

*Andrzej Zawistowski**

RATIONING IN POLAND

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Abstract

Card rationing was one of the most important symbols of imbalance in domestic trade Poles faced in the 20th century. Rationing of staple consumer goods accompanied Poles in the 20th century for over 30 years. First, during World War I and the first post-war years. Next, during World War II and the years which followed, this period lasting, with but a short break, till 1953. And, finally, in the years 1976–1989. Each of those rationing periods had a specificity of its own, being the resultant of the circumstances in which it was introduced. The article provides a synthetic discussion of the rationing systems referred to and the contexts in which they operated.

Keywords: rationing, trade, shortage economy, cards, the People’s Republic of Poland

Introduction

Card rationing of staple consumer goods accompanied Poles in the 20th century for over 30 years. First, during World War I and the first post-war years. Next, during World War II and the years which followed, this period lasting, with but a short break, till 1953. And, finally, in the years 1976–1989. After the fall of communism, cards ceased to function in general trade. Yet, they remained an instrument ready to be used in an emergency situation.

Rationing trade is a well-known instrument of economic policy. It was applied in many countries of different economic and political systems. Card supply was used when demand was significantly higher than supply. As a rule, such situations were caused by wars, natural disasters or crop failures. In order to guarantee everybody a possibility of access to minimum food portions, to counteract a significant

* Collegium of Socio-Economics, SGH Warsaw School of Economics.

growth of prices and – which is of no less importance – to ensure social peace, the authorities of a country or a region would decide to determine the rations everybody was to be entitled to. It was different in the communist, centrally planned economy. In this case rationing was resorted to also due to the market imbalance caused by a wrong economic policy.¹

1. The first cards

After the outbreak of World War I, one of the priorities of the countries involved in the conflict was to supply the fighting army. Deliveries to civilians were limited to the necessary minimum. A mixed system prevailed, that is rationed goods were sold to the entitled at a special, low price and concurrently the same goods were available on the free market at much higher prices.²

The Germans who invaded the Polish territory, hitherto under the Russian occupation, in the years 1914–1915 were quick to introduce rationing there. In the first place it covered staples: bread, flour, sugar and potatoes. The allowances for Poles were half lower than those then in existence in Germany. Food rationing as well as high market prices caused the average consumption per an inhabitant of the Polish Kingdom towards the end of the war to be three times smaller than before its outbreak.

The Austrian authorities also introduced food rationing both in Galicia, which belonged to them, and in the old Polish territories belonging to Russia prior to the war, which under the Austrian occupation came to be known as the Lublin General Government.

Problems with supply did not end on 11 November 1918, that is on the day on which Poland symbolically regained independence. What yet awaited Poles was a long fight for the borders of the reborn state. That is why the economy was still primarily oriented for the needs of the army and rationing in retail trade was still in force. In 1919, with cards, that is at a low price, one could buy bread, sugar, salt, lard and also with cards, accessible only to part of the entitled, flour, groats, peas, tea, potatoes and coal. However, the catalogue of products and the rules of their allocation often changed. Entitled to cards were in principle only inhabitants of big cities (ca. 15% of the country's population); excluded from the system were inhabitants of villages

¹ D. Jarosz, M. Pasztor, *Afera mięsna: fakty i konteksty*, CEE, Toruń 2004, pp. 146–147; J. Kornai, *Niedobór w gospodarce*, PWE, Warszawa 1985, pp. 550–551; W. Roszkowski, *Kartkowe zaopatrzenie*, [in:] *Encyklopedia historii gospodarczej Polski do roku 1945*, vol. 1, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1981, pp. 301–302.

² *Ibidem*, p. 301.

and small towns, as they were deemed to have much greater possibilities of acquiring cheaper food and wood (replacing coal sold for heating cards),³ Rationed sale of foodstuffs was abandoned only in 1921, after the end of the war with Bolshevik Russia. Heating cards remained in use till the end of the winter of 1921/1922.

