

Characteristics of Poor Elderly People in the Early 19th Century Included in the System of Formal Care – the Case of the Provincial Centre of Ljubljana¹

“The undersigned learned the profession of postmaster properly and in due form from the local guild of postmasters in 1771 and earned an honest living in the Imperial-Royal lands for 20 years. In 1779, he served the state in the war (...) Owing to great exertions in his work, he exhausted his strength and has for several years now been supporting himself only with great difficulty and very poorly. At present, not only his advanced age but also his failing eyesight and additionally a diseased leg make it entirely impossible for him to earn a living. The undersigned, with the deepest respect, awaits and hopes that the honourable commission will grant his request for poor relief, so that he will not be forced to seek alms from door to door and on the street. Valentin Mačehet”²

1 The research was partly financed by the ARIS project J6-4602 (Motherhood and Reproductive Politics in 18th and 20th Century).

2 In original: “Podpisani se je poklica poštnega mojstra redovito priučil pri tukajšnjem cehu poštних mojstrov leta 1771 in se v cesarsko kraljevih deželah 20 let pošteno preživljal, leta 1779 je služil državi v vojni (...) Zaradi velikih delovnih naporov je svoje moči izčrpal in se že nekaj let preživlja zelo slabo in z veliko muko. Sedaj pa mu ne samo visoka starost ampak tudi pešanje vida in poleg tega še bolna noga popolnoma onemogočajo, da bi se preživljal. Podpisani z globokim spoštovanjem pričakuje in upa, da bo častitljiva komisija ustregla njegovi prošnji za oskrbo revnih, da ne bo prisiljen iskati podpore od vrat do vrat in na ulici. Valentin Mačehet.” (SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 15, 1825, n. 126, 19. 11. 1825).

The petition of Valentin Mačehet, who was born in the rural surroundings of Ljubljana, is in many respects exceptional. It does not represent a typical recipient of assistance within the existing funds for the support of the poor or the elderly, which will be the focus of this analysis, yet it nevertheless reveals a broad spectrum of attitudes toward the elderly in the early 19th century. The article presents the basic characteristics of the perception of old age based on an analysis of the records of the largest poor-relief institution in Ljubljana between 1785³ and 1857. The material is examined through three perspectives and hypotheses. The first underlying assumption is that the documentation of the Poor Institute is particularly informative for the study of old age, as it describes in considerable detail the life circumstances of individuals at the moment they entered the institution. It thus shows when and how people perceived the decline of their physical strength and their ability to support themselves, which often also meant the loss of independence. In certain cases, it also makes it possible to trace their way of life, shaped by biological as well as social, cultural, and economic circumstances. Since an analysis of the entire spectrum of ideas would be too extensive for the format presented here, the contribution focuses on two aspects: imaginaries of old age and the characteristics of informal forms of care in old age—namely intergenerational solidarity and the “economy of makeshifts.” Although the analysis concerns attitudes toward old age in urban environments, the life stories of applicants are in some cases also connected with rural life, especially because they lived in the countryside in their youth or moved there in old age. Because the operation of the Poor Institute in Ljubljana is well preserved for the first half of the 19th century, the analysis of representations of old age is based on the records of the largest poor-relief institution in Carniola, intended for the care of the poor after its reorganisation in 1820, when the number of recipients increased significantly in a short period of time. Both qualitative and quantitative data are examined. The quantitative analyses are based on the records of 267 recipients in 1819, who, after the reorganisation, received support

3 SI_ZAL_LJU/0336, b. 1, circulars requiring the establishment of a Poor Institute were already being issued in 1784, namely on 18 September 1784 and 3 December 1784. They were followed—characteristically for the Josephinian period—by an intensive wave of circulars that regulated the operation of the institute, the official records that had to be kept and submitted to higher authorities, as well as other instructions, namely: 10. 6. 1785, 26. 4 and 10. 5. 1786, 25. 8. and 6. 9. 1787, 24. 5. and 30. 6. 1788, 19. 1. 1789.

from the institute for an average of three years. The qualitative analyses draw primarily on 145 petitions and minutes of the commission for applicants,⁴ which were processed in 1820 as part of the admission procedure to the Poor Institute. This represents the largest single corpus of admission petitions, as in the following decades the institute admitted new recipients only to the extent of vacancies and occasional increases in available funds. Until 1832, the support consisted exclusively of outdoor relief.

