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DACHAS AND VEGETABLE GARDENS IN BELARUS: ECONOMIC AND SUBJECTIVE STAKES OF AN “ORDINARY PASSION”

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Do you plant potatoes?

- Of course! It is like asking if there is the moon in Belarus...”

(Conversation with Alexandre K., Smilovichi, April 20th 2002)

Why am I interested in such a question? The choice of this subject matter may, *a priori*, be perplexing. Why be interested in such a mundane topic as the vegetable gardens in a country hit by the Chernobyl catastrophe, under the yoke of a megalomaniac dictator, controlled by services of interior safety still called the KGB, whose monumental headquarters is set up right in the center of the town, and in front of which Dzerjinski’s statue sits imposingly, a country which sells weapons to countries supporting international terrorism, passes through a deep economic recession, whose population, rare fact in the world, is decreasing, whose agriculture is weakened, where the housing problem and the familial ruptures make up first-rate “social problems” (Goujon, Lallemand and Symaniec 2001)? *It a priori* appears that the subject matter “Belarus” brings up numerous questions more “serious” and important as the question, a little bit exotic, nearly anecdotal, of vegetable gardens. Nevertheless, it seems to me that this question of gardening in actual fact refers to these various tragic dimensions of life in Belarus and that the study of this “ordinary passion” (Bromberger 1998) allows one to explore from an original angle the problems of “power”, “public health”, “family” and “poverty”.¹

The starting point of my research is articulated with two central questions. From an economic point of view, how do the individuals hold out? From a subjective point of view, how do the individuals hold out?

Wages are decreasing, overdue wages are accruing, and the purchasing power is collapsing. How might individuals survive this situation? What strategies do individuals adopt in order to overcome the difficulties linked to the deep transformations of their environment? How to apprehend this nebula called “resourcefulness”? How to live with 50 or 100 dollars per month in Minsk? Admittedly the service charges for a flat, the price of gas, water, electricity, local phone calls, public transports, basic foodstuffs (bread, flour, eggs, milk, vodka), are very low. But without living a luxurious lifestyle, I realized, living in Minsk, that I spent considerably more than the local inhabitants, even after changing my habits in consuming foodstuffs, adapting them better to the local products. Therefore, this question did not cease to gnaw at me. Then, through conversations and meals with Belarusian friends, I became more and more aware of the importance of self-sufficiency: a large part of the foodstuffs eaten comes from dacha. To eat one’s own produce means not spending as much money on foodstuffs, fundamental budgetary item for the households with low incomes, and to be able to afford high-class clothes or a pirated CD from time to time.

But the question of the post-Soviet subject, formulated in exclusive terms of resourcefulness, seemed unfinished. In this perspective, the image of a disembodied individual is drawn, an individual who would adopt the logic of action but without experiencing anything. Thus, the individual endures deprivation, a drop in status, and feels it. These first questions necessarily bring about some others. How do the people endure this situation? How is this necessity of multiple activities experienced? What work on themselves do the individuals carry out to bear this worsening of social status? How do they manage to maintain a positive image of

themselves? The question of resourcefulness raises the problem of supports (Castel and Haroche 2001; Martuccelli 2002) on which the subject leans to maintain a minimum of consistency. The question of de-subjectification is also asked (Clement 2000; Dubet 1994) for the “shipwrecked” people who do not have any support, real anchorages, that is expressed by self-destructive behaviors: suicide², alcoholism, etc. In a perspective of subject sociology, the question is to analyze how, in a very restrictive system (in which the ideal type resembles Goffman’s “total institution”), the individual mobilizes resources, sets up supports so as to manage to endure the deep tensions which distract him, draws in a limited environment the elements which are necessary for his preserving, the composition of an identity acceptable in his eyes and in the eyes of others.

The question of dachas and vegetable gardens appears at the crossroads of these two interrogations as a favored subject of research. Here I attempt, from one example, to show the economic and subjective stakes brought about by the question of vegetable gardens in Belarus.

Piotr and Maria, “tireless gardeners”³

In 2000 I met Yuri’s parents. Yuri is a student I met in Minsk. His parents, Piotr and Maria live in Babruysk, the seventh largest city in Belarus, population 228,000. They are both about forty years old. Piotr is a skilled workman, a metal worker, in a tire factory. He intervenes in the production line when there is a breakdown: “he does everything with the heart and the brain,” explains Yuri. Piotr studied in a technical school, then in a *teknikum*, in other words six years of post-secondary education, more than an education at university. Maria was trained as a teacher in Mathematics and Physics but works as an Accountant. Their dacha is located in Kirovsk, a little town of 10,000 dwellers, 25 kilometers northeast from Babruysk. This dacha is in fact the former house of Maria’s parents.