Rationing came back during World War II. Card rationing was particularly widespread in the General Government. Already in November 1939, sugar began to be sold for cards and a month later bread (in some places it had begun even earlier). Next, allocations of flour, marmalade, malt coffee, potatoes, meat and fat were introduced. The system was in force for several months so as to reach full efficiency from 1 January 1941. That rationing, covering urban population, not only limited the possibility of acquiring provisions but was, in the first place, an element of the German policy of discrimination against Poles and Jews. Their allocations were much lower than those for the Germans.⁴ After 1 October 1943, card rations for Poles were increased to persuade them to work harder for the German occupant. In general, however, with shortages in shops, the population was able to survive solely thanks to a fully developed black market and their own resourcefulness.⁵

In the Polish territories incorporated into the Reich rationing took effect at the beginning of 1941 (though in some localities its regional varieties had begun to operate already in 1939). It covered foodstuffs and fabrics, clothes and shoes. Paradoxically, Poles and Jews who stayed in these territories were entitled to allocations higher than in the GG. They were reduced in 1943 but even then they remained higher than in the GG (with the exception of certain ghettos, for instance, the one of Łódź). The best situation was in Silesia, where Poles were given the same cards as the Germans.⁶

Under the Soviet occupation the card system had not been in operation till 1941. It was true that attempts were made to introduce it in individual towns, but the central authorities were against it. Yet, the sale of goods to an individual person was limited. The limitations were accompanied by shortages of goods and spread of the black market.⁷

³ J. Tomaszewski, *Handel reglamentowany w Polsce 1918–1921*, “Zeszyty Naukowe SGPiS” No. 56, 1965, pp. 18, 23–31.

⁴ I. Kostrowicka, Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Historia gospodarcza Polski XIX i XX wiek*, KiW, Warszawa 1984, p. 416.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 416; C. Madajczyk, *Polityka III Rzeszy w okupowanej Polsce*, PWN, Warszawa 1970, p. 78.

⁶ Ibidem, pp. 43–45.

⁷ W. Baran, *Przekształcenia ekonomiczne na Ukrainie Zachodniej w latach 1939–1941*, ‘Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość’ No. 1, 2002, pp. 486–493; W. Bonusiak, *Polityka ludnościowa i ekonomiczna ZRSS na okupowanych ziemiach polskich w latach 1939–1941* (‘Zachodnia Ukraina’ i ‘Zachodnia Białoruś’), WUR, Rzeszów 2006, pp. 225–241.

2. People's Poland: from July 1944 to January 1949

From July 1944 the Polish Committee of National Liberation, that is the quasi-government created by the Soviets and Polish communists, was trying to control the situation as regards the supply of the population. According to the system adopted in autumn 1944, entitled to cards were all employed hired workers, their families, some owners of industrial plants and people performing free professions. The right to ration cards was also given to unemployed people in state custody: the disabled, pensioners, single mothers with minor children, families of soldiers, families of the fallen as well as people incapable of taking up work.⁸

In the years 1944 and 1945, products sold for cards included bread, fat, meat, potatoes, groats, sugar, tea, salt, matches and kerosene. Five categories of provision cards were introduced and allotted according to the criterion of the usefulness of particular groups of people to the national economy and for social considerations. People employed in public and self-government institutions on posts considered to be of major importance as well as employees of plants working for the state (public, private under state or council management) received Category I Cards (guaranteeing larger allotments). Other employees of public institutions and employees of private enterprises working for state needs received Category II cards. Families of employees of both of the above groups received IR cards (R for 'rodzina' = family). Category III cards were issued to lawyers and owners of enterprises working for the free market, freelancers and housewives. Their families received IIR category cards.⁹ Allotments were also diversified depending on the size of the locality. The distribution of cards was usually done through workplaces and in the case of the unemployed through house committees, house owners (or caretakers), housing departments or local authorities.

The ration cards system enforced was of mixed character: free market and rationing existed parallel to each other. Goods covered by cards were to be supplied at fixed prices, lower than market prices. In this way cards were a substitute for part of the remuneration and simultaneously raised real wages. There were substantial amounts involved. It is worth remembering that in the second half of the 1940s food expenses constituted approximately 50% of the budgetary expenses of an average household;

⁸ H. Gnatowska, *Funkcjonowanie systemu aprowizacji ludności w Polsce w latach 1944–1948*, Zeszyty Naukowe Filii UW in Białymstoku. "Humanistyka" No. 8, 1983, pp. 144–145.; Z. Grodek, *Zaopatrzenie kartkowe w okresie Rządu Tymczasowego (31 grudnia 1944 – czerwiec 1945)*, "Przegląd Historyczny" No. 4, 1969, p. 685.