The Poor Institute in Ljubljana was, in terms of available funds and the number of allowances granted, the largest in Carniola (land of Austrian empire), and it was intended to provide outdoor support for the poor in Ljubljana, the capital of the land, and its suburbs. Poor Institutes were introduced in the 1780s as part of the Josephinian social reforms and, despite resistance from certain political and social groups (such as the Ljubljana burghers and the nobility), they remained—albeit with necessary adjustments—one of the mechanisms for addressing social issues in Carniola until the late 1880s. These institutes functioned as institutions that collected money for poor-relief in a regulated and supervised manner and established rules and procedures for distributing the collected funds among eligible recipients. With the support provided through the Poor Institute, institutional care for the poor in Ljubljana for the first time reached a scale that was no longer limited to a negligible number of paupers—far fewer than one percent of the urban population. In 1786, approximately four percent of the city's population received assistance through the Poor Institute.⁵ This was still a small share, considering that the city physician Viljem Lipič classified as many as 51 percent of Ljubljana's inhabitants among the poorest strata in 1831, even though he included only maidservants

4 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11 and 12.

5 Čeč, Dragica: "Revni – ostareli v času kriz: družba na dlani." *Arhivi: glasilo Arhivskega društva in arhivov Slovenije*, 43, 2020, 2, 307–329; Čeč, Dragica: Reforme na področju reševanja socialnih vprašanj v 18. stoletju. In: *Marija Terezija: med razsvetljenskimi reformami in zgodovinskim spominom* (Preinfalk, Miha, Golec, Boris, eds.). Ljubljana: ZRC SAZU, Zgodovinski inštitut Milka Kosa, Založba ZRC, 2018, 363–406. Čeč, Dragica: Župnijski ubožni inštituti kot začetki sistemske oskrbe revnih. In: *Religio, fides, superstitiones: o vjerovanjima i pobožnosti na jadranskom prostoru: zbornik radova = Religio, fides, superstitiones: faith and piety in the Adriatic area: conference papers* (Mogorović Crljenko, Marija; Uljančič-Vekić, Elena, eds.). Poreč: Zavičajni muzej Poreštine = Museo del territorio parentino; Pula: Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile; Pazin: Državni arhiv, 2017, 254–273.

and manservants, day labourers, and urban paupers.⁶ He did not include certain petty artisans who also belonged to vulnerable social groups and were at risk—especially in old age, with declining physical strength or in the event of an accident—of falling below the poverty line. Such risks are also confirmed by the life—narratives of the recipients of the Ljubljana Poor Institute. A total of 412 petitions for assistance will be analysed, representing support for well over 500 individuals. Although far fewer people received systematic institutional care than those who lived at or below the poverty line, the number of beneficiaries was nevertheless significantly higher than at any previous point in the city's history.

The municipal authorities, aware of the problem of the financial sustainability of the poor-relief system, sought to supervise the collection and distribution of support to the poor, since their care depended on voluntary donations from individuals. These donations to the Poor Institute were either distributed directly among the poor or invested as capital, with the interest then used as a basis for provisions to beneficiaries. In the political theory of the Habsburg Monarchy, the care of the poor was understood primarily as the responsibility of the individual. The authorities intervened only occasionally and in times of crisis, providing assistance from other public funds. They were aware of society's sensitivity toward certain types of paupers who were not necessarily those who, according to the strict norms of the begging and domicile laws (1754), formally qualified for relief. In the first half of the 19th century, special funds existed for recipients who were members of urban elite with special rights – burghers. Funds for them were established from the assets of abolished institutions: the municipal hospital (*Bürgerspital*) and the Ljubljana almshouse. The types of poor relief in the first half of the 19th century included: 1. care in the almshouse (from 1832 onward), 2. monetary or material support in the form of basic necessities,⁷ 3. so-called “natural care,” that is, the practice of

6 These are the proportions that Lipič attributed to individual social groups which, according to the political theory of the 18th and the first half of the 19th century, lived solely on the income generated by their labour (that is, servants, maidservants, day labourers, and urban paupers), cfr. Lipič, Fran Viljem: *Topografija c.-kr. deželnega glavnega mesta Ljubljane z vidika naravoslovja in medicine, zdravstvene ureditve in biostatike*. Ljubljana: Znanstveno društvo za zgodovino zdravstvene kulture Slovenije, 2003, 166–168.

