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Antifascist Mothers and Folk Healers: Queer Reinterpretations of Polish and Regional Cultural Archetypes in Familia

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ABSTRACT: The article serves as an analysis of *Familia*, a Polish independent fiction podcast from 2020 produced by the Teraz Poliz theatre as a response to increase of state supported homophobic propaganda in the recent years. By pointing out similarities and differences between the podcast in question and mainstream Polish audio series, as well as drawing comparisons to popular globally distributed independent audio fiction produced in English, the author aims to prove the unique position of *Familia* as a sole representative of a politically conscious podcast drama presenting a specifically Polish perspective on queer emancipation. The author then proceeds to analyse the narrative content of the podcast, presenting the ways in which the story plays with elements of traditional, Polish national identity, reframing them via a radical lens as potential symbolic tools for LGBTQ+ emancipation and antifascist resistance in everyday life, while at the same time warning of the limited scope of use for such tools.

KEYWORDS: audio series; familia; folk healers; nationalism; podcast; Polish mother; queer; theatre

Introduction

There is no doubt today that in the last few years podcasting has become an integral and crucial part of the modern digital media landscape, especially its vast, English-speaking part with an almost global reach. A lot has been said about the unique features that set podcasting apart from both the radio – often seen as its closest predecessor – and other digital and internet based media. From its early days podcasting was seen as a disruptive technology, reshaping the established practices of the radio business owing to the principles of free access and automated delivery (Berry 2006: 144). As a convergent medium,

podcasting reshaped the relationship between content creators and listeners. For the early adapters of the technology it seemed like an opportunity to reclaim the radio and use it to create otherwise impossible content, liberated from often restrictive programming guidelines (Hammersley 2004). As later observations show, that opportunity has been, at least in some extent, seized by creators stemming from a wide range of marginalised groups. Through podcasting about their lived experiences, such creators have been able to facilitate a media community that finds strength in what Lance Dann and Martin Spinelli call experiential diversity:

Conceiving of diversity in this way means seeing it as a nexus of making, listening, sharing, social interaction, and group and individual identity formation around a podcast. This is a conceptual evolution still very much in process and vestiges of older approaches to diversity are still present, even in the minds of our respondents. Indeed one of our ethnic-minority respondents acknowledged that he “might be naïve” when he says that in his experience of podcasting (participating in a podcasting scene and making and listening to podcasts) he has not felt any discrimination. He and others seem more interested in experiencing and contributing to “difference” than they do in tallying exclusion, inclusion, or misrepresentation (2019: 160).

While the authors of *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution* describe this phenomenon in the context of Podium.me, a youth initiative focused on non-fiction content, diversity, both experiential and its more established, representational kind, has been an important factor fuelling the rapid growth of the independent audio drama podcasting scene. It was after all the depiction of a homosexual relationship between two men in *Welcome To Night Vale* that – according to its co-author Jeffrey Cranor – guaranteed the show’s success among the young queer users of Tumblr, hungry for honest representation and frustrated by the mainstream media portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters or, rather, the lack thereof (Weinstock 2018: 3). The standard set by *Night Vale* was quickly picked up and improved upon by other audio fiction creators, many of them members of marginalised communities themselves, saturating the medium with stories both celebrating unique identities and serving as social commentaries of systemic issues specific to such groups¹. One of such audio dramas is *Familia*, which tells the story of a queer, multigenerational family of restaurant owners and their struggles against increasing homophobia in their country. What makes *Familia* unique is the fact that according to my best knowledge, it appears to be for the time being the only example of an original, independent Polish audio series

¹ Some noteworthy examples include *Ars Paradoxica*, a time-travel sci-fi podcast focusing on the institutional mistrust and invigilation faced by members of racial and sexual minorities during the Second Red Scare or *Greater Boston*, whose central plot revolves around the struggle of the city’s poorest citizens for affordable living in the wake of the housing crisis.

with wider recognition and as such is an important subject for Polish podcast studies. In this article, I shall analyse the place of podcasts in the Polish audio media market, its relation to other Polish media traditions and modes of distribution and, most importantly, its narrative, hoping to identify core concepts the podcast uses to tell its story and how they are rooted in Polish culture, national mythology and ethnic traditions. By answering those questions I hope to initiate an inquiry into how a Polish independent audio drama may differ from its global counterpart.

