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pages: 17 - 28

CASE STUDY OF AN OLD FARMHOUSE IN OLSZEWO: *PRO MEMORIA*

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Abstract

In 2021, the authors performed a series of field surveys in Podlaskie region, northeastern Poland, looking for culturally significant specimens of vernacular architecture. The search in Brańsk commune (gmina Brańsk) have resulted with finding a small but extremely interesting farmhouse, built some 80 years ago, i.e. in the early 1940s, with the use of locally obtained materials. In this article the authors present their findings; namely, they have documented the unique history and essential features of this farmhouse in terms of its construction, materials, layout, architectural form and adornment. All these aspects also witness a tangled history of the village and its surroundings, as well as intricacies of the local culture. An observed accumulative nature of the house and the uniqueness of its long history attribute the house with moral values of commemoration. Both that reason and the recently-observed rapid deterioration of the house compose a rationale for its documenting.

Streszczenie

W 2021 roku wykonano serię poszukiwań terenowych na Podlasiu. Celem poszukiwań było rozpoznanie zachowanych po dziś dzień cennych przykładów budownictwa ludowego. W rezultacie znaleziono bardzo interesujący obiekt we wsi Olszewo w gminie Brańsk. Ten ponad osiemdziesięcioletni budynek wzniesiono około 1940 roku lub niewiele później z użyciem różnych materiałów miejscowych. W artykule scharakteryzowano go pod względem materiałowo-konstrukcyjnym, rozplanowania, kształtu (formy architektonicznej) i zdobnictwa, rozpoznając w tychże jego cechach wartość unikat. Autorzy stawiają tezę o kulturowej esencjonalności opisywanego budynku jako wieloaspektowo upamiętniającego przeszłość swą formą, konstrukcją i zdobnictwem, przy czym mało który dawny wiejski dom (lub chałupa) równie bogato poświadczał minione zakręty historii. Czynniki te zaważyły na decyzji o jego naukowym opisie, niemniej także postępujące ostatnio techniczne zniszczenie domu dowodzi zasadności przedłożenia tu jego dokumentacji ku pamięci następnych pokoleń.

Keywords: vernacular architecture; farmhouses; local building materials; the Podlasie region; N-E Poland

Słowa kluczowe: architektura wernakularna; budownictwo ludowe; domy wiejskie; budownictwo z materiałów miejscowych; Podlasie

INTRODUCTION

In October 2021, the area of south-western Białystok was included in a field search to find examples of folk architecture. The reason for the search was the acceleration of the transformation of rural buildings observed in recent years, resulting in the complete disappearance in many (if not most) villages in the west of the region of old buildings of traditional construc-

tion and form, not to mention the old architectural ornamentation that had disappeared even earlier. So far, only the eastern part of the Białystok region has not suffered similar losses (and even some villages around Białystok still abound in old buildings), but the west of the region has almost completely lost its pre-modernistic identity.

The authors, aware of these changes, as well as of the fact that the old wooden rural buildings in the study area had already passed away, included in their research also clay, brushwood, stone and cordwood buildings, which, although non-indigenous (because these structures were introduced secondarily here in the second half of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century and were promoted and developed until the end of the 1950s), constituted a sort of bridge between the old folk architecture of the region and the new construction and architectural solutions.

The most interesting facility turned out to be an already abandoned dwelling house on the eastern edge of the village of Olszewo¹ in Brańsk commune – a house with a pleasingly traditional form, interesting external ornamentation (reminiscent of the decorative fashion of the early 20th century) and unconventional material solutions, combining the heritage of tradition with the *novum* of the cordwood masonry construction introduced here by 20th-century modernisers. The building's creation was also linked to the tragic twists and turns of history that the house witnessed.

This article presents (and comments on) a selection of synthetic inventory drawings of this building, documenting it for the memory of generations, especially as it has been rapidly deteriorating since it ceased to be inhabited (i.e. since 2008). In anticipation of its imminent passing, its documentation is presented here as source material, perhaps useful for possible future research into local clay building traditions. Factual information about the building was obtained from neighbours and family members of the owners. The information was fragmentary, hence this article provides a critical synthesis of it.