7 In the first half of the 19th century, the costs were covered by the Poor Institute, and the responsibility was transferred to the municipality with the administrative reforms.

housing a pauper from household to household. In the homes where they were accommodated, the poor were required to perform all the tasks they were capable of doing.⁸

With the funds of the Poor Institute in Ljubljana, support was provided primarily to women. Men accounted for only 23.5 percent of all recipients. Expressions of solidarity toward men were considerably more restrained than those toward women, even though opinions among the Ljubljana burghers and the officials of the Poor Institute differed significantly regarding who experienced greater or more severe poverty in old age. The petition of Valentin Mačehet likewise elicited divergent reactions. His petition—rarely recorded in such a formal manner—was confirmed as credible by two prominent burghers, which was more the exception than the rule. Yet even so, the petition met with quite varied responses among the officials and members of the Poor Institute. The “poor father” and the parish priest would have granted the petitioner an allowance, though a modest one, while one of the most distinguished members of the commission, the burgher and merchant Ivan Dežman, believed that poverty among men was “more arduous” than among women and that the “old man” therefore deserved a substantial allowance.⁹ This case, as well as the broader functioning of the institute, reveals the presence of solidarity within particular social or occupational groups. There was a sense of obligation on the part of existing institutions to support those who, due to the limited financial capacity of traditional forms of corporate assistance (especially guilds), had fallen out of the support networks of their own estate or profession. Estate-based solidarity was particularly pronounced at this time, as also illustrated by the petition of the postmaster’s apprentice with which this article begins. Mačehet hoped that he would eventually receive a higher allowance—one that the Ljubljana municipal authorities, through the mediation of the Poor Institute, granted to burghers from the municipal fund, which provided significantly higher support to a very limited number of

8 The basic characteristics of the functioning of the Poor Institute after its reorganisation, rather than its establishment, were presented by Anžič, Sonja: *Skrb za uboge v deželi Kranjski: socialna politika na Kranjskem od srede 18. stoletja do leta 1918*. Ljubljana: ZAL, 2002, and Anžič, Sonja: “Ubožni institut v Ljubljani.” *Kronika*, 42, 1994, 3, 6–11.

9 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 15, 1825, n. 126, 19. 11. 1825.

applicants.¹⁰ He submitted such a petition to the commission despite the fact that the master for whom he worked provided him with free lodging.

Four years after the major crisis experienced by the Poor Institute due to funding difficulties in 1815, the structure of recipients in 1819 displayed the following characteristics (see Tables 1 and 2): around sixty percent of all beneficiaries were over sixty years old at the time of entering the system, which already corresponded to the chronological age that was also understood in legal frameworks as the threshold of general physical and often also incapacity for work.¹¹ If we add to this group the recipients over fifty, their share increases significantly in comparison with other adult age groups, as beneficiaries from both age categories together accounted for almost 84 percent of all recipients in 1819, and on average they had already been receiving support for three years. Analyses of the institute's operations show that in the following decades the duration of support increased substantially. Among the new applicants for admission to the relief system in 1820, the share of the ageing population was somewhat smaller: nearly 75 percent were over fifty, and by far the largest number of beneficiaries were admitted to care after the age of sixty. Within the group of applicants over fifty, there were many individuals with work-related disabilities, both men and women. The petitions for admission to poor relief in 1820 reveal similar patterns, except that the age at the time of submitting the petition—or entering the support system—was slightly lower.

10 In Celje, the funds of the dissolved guilds were allocated to the operation of the hospital. In Ptuj, support was even expanded, as after the reorganisation of poor relief the guilds committed themselves by contract to supporting the »hospital« (as almhouse) "for assistants, apprentices, and servants." (Žižek, Aleksander: *Skrivno življenje cehov. Cehi Celja, Maribora in Ptuja med letoma 1732 in 1859*. Celje: Zgodovinski arhiv, 2012, 427–430). The determination of assistance within the hospitals depended on the amount of the foundational capital and, consequently, on the amount of interest generated by that capital. Cfr. also Vrhovec, Ivan: *Meščanski špital. Doneski h kulturni zgodovini ljubljanskega mesta*. Ljubljana: [s. n.], 1898.