In 2000 they harvested 750 kilos of potatoes. One half was eaten; the other half was kept to be planted the following year. They think that they gathered 50 kilos of tomatoes, but they are not sure. Indeed it is “difficult to assess”, “we don’t count”, “we take our basket, we go there, we fill it with produce and we treat them” (Weber 1996). They also cultivate green and red peppers, zucchinis, radishes, carrots, onions, peas, lettuce, pumpkin, cabbage, beets, garlic, cucumbers, green beans, strawberries and

raspberries, red currants, grapes, herbs and spices. They make preserves, jam (from raspberries, strawberries, apples), tomato juice, apple juice (20 liters), and sometimes a bit of black currant liqueur and apple liqueur: but this is difficult because “to do that, you need a lot of time” and because the liqueur is made of vodka and vodka has to be bought. They don’t gather mushrooms because they don’t have any time. Sometimes they pick medicinal plants in the forest, to be consumed during the winter. They still have some flowers but the flowerbeds narrowed: “there is no time for the flowers”.

Before Maria’s mother fell ill, she used to do most of the work in the garden. She gave everything she did not eat to her family. At the time, Maria essentially went to the dacha to rest. Nowadays Yuri’s parents do everything, and “there is not enough time to do it all.”

Piotr’s brother helps them. He lends them his horse for the potato harvesting. In fact, Piotr goes to his brother’s and then brings the horse to the dacha; he covers 14 kilometers in his cart. He seldom goes to his brother’s (once a month during summertime). There he is given some produce: meat, potatoes, milk. But: “I don’t go there to get these commodities, but to help, in an effort of mutual aid.” Yuri and his sister rarely go to the dacha. In September 1999, Yuri went there “one week, or three days”, for the potato harvesting.

Maria and Piotr tell me, laughing: “we are self-sufficient”. In fact, “we buy bread”. “It is sometimes said that dachas are not profitable, not worthwhile; but we couldn’t otherwise eat our fill of tomatoes.” In brief, even if they have to buy fertilizers, pesticides and bus tickets, their dacha helps them. They no longer have to buy fruit (with the exception of bananas and lemons) or vegetables.

Piotr and Maria have been working in the tire factory for 25 years. Maria earns 90 dollars per month. Piotr gets 75 dollars, “because the factory is in stagnation... there is no demand.” Yuri goes to a private university in the capital. Tuition fees are high⁴. If Yuri had no “social security”, he would have to pay 80 dollars per month. But the university council, in view of his parents’ incomes and his results, decided that he would have to pay only half of the tuition fees. Consequently he has to pay 35-40 dollars per month. In addition, he had to find a place to live in Minsk. He rents a room in a flat owned by elderly people and pays 20 dollars per

month. Finally, his sister works at the University of Babruysk but spends all her money, according to what Yuri says, to buy clothes. When she was going to university, tuitions fees totaled 250 dollars per semester. She still lives with her parents and her parents have to feed her. In short, budgetary constraints weighing on the household are very heavy. The production in the garden allows the family to buy a minimum of foodstuffs in the shops and thus to save money. Otherwise, Yuri would most likely have to stop going to university.

They sell their surplus production only in the case of grave economic difficulties. In 1999, they sold three buckets of cherries in the Kirovsk market and earned the equivalent of “one tenth of a monthly wage,” that is to say less than 10 dollars. But Maria seems to feel ashamed of that: “morally I can not sell [our produce]... my husband feels even more strongly about it than I do” (Kanef 1998). The surpluses are generally given to neighbors in form of “gifts”, “exchanges without counting”.

From this example we can see that, for some households, the aid of the dacha is undeniable⁵. The produce cultivated in the garden plot allows them to better deal with financial difficulties, to improve the everyday. However, the economic stakes of the dacha should not be overestimated: the statistical analyses of Clarke and his team (Clarke and Karelina 2000) are in this perspective revealing. They point out that the cost of intermediary consumptions (the cost of seed, fertilizer, tools and the like) is high, that the products cultivated at the dacha are those that are cheap in the shops and in the markets (potatoes, onions, garlic...). Finally, they compared food expenses of those who own a dacha and those who don't and concluded that those who have a dacha spend as much money for food as those who don't.