1. ORIGINS OF THE FACILITY

On 13 September 1939, a little over an hour before midnight, a battle between the Germans and the Polish army began near Olszewo. After the nightlong battle, the Polish troops lost about 70-80 people and retreated eastwards, while the village was burnt down. The next day the Germans shot about 50 people, including at least 13 villagers, after which they set fire to the few buildings that had not burned down during the night and retreated. Of all the buildings in Olszewo, only

the smithy building remained, also badly damaged but not burnt down.

That same autumn, three villagers rebuilt small sheds in which they lived with their livestock. It was not until the following years that the buildings began to be rebuilt to a greater extent, not least because of a shortage of building materials. Among the buildings erected at that time was the house to which this article is devoted – a building erected on a large property belonging to a relatively wealthy (for the time) family.²

It was rebuilt on the foundations of an earlier burnt wooden cottage, but using substitute building materials, including finely chopped cordwood logs, brushwood and clay (the choice of building materials was mainly due to their easy availability). However, no reliable information could be obtained as to the year of its reconstruction. It may have been erected only a few years after the village fire, which would be indicated by the careful and thoughtful construction of the house and the external ornamentation used on it. Nevertheless, some of the German wartime equipment (most likely cannons) that remained after the battle was used to build the fence gate. It is therefore possible that the house was also rebuilt quite quickly, probably as early as 1940. Nowadays, it survives together with several other buildings on a rather large plot of land (Fig. 3), but it is no longer used or heated.

2. DESIGN AND MATERIAL

The building rests on a solid foundation of large and carefully coursed stones (Fig. 4). It is likely that an existing foundation from a previous burnt building was used during construction, perhaps reinforcing it. The stone foundation wall, elevated 40 cm above ground level and pierced every metre and a half with drainage pipes acting as sub-floor ventilation, was covered with a thin layer of cement plaster with an imprinted relief ornament in the shape of plant tendrils (such foundation ornamentation had previously been found in small-town and urban construction in the Białystok region).

On top of the foundation rests a rather thick (about 60 cm including plaster) clay wall interlayered with cordwood. Visual inspection of the wall where the plaster has fallen off, i.e. at the jambs, reveals that not only debarked chopped cordwood logs, but also

¹ This village should not be confused with the larger village of Olszewo in Boćki commune, 20 km to the south-east, or with the village of Olszewo in Perlejewo commune, 30 km to the south-west. Olszewo in Brańsk commune is a small former gentry village, not overpopulated (unlike many of the surrounding gentry hamlets), and therefore inhabited by a relatively wealthier population.

² During interviews with neighbours and descendants of the builders of this house, it was not possible to reconstruct an accurate knowledge of local social relations and the position of the family (material and social) in relation to its neighbours, as conflicting, uncertain or incomplete information was obtained. The article provides approximate information.