11 See the case from 18th-century military conscriptions, in which the age limit was set at sixty years.

Table 1: Share of recipients by age groups in 1819

Age groups	Widows	Widowers	Married women	Married men	Single women	Single men	Sum
50–54	10	1	2	1	9	1	24
55–60	12	3	0	3	10	1	29
61–70	37	8	2	13	26		86
71–80	18	4	3	10	22		57
81–104	11	5	0	4	8		28
Sum	88	21	10	30	72	2	224
Share	39.29%	10.29%	4.90%	14.71%	35.29%	0.98%	83.90%

Table 2: Share of recipients by status in 1819

Age group	Widows/ widowers	Married	Single
50–54	39.13%	26.09%	26.09%
55–60	31.82%	13.64%	45.45%
61–70	41.98%	18.52%	35.80%
71–80	38.60%	22.81%	38.60%
81–89	60.71%	14.29%	25.00%
Sum	43.63%	20.10%	36.27%

When is someone perceived as old?

The transition of an individual into old age—namely, the question of when someone was perceived as “old” or regarded as old by society—varied greatly in the context under study. Old age, whether understood chronologically, culturally, or functionally, differed considerably between social groups. In general, we may say that physical incapacity for work, mental and cognitive weakness, and physical appearance¹² were the primary factors determining when someone was perceived as old, and when individuals perceived themselves as old, since this involved an interplay of cultural and functional understandings of old age. Yet the very threshold at which someone was labelled as “ageing” also depended on the individual’s integration into the community, including behavioural patterns, family ties, economic circumstances, and, not least, lifestyle. Functional old age began when a person could no longer perform certain tasks or work sufficiently to support themselves. The decline in functionality was linked to the physical characteristics of the body, including behavioural and cognitive abilities. Cultural perceptions of old age marked an individual as old when they “appeared” or behaved as old according to the norms, experiences, and beliefs established within a given community. For a long time, the boundary of old age remained undefined; it was only clearly fixed by bureaucratic definitions that granted certain rights or imposed certain obligations (such as population censuses or systems of (pension) insurance). Among the many debates¹³ on determining the threshold of entry into this stage of life, chronological age had the least influence on self-perception and collective

12 But also in this case it concerns different physical perceptions of the body, as pointed out by Urška Bratož (Staro telo. Medicinski pogled 19. stoletja. In: *10. Istarski povijesni biennale: Corpus, Carnalitas – o tijelu i tjelesnosti u povijesti na jadranskom prostoru: zbornik radova s međunarodnog znanstvenog skupa*, sv. 10. (Mogorović Crljenko, Marija, Uljančić-Vekić, Elena, eds.). Poreč: Zavičajni muzej Poreštine, Pula: Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile, Filozofski fakultet, Pazin: Državni arhiv, 2023, 102–114).

13 Cfr. Thane, Pat: “Social Histories of Old Age and Aging.” *Journal of Social History*, 37, 2003, 1, 93–111; Neumann, Alexander Christian: Introduction. Old Age before Modernity. In: *Old Age before Modernity: Case Studies and Methodological Perspectives, 500 BC–1700 AD* (Neumann, Alexander Christian, ed.). Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2023, 1–30; Ehmer, Josef: Altersbilder im Spannungsfeld von Arbeit und Ruhestand. Historische und aktuelle Perspektiven. In: *Bilder des Alters im Wandel. Historische, interkulturelle, theoretische und aktuelle Perspektiven* (Ehmer, Josef, Höffe, Otfried, eds.). Stuttgart: Wissenschaftliche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2009, 209–234; Ehmer, Josef: Das Alter in Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft. In: *Was ist Alter(n)? Neue Antworten auf eine scheinbar einfache Frage* (Schriften der Mathematisch-naturwissenschaftlichen Klasse der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften 18) (Staudinger, Ursula M., Heinz, Häfner, eds.). Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2008, 149–172.

understandings of old age at least until the late nineteenth century, while the other two criteria were far more significant.