My fieldwork corroborates these two interpretations. For some households the economic role is real. But we cannot reduce this generalized phenomenon to this single dimension⁶. In fact, approaching the dacha phenomenon purely in economic terms precludes grasping other fundamental dimensions of the dachas.

The biography of food: to make ties

Gardening allows at first to create, maintain, and reproduce social ties, sometimes with the neighbors⁷, but above all within the

family. As a matter of fact, the “biography of food” (Kopytoff 1986) reveals the symbolical and practical dimensions of household food production. The seed is sometimes bought but is often chosen, extracted from the best products of the previous harvest, then exchanged with neighbors and colleagues for other seeds.

Gardening is a subject of ceaseless conversations, of perfection; sometimes – though seldom – the neighbors propose a helping hand (for a bottle of *samogon*, for a service, sometimes without asking anything in return), the family members help to dig, plant, harvest; the whole family gets together for some occasions (potato harvesting...) (Gessat-Anstett 2001). Gardening and the cultivated products have many meanings. Among those are the condensation of family ties, the crystallization of familial solidarity. “The term ‘work’ is in fact a metaphor covering a large range of social relations which are established during the process of household food production” (Kanef 1998). Finally a vast system of gifts of cultivated products appears in every observed situation (Smolett 1989). The harvested product is eaten within the family, circulates, sometimes onto hundreds of kilometers, to maintain, strengthen the ties.

Work for Oneself

Maria and Piotr's story is about an ascending social trajectory, suddenly ruined. In a diachronic perspective, the vegetable garden takes on a new dimension: it is a place where work may be re-appropriated and where it is possible to restore a positive image of oneself.

The familial story is characterized by a strong ascending mobility. The grand-parents lived in a rural environment where the living conditions were particularly trying: no running water, no electricity, painstaking work in the fields and in the private plot, this plot being necessary to ensure the feeding of the family; the grand-parents had no specific education and training and occupied the same place as their forefathers did in the social structure; and the status of *kolkhozian* was the lower in the scale of remunerations and prestige. The grandchildren had a good education and training, found a job in the city, a relatively enviable income, and got a flat in a modern building. It is to the tire factory that they owe this ascension.

Belshina Tire Factory. It is the city's economic lung, its pride. It offered to its employees the possibility to enter the modern

world, to leave the countryside, to get a flat with running water, electricity and the different elements comprising modern comfort. It is the factory that in 1987 “gave” to the young household the flat where they have been living until today. It is the factory that allowed them to leave the workman hall where they have lived for six years: they were four living in 12 square meters; two families shared the toilets and the bathroom, sixteen families were cooking in the same kitchen.

The industrial complex employs 14,500 people and participates fundamentally in the development of the town, whose population has grown from 138,000 in 1970 to 228,000 in 1999. Belshina, it is “the half of Babruysk”.

The factory built the half of the buildings The factory financed the kindergartens, the cultural center, the parks, the hospitals, and all these things. It is what we call the socio-cultural complex, which precisely functioned well in Soviet days, and all of that was done for the workmen.

At the factory, Piotr’s work consists in intervening on machines when they break down. For thirty years he has been mending the same machines that he knows intimately. Whereas the years elapsed, thanks to exchanges with colleagues, his successive makeshift repairs and patching, Piotr acquired a know-how from which he derives a certain pride: he can mend everything, do everything, with the bare minimum. Moreover, his son adds, “In thirty years, my father has never been late.”

To the workman invested in the factory, the latter offered bonus in return. “Socialist competitions” were organized; workmen were invited to propose solutions to rationalize the production. Then the conscientious workman, punctual, invested and competent, was “sure to earn a surplus to the wage”, fair payment of done work well, performed with a concern for precision and efficiency: these bonus amounted to “10 % [of the wage] but sometimes the bonus composed 20 % of the wage.”

Of course there were constraints, at work and out of work. But they were not really weighing: for instance, in the participation of the “*subotniki*” (tasks to be carried out for nothing, in a nearly compulsory way, on Saturdays – *subota*) there was “a part of enthusiasm”. Besides, it is thanks to them that Maria and Piotr met. Moreover there were unofficial bonuses.

“Pilfering” was practiced (Haraszti); materials from the factory could be taken in order to make something, outside the factory. So Piotr made knives.