⁹ H. Gnatowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 146–147.

in blue-collar workers' families they were even higher, for instance, in 1950 they amounted to almost as much as 70%.¹⁰

According to Zofia Grodek, in mid-1945, a full monthly ration allotment of the highest-ranking group cost on the free market ca. 2,500 PLN while, for instance, a worker in the textile industry earned ca. 1,000 PLN (and was thus condemned exclusively to card-based provision) and an office worker ca. 3,600 PLN a month.¹¹ Besides it happened that many employees would receive their pay partly (even up to 50%) in kind even for several months.¹²

All looked perfect only on paper, the everyday reality being much more complex. At the turn of spring and summer 1945, in the region of Kielce, it was impossible to buy card guaranteed rations of meat and fats, and often also bread. It was similar in Białystok, Olsztyn, Cracow and Warsaw, though in the capital supply was slightly better. Workers in Łódź openly admitted stealing because the card allotments of staples were very low and they could not afford to buy things on the free market.¹³ That is why the rationing system was being steadily worked on and made more specific.¹⁴

Not all citizens were, however, entitled to cards. In 1946, only approximately 41% of the country's population had access to them and a year later – 34%. The number of those entitled to meat cards, the second most important product after bread, oscillated around 40% of the country's inhabitants in 1946, around 18% in 1947 and around 29% in 1948.¹⁵

The catalogue of rationed goods changed together with the political, geopolitical and economic situation. With time, further items were crossed out from the list of rationed goods. In 1946, matches and vegetables ceased to be rationed, in October of the same year – tea and coffee. In 1947, cards for salt and kerosene were cancelled, from 1 January 1948 for potatoes, from 1 April for sugar, groats and knitted goods. On 29 September 1948, the Council of Ministers passed a law on the abandonment of cards for bread, flour and coal. Finally, the system of rationing in retail trade ceased to exist in Poland from 1 January 1949.¹⁶ Simultaneously, wages were regulated to offset the resignation from cards.

¹⁰ D. Jarosz, *Reakcje społeczne na niedobory mięsa w Polsce w latach 1945–1989 (zarys problematyki)*, [in:] *Polska 1944/89*, "Studia i Materiały" Vol. VII, IH PAN, Warszawa 2006, p. 225.

¹¹ Z. Grodek, *op. cit.*, pp. 686–687; B. Brzostek, *PRL na widelcu*, BAOBAB, Warszawa 2010, p. 20.

¹² D. Jarosz, M. Pasztor, *Afera mięsna ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

¹³ M. Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys*, Znak, ISP PAN, Kraków 2012, pp. 251, 520, 521, 526, 552.

¹⁴ Decree of 27 June 1946 on the rationing of population supply with staple goods, *Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland* 1946, No. 35, item 217.

¹⁵ A. Zawistowski, *Bilety do sklepu. Handel reglamentowany w PRL*, PWN, Warszawa 2017, p. 86.

¹⁶ State Archive in Elbląg with the seat in Malbork (hereinafter referred to as APEM), District Office in Elbląg (hereinafter referred to as SPE) 248, Decree No. 20 of the Minister of Supply of 29 September 1948,

3. Return to vouchers

Did cards really disappear from circulation in January 1949? The decision on resignation from them was announced¹⁷ in the period of the formation of the Polish United Workers' Party, which was extremely stormy in terms of propaganda. Thus, although rationing was drawing to an end, six types of fat vouchers were introduced in dozens of towns at the same time. The highest allotments were assigned to pit workers, steelworkers working in health-threatening conditions and the technical management of mines and ironworks.¹⁸ Voucher owners had to register with a shop where the date of collecting the allotment was set. The buyer had no choice as to what he/she would be sold. It could happen to be butter, pork fat, margarine.¹⁹ Children's cards entitled to butter and margarine. At the same time vouchers were also introduced for milk for people receiving family allowances. However, it happened that rationing of individual products, for instance, meat,²⁰ was occasionally and locally introduced until April 1950. Fat vouchers disappeared on 1 July, 1950.

Supply in Poland deteriorated already in 1951. The international situation only magnified anxiety. Goods were massively bought. Party agitators were sent to shops to calm down moods but what they met with was only mob aggression. Rationing of supplies returned spontaneously – enterprises arranged the purchase and distribution of meat for their workers on their own. The local authorities limited sales to people from outside of a given town, for instance, shops were closed so that the

c. 439; National Archive in Cracow. Branch Office in Spytkowice (ANKS), Regional Supply Center in Cracow (hereinafter referred to as RCA Kr), Decree No. 14 of the Ministry of Supply of 30 June 1948, n.p.