Since more than two-thirds of the beneficiaries—or more precisely, the female beneficiaries—of the Poor Institute in Ljubljana were over fifty years old and were temporarily or permanently unable to work, the institute's recipients were inseparably associated with images of ageing individuals, often ill and above all marked by declining physical strength. Officials and burghers thus confronted a similarly “grey” image of ageing as the one presented in eighteenth-century encyclopaedias.¹⁴ If in certain rural environments, shaped by different forms of property transmission, the age of fifty could mark the beginning of a gradual withdrawal from the position of household head,¹⁵ in this pattern of beneficiaries of the urban Poor Institute—who were primarily the poor lacking accumulated capital or possessing very little of it—the onset of old age was defined precisely by diminished capacity for work.

It is evident from the analysed sources that around the age of fifty certain physical changes associated with the biological ageing of the body began to appear among part of the population, and more frequently among those engaged in physically demanding occupations (e.g., blacksmiths, carpenters, masons), especially among the poor.¹⁶ Just as widespread as the awareness of the inevitable “biological clock”¹⁷ was, in the period in which Valentin Mačehet lived, the belief in the interdependence between lifestyle—or the performance of certain types of work—and ageing, as well as the occurrence and course

14 Borscheid, Peter: *Geschichte des Alters*. Münster: F. Coppenrath, 1987, 134.

15 Ehmer, The Life Stairs, 63–65.

16 Čeč, Revni – ostareli.

17 Some studies have calculated that retirement in the early 19th century in Upper Austria peaked between the ages of 50 and 65, while around 1890 it occurred on average at the age of 52 in Moravia and Bohemia, and between 45 and 50 in Upper Bavaria. See Ehmer, The Life Stairs, 63; Čeč, Dragica: “Funkcije preživitka in družbena realnost preživitkarjev.” *Glasnik Slovenskega etnološkega društva*, 62, 2023, 2, 31–44; Held, Thomas: “Rural Retirement Arrangements in Seventeenth to Nineteenth-Century Austria: A Cross-Community Analysis”. *Journal of Family History*, 7, 1982, 3, 227–254; Grulich, Josef: “Das ländliche Ausgedinge in der Frühen Neuzeit. Ein Beitrag zur Problematik der Wahrnehmung sozialer Kategorien im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert.” *Opera Historica*, 9, 2001, 1, 343–369.

of particular illnesses.¹⁸ This is reflected, to some extent, in the pattern of those receiving support, since the share of individuals who had never married (often servants or apprentices) was lowest precisely in the group of the oldest beneficiaries. Servants, artisan assistants, and day labourers therefore often did not reach advanced old age. Yet, almost in defiance of the prevailing pattern, the oldest beneficiary in the analysed sample was, contrary to all stereotypes of ageing, an unmarried “old woman,” a former maidservant, who at the age of 103—despite being immobile—was still cared for by a prominent burgher woman referred to as “Madam” Vogel (Vogau).¹⁹ An individual’s alignment with the characteristics of a particular age group was thus linked to the person’s physical attributes, outward appearance, and bodily traits. Given that the majority of the Poor Institute’s beneficiaries over the age of fifty were temporarily or permanently unable to work, the institute’s recipients were inevitably associated with images of ageing individuals. Poverty and old age had, for centuries, often been synonymous.²⁰

The image of poverty

Cultures respond to the needs of older people by creating ideals of ageing, old age, and its position within society. Perceptions of old age have always been shaped by cultural codes—that is, by imaginaries and idealised images of ageing—as well as by the social constructions of gender. Cultural patterns of attitudes toward the elderly were marked above all by the ideology of the “stages of life.” The theory of the stages of life is the most widespread temporal and spatial representation of the life cycle. Between the Middle Ages and the seventeenth century, images and stereotypes of ageing emerged that depicted it as a sequence of life stages, a personal or

18 This is clearly reflected in the work of F. V. Lipič, while Meta Remec (*Podrgni, očedi, žival otrebi: higiena in snaga v dobi meščanstva*. Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2015) has provided a more detailed analysis of interpretations concerning the interdependence between lifestyle and life expectancy on the basis of scholarly literature and historical surveys.

19 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11, 1820, n. 64.