In the mid-1990s and overall from 1999, the factory experienced important difficulties. During Soviet times the factory was prosperous, went flat out, made stock that the factory was sure to sell; henceforth exports were low, the factory works to order, and orders decrease. Then the atmosphere at work altered in the different workshops. What’s the use of working? What’s the use of investing in the factory? The bonuses that were paid when the workmen were motivated for their work, are not paid anymore: propositions voiced by the workmen to rationalize the production have not been paid for ten years; since 1998 no bonus of any sort have been paid. Piotr still works the best he can, however, even if his efforts are not remunerated.

But in general our equipment lives only on that, innovations that we make, even if it is not written on paper. To maintain a machine, I try to add something; we still make innovations.

Piotr is bitter, he feels no more enthusiasm, but he can not tear himself away from his work, radically distance himself, even if his skills, his *savoir-faire* are not recognized anymore.

The fact that I am not paid makes me feel uncomfortable, I am not stimulated, I have no real desire to work. And if I work until I fall or if I do nothing, I earn the same wage. I would like a better income, I would work with a lot of enthusiasm, and I would work ten hours per day, provided that I am better paid.

The question is not only an economic one. As a matter of fact, to specifically pay certain practices means to recognize that a *savoir-faire* was implemented; not to pay them comes down to ignoring this *savoir-faire*, almost to deny them, and consequently to deny the essential attribute of this skilled workman’s identity -- ingenuity.

In this context, the managers of the factory try to dismiss employees but the room to maneuver is very small. Indeed, no other economic sector offers jobs in this area and if the factory dared to dismiss too many employees, the social consequences would be disastrous. The political leaders are aware of it:

Our mayor forbids the factory's managers to dismiss employees because there are no other jobs and there would be a social revolution. It is the mayor who does not authorize the dismissal of employees.

At the factory general suspicion becomes firmly established. The factory's managers, who do not want to give arguments to possible protesters, refuse that the faults may be attributed to them (Clement 2000). Then employees are not dismissed for economic reasons: the managers try to attribute firings to individual behaviors. The one who commits even the most minor theft will be automatically dismissed. The one who drinks in the workplace will not have his job anymore. "Parasitism" and "laziness" are pursued. "To dismiss, they just have to find a nut, minus one person," Piotr laughs.

To the usual guards, a new corps of surveillance was added composed of policemen, sometimes with dogs: there is one regiment of policemen that is henceforth included in the factory's strength. They were hired in order to keep watch over the guards, suspected to let some thefts be committed, in exchange for a service or for a bottle of vodka. Piotr, exemplary workman, always punctual, mindful of the orders from his superiors, sees himself hence, as the others, suddenly considered as a potential delinquent, a dishonest worker. He bares his heart to me, in a laconic way: "This frisking is a little bit frustrating because they look at you as a potential thief."

This negation of the worker's value, straightaway subject to be stigmatized as a "parasite", is intensified by the fact that the managers and the policemen, height of cynicism, misappropriate big quantities of factory's materials.

Recently they succeeded in taking 16 tons of metals that don't rust, noble metals. If they had not broken the crane, nobody would have noticed. The guard shut his eyes to it. All the thefts are committed on Fridays. And on Monday we come and we see that the crane is derailed. We saw that 16 tons of metal were lacking. It is said that it is not possible to steal that without help from the policemen. I am sure that a policeman went with the car because every policeman on the road should have stopped the car. There is no more metal.

In this configuration the dacha's uses take on a new dimension. The dacha becomes an essential refuge within which the recovery of the fragile self can begin. The *savoir-faire* implemented is naturally recognized in the product of the work. When I speak about such dacha's use, Maria and Piotr's faces suddenly light up, they look at me and approve actively. I had the impression to formulate something that had been ineffable for them until this moment. I wrote in my field journal (May 6, 2002): "the vegetable garden seems to appear as an important way to "hold out", to keep as sense of personal dignity and a positive self-image. When I proposed this explanation to them, their faces opened up and they confirmed what I said, as if I had just expressed something that they felt but couldn't articulate". Here is the extract from the interview.

Why do you still produce as much as you do, because planting potatoes is a difficult work? Is there a pleasure that comes from being able to control a little bit of what you do? Because at the factory Piotr is a little deprived of what he does, he is not recognized, he is not paid... And there, at the dacha Piotr can find a place where it is possible to be the master of what he does?

Maria: Yes this is this feeling; you feel that you are the master of what you do. You do everything from beginning to end; you have control of the situation. It all depends on your own work. We plant and we harvest whatever we like, we sow the seeds of what we have created.

