be taken from landowners by force and sold to the poorest peasants, while the landowners were to receive compensation for the lost land.

Reverend Okoń wondered why the clergy so obstinately opposed the cessation of the land of the dead hand for the sake of the agrarian reform and bishops such as Józef Teodorowicz even accused their opponents of sacrilegious deeds in this respect. Okoń thought that the stance taken by the priests representing the Right was petty-minded because they defended so fiercely not only the Church owned landed estates but also the lay ones. He called upon the clergy to abandon the political camp of the landowners and to support the People's Poland [Polska Ludowa]. He reminded the priests-members of parliament that they had become elected deputies owing to the votes cast by the peasants. Moreover, Okoń postulated that some reform should be initiated also within the Church – he wanted, *inter alia*, to have the right of patronage when nominating parish priests transferred from landowners to parishioners themselves – as a result parish priests would cease to be dependent on landowners (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 4 III 1920, łam 27 and ff).

Later Reverend Okoń asked Sejm many times to accelerate the execution of the statute of Uchwała Sejmu Ustawodawczego z dnia 10 lipca 1919 r. w przedmiocie zasad reformy rolnej [i.e. the act instituting the agrarian (land) reform] (cf. sprawozd. stenogr. ... 11 V 1920 r., łam 58 and ff; 9 XII 1920, łam 48; 22 II 1921, łam 36–37; 7 VI 1921, łam 49–52; 3 VIII 1922, łam 38; Okoń, *Droga...* 1920: 1–2). In addition, he demanded that the state should quickly provide help for those landowners whose farms had been destroyed during the war – allowing them for example to buy allotted wood at low prices, mainly in Nisko and Tarnobrzeg districts (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 10 IV 1919, łam 18–20, 3 VII 1919, łam 9–12; 18 VII 1919, łam 58–59; 20 I 1920, łam 41–43; 2 III 1920, łam 43 and ff.). He demanded that food provision was improved, the rise of prices curbed and speculation counteracted by adopting maximum prices, especially as regards staple goods, as well as exempting farms of less than 3 *morgs* of land from paying a land tax. In addition, he proposed that no state tax be extracted from the owners

of farms below 8 *morgs* and the poorest districts in the country be exempted from the requisition of grain by the state – the latter proposal applied *inter alia* to the area of „Republika Tarnobrzaska”, which was plagued not only by famine but also by various diseases (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 7 IV 1919, łam 48 and ff; 14 XI 1919, łam 20–21; 18 XI 1919, łam 62–63; 10 II 1920, łam 35; 23 IV 1920, łam 31; 12 XII 1921, łam 36; SU, druk nr 1442, 20 I 1920).

Reverend Okoń postulated that the integration of the former Austrian partition with the re-born Polish state should proceed quicker. In his first proposal, which he filed together with Dąbal in the capacity of the deputy, he demanded on 19 February that Komisja Rządząca dla Galicji, Śląska Cieszyńskiego, Spiszu i Orawy [Commission Governing for Galicia, Cieszyn Silesia, Zipsz and Orawa] be liquidated, which came into effect on 7 March in 1919. On 1 October in 1919, Reverend Okoń put forward that a voivodship (province) with the capital city in Sandomierz „be resurrected and created”². He demanded that physical punishment be removed, seeing in it a legacy of the Austrian rule; capital punishment was to be abolished, too (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 5 IV 1919, łam 56 and ff; SU, druk nr 1977). He stressed that a canal linking the cities of Cracow and Jarosław should be built, being an element of a waterway planned already by the Austrians that ought to link the Vistula with the Ister (Dniestr) River. On 25 January in 1921, Sejm turned down his proposal to construct a river port on the San between Radomyśl Mały and Skobierzyn. Much earlier, namely on 27 February in 1919, Okoń filed a request voicing the need to build a railway linking Rzeszów with Głogów Małopolski, Kolbuszowa, Tarnobrzeg, Sandomierz and finally with Warsaw. On 19 July he informed the deputies that he had already filed that postulate (it is quite likely that the railway linking Sandomierz with Warsaw had been missing then) at Sejm Krajowy in Lvov in 1913. It had been approved but the subsequent outbreak of WW I put an end to that enterprise at that time. On 19 July in 1919, Sejm Ustawodawczy passed the bill concerning the construction of the railway linking Rzeszów–Głogów Małopolski–Kolbuszowa–Tarnobrzeg–Sandomierz (Sprawozd stenogr. ... 9 VII 1919, łam 35; 25 I 1921, łam 47, 52; 19 VII 1919, łam 20–22). On 12 November in 1919, Reverend Okoń filed a resolution in which he de-