20 The classic “triad” of the poorest members of society consisted, in addition to the elderly, of children and widows or families with many children (cfr. Čeč, Revni – ostareli; Jütte, Robert: *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

spiritual drama, or as a conception of life as a career—an idea which, according to J. Ehmer, was especially characteristic of the European middle classes and, of course, of men, who were most exposed to the risks of losing status and property in old age. In popular iconography, the depiction of the stages of life became a motif that transcended social estates. It presented recognisable, stereotypical images of the phases of an individual's life, regardless of how long each phase lasted or how many phases were included. Through popular texts and affordable visual representations, images of the stages of life spread across various cultural environments—from Spain and Italy to France and the Netherlands, where such typified images formed part of the interiors of wealthy burghers' homes, and further to Germany and Scandinavia.²¹ With inexpensive prints, they eventually reached the broadest layers of the population and their everyday surroundings; in the Slovenian context, most likely in the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the depiction of the stages of life on beehive panels.²²

Even though the images of the stages of life are undoubtedly typified, they nevertheless represent, to some extent, a social definition of life and behaviour—one that did not perceive life merely as the work of fate, but also reflected on—albeit subconsciously—planned practices which, despite all limitations, constituted long-term investments and took into account risks and security in the process of ageing. Despite the fact that depictions of the stages of life—of ascent and decline within an individual's life—are idealised, they nonetheless indicate that ageing was understood as a process divided into several phases, which affected individuals at different speeds. The petitions and the extensive information on the living circumstances of the beneficiaries of the Poor Institute, although dominated by the discourse of hardship inherent to the system itself, still reveal that ageing and the decline of physical strength could, at least in its early stages, also represent a challenge and an opportunity. Older people did not always passively accept their circumstances; rather, they often tried to cope, to find work still suitable for them, to secure shelter, and above all to maintain

21 Shakespeare playfully mocks the stages of life in *The Seven Ages of Man*. From Spain, Pedro Mexía's 1542 encyclopaedia spread—through translations into eight languages—into various cultural environments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and depictions of the stages of life can also be found in Scandinavia.

22 Ehmer, *The Life Stairs*, 53–55.

independence through petty work. Thus, a 76-year-old locksmith sold tobacco; a former apprentice who had never advanced to the rank of master, Jakob Flere, continued to chop firewood, even though the physician noted that he was completely exhausted and disabled; and a former day labourer cleaned a stable in exchange for a place to sleep.

Indigent elderly tended to live out their final years in much the same way as they had always done—through hard and constant work, or by relying on the kindness of others. The petition of Valentin Mačehet follows, as expected, the typical images and anticipated lifestyle patterns of the elderly. In his petition, he touches upon the characteristic motifs associated with poverty, ranging from the immorality of public begging to society's expectation of active labour to the extent that an individual's physical and other circumstances still allowed. He concludes his petition with a request to be admitted into some form of poor relief. Despite all the necessary methodological reservations that such sources require, his petition already points to the remarkable complexity of the experience of ageing and of the various stages of old age, to which Valentin, as a morally exemplary individual, adapted in accordance with social expectations. The petitions and the information that applicants for support provided to the officials of the Poor Institute are wrapped in a discourse of distress—characteristically pragmatic and prone to exaggeration.²³ These petitions were addressed to a very specific audience: the volunteers of the Poor Institute. On the other side stood the recipient of the petition. His attitude, and that of the institute's committees, toward the poor was highly multifaceted, ranging from compassion and solidarity to social control and criminalisation—from mercy to the gallows, to borrow the apt translation of the title of Geremek's study on poverty in the early modern period.²⁴ Their decisions were constrained by moral and legal norms that defined the behaviour of the elderly and guided various forms of social disciplining. The attitudes and perceptions

23 In the case of protocol concerning admission to poor relief, we are not dealing with exactly the same type of source, since the information that the officials of the Poor Institute were required to obtain from petitioner was standardised (King, Steven: "Pauper Letters as a Source." *Family & Community History*, 10, 2007, 2, 167–170 in King, Steven, Jones, Peter (eds.): *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, 74).