Is it important to see the tangible results of your work?

Maria: Yes, it is very important.

To be able to recover it, whereas at the factory, the product of your work is not always recoverable?

Maria: Yes, to reach a reward is very important, you see the fruits of your labor."

It is not possible to leave the factory to find another job where these types of conditions exist. It is thanks to this gardening culture that the subject succeeds in distancing himself from the generalized degradation of working conditions within the factory. The implementation of certain competences outside the factory seems to make it possible to accept doing less at the factory. Succeeding in doing something out of the factory

helps these workmen to reconstruct a stable self-image and helps them to avoid confusion of the factory's weakness with a personal weakness. Gardening has a role of "shock absorber" in the process of subjective self-destruction caused by the degradation of the working conditions, the drop in social status.

In general are these people who own a dacha the best workers?

Piotr: At work we rest after gardening at dachas [Piotr, Maria and Yuri laugh]. Yes, because the one who doesn't do anything still has strength and a lot of energy. It may seem to you to be a joke, but in fact that's the way it is; we work during the weekend, we come back to the factory and we rest. Whether you work or not, you earn the same wage. So everybody rests on Mondays. But in general we work normally. It is almost the same rhythm for everybody. We work in brigades."

Within the brigades, workmen no longer try to write down on paper projects for the rationalization of the production like they used to, which could allow them to share some extra earnings among companions. They speak about dachas, harvesting, and weather forecasts. Gardening permits them to employ competences for themselves, to prove that in the order of natural fairness, it may be possible that the work they do would be justly rewarded. The fact that gardening takes on a collective dimension, that most of the friends, the colleagues own their garden, allows one to assume this picture of oneself decentered from the subjective pivot constituted until now by the factory: these talks about dachas within the factory certainly have a practical function, which is to exchange advice, to suggest experimentation, to share experiences; but they may also allow the workers to not feel guilty towards the least human investment in the factory, to assume more easily the distance instituted towards the work at the factory.

Time for oneself

The factory is going under. Wages are paid late. The factory's directors set forced time off: in April 2002 this measure affected between 70% and 80 % of the employees. Employees still have to be paid, though minimally, even if there is no work. For the employees the everyday is stamped with great uncertainty.

Every day we go to work but we never know if we are going to turn around and go back home, work two thirds of a day, if we are going to be paid for two hours of work.

Waiting to be paid, the uncertainty of which tasks to perform each day, make the everyday disturbing, harrowing. The projects brought into play some time ago might never disappear. Piotr and Maria are afraid that they might not be able to pay the tuition fees for their son any more.

Before, we earned enough money to bring up our children, buy food, we saved up a little bit, we bought the desk, the bed, and now we don't have enough money to buy an overhead light [laugh]. We live from one paycheck to the next. What is difficult is to pay university for Yuri. His fees take more than one whole paycheck. That leaves just one paycheck to provide for the three of us.

The economic depression causes a transformation within the workplace with relation to time. Broken, marked by profound irregularities, this artificially "heteronomous" time has an effect on the workers' bodies and increases the individuals' psychological tension. This displacement of everyday time at the factory is added to the system of small dispossessions of time characterizing the Soviet city: distances between the shops, queues, shortages, water cuts (Verdery 1996)... The vegetable garden is a place where it is possible to restore oneself. Gardening is equivalent to composing with matter, organize elements, order a piece of the universe; this exchange with matter is done to the desired rhythm, the passing of time is no longer broken by external constraints (Bitov 1999, Schwartz 1990). Moreover, in an uncertain economic environment, the existence of the garden and the fact that it is possible to feel like the master of a part of one's own future resources (which is not the case for wages or pensions), can calm the subject. The dacha and the products that will be harvested can be relied upon.