Familia and the Polish Audio Fiction Market

In a study conducted in 2015, Agata Włodarczyk and Marta Tymińska reached out to Polish members of the *Welcome To Night Vale* fandom, hoping to identify cultural differences between Polish and American understanding of the podcasts content. All 21 participants of the study declared familiarity with the English language, contrary to the initial assumption that some Polish fans may actually participate in fandom without any level of proficiency in said language² (Tymińska, Włodarczyk 2015: 3.3–3.5). As an audio based medium, podcasting faces difficulties when it comes to translation. Unlike movies or TV shows where the problem is solved by applying captions to unedited visual component, translating a podcast without robbing it of its unique properties related to specific listening modes would de facto require producing a completely new phenomenon. Those conditions result in limiting the reach of the English-centric independent audio drama movement mostly to the developed countries of the West, in turn making fiction podcast a fringe interest elsewhere. This, among other factors, might contribute to local creators being unfamiliar with the idea of using podcasting as a medium for disruptive and radically inclusive storytelling, therefore allowing the mainstream oriented, commercial initiatives to dominate the local audio fiction landscape. Such is the case of the Polish audio drama market. Audio fiction podcasts in Poland are currently produced by established multimedia companies with countrywide reach, mostly those involved with the local audiobook market, such as Empik Go or the local branch of Storytel. An interesting, although somehow lacking analysis of the Polish audio series³ market is offered by Anna Gawrońska-Piotrowska in her article titled *Audio series in Poland as a modern form radio play*. Basing her conclusions on five most popular Polish audio series and their promotional materials, Gawrońska-Piotrowska observes some of the leading characteristics of local audio fiction. All of the productions feature popular Polish actors in their cast, usually in both leading and supporting roles. All of them are also heavily promoted with use of other modes of media, such as video trailers or even video episodes fully integrated into the plot. With some

2 The assumption was based on the fact that during their research, Tymińska and Włodarczyk identified at least two fan-lead attempts at translating *Night Vale* to Polish, possibly as a way to make it accessible to those non-English speaking fans.

3 The term used in Polish is “serial audio”, popularised by Storytel.

exceptions⁴, the audio series in question are only available to users willing to pay subscription fees required to enter the publisher's platform. What is even more interesting is the fact that Gawrońska-Piotrowska's research proves to some extent the lack of awareness about independent audio drama among Polish people interested in audio fiction. At one point in her article, the author quotes Jakub Barzak, a representative of Storytel, who in 2018 claimed that "according to their information, nobody in the world have yet produced an audio series" (Gawrońska-Piotrowska 2021: 139). Not only does Gawrońska-Piotrowska not confront this statement in any way, but throughout her whole analysis she seems to see Polish audio series as a uniquely local medium, an evolved form of Polish radio plays rather than a part of a global phenomenon (2021: 139–153). Although the author makes no note of that, it is worth mentioning that all provided examples of commercial Polish audio fiction, as well as many others I am aware of myself, do not feature any content related to topics of emancipatory struggles and social injustice, so prevalent in countless English-speaking podcasts. With aforementioned monthly subscription fees and content curated for a wide audience, Polish audio series seem to be a safe, depoliticised medium addressed to city-dwelling members of the middle class, rather than a radically inclusive space for thought-provoking social commentaries that many of Western audio series aim to be.

Familia, whose secondary title could be roughly translated to "the first podcast series about a non-normative family" was released in 2020 by Teraz Poliz, a feminist independent theatre based in Warsaw. Written by Weronika Murek and directed by Jakub Skrzywanek, it tells the fictional story of a multigenerational, openly queer family of restaurant owners falling victims to identity erasure committed by representatives of Polish Television in a manipulative documentary about their business. Presented as a traditional and deeply patriotic establishment, rather than a place of cultural and sexual freedom it was throughout the ages, the restaurant attracts the attention of a group of Polish neo-Nazis looking for a place to organize an event. While the clearly politicised plot of the podcast sets it apart from other Polish audio dramas, it is not the only thing that makes *Familia* unique in the local audio media landscape. Unlike series by Empik Go or Storytel, *Familia* is available to everyone on streaming platforms free of charge. What is also notable is the fact that unlike star-power driven mainstream audio dramas, *Familia* employs actresses of Teraz Poliz in most of its roles, with its two only "stars" being recognisable LGBTQ+ activists and performers: Michał Piróg and the drag queen Twoja Stara⁵.