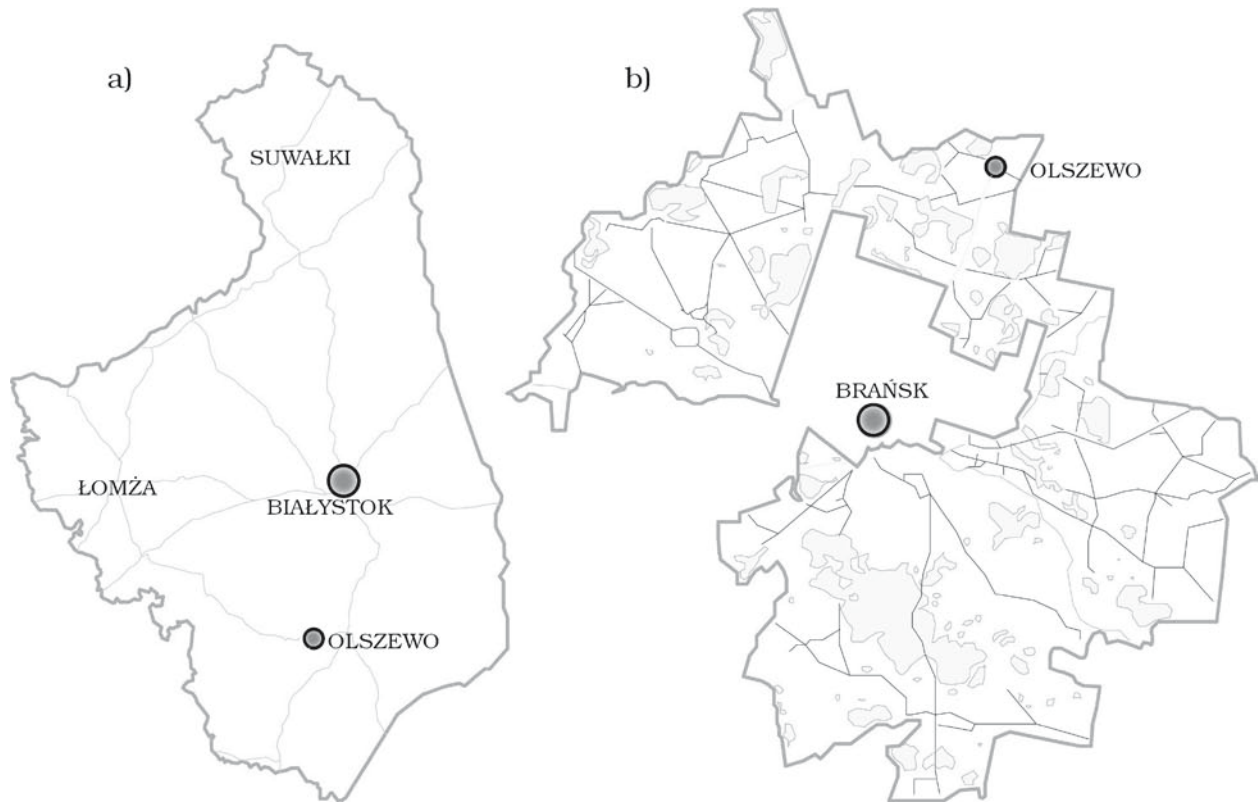


Fig. 1. Olszewo on a map of the Podlaskie region (a) and Brańsk commune (b); source: the authors, 2022



Fig. 2. An old cordwood masonry house in Olszewo; source: the authors, 2021



Fig. 3/a-d. The cordwood house in Olszewo, against its farmstead plot (panoramic views); source: the authors, 2021

coarser unbarked juniper brushwood and waste wood were used as 'reinforcement' for the clay wall (Fig. 5). Cut boards, perhaps remnants of wood salvaged from previously burnt buildings, were used to reinforce the corners. These have survived in fairly good condition.

The wall was plastered on both sides with a thick layer of cement-lime plaster. Unlike other buildings with cordwood walls erected in the surrounding villages, the object under investigation was probably plastered with one very thick layer of plaster (other buildings were plastered with two or three thinner layers, with only the outer layer containing cement, and the inner layers were lime mortar). This thick layer of plaster has not deteriorated to this day, because good adhesion to the timber-clay wall was achieved by the fact that the clay with the logs was applied without compacting, producing a very uneven wall with protruding log ends and brushwood into which the plaster mortar was later pressed.

The smoothed plaster surface was whitewashed with lime. This massive clay-polish wall, rendered in lime plaster with a small amount of cement, was built up to the level of the wall plate above the ground floor, while the pediment triangles leading out above already have a clay core and stovewood construction.

The roof truss was made as a collar-purlin construction, with each of the purlins resting on two outer-



Fig. 4. A stone foundation of the house in Olszewo, its ornamented plaster and two ceramic tubes for wooden floor ventilation; source: the authors, 2021



Fig. 5/a-e. Walls of the house in Olszewo: exposed clay core and stovewood pieces, embedded in thick lime mortar; source: the authors, 2021



Fig. 6/a-d. A garret and roof construction; source: the authors, 2021

most queen posts and two central posts with braces (Fig. 6). This construction is noteworthy insofar as it was usually used in small-town and urban construc-

tion, whereas the roofs of country cottages and houses almost always had the simplest rafter-collar construction. It is therefore puzzling to see the use of purlins and

queen posts here to support the rafters of a relatively small house on the edge of a small village, rebuilt after war damage. It is possible that these are later additions, made during the last replacement of the roofing with asbestos panels (the 1980s).

3. AESTHETICS, ORNAMENTATION

The exterior ornamentation of the house is modest. The corners are decorated with simple rhombic rustication (Fig. 2). The layer of plaster covering the clay wall is thick, a few centimetres in thickness, but even

twice as thick on the corners, and even thicker on the corner rustication and the window sills, where it can exceed 10 cm.