² SU, druk 17; tamże, druk nr 1001. Komisja Rządząca was created on 28 January in 1919 by unification of Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna (created on 28 October in 1918) and Tymczasowy Komitet Rządzący (created on 23 November in 1918).

mandated that regulations concerning teachers' salaries should be harmonized in the whole country. He called for the development of education, including vocational education, doing away with illiteracy, providing access to education for children of peasants and workers as well as leveling the quality of education at urban and rural schools (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 12 XI 1919, łam 37; 4 VI 1920, łam 32 and ff).

Reverend Okoń postulated that the work over the Constitution should be accelerated. During a parliamentary debate, he focused mainly on the shape of the parliament and the procedures to elect the Head of the State. He dreamt of a peasant Poland. That was why he perceived the senate as a „fulcrum of reactionaries [„ostoja reakcji”], a remnant of the past that was incongruent with the idea of People's Poland which he deemed dangerous from the point of view of the peasant movement. In his opinion, the establishing of the senate would mean a disaster for the recovering Polish state – and it could stifle the development of democracy in Poland. He argued that its establishment by the Constitution would play a negative role in the country's history. According to him, the people (peasants) were against the senate. From his point of view, that was a decisive argument³. He supported a direct election of the Head of the State by all citizens for a term of seven years while voting for one of the three candidates proposed by the Sejm (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 16 X 1920, łam 15). On 15 March, after the constitutional debate had been over, Reverend Okoń asked for permission to take the floor – he pretended that he wanted to make a personal announcement. Using this ruse, he read then out „Deklaracja Chłopskiego Stronnictwa Radykalnego w sprawie konstytucji” [Chłopskie Stronnictwo Radykalne's declaration concerning the issue of Constitution] – during the preceding debate he had not been allowed to speak on this issue. In his opinion, the debated constitutional statutes amounted to a step backward comparing with Konstytucja 3 maja; moreover, they did not match the expectations of the majority of the Poles. According to „Deklaracja”, which restated arguments voiced by Okoń at some earlier occasions, the new Constitution did not guarantee sufficiently clearly the execution of the agrarian reform. In addition, his ChSR demanded a revision of the statute adopted by Sejm on 10 July, concerning the reform and constitutional provisions for free education. The

³ Okoń, *Dlaczego...* 1920: 1–2; Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 5 X 1920, łam 57–60. On 5 November, Marshal excluded Okoń from participation in the next 5 sittings of the Chamber because he had shouted „Away with the Senate!”. Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 5 XI 1920, łam 6–7; 9 XII 1920, łam 46–49; 25 I 1921, łam 31–34.

ChSR grouping declared also that it should fight for a Constitution that is popular and democratic, evaluating the constitutional statutes debated then by Sejm as „backward” and „reactionary” (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 15 III 1921, łam 34 and ff.). Okoń postulated that capital punishment be abolished – together with Dąbal he filed a motion demanding this reform on behalf of Chłopskie Stronnictwo Radykalne in July of 1920 (SU, druk nr 1977).