4 Gawrońska-Piotrowska notes that the audio series adaptation of Bolesław Prus' *The Doll* is available free of charge, as it was partially financed by The National Centre for Culture, a state institution.

5 The drag name is a Polish maternal insult.

Production, Financing and Media Genealogy

Before taking an in-depth look at the narrative presented by *Familia*, it is important to understand where the podcast originates, how it is related to other Polish and international audio series and other media and how it is promoted and distributed. Answers to those questions might also provide some insight into the target audience of the series. As mentioned earlier, *Familia* is produced by a feminist theatre group; therefore, most of the people involved in its conception are mainly experienced in theatrical storytelling modes, often reliant on visual components such as stage design or the movement of performing actors. As Wiktoria Tabak points out in her analysis of *Familia*, “a podcast is not merely a recorded audio track of a theatre play, but a completely different form, requiring explicit modifications to the actors’ mode of expression”, arguing that the series at times fails to communicate its message due to its characters speaking in a more theatrical manner (Tabak 2021). An even harsher opinion on the show’s nature was voiced by Katarzyna Niedurny in her review for “Dwutygodnik”, in which she calls the narrative unfit for the “stiff and creak form resembling a radio drama more than a modern podcast” (Niedurny 2020). What I find interesting about those opinions is their usefulness in situating *Familia* in relation to other media, especially different kinds of audio series. In her previously discussed article, Gawrońska-Piotrowska makes an attempt at defining an audio series, or more specifically a Polish audio series, as she frames the phenomenon mostly in relation to Polish media traditions. While formulating that definition, the author references Agnieszka Pawlik and her work concerning radio theatre, proposing to see Polish audio series as a modernised form of a radio novel, continuing the tradition of stories produced by the Polish Radio Theatre while employing a wide range of advanced audio effects. In Gawrońska-Piotrowska’s opinion an audio series is thus closer in its nature to visual media such as a movie, TV show or theatre (2021: 130–138). Interestingly, even though it is produced outside of the commercial mainstream of Polish audio series, *Familia* does match a lot of elements contained in Gawrońska-Piotrowska’s definition, making it a text closely tied to Polish theatre or even a wider category of performing arts. This becomes even more explicit if we consider how the podcast is promoted and distributed and what audiences are exposed to it.

According to the official website for the series, *Familia* is a podcast aiming to increase awareness about tolerance, equality and knowledge about human rights, especially concerning members of the LGBTQ+ community and their visibility. It is described by its authors as an answer to the increasing levels of hate speech towards non-heteronormative people. Teenagers and young adults facing systemic discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation are cited as the target audience of the podcast, which is supposed to offer them a glimpse into a queer family they are barred from starting themselves due to Polish homophobic legal regulations. The political mission of the podcast is also clear due to its open involvement with Polish NGOs or initiatives concerned