The boarding of the pediment triangles is also decoratively and carefully shaped. The extremities of the timber framing, to which the decorative radial boarding elements are nailed on the pediments, have an arched (curvilinear) shape, requiring greater care in workmanship, which is all the more noteworthy. As the building is situated with its ridge facing (parallel to the street), both gables were made with equal care and concern for aesthetics (Fig. 6/b).



Fig. 7/a-c. Panoramic views of the living room (a) and the kitchen (b, c); source: the authors, 2021

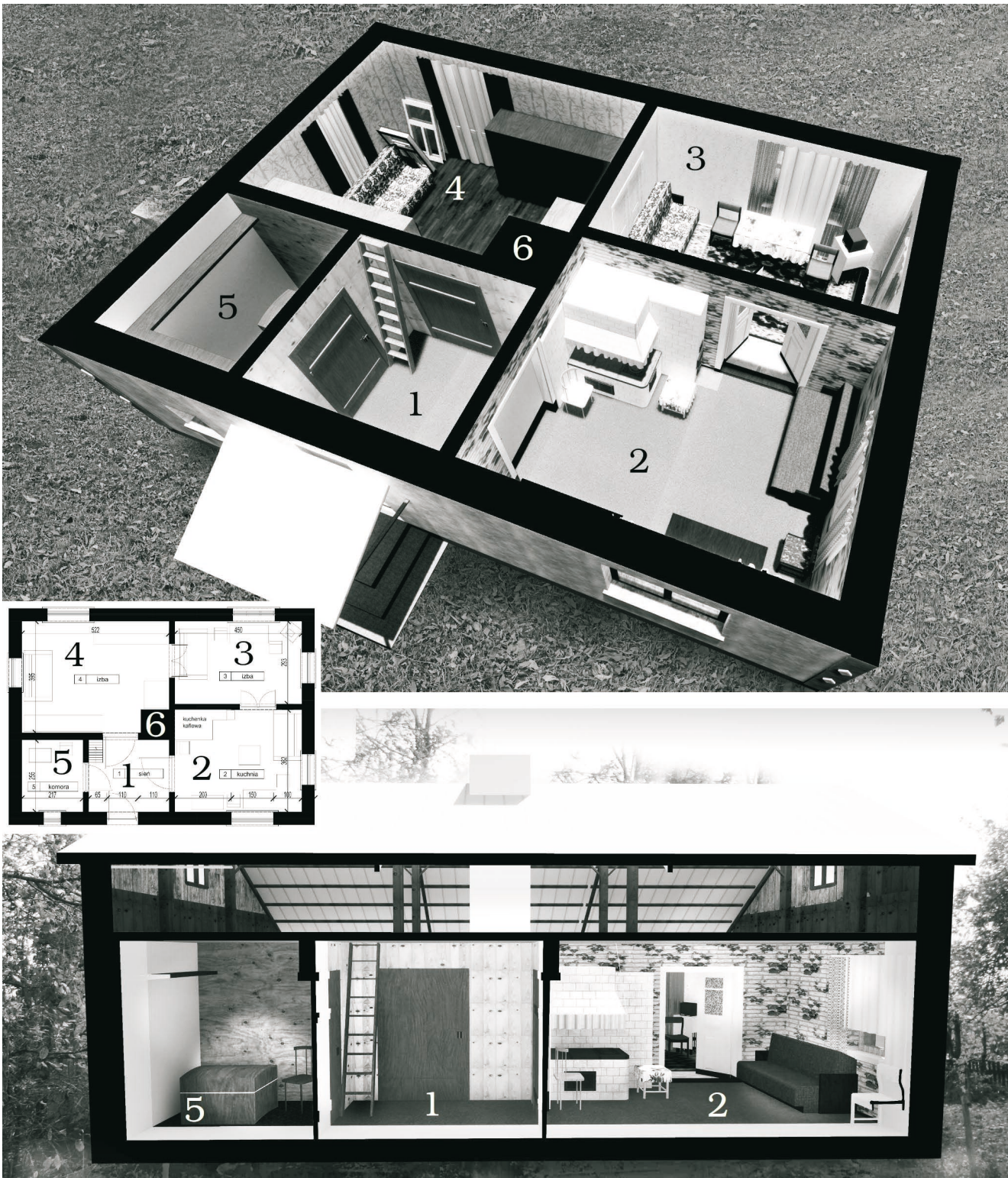


Fig. 8/a-c. House layout (plan and 3D schemes): 1 - hall, 2 - kitchen, 3 - sleeping room, 4 - living room, 5 - storeroom, 6 - stove and chimney; source: the authors, 2022