Reverend E. Okoń made also a statement concerning Poland’s borders – Śląsk Górny, Śląsk Cieszyński, Spisz, Orawa, Gdańsk, Pomorze („szersze” – „broader”), Mazury, Galicja Wschodnia, Litwa and „Polish borderlands” („kresy polskie”) were to be included within the state borders according to the principles stated in the Lublin Union statute. He criticized Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna accusing it of stalling the time when assistance for the Polish defenders of Lvov in November of 1918 was being prepared. He criticized it for using instead the army primarily to suppress the unrest in the territory of „Republika Tarnobrzaska” (Okoń, *Bracia...* 1920: 2; Sprawozd. stenogr, ... 26 II 1919, łam 273 and ff.). Also, he was dissatisfied with the decision by the Peace Conference in Paris that decided on the western borders of Poland. He blamed Roman Dmowski and Ignacy Paderewski for the fact that Poland had not been granted Upper Silesia without the plebiscite. He pointed out to the Czech diplomacy as a model to follow in terms of efficacy. That was why on 22 May in 1920, he and Dąbal filed a deputy motion on behalf of ChSR, in which they demanded a revision of the Paris treaty in respect of issues concerning Gdańsk (Danzig) and those territories in Eastern Prussia where a plebiscite was to be held (SU, druk nr 1851; Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 22 II 1921, łam 44; Okoń, *Walka...* 1920; 5).

As much as Reverend Okoń expressed his satisfaction with the progress of the Polish military offensive in the East, which had began on 25 April in 1920, he opposed too much involvement of the Poles in the establishing of the Ukrainian state in the situation when the idea got insufficient support from the Ukrainians themselves. He warned the deputies that the Polish forces should not proceed too far in the territory of Russia, emphasizing the memory of Napoleon’s defeat (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 29 IV 1920, łam 22–23; Okoń, *Wojna...* 1920: 1–2). In July of 1920, when the Red Army was nearing Warsaw, Okoń stated that the government, together with Sejm and the army were all guilty of admitting this threat to the Polish state’s existence and of bringing Poland on the verge of „chasm”. He thought that the „unnecessary and harmful

march against Kiev” was a strategic mistake. He blamed the government for forsaking the opportunity to make a peace treaty with the Soviet Russia – Russia proposed it at the turn of 1919 and 1920. Poland could be saved – in his opinion – by a radical change of its political regime, leading to a situation in which it was the people who were the collective lord in their country. He demanded that the agrarian reform be enforced. He stipulated that it had been Tadeusz Kościuszko who already indicated the way in which the peasantry could be won for the national cause in Poland. He evaluated Rada Obrony Państwa [the Council for the State Defense], whose creation was planned as an antidote against the „homeland’s disease [„choroba ojczyzny”], as a „means very uncertain, very unrealistic and very much undemocratic” [„środek bardzo zawodny, bardzo mało realny i wielce niedemokratyczny”] (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 1 VII 1920, łam 23, 26)], infringing upon Sejm’s prerogatives. Okoń favored an immediate beginning of peace negotiations with the Soviet Russia.

It is debatable whether Eugeniusz Okoń was more of a priest than of a politician. In the period of 1906-1916, he was eight times transferred from one parish to another, whereas during the period when he served at Sejm Ustawodawczy, he remained without a parish allotment. Initially, he collaborated with Stronnictwo Demokratyczno-Narodowe [Democratic-National Party], but later he became associated with the peasant political movement, contributing significantly to the development of a radical wing within the agrarian stream of the peasant political movement. Together with Dąbal he chaired „Republika Tarnobrzeska”. They also created jointly Radykalne Stronnictwo Chłopskie. At Sejm Ustawodawczy, Reverend Okoń belonged to most active deputies, being disliked by the Right and other priests-deputies. He was interested in nearly all issues debated at the Chamber, especially the ones that were related to the nature of the future political regime in the country and the shape of the borders of the re-born Polish state. He cared for the interests of the poorest social strata, predominantly of the peasants. Okoń was a good speaker and was often accused of being a demagogue – not without a reason.

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