with the fight for emancipation of the LGBTQ+ community in Poland as well as providing help for queer youths facing discrimination. Each of the four episodes of the podcast features a short announcement given by one of the actors, addressing the listener and acknowledging hardships they may face in an increasingly homophobic country, pointing them to one of the four initiatives partnered with the project that might offer them help with their struggles. Another element that suggests a desire to reach a wide audience of Polish youths regardless of their place of residence is the free-of-charge distribution model of the podcast using popular platforms such as YouTube or Spotify. At the same time, before the first episodes of the podcast were released to the public online, *Familia* premiered its first two entries during a public event held at Resort Komedii, an improvisational comedy club in Warsaw. As the event took place during the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic, the attendees were required to confirm their presence by e-mail, making a limited physical space of the club even more restricted due to public safety regulations. The club itself is advertised as an “American comedy club done in the Polish way”, referencing *The Office*, *Fleabag* and Bo Burnham as some of its main inspirations. This, in turn, paints a picture of a place catering to a rather defined audience familiar with not only Western media in general, but a specific subset of stand-up comedy and culture associated with it. Considering this and the fact that the event takes place in the country’s capital, its largest and most developed city, it seems that *Familia* might suffer from the same problem a lot of modern LGBTQ+ media do, that is, the limitation of its reach to the economically privileged, culture savvy members of the metropolitan middle class. Despite its efforts, *Familia* might then be a text familiar mostly to citizens of Warsaw interested in the city’s independent theatre scene, rather than to a general population of queer youth in Poland, spread across the country and lacking the knowledge of the niche in which the audio series was brought to life. It is worth noting that both aforementioned works concerning *Familia* are written by representatives of theatre studies, further confirming the notion that it is seen as an eccentric extension of theatrical work rather than a text belonging to its own medium. Of course, those familiar with history of modern fiction podcasts will know that many now widely recognised productions started in similar circumstances. *Welcome To Night Vale* was born out of New York off-off Broadway theatre traditions with its writers being members of a company known as The Neo-Futurists, while before it became a podcast, *Thrilling Adventure Hour* parodied old time radio as a live comedy show (Spinelli, Dann 2019; Settembre 2010). As independent audio fiction is taking its first steps in Poland, it has plenty of room to grow into a medium of its own, forging its identity regardless of its roots being theatre or analogue radio.

It is also worth mentioning that the funding for the project was acquired through a public contest under the name Diverse Warsaw, held by the office of the President of Warsaw. The contest’s goal was to fund public tasks concerning culture and arts in the city, thus deeming the winning initiatives to

be important in the eyes of the local government, known for its more liberal leanings, at least compared to the national government's stance. This public backing for the project led to *Familia* being targeted by Polish right-wing media in their attempt to attack the city's president, depicting him as a "madman sponsoring sodomites" and declaring this decision an affront to Warsaw's historical heritage. As Tabak points out in her analysis, the herein described overreaction is clearly a mechanism of othering in work, targeting the minority as a danger to cultural values and depicting the aggressors as merely victims, defending their identity (Tabak 2021). The backlash against *Familia* shares at least a few characteristics with "Ur-fascism" described by Umberto Eco, mainly the condemnation of non-normative sexual identities as well as an obsession with an outside plot, here perpetrated by "deviants" and the liberal city government, thus in a way serving as evidence of dangers the text wants to warn its listeners about (Eco 1995: 6–8). Although from its conception *Familia* was clearly a politically motivated podcast with a declarative mission, the hostile reception further situates it as an act of what Fiske would call exercising localising power, in this case by women and queers against the Polish power-bloc, formed with the aligning interests of mostly Catholic, straight men among different economic classes in mind (Fiske 1993: 5–12). It is worth noting that in its funding model, *Familia* resembles some other European independent fiction podcasts, which seem to be officially associated with NGOs or public institutions more often than their American counterparts. A good example of an English language podcast with a similar mission and funding model would be *Radio Elusia*, telling a story of a pirate radio operated by youth activists fighting against an authoritarian regime to regain their digital privacy. The podcast was born out of international cooperation of European youth theatres and as such was co-founded by the Creative Europe programme of The European Union. While the fact that a public institution in Poland was willing to actually fund a queer podcast openly advocating for equality does inspire some optimism about further opportunities for the development of the local independent audio fiction scene, it is worth remembering that involvement in official funding channels and procedures could be detrimental to some of the promises offered by podcasting; as a medium dependent on local government funding, the podcast could easily become a neutered text embracing only the most normative of the non-normative social models LGBTQ+ community has to offer and avoiding a wider critique of the shortcomings of the current political system. It seems, however, that such fear would be unfounded. As it will become evident during narrative analysis, *Familia* strives to be a story of a radical social change, even if some of its critical points are voiced more strongly than others.