The couple restored

The dacha is a different place; it presents an alternative. It offers the possibility of openness and consequently can soothe tensions that may exist within the household, or to strengthen the ties between certain family members. The scarcity of urban flats and the chronic lack of dwelling places creates a situation characterizing the Soviet everyday life:

different generations have to live together in a small space, endure continual constant surveillance by other members of the family, which limits the possibilities of safeguarding a sphere of intimacy (Kehayan and Keyahan 1978; Messina 1995). It is difficult to question people about these types of difficulties. I sometimes succeeded, through discussions, in getting the points of contention that weigh on the household, but I never managed to open a direct discussion on these issues. Through scattered anecdotes I succeeded in perceiving the dull threat that weighs on everyday life and on the fragile stability of the family, due to the chronic lack of personal space. In an indirect way the existence of dacha allows to feel more at home, when people are in town or at the dacha: the dacha allows, thanks to subtle displacements of the family members, to further the existence of a sphere of intimacy, room for oneself, where it is possible to be oneself. Piotr and Maria have been living for two years with Maria's mother who is suffering from an affliction of the brain. She hardly articulates and often groans to indicate to them that she needs something. Greatly affected by the difficulties at the factory, Piotr and Maria furthermore have to bear this particularly burdensome everyday presence. When they go to the dacha they leave the old lady in the flat; their daughter, sometimes their son, takes care of her. At the dacha they rediscover a certain intimacy. They garden together, can be alone with one another, and together share this pleasure of gardening, relax at lunchtime, watching the fruit of their common labor. When I ask them the question: "At the dacha, do you rediscover intimacy, as a couple?" they answer with a honeyed tone, full of mischief, looking at each other: "of course".

In addition to the lack of occasions for intimacy, there is yet another threat that weighs on the stability of the couple – alcoholism. At first one might remark that the figure of the drunken man, even the blind drunk, is not systematically stigmatized in Belarus, this is far from being the case. However, the non-regulated consumption of alcohol might cause an "unhinging" and the makings for an alcoholic's "career". The attitude admitted in certain circumstances (parties, feasts) and in certain places (at home) is that the consumption of alcohol to the point of drunkenness doesn't seem to be in itself dishonorable in the woman's eyes. However, the chronic, non-regulated consumption of alcohol, out of the home

constitutes a threat to the stability of the couple. Thus, in 1985, the first reason put forth by women applying for divorce was the husband's alcoholism (Kerblay and Lavigne 1985). It seems that one of the attitudes of the wife within the couple is not to outright forbid her husband to drink alcohol but to bring him back home, to prevent him from running off outside (the street, the public bench, the kiosk) and to prevent him from drinking the entire bottle with a couple of his drinking companions: it seems to be a "struggle to territorialize the other" (Schwartz 1990), notably in order to prevent him, as much as she can, from behaviors which could be destructive to the family.

In May 2002 I was going for a walk with Piotr and Yuri around the buildings in their neighborhood. Piotr wanted me to meet Ivan for an interview (he is one of his co-workers at the factory and owns a dacha too). At a window, on the fifth story, Piotr sees Ivan and calls to him. He asks him to come down to talk and eventually to have a beer (we have already drunk two). Ivan answers: "But I can't, I am tied up!" He points out that his wife is keeping him in the flat and that he submits in this case to her authority. Piotr cannot drink as much as he would like. He takes advantage of my presence to go for a walk and drink some beer, to drink vodka (with everybody) at dinner, or on the occasion of orthodox Easter. Would he be tempted by a more vast consumption of alcohol, as the temptation is great when the psychological tension caused by a drop in status and social prestige is intense, when he doesn't know if he can still pay tuition fees for his son? Is his wife not more capable, thanks to gardening, on one hand of keeping watch over him and on the other hand showing him, through the results and the satisfaction of their gardening together, the pride they get from it, that he is worth more than the man who drinks his life away?

At the dacha people work, so occasions to drink in large quantities seem to be less frequent. Gardening requires alertness, regular and consistent activity, as well as a physical investment. The alcoholic is rarely a very good gardener. Moreover, when someone drinks, the structure of the "dacha massifs" infers a system of looks from the neighbours, which acts as a form of social control. It seems that it is more difficult to drink there, or if men do drink, it is on the margin of the domestic sphere, where the wife might intervene to "stow away" the man inside the home.

Thus, the analysis of this familial story shows that gardening doesn't have to be only interpreted as a survival strategy. If, from an economic point of view, the garden sometimes aids, it is overall a space that allows for the individual, from a subjective point of view, to persevere. Maria and Piotr experience financial difficulties but also the degradation of their working conditions, their social status: their everyday life is marked by dispossessions of time and by a continual tension on the sphere of their intimacy; in this familial configuration, alcoholism appears to Maria's eyes as a threat on the stability of the couple, even if Piotr consumes beer and vodka in moderation. The garden has an important role in maintaining an acceptable identity to him and to others.