The internal aesthetics of the house are the result of a build-up of successive fashions and aesthetics from the time the house was built (woodwork, stoves, some furniture) until it ceased to be used, i.e. until 2008, but with a predominance of elements (furnishings, decoration, wallpaper) from 1970-1990 (Fig. 7). The oldest furniture was discarded in the garret and in the storage room (room 5 on the plan), although a typical sideboard from the 1950s can still be found in the kitchen.

4. LAYOUT AND FITTINGS

In terms of ethnographic typology, the examined house represents a wide-fronted asymmetrical type

with an all-round enfilade of rooms, with a layout similar to that of Podlasie-Mazovian three-roomed (Polish: *tro-jak*) houses. However, the order of rooms (storeroom-hall-living room-sleeping room), typical of three-roomed houses, was slightly extended here: the sleeping room was separated as a separate bedroom, the storeroom and the hall were reduced in size, and the living room was separated behind them. The chimney base, which is probably a relic of the old wide open-fireplace chimneys, the interiors of which used to be separate rooms, is somehow 'cut into' this guest room.³

The schematic drawings (Figs. 8, 9 and 10) relate the elements of the equipment to the plan; they are shown on the model, sections and photographs.

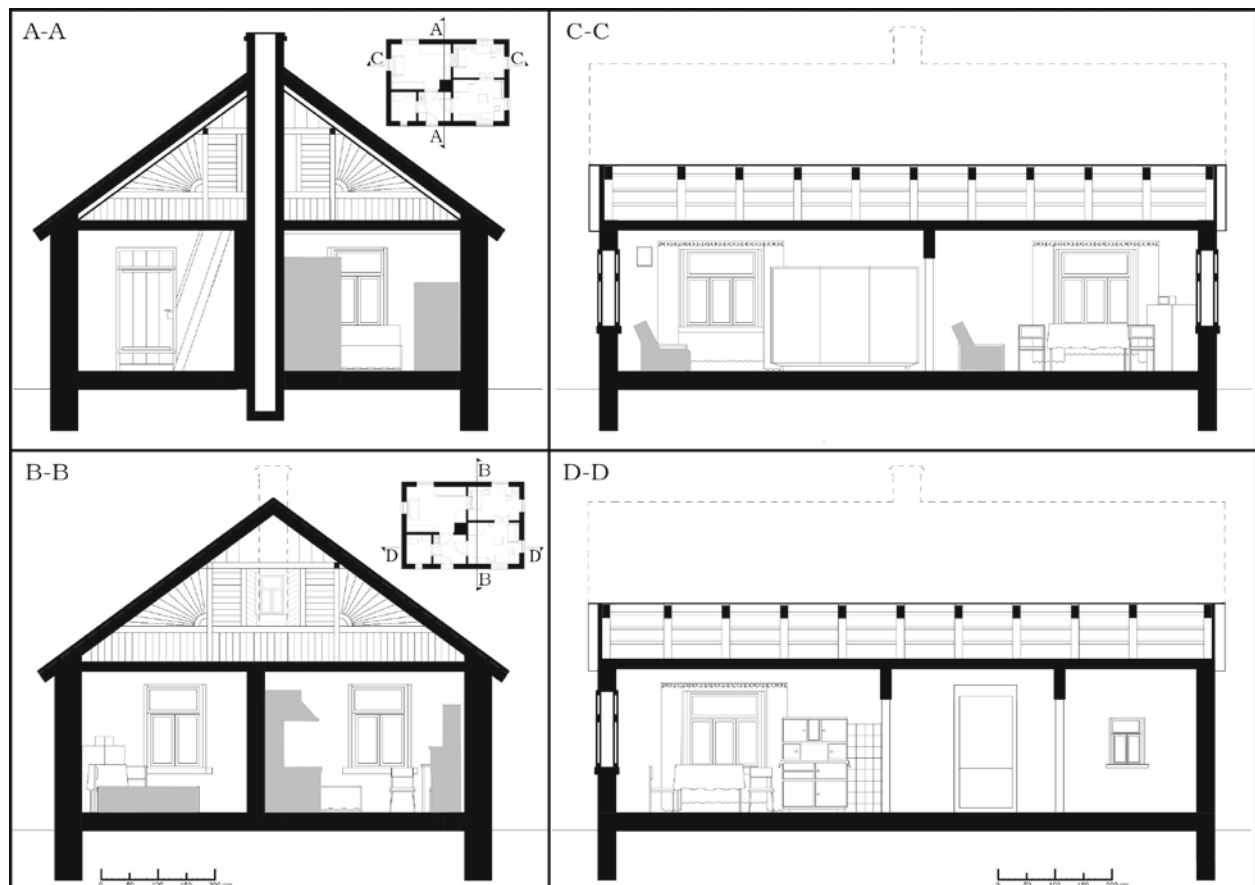


Fig. 9-a-d. Schematic section drawings with home furniture; source: the authors, 2022

³ Since the middle of the 20th century, brick chimneys in rural houses in Podlasie have had an external width of two bricks (about 52 cm including the joint), whereas the bases of the earlier (former) open-fireplace chimneys had a width of up to 2-3 m in the case of wide-fronted symmetrical houses (M. Pokropek, T. Strączek, 1993, p. 91) and a metre and a half in the case of triangular houses. In contrast, in the studied Olszewo house, the base of the chimney has a diameter of about 80 cm at the base and 52 cm at the top and at the mouth.