The Narrative of *Familia*

Familia is set in modern day Warsaw and all of the events of the story take place at a family-owned restaurant called "Jak u Mamy" ("Just Like Mom's"). Although its name references a rather traditional archetype of a Polish mother

responsible for keeping the household, the restaurants owners and staff are far from the conservative norm. The business was funded sometime between the World Wars by Grandma Leoncia (Twoja Stara) and was later passed down to her daughter, Regina (Dorota Glac), who now co-runs it with her life partner Majka (Adrianna Kornecka), an ethics teacher with doctorate in human sciences. The lesbian couple is often assisted by their daughter Kasia (Marta Jalowska), a revolutionary radical activist who also happens to work as an accountant. The last character associated with the restaurant is Magda (Kamila Worobiej), a cook and a vegetarian online influencer who runs the establishment's kitchen. The lack of men in the family as well as the presence of an openly queer couple from an older generation are enough for a Polish listener to understand how far the protagonists stand from the social norm, yet the podcast does not stop at that. As the narrative structure is based on the restaurant being a subject of a documentary, one of the first jokes uttered in the podcast serves to inform the Public Television journalist (Maciej Pesta) that a souvenir mug is the most heteronormative thing he could find there. The protagonists are not only aware of being outside the norm, but take pride in it and strive to make the restaurant seen as counter-normative as well. During the interviews for the documentary, listeners can learn that "Jak u Mamy" was a place of safety and acceptance for the oppressed from the day of its conception, serving as a hotspot for anti-fascist operations during the Second World War and as a place where a gay Polish soldier could place a kiss on the lips of his Russian lover without a fear of persecution. As Magda shows the documentary crew her kitchen, she makes sure to note that while the food is inspired by traditional cuisine, especially dishes from her home region of Podlasie, her goal is to adapt the menu to be fully vegetarian, as according to her, switching to such diet is a crucial step in ensuring the survival of all life on Earth, thus questioning to some extent the dominant anthropocentric viewpoint. Using once again Fiske's terminology, the antifascist queer eco-friendly restaurant is depicted as a place, a physical space in which social identities, relations and histories are formed and maintained through time in opposition to imperialising power (Fiske 1993: 11–13). The exercise of localised power manifests mostly through cultivating the local queer oral history with Leoncia and her family as first-hand narrators from three generations. This practice allows the characters to, as Gramsci would put it, subvert cultural codes and tropes crucial for the conservative, Polish hegemonic narrative. The greatest subversion happens in the restaurant's name as the queer family redefines the understanding of the social myth of the Polish Mother, established during the period of the partitions (late 18th to early 20th century) and still rich in meaning today. Born out of war and uncertainty, the archetypical Polish Mother – with her husband imprisoned or in combat – was burdened with taking care of the whole household, heroically surviving titanic amounts of housework and providing her children with patriotic education, often with the devastating knowledge that their

lives will also be sacrificed in insurrectionist combat. The myth would return whenever Polish society struggled against oppressive rule, both during the Nazi occupation or in its modernised form among the women involved in the anti-communist opposition movement of the Polish People's Republic period. In modern times, the myth is often employed as a part of the Polish right-wing rhetoric attempting to undermine feminist ideals by contrasting them with the exalted, special position in society already held by Polish women and equating the Polish Mother with "normal", usually Catholic women who fit into traditional, established gender roles (Imbierowicz 2012: 431–435). As evident in the description provided, a lot of duties ascribed to the Polish Mother fit into the definition of care work, especially of the unpaid kind. A lot of the activities undertaken by the restaurants staff throughout the ages fit into the presented archetype. As an establishment ran by women, "Jak u Mamy" provided care for Polish revolutionaries during the war, offering them food and a place to hide and conspire. However, rather than focusing on national identity, the restaurant cared for all antifascists regardless of their place of origin, as evidenced by the story about the gay Soviet soldier. While the Polish Mother teaches her son the value of patriotism, the mothers of the titular family pass down values of freedom and resistance to their daughters, culminating in Kasia's work as an activist, infiltrating Warsaw's far right groups to gain critical information. By introducing Magda's ecological ideals to the restaurant's agenda, the care provided by the place is, in a limited scope, extended towards non-human beings, suggesting the place is ready to question its politics in order to embrace a non-anthropocentric understanding of diversity. The care traditionally provided by the Polish Mother is thus transformed into its more collective and inclusive version, focused especially on socially excluded members of the LGBTQ+ community, promising them motherly love and empathy without judgement. However, the same symbolic core used by the podcast's protagonists to establish the inclusive identity of "Jak u Mamy" is shown as incredibly helpful in distorting their narrative by the Polish Television and their documentary team.