24 Cfr. Geremek, Bronisław: *Usmiljenje in vislice: zgodovina revščine in milosrčnosti*. Ljubljana: ISH, 1996.

of the elderly were also shaped by the cultural prejudices held by the urban middle classes. The collective of the poor—even if largely elderly—could represent a social threat, for it consisted of a large segment of the population who, as the life stories of individuals show, often lived in subletting arrangements due to lack of space.²⁵

The key normative criterion that distinguished between an adult and an elderly person in this context was the ability to work. In the eighteenth century, the concept of work occupied a central place both in political theory and in moral norms and ethics.²⁶ From the Enlightenment onward, moral treatises increasingly linked the notion of work with that of wealth. Thus, a person who worked²⁷ was not supposed to be poor. This also implied that anyone no longer capable of work was, by definition, poor. Individual responsibility for one's own fate held an important place in society,²⁸ yet at the same time the care of the elderly rested on intergenerational solidarity. This solidarity should not be understood solely as solidarity among relatives, but also as solidarity within the community in which an individual lived.

Among the beneficiaries or applicants for admission to the Poor Institute, the elderly predominated. Among the older applicants, one occasionally finds representatives of wealthier social groups who hoped for additional support. At times, petitions for assistance submitted to the Poor Institute also came from individuals who were far from typical applicants. Even though the turbulent and morally questionable life of Ivan Nepomuk

25 Cfr. Čeč, Revni – ostareli.

26 Cfr. Bratož v tem zborniku; Bratož, Urška: "Kruha in dela: o reševanju socialnih vprašanj v Istri in Trstu 19. stoletja." *Annales: Series historia et sociologia*, 32, 2022, 4, 547–558.

27 Studen, Andrej: Človek mora delati za svojo srečo! Pretekla razpravljanja o delu s poudarkom na drugi polovici 18. stoletja in prvi polovici 19. stoletja. In: *Pomisli na jutri* (Studen, Andrej, ed.). Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2012, 9–36, 14; Münch, Paul: *Lebensformen in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Berlin, Propyläen, 1998, 304–353. Odnos med revščino in nezmožnostjo dela in dolžnostjo države za skrb za te skupine prebivalstva je izpostavil že Justi sredi 18. stoletja, a že kmalu Sonnenfels postavi dolžnost države (in s tem tudi državne upravne strukture) v ozadje, ko vlogo države omeji na občasno pomoč (see Čeč, Dragica: Srce vsakega je treba pripraviti za dejavno udejanjanje zapovedi ljubezni do bližnjega: začetki sistemske oskrbe revnih in pomen kulture osebne dobrotelčnosti. In: *Pomisli na jutri* (Studen, Andrej, ed.). Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2012, 37–70, 43).

28 Pančur, Andrej: Problem samoodgovornosti beračev, potepuhov in brezposelnih na Slovenskem pred drugo svetovno vojno. In: *Pomisli na jutri: o zgodovini (samo)odgovornosti* (Studen, Andrej, ed.). Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2012, 135–168, 136, 137.

Jurkovič, a judge and commissioner responsible for the provisioning and accommodation of soldiers in Vrhnika, had been investigated by the Ljubljana authorities in 1801, this circumstance did not trouble the parish priest of St. Jacob, Pohlin, seventeen years after the events, nor did he mention it when giving his opinion on the economic situation of the official in question. He did, however, state that the applicant, at sixty years of age, was still a very robust man who could certainly take up some form of work. He concluded his assessment of the judge's living circumstances by noting that he was perfectly capable of supporting himself, given that, as a widower, he was able to pay as much as thirty gulden in rent for his accommodation. He had collected the money for it from "benefactors." This circumstance aroused strong compassion and sympathy in the official of the Poor Institute toward the applicant, whereas for the parish priest it carried no weight, unlike the former, he did not wish to grant support to the applicant. On the other hand, the parish priest believed that the only work Jurkovič was still capable of was writing, and that he was not entitled to support. In the end, however, his application was rejected precisely because of the rules of domicile rights, as he had not yet lived for ten years in the town where he applied for assistance.²⁹ Of all the children born before 1803 to his twenty-year-old foster daughter, Uršula Cerer—whom he had taken into his care at the age of four—only one boy was still alive, a student at the higher school. Uršula herself, whom the former judge was supposedly to marry, had already died.³⁰

In the everyday lives of the poorer population—in all 412 petitions for assistance, on which more than 500 people certainly depended, since some beneficiaries also supported family members—one finds almost no stereotypical images of the elderly disseminated by written and visual media, particularly the motif of the elderly person as a source of shame for descendants or the community. Typified negative representations of old people must, in any case, be understood in connection with the widespread

29 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11, 52, n. 94, 1820.