¹⁷ The decision on the termination of card sale was, however, made much earlier, already in May 1948 Protocol no. 19 from the meeting of the Political Office of 25 May 1948, in: *Protokoły posiedzeń Biura Politycznego KC PPR 1947–1948*, A. Kocharński, (Ed.), ISP PAN, Warszawa 2002, p. 216.

¹⁸ State Archive in Szczecin (hereinafter referred to as APS), Voivodeship Office in Szczecin (hereinafter referred to as UWS), Decree of the Minister of Industry and Trade of 31 December 1948 on determining people entitled to receive fat vouchers, c. 18–20; Decree of the Minister of Industry and Trade of 26 January 1949 on amendment to the Decree of the Minister of Industry and Trade of 31 December 1948 on determining people entitled to receive fat vouchers, c. 22; APS, UWS 3919, Letter of the Ministry of Home Trade to the Department of Home Trade of the Voivodeship Office in Szczecin of 29 March 1949, c. 31; APS, UWS 3919, Letter of the Ministry of Home Trade to the Department of Home Trade of the Voivodeship Office in Szczecin of 16 April 1949, c. 33; M. Jastrzab, *Puste Pólki. Problem zaopatrzenia ludności w artykuły powszechnego użytku w Polsce w latach 1949–1956*, Leon Koźmiński Wyższa Szkoła Przedsiębiorczości i Zarządzania, Warszawa 2004, p. 136.

¹⁹ APS, UWS 3919, Decree of the Minister of Home Trade of 31 December 1948 on the determination of people entitled to receive fat vouchers, c. 17–21; APS, UWS 3919, Letter of Ministry of Home Trade to the Department of Home Trade of the Voivodeship Office in Szczecin of 11 March 1949, c. 27.

²⁰ M. Jastrzab, op. cit., pp. 145–146, 148.

coming farmers would not buy out deficit goods.²¹ All that served one purpose – to calm down social moods.

The supply problems were, however, causing ever greater social discontent, strikes were breaking out. The decision was made to restore rationing. On 29 August 1951 the Council of Ministers passed a resolution on ‘facilitating the purchase of meat, pork fat and meat products in September 1951’, which was then regularly extended.²² However, the action of voucher issuing had already begun a day earlier and covered people employed in 1,363 plants located in 14 voivodeships (Koszalińskie, Olsztyńskie and Białostockie voivodeships being exceptions) and two townships (Warsaw and Łódź). In total, in the days which followed cards reached an over two-million group of blue- and white-collar workers in 290 localities.²³ In the months that followed the list of the entitled was gradually extended.

When the rationing was introduced, it was planned to remain in force for a short time. When the solution proved to be more permanent, the authorities began to change the rules. Instructions appeared giving detailed descriptions of the assortment of meat to be rationed. It increased gradually, with the assortment of meat available for general, non-rationed sale shrinking. The number of rationed products also increased with next products being added – in December 1951 – butter and vegetable fats and stockings, in April 1952 – soap and washing agents, in May 1952 – sugar, candy and sugar-based products.²⁴

Goods covered by rationing could be bought also on the free market at the so-called commercial prices. In free turnover, in March 1952, butter was 42% more expensive than the rationed, margarine 83% and lard 32%. Commercial sales were gradually extended onto other varieties of meat.²⁵

The introduction of rationing not only failed to liquidate social tensions but even fuelled them in some cases. The lack of equalitarianism in the allotment of cards kindled hostility towards those who received them, for instance, by coining for them a special nickname. An outflow of workers from plants not covered by rationing to those where workers enjoyed the privilege was also observed.²⁶

²¹ D. Jarosz, M. Pasztor, *Afera mięsna...* op. cit., p. 224.

²² AAN, Office of the Council of Ministers (hereinafter referred to as URM) 5/1148, Protocol No. 25/51 from the meeting of the Presidium of the Government on 29 August 1951, c. 372–375.

²³ M. Jastrząb, op. cit., pp. 160–167; D. Jarosz, M. Pasztor, *Z badań nad stosunkiem władz Polski Ludowej do niedoborów mięsa*, *Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych* 2005, p. 252; D. Jarosz, M. Pasztor, *Afera mięsna ...* op. cit., p. 244.

²⁴ A. Zawistowski, op.cit., pp. 119–120.

²⁵ AAN, URM 9/171, Theses on the ‘R’ action, c. 84; AAN, URM 9/171, Specification of meat prices, December 1952, c. 201.

²⁶ D. Jarosz, M. Pasztor, *Afera mięsna ...*, op. cit., p. 245.