During the first episode of *Familia* it is quite clear that Robert, the documentarian sent in by the Polish Television is a rather loyal representative of the government-controlled public media outlet and, as such, he adheres to the values upon which said government constructs its identity. He interrupts the women he is interviewing, usually whenever he feels the opinions they voice or stories they tell are impossible to fit in the normative framework. While most of the issues Robert tries to avoid are tied to queerness and non-heteronormative identities, he also seems to be wary about vegetarianism and modern culinary trends. One of the comedic interactions featured in the first episode takes place in the restaurant's kitchen, where Magda explains her modernised approach to traditional cuisine. One of the core concepts of her cooking style is preparing dishes rich in High Doses of Vitamin C for their supposed health benefits, which she describes with a four letter initialism

WDWC⁶. Whenever WDWC is mentioned in the interview, panicked and almost fearful Robert interrupts her loudly with almost nonsensical exclamations, such as names of old-fashioned, traditional dishes or outdated onomatopoeic words for cooking. The fear of this initialism is clearly meant to mirror the fear of another such abbreviation, that is, LGBT, which in the last few years, especially during the election period, has often been demonised by the politicians of the ruling party and in state controlled media. Using the term “LGBT ideology”, the Polish government representatives created a powerful narrative about culturally foreign political influence meant to indoctrinate children into sexual deviancy, thus destroying the moral foundations of the nation. That narrative shares, of course, many common points with the notion of Cultural Marxism, a conspiracy theory developed by American conservative thinkers in the 1990s, now popularised among supporters of right wing movements all over the world thanks to global mechanisms of disinformation born out of privately owned social media platforms. Jérôme Jamin describes the foundations of that theory as follows:

With the fall of the Berlin Wall the Communist threat disappeared, and yet only a few years later there emerged a literature claiming that the fight was still not over, and in many ways, the threat had passed from economic to the cultural arena. According to the analysis, the former ‘proletarians’ who needed saving from capitalism made way for the new ‘proletarians’: women, gays, sexual minorities, ethnic minorities and immigrants. They must defend themselves against the ‘White man’ with new weapons such as the fight against racism, sexism, male chauvinism, the struggles which Lind regroups under ‘politically correct’, which is nothing other than a thought control capable of suppressing everything that is not thought or spoken ‘correctly’ (2014: 84).

As Barkun points out, almost all conspiracy theories share three principles – a strong conviction in lack of accidentality, distrust towards appearances and a belief in interconnectedness of all things in reality through hidden patterns (2003: 3–4). Considering Cultural Marxism is one of them, it is no surprise that one of its recent developments is seeing any aspect of cultural change, including culinary culture and shift towards plant based cuisine as another way of destroying the “proper” way of life. Although the name of the theory itself is not uttered in the script, Robert’s avoidance of all non-familiar concepts encountered in the restaurant strongly suggests he and his supervisors adhere to such optics. Whenever possible, Robert attempts to steer the conversations into normative territory, asking mostly about the heroic deeds of Polish wartime conspirators that met at the restaurant or obsessing about the fact that