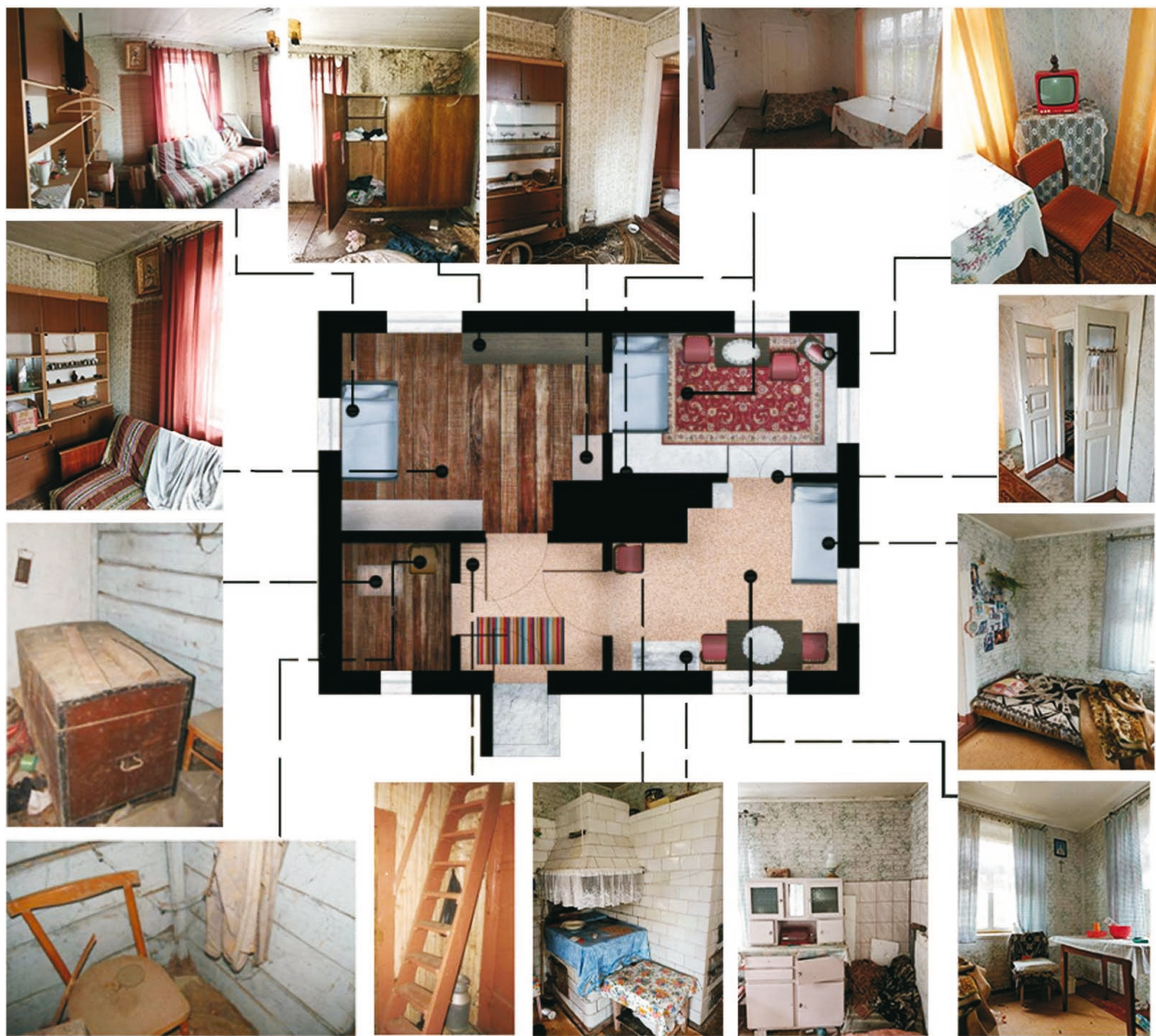


Fig. 10. Schematic section drawings with home furniture; source: the authors, 2022

5. SELECTED PARTICULARS

A thick floor earthen insulation made of sawdust and chaff mixed with clay has survived (Fig. 11/b). In the past, this method of insulating the ceiling was common, but it has been mentioned here in order to highlight the wide range of clay used in this building: in addition to the above-mentioned sawdust-clay earthen insulation and clay chimney walls, clay mortar was used to build the stove and the chimney, and originally also instead of a wooden floor there was a clay earthen floor – if not in the whole house, then at least in the storeroom and the hall.

The garret has also remained – as in many other old houses in the region – as a repository of old tools, furniture and rural craft equipment (cf. M. Ładny, J. Szewczyk, 2019, pp. 30 and 31; A. Antoniuk et al.,

2018). Fig. 12 shows selected relics of the past found in the garret: a weaving warp, a spinning niddy niddy, an old-type (handmade) rake and wooden moulds for making felt shoes (*valonki*). In addition to the objects shown in these four photographs, the garret also still houses an old trunk with linen and books (in any case, not the only one), wooden and metal buckets, parts of weaving reels, old leather school bags and numerous contemporary utensils, crockery, tools and appliances. In the garret, the chimney has been fitted with an inspection and smoking door (visible in Fig. 6/c), allowing both easy cleaning of the chimney and facilitating the hanging of meats in it. Interestingly, this is not a regular single door, but a set of double hearth and ash doors, already heavily rusted, probably removed from the hearth during some tiled stove repair. In this way recycled material was used for free.