It turned out that rationing did not always calm down the situation in trade. People were buying goods *en masse*, fearing further limitations. In addition, all sorts of irregularities appeared in the distribution of cards. Those were only some of the reasons underpinning the resignation from the ration card system on 3 January 1953. The abandonment of rationing was accompanied by considerable price rises – prices reached the commercial price level and in the case of meat and fats an even higher level.²⁷ After that date there were only isolated, spontaneous attempts at the rationing of goods which were, however, fought by the government.

4. From product tickets to supply inserts

The economy of the Polish People's Republic was for years chronically inefficient. Its functioning was not dependent on the real needs of citizens but on the political decisions of the communist party. The authorities navigated between the implementation of the ideological assumptions of the communist system and the necessity of at least partially satisfying the growing consumption aspirations of the society. Edward Gierek's administration in power from December 1970 undertook a risky and, as it turned out, largely irresponsible economic policy, entirely detached from basic rules of economics. The amount of money on the market, money which had no coverage in goods, kept growing, while prices, frozen by the state, did not move. A specific form of inflation developed – suppressed inflation. Meanwhile, people having more and more money at their disposal were buying ever more goods fearing that they might disappear from shops. As prices did not grow, they only encouraged such behaviour. It was the beginning of the process of collapse in supply. Queues in front of shops (even bookshops and gas stations) were growing and people were buying out anything that was delivered on the spot. Goods of no use to the buyer could always be exchanged for another product sought after.

Realizing how dangerous a course Polish economy was taking, in June 1976, the authorities decided to at least partly adjust prices to the real production costs. However, the rise precipitated social protests, which made the government quickly withdraw from the planned changes. Yet, the society was attentively listening to the statements made by the 1st Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United

²⁷ AAN, URM 9/173, Resolution of the Council of Ministers of 3 January 1953 on the abandonment of vouchers-based supply, price regulation, general price rise and lifting of limitations in trade in farm products' surpluses, c. 109–110; ANN, URM 9/173, Resolution No. 2/53 of the Presidium of the Government of 3 January 1953 on the abandonment of the vouchers-based system and adoption of uniform prices, c. 115.

Workers' Party, Edward Gierek, and Prime Minister, Piotr Jaroszewicz, concluding from them that another attempt at changing prices was only the question of time. No wonder people stormed shops. The calming down communiqués made by the authorities were of no avail. Workers and office workers left work to stand in queues. There were cases when a mob of customers would practically demolish a shop or ransack the back of a shop to seize goods stored there. Spontaneous rationing, that is a limitation of the quantity sold to one customer, immediately appeared. It was an attempt at not only calming down the conflict threatening situation but also at self-defence on the part of shop staff facing a lynch threat.²⁸

Sugar came to enjoy particular interest among buyers. Its black market price skyrocketed almost overnight, exceeding the official price by over 100%. The authorities were doing their best to counteract the situation. Sugar was sold in places of work or only in selected, controlled and protected, shops. Personal lists of buyers were prepared. Speculation was also fought against. Between 15 July and 15 August 1976 boards judging petty offences received 578 motions for punishing speculators.²⁹ All those moves failed to bring the desired effects.

The helpless authorities had no choice but to resort to the rationed sale of sugar. The decision took effect on 12 August 1976.³⁰ The recipients of cards got the right to purchase a specified quantity of sugar at the price hitherto in force (10.50 PLN per kilo). The remaining quantity of the product was available at a commercial price (26 PLN per kilo). However, most farmers were deprived of the right to sugar cards. Officially, the blame was put on speculators and 'hoarders'.

The decision brought the desired effect. Firstly, it calmed down the social moods tense because of market shortages. Secondly, it reduced sugar consumption so that a surplus appeared which could be exported. Thirdly, the more difficult access to sugar limited illegal alcohol production and increased the revenues from the production of alcohol by state enterprises. In the mid-70s state budget revenues from the sale of alcohol accounted for 12.5 to 14% of total budget revenues.³¹

The introduction in August 1976 of sugar cards can suggest that shortages affected mainly this product. It was not so. The inspection conducted in mid-September 1976 by the National Trade Inspection revealed enormous shortages of staple goods. The most sensitive of them, bread was lacking in 0.3% of the inspected sale points, milk

²⁸ A. Zawistowski, *op. cit.*, p. 167–169.

²⁹ P. Sasanka, *Czerwiec 1976. Geneza – przebieg – konsekwencje*, IPN, Warszawa 2006, pp. 373–374, 381–385.