6 It stands for “Wysokie Dawki Witaminy C” which should be translated as “High Doses of Vitamin C”.

Leoncia was born in 1920, the year of the Battle of Warsaw, which up to this day plays an important role in patriotic, anti-communist narratives due to the unexpected triumph of Polish troops over the invading Red Army – a victory often called the Miracle on the Vistula and ascribed at least in part to God and St. Mary, specifically the Black Madonna of Częstochowa (Davies 2003: 17–87). In one of the more telling comedy scenes, the journalist persistently corrects the way Leoncia is supposed to walk in front of the camera, subtly insinuating that her movement is not “straight” and as such does not belong on public television. Robert’s intent to strengthen the hegemonic, conservative narrative becomes clear in the third episode of the podcast when the protagonists watch the complete documentary on TV. Through careful selection of published materials and liberal editing of the conversations, the restaurant is depicted as an extremely traditional establishment with its identity rooted in narrowly understood Polish patriotism. The queerness of both the owners and typical patrons is omitted, while the segment of the program set in the kitchen falsely depicts the dishes as meat-based. A lot of the narrative in the documentary is performed by Robert himself, who speaks with pathos about suffering endured by oppressed Polish Catholics during the war. This false depiction of “Jak u Mamy” quickly draws the attention of a far-Right organisation called Eagle and Nest, whose freshly appointed Chairman⁷ (Michał Piróg) is searching for a venue fit for their celebratory meeting. Describing his organisation as “a small group of friends with nationwide reach” and stating that the friends in question are brought together due to “small differences in their difference of opinions”, he attempts to communicate the nature of his group to the owners with euphemisms, hoping that the subtext will be understood by people he now perceives as traditional conservatives allied to his cause. As the Chairman offers a large sum of money for the organised event, the owners decide to allow it to happen, hoping that through an elaborate ruse they will be able to publicly discredit the group and its members during the celebration while securing the funds for the restaurant’s development.

It is through this plan that another cultural figure, this time drawn from regional folklore, emerges to take an important place in the podcast’s narrative. It is hinted throughout the story that Magda is knowledgeable not only in cooking, but in plant-based folk medicine as well. At one point during her conversation with Robert, she openly mentions that methods of *szeptuchy* (plural of “*szeptucha*”) are close to her heart. As explained by Ewelina Sadanowicz, a *szeptucha*⁸ is a specific type of a folk healer and magic practitioner characteristic for rural areas of Podlasie, a region of Poland adjacent to the Eastern border and thus culturally influenced by the rich devotional customs of the Orthodox Church. Usually perceived as a “good” practitioner, a *szeptucha* was considered knowledgeable about the higher powers and expected to heal the

7 An unnamed character introduced in the Polish credits as “Prezes”.

8 Can be loosely translated as “whisperer”, a “wise woman”.

sick and undo harmful curses, in return being widely respected among representatives of folk culture. The practice is still alive in Podlasie, especially near Hajnówka and Bielsko Podlaskie, as the region is characteristically conservative, especially when it comes to opinions and practices concerning healthcare (Sadanowicz 2018: 190–192). With exceptions, most of such folk healers are women, hence the feminine grammatical gender of the term (Weber 2014: 209). Therefore, once again we encounter a specific social role performed by women which puts them in an elevated position in a rather patriarchal society. In *Familia* it is Magda who embraces her folk culture heritage and as a modernised szeptucha offers to spike the drinks served to the nationalists with psychedelic herbs, meant to alter their perception so that they would see their surrounding as incredibly large, thus making them, in turn, feel small and insecure. By reaching for her ethnic traditions, Magda aims to destabilise a conservative, traditional, hegemonic identity with one that, while also traditional, cannot be integrated with Polish nationalism due to the fact that it stems from a cultural root that is considered foreign and, thus, is excluded from the dominant narrative. Folk traditions of Podlasie become representative of ideas of multiculturalism and coexistence of different ethnic traditions as opposed to the idea of a homogenous Polish state. The plot quickly backfires, however, when one of the things that manifests itself as great to the fascist partygoers (and Majka, who accidentally tries the potion) is Poland itself, strengthening their convictions and serving as a reference to the concept of Great Poland, an imperialistic vision of the country as a superpower. The situation complicates further as Leoncia arrives at the scene, performing a 19th century poem by Wincenty Pol as a song. In the final scenes of the podcast, the Chairman seems moved by the images of Poland destroyed by war and abandoned by its people and realises that it is those people that he truly yearns for. However, as the story ends with a cliff-hanger, it is uncertain if his understanding of who constitutes the people of Poland is changed.