In effect, the garden may be considered as a "tool kit" (Swidler 1986) of symbols, gestures, stories, representations: individuals draw from it disparate elements, adjust them in different ways, according to the configuration of their social and personal trajectory, and thus can resolve or soothe tensions which weigh on them. The garden is an index in which the individuals select some components, organize them in various geometries, in order to constantly negotiate and renegotiate their identity. Gardening is also a symbolic conquest for the one who is the subject of it: it restores meaning to an environment that arouses anguish, it restores a model of fairness in a trajectory whose breakdown is lived as unfair, depersonalized, as a fatality. The garden reduces the field of possibilities, but makes a certain reality desirable. The garden opens up a space allowing an elaboration of the lines of action, and simultaneously closes or reduces the necessity to resort to other spaces implying other strategies.

This ambiguity takes on a tragic characteristic in the situation of those dwelling in areas contaminated by the Chernobyl catastrophe. One quarter of the country's soil has officially been contaminated (essentially in the south and in the east). The nuclear catastrophe of April 26th 1986 caused disastrous health consequences in Belarus. According to Professor Nesterenko, director of the Institute of Nuclear Energy at the Belarusian Academy of Sciences at the time of the catastrophe, (his professional standing diminished ever since and suffering the constant pressures of the KGB, ordering him not to spread panic among the population) two million people, among whom 500,000 are children, presently live in contaminated areas of

Belarus. "The children are the first victims of the radiation, and 80 % of the contamination comes from the food they eat. Milk, game, mushrooms and berries are the most dangerous foodstuffs. In Belarus most of the heavily irradiated soils (23 % of the national territory) are still cultivated" (Nougayrede 2000).

The importance of the dacha in the domestic economy, in family ties, its role in restoring the self submitted to difficult constraints (in the sphere of work, in the Soviet urban environment) point out the tragic dimension of existence in contaminated territories. To give up gardening and consuming the products cultivated in a radioactive soil means preserving oneself from a risk of contamination, but it also means risking a form of social Death (Boceno, Grandazzi and Lemarchand 1997). In brief, a slow poisoning takes place.

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Notes

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² "In the middle of the decade of communist transformations (1994), the growth in number of suicides is quite tragic; then taking a basis 100 in 1989, starting line for the new political systems, the indexes are the following: (...) Belarus, 140" (Colas 2002).

³ Murard and Zylberman 1976.

⁴ The tuitions fees in public universities, in some prestigious paths are also very high.

⁵ Another example is revealing. A couple of pensioners were able to give me precise data, because all the results are recorded in an account book. They were both university professors. He is 82 years old, she is 78. Their pension was divided in two during the last ten years, on account of the inflation. They gather (every two years) almost one tonne of apples. In 2000 they harvested 34 kilos of pumpkins, 45 kilos of courgettes, 32 kilos of cucumbers, 10 kilos of onions, 3 kilos of peas, 87.5 kilos of tomatoes, 15 kilos of carrots, several dozen kilos of cherries and plums, cabbages for the summer, celeriac, parsley, and other herbs... They make apple liqueur (40 litres), birch juice (200 litres), apple juice (76 litres in 1999), red currant juice (20 litres in 2000), tomato juice (5 litres in 2000)... They make preserves, sauces, jams. They also cultivate potatoes (250 kilos). The man fishes during the winter: in 2000 he caught 70 kilos. Due to this, they never buy vegetables or fruit (except occasionally bananas and lemons).

⁶ Other arguments may be found in support of this thesis. There are differences between regions which are difficult to explain in purely economic terms. Those households who do not “need” dachas to survive devote as much time and energy to them as other people. Also, a lot of people declare that the economic role of dachas is weak (even if it is difficult to trust some statements, notably because of the shame felt by some people in declaring and telling to themselves that they are reduced to the garden to survive) and that they don’t work in the garden because of economic reasons. So we can remark that the practices of households with upper-middle incomes are very similar to the practices of households with lower-middle incomes. If they cultivate in such quantities, it cannot only be for economic reasons.

⁷ During the food production process there may be exchanges between neighbours: exchanges of advices, of information, of recipes, dexterity, methods, exchanges of seeds, exchanges of products (seldom), exchanges of services (often limited), reciprocity in the work characterizes to a certain extent the relations with the neighbours. But these relations are also (and overall) characterized by recurrent tensions.

“Don’t choose your place, choose your neighbours”: this proverb mentioned during an interview conveys quite well the fact that, although it might be a source of mutual aid, the neighbourhood is more often a source of everyday tensions.