³⁰ AAN, URM 94/73, Resolution No. 174 of the Council of Ministers on the introduction for a temporary period of sale of sugar on product tickets and commercial sale of sugar, c. 446.

³¹ K. Kosiński, *Historia pijaństwa w czasach PRL. Polityka – obyczaje – szara strefa – patologie*, Neriton, IH PAN, Warszawa 2008, p. 48.

already in 2.85%, Wrocławska flour in 4.2%, pasta in 7.2%, poultry in 17.5%, fish fillet in 20.6%, meat in 20.8%, beer in 21.5%, sausage in 31.1%, groats in 34.8%, oil in 36.8%, corn flakes in 58.7%, rice in 59.7%, lard in 75.6%³². At the beginning of the 1980s shortages in supply affected 80% of all consumer goods. Sociological research carried out in September 1976 to see the possible reception of the introduction of meat cards showed 59% positive and only 27% negative answers.³³ Yet, this step was not taken.

Psychologists described a phenomenon characteristic of human perception of the future. People longed for the old solutions even if earlier they deemed them unfavourable (in the 1950s rationing was considered a cumbersome solution). It was the same with cards; tired of market shortages, people began to demand rationing. Many considered it to be the most just and fair system of the distribution of goods being in short supply. The positive experience with sugar rationing also supported the case. That is why the demand for cards appeared among the postulates put forward by workers on strike in July and August 1980. When the final list of the 21 postulates was prepared on the night from 16 to 17 August 1980 in Lenin Gdynia Shipyard, what was written in Point 11 was: 'Introduce cards – food vouchers for meat and meat products (till the situation on the market is taken under control).'³⁴ A similar postulate appeared in Szczecin.

Signing on 30 August 1980 an agreement with the Inter-Enterprise Strike Committee in Szczecin, and a day later in Gdańsk, the authorities agreed to this postulate. Yet, negotiations on the introduction of meat cards (and later also on the extension of rationing to other groups of goods) lasted a few following months. For a certain time the authorities intended to avoid this step fearing that the introduction of cards (i.e. a difficult to implement guarantee of purchase) would only aggravate the social and economic situation.

The controversy revolved around the diversification of allotments to inhabitants of rural and urban areas and around the type of rationing. For some time a package mechanism, delivery to the staff of enterprises of meat packages prepared according to a uniform instruction, was also considered as an alternative to the card system.

³² Ibidem, p. 383.

³³ OBOP, Problems of product tickets in public opinion. Communique from studies, October 1983, pp. 2–3.

³⁴ 1980 sierpień 16/17, Gdańsk – Żądania strajkujących załóg zakładów pracy i przedsiębiorstw reprezentowanych przez Międzyzakładowy Komitet Strajkowy w Gdańsku, [in:] *Sprawy gospodarcze w dokumentach pierwszej Solidarności*, Vol. I: 16 August 1980–30 June 1981, selection, introduction and editing by J. Luszniwicz, A. Zawistowski, IPN, Warszawa 2008, p. 68.

Again, this resembled the anti-egalitarian solution from the first half of the 1950s. Discussions were going on but no decisions made.³⁵

In November 1980 the authorities forced by the growing pressure on the part of the NSZZ Solidarity presented a plan for the introduction of meat rationing which provided for the cards to have a value-related character (i.e. they were to be divided into segments corresponding to different amounts of money). The project was generally criticized and finally rejected. In December, the minister of home trade and services, Adam Kowalik, again presented to the Political Office of the Central Committee of the PZPR the concept of cards; this time – also under pressure – he increased the monthly allotment of meat and proposed a quantity and value rationing system. The Political Office – as it then seemed, finally – decided to introduce rationing from 1 February 1981.³⁶ In spite of it also this project was not implemented because of the objection of Solidarity.

The rules of meat rationing were finally adopted by the government on 1 April 1981.³⁷ A very complex system of rationing emerged. There were 10 supply categories (depending on the age of the citizen and the type of work performed). Within those norms a detailed list of the assortment of meat allotted was determined. It was divided according to the quality of meat, with the share of better quality meat and sausage always smaller. The rules were supplemented with detailed regulations concerning the way in which the supply cards were to be distributed, used and stored.³⁸ The majority of farmers and part of their families were refused access to cards.