Fig. 11. Garret floor construction (a – ladder descending to the entrance hall; b – earthen insulation); source: the authors, 2021



Fig. 12. Old artifacts of vernacular craft, left in the garret space; source: the authors, 2021



Fig. 13. A storage room with an old trunk and some old utensils; source: the authors, 2021

The storeroom, in turn, was secondarily separated from the hall by a wooden wall (not a clay wall; Fig. 13) and was also used for storage purposes, in which to this day – in fact, until the survey in December 2021 – are preserved, among other things, a trunk, a wooden mould for making *valonki*, a weaving warp hook and old-type shears for shearing sheep, and an old charcoal iron.

SUMMARY

The over 80-year-old Olszewo house, representing the three-bedroom house type (a wide-fronted asymmetrical house with an enfilade of rooms), was built using a rarely used construction of cordwood interlaid with clay. It is therefore a valuable witness to history, all the more so because its construction was the aftermath of famous war events (the battle of 13/14 September 1939); its furnishings, which have been preserved to this day, also bear witness to the culture and craftsmanship of the past (spinning and weaving tools, old chests, etc.). The article describes the house

in terms of material and construction type, layout, architectural form and ornamentation.

The authors put forward the thesis of the cultural essentiality of the described building as a multi-faceted commemoration of the past with its form, construction and ornamentation. The recent technical deterioration of the house proves the validity of its documentation to the memory of future generations.

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