While the main focus of the podcast is clearly the conflict between the queer family and the fascist organisation in which the listeners are supposed to side with the restaurant owners, the narrative is far from uncritical praise for the protagonists and finds time to address some problems present in the homonormative structure as well. The internal conflict among the protagonists presents itself in two distinct, yet interconnected ways. Firstly, while united by general leftist values, the family is shown to clash along generational lines, especially when it comes to the relationship between Kasia and her mothers. While the young woman is doing dangerous field work and advocating for radical action, Regina and Majka are shown to be much more politically moderate, living as an openly lesbian couple but limiting their activism to maintaining a culturally significant place, operating within the boundaries of the current system. While Majka distances herself from the conflict through theoretical, slightly absurd academic work and recreational drug use, Regina becomes responsible for the workings of the restaurant, handling most of the financial

aspects of running a business. It is Regina who first among the protagonists considers accepting the nationalists' offer, which to her daughter seems like a complete betrayal of family values. Both mothers are also accused by Kasia of inaction and apathy during their youth, being partially to blame for the lack of progress for queer emancipation in Poland. These differences drive Kasia to team up with her grandma and, unknowingly to Regina, modify some elements of the planned ruse as to further humiliate the nationalists. The second area of conflict is rooted in the restaurant's dependence on the flawed economic system and as such is tied to Regina's leadership. It is revealed during the course of the plot that although Magda is responsible for the kitchen – arguably one of the most important aspects of a restaurant – she was never offered a proper employment contract and is working at “Jak u Mamy” on the grounds of a contract of commission, unfit for the type of work performed and in this case recognised as an abuse of the legal system meant to free the employer from the burdens of workers' rights guaranteed by the Polish labour law. When the injustice and unfair redistribution of profits is called out, Regina initially tries to stand by the way things are by appealing to leftist solidarity and pointing out the financial troubles the restaurant is facing. She caves in to Magda's demands only after the rest of the family agrees with the cook, threatening they will also abandon the establishment. By including this criticism of exploitative work environment in a queer-centric story, the podcast plays into a larger debate among the members of the LGBTQ+ community concerning the ways they should fight for social recognition. While the younger generation, supported by the anti-fascist grandma, represents a more intersectional approach, demanding radical change to the whole social order, Regina serves as a character much more in line with the idea of normalising same-sex relationships within the current, neoliberal system regardless of other injustices it produces, thus fitting into what Peter Drucker calls “gay normality” (2015: 219–306). By framing Magda's situation as clear injustice, *Familia* thus can be read as a text critical of attempts at normality, siding to some extent with queer, anti-capitalist critique.

Conclusion

After considering both the podcast's narrative and the circumstances in which the audio series exists, it is possible to say that *Familia* seems to be a so far unique production both among Polish and international audio dramas. Its complex scenario aims to provide a nuanced view of the current socio-political situation in Poland, focusing on both real and hypothetical interactions between Poles of different, often antagonistic identities. By showing queer and feminist recontextualizations of historical events, cultural myths and folk traditions, it aims to show that, contrary to prevalent opinions, minorities are and always have been an integral part of Polish society, rather than a foreign, invasive force born out of ill intent and conspiracy. At the same time, the story seems to be cautious about such recontextualizations, showing that while they might empower those who use them to legitimise their emancipation, they might also

hinder the progress due to their strong ties to traditional and conservative viewpoints. As many of the elements of both the story and the way it is edited reference factual events from modern day Poland, *Familia* makes sure it is understood as a direct social commentary and not merely a work of fiction unrelated to current problems. As such, the audio drama by Teraz Poliz becomes an interesting starting point for future independent fiction podcast made in Poland. Just as American independent fiction podcasts, *Familia* still struggles to find its identity as a podcast, borrowing heavily from its theatre and radio drama roots, yet differs from such shows when it comes to its content. While the early days of fiction podcasting were full of apolitical mystery stories written for white, millennial, middle-American geeky men, *Familia*, with its mostly female and queer cast and a strongly relevant themes of rampant fascism and homophobia, is already much more similar to mature stories that lately gained foothold in the global audio drama landscape (Dann, Spinelli 2019: 130). Probably due to the fact that the Polish market for normative stories is dominated by large scale businesses, we might expect that if local independent audio fiction develops further, it will continue in *Familia*'s footsteps, providing a new space for politically conscious storytelling in the Polish media landscape, as well as amplifying the voices of those fighting for emancipation.

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