Yet before the card sale of meat got started, the rules of sugar rationing hitherto in force were changed. From 1 March 1981 practically all inhabitants of Poland received sugar allotments, also farmers. Simultaneously, the possibility of its purchase at a commercial price was cancelled.

Meat rationing was theoretically to remain in force for three months. However, problems with supply did not end, and meat, also the amount bought with ration cards, was in short supply. In July 1981 the Council of Ministers extended the rationed sale of meat for another three months (with a possibility of its extension till the end

³⁵ Protocol No. 39 from the meeting of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers; Party, 21 October 1980, [in:] *Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego. PZPR a „Solidarność” 1980–1981*, Z. Włodek, (Ed.), Annex, London 1992, pp. 147–148.

³⁶ Protocol No. 54 from the meeting of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers from 9 December 1980., [in:] *Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego. PZPR a „Solidarność” 1980–1981*, IPN, Warszawa 2013, pp. 318–319.

³⁷ Before the 1980 Christmas Eve regional cards for meat and meat products were introduced in some towns and voivodeships for a short time. A. Zawistowski, op. cit., pp. 309–312.

³⁸ Resolution No. 38 of the Council of Ministers of 20 February 1981 on rationed sale of meat and meat products, MP 1981, No. 7, item 57.

of 1981).³⁹ Simultaneously, from 1 August, part of the norms were reduced by 20%, which gave rise to enormous social discontent and caused an avalanche of protests in the following months.⁴⁰ In October 1981, further corrections were made, among others, from November miners working underground full-shift received an additional allotment of meat and sausage. Interestingly, apart from miners and teenagers, particularly high norms were allotted to meat plants employees. It was supposed to prevent pathological phenomena such as theft or uncontrolled sale outside of the card system.

The introduction of meat rationing opened a 'sack of cards'. Together with the change of the rules of sugar rationing, chocolate cards were introduced. From May also butter and grain products came to be rationed. In the months that followed, the list of goods sold for cards was enriched with washing powder, powder milk, 'Cypisek' washing powder, cotton wool, soap and cosmetic olive oil. Sometimes regulated sale of a given product was introduced solely in a particular voivodeship or town as it was initially with, for instance, alcohol or cigarettes.⁴¹

The proliferation of rules and forms of rationing as well as subsequent changes to the rules in force caused unimaginable chaos for which the authorities were blamed. The situation was stabilized only in December 1981 by the resolution of the Council of Ministers specifying the rules of the rationed sale of goods in 1982. The resolution was adopted at an interesting moment – on Saturday, 12 December, shortly before the introduction of the martial state.⁴² According to the new regulations, from January 1982, rationing was to cover: meat, butter, sugar, candy, chocolate, wheat flour, groats, flakes, rice, alcohol, cigarettes, washing powder, toilet soap, cosmetic oil for children, powder milk for children, milk with 3.2% fat content, lard. Occasionally, also other goods were rationed: oil, shoes, carpets, citrus fruit, school articles (copy-books, sketchbooks, coloured pencils, pencils, pencil sharpeners, rubbers, plastic clay, watercolour paints, brushes). It was a norm that for cards for stimulants one could get other goods: for alcohol or cigarettes – coffee, sweets or imported wine. Equivalents changed with time.⁴³ From 1 March 1982, a card for cards was also introduced, that is a special book in the form of an insert to the identity card where cards issued to a given person were marked.

³⁹ Decision No. 21 of the Minister of Home Trade and Services of 17 October 1981 changing Decree no. 20 of the Minister of Home Trade and Services of 13 July 1981 on rationed sale of meat and its products on the basis of procurement cards, Official Journal of the MHT and S 1981, No. 7, item 21.

⁴⁰ A. Zawistowski, *op.cit.*, pp. 277–278.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 243–258.

⁴² Resolution No. 264 of the Council of Ministers of 12 December 1981 on rationed sale of goods, MP 1981, No.32, item 291.

⁴³ A. Zawistowski, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

Relatively late, because only in February 1984, petrol cards were officially introduced (they came in force in April that year). In practice, fuel rationing had existed before. From the beginning of 1982 the purchase of petrol was limited according to a key being a hybrid of the car registration number and calendar. Cars with the registration number ending in 1 could fill up on the 1st, 11th and 21st day of the month, those with the number ending in 2 on the 2nd, 12th and 22nd of the day, etc. Then the system was formally fixed with a stamp confirming the purchase on a document issued together with compulsory civil liability car insurance. In 1984, massive forgeries of the entries to those documents resulted in the decision to introduce cards.⁴⁴

Rationing was one of the most evident proofs of the collapse of the socialist economy. It was equally troublesome for shop customers, authorities and also shop assistants. A legal bureaucratic system and an illegal black market of forms developed around rationing. No wonder the authorities were striving to do away with rationing, which followed slowly: on the 1st of February 1983 the rationing of washing powder and soap was lifted, in April of the same year, rationing of cigarettes and alcohol, and then sweets terminated. In March 1985, rationing of flour and part of grain products as well as cotton wool ended. June 1985 saw the final abandonment of the card sale of butter and vegetable fats, that is lard, bacon and margarine (it was suspended already in June 1983 but restored from 1 November). In November 1985, the rationing of sugar finished, on the 1st of June 1986 of semolina, on the 1st of March 1988 of chocolate products.⁴⁵

The rationing of petrol remained in force till the end of 1988. Yet, it was not abandoned immediately. On the 1st of July 1988, an exploratory, as it was called, possibility of the purchase of petrol at commercial prices was carried out. In October of the same year, card owners were allowed not to come to the gas station in the car for which the cards were issued. Finally, the cards were totally withdrawn.⁴⁶

The last card product, which is anyway symptomatic, was meat (although it was sugar that was rationed the longest – for 10 years). In July 1986, the 10th Congress of the PZPR declared in its resolution that meat cards would have been abandoned by 1990. Paradoxically, party activists were not very wrong. Meat rationing survived June 1989, which is considered to be the symbolic end of the PRL. It was lifted with the end of July 1989 although numerous plants had managed to distribute the autumn meat cards and printing houses printed yet September cards. Simultaneously, a compensation was promised for meat not bought out under the July 1989 norm.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 462.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, pp. 385–386.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 436.

5. Market economy

Although food cards disappeared from circulation, the problem of staples rationing is still present in Polish legislation. These questions are regulated by the provisions concerning emergency situations (a system of this kind was present in the Polish People's Republic from 1961⁴⁷). The law on the state of a natural disaster provides for a possibility of 'full or partial rationing of supply with articles of a particular kind'.⁴⁸ In turn, in the laws on the state of emergency and state of war the first of possible limitations of human and civil rights and freedoms was deemed to be 'access to consumer goods through full or partial rationing of supply of the population'. A penalty of detention or fine is foreseen for people violating the rules of rationing supply to the population⁴⁹. Also the law on prices gives, indirectly, a possibility to the Council of Ministers to determine the level of official prices and official trade margins with the help of a decree. This is, however, reserved for cases of 'special threats to the proper functioning of the country's economy'.⁵⁰

Rationing of the most necessary products accompanied Poles over one-third of the 20th century. It was first introduced in the years of World War I by the authorities of the invader countries. It was also present in the first years of the reborn Poland. The economic imbalance resulting from enormous outlays on the army fighting for the country's borders as well as inflation caused cards to be used as an instrument of the current economic policy until 1922. Cards appeared in Poles' wallets again during World War II. They were distributed – in different forms – by both occupants. In the People's Poland rationing was one of the final forms of redistribution among citizens. They were introduced three times but only in one case the rationing was caused by objective determinants connected with war operations and their consequences. In the 1950s, 1970s and 1980s, when the authorities resorted to this instrument, it was a proof of their helplessness. What was also important was the justified fear that the introduction of rationing would open new conflict areas over rights, size of allocations, special exceptions, etc. Interestingly, for the society, the card was for a long

⁴⁷ Ibidem, pp. 148–149.

⁴⁸ Law of 18 April 2002 on the state of a natural disaster, Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland, No. 62, item 558.

⁴⁹ Law of 21 June 2002 on the emergency state, Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2002, No. 113, item. 985; Law of 29 August 2002 on the state of war and competences of the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and rules of its subordination to the constitutional bodies of the Republic of Poland, Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2002, No. 156, item 1301.

⁵⁰ Law of 5 July 2001 on prices, Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland 2001, No. 97, item 1050 with amendments.

time an inconvenient but useful guarantee (or delusion) of purchase. This changed only in the 1980s. Did the cards introduced by the state bring the intended result? To some extent – yes. They allowed for artificial stabilisation of supply and control of its distribution as well as also partially calming down social moods. Yet, rationing was a consequence of the imbalance in domestic trade. In the economy of the People's Poland gradual resignation from rationing was not accompanied by ensuring an adequate level of supply with a given product. These problems disappeared only with the collapse of the centrally planned economy.

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