30 This intriguing case—though without this epilogue in the protagonists' later lives—has already been discussed by Kos, Dušan: *Zgodovina morale. 2, Ljubezenske strasti, prevare in nasilje ter njihovo obravnavanje na Slovenskem med srednjim vekom in meščansko dobo*. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2016, 188 and Mal, Josip: *Stara Ljubljana in njeni ljudje: kulturnozgodovinski oris*. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1957, 49–50.

culture of exempla and contra-exempla. A note stating that someone was unable to “converse with others,” and was therefore asocial, appears only in the case of a single woman, who had evidently been marginalised for a long time, as she was described as a cowherd—a particularly stigmatised occupation.³¹ Widows and elderly women were often subjected to highly negative stereotypes, shaped by various cultural imaginaries associated with social disciplining and the informal regulation of the marriage market by families, kin groups, and the wider community. Visible biological changes and imagination further fuelled these perceptions. Elderly women were frequently attributed supernatural powers, especially the ability to exert negative or harmful influence on women’s reproductive capacities and on food.³² The active role of women was centred on their reproductive function, which, as theoretical works of the Renaissance show, could be considered complete by around the age of thirty-five. After this point, a woman’s social standing could rapidly decline—unless she belonged to the higher social strata.

The partial absence of “problematic” impoverished elderly in the sources is also conditioned by the nature of the material itself, since—except in truly exceptional cases—individuals of questionable moral character were not proposed for support. Such people are more likely to be found in police and criminal records.³³ The poor-relief system rewarded morally irreproachable elderly individuals; those who behaved immorally, and especially those who begged publicly, were excluded from the system. Because the analysis also included archives of criminal courts, the (admittedly incomplete) corpus covering roughly the same period, 1820–1850, also contains elderly or older individuals who committed crimes arising from long-standing conflicts with spouses, children or their spouses, or from disputes within the community. Likewise, the analysed material rarely contains stories of elderly people who enjoyed social esteem due to their experience and knowledge—qualities particularly important in shaping relationships within illiterate communities—wisdom, or social standing.

31 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11, 1820, n. 43.

32 Cfr. Cavallo, Sandra, Warner, Lyndan: *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Harlow: Longman, 1999.

33 Čeč, Dragica: “Starostniki na podeželju v 19. stoletju”. *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino*, 64, 2024, 1, 142–160.

Such representations are more common in rural environments and among social groups not typically captured by the sources examined here. In petitions for admission to poor relief, we naturally do not find positive images of the elderly, even though such images were produced by, and embedded in, broader society. These positive roles of the elderly were already widespread in humanist thought (for example, in Erasmus of Rotterdam). Theoretical and didactic texts in educational contexts celebrated the elderly as guarantors of wisdom and experience.³⁴ This motif became especially prominent among eighteenth-century pedagogues, as it fit perfectly with the ideal of the educator as a moral exemplar.

Since more than two-thirds of the residents—or more precisely, the female residents—of the Poor Institute in Ljubljana were over fifty years old³⁵ and were temporarily or permanently unable to work, the institute's beneficiaries were inseparably associated with images of physical decline: people who were often ill and whose physical strength was waning. A similarly “grey” image of ageing is conveyed by eighteenth-century encyclopaedias or by depictions of the elderly as wrinkled, frail, incapacitated, or physically deformed.³⁶ The image of poverty was frequently intertwined with the image of old age.³⁷ Yet, through the lens of these attributed representations of ageing, exceptional and atypical elements occasionally emerge—elements that were likely also part of the self-perception of the ageing individual.

The body of the elderly person

In early modern society, old age was not the only cause that could deform the human body and provoke various negative emotions and feelings of repulsion in others, but it was certainly the most common one. Although

34 Borscheid, *Geschichte*, 135; Bratož, Urška: “Podobe starosti v ljudski in uradni medicini 19. stoletja.” *Glasnik slovenskega etnološkega društva*, 63, 2023, 2, 22–30.

35 Eighteenth-century encyclopaedias placed the peak of life at the age of forty-five, which differed markedly from military conscriptions, where the authorities were interested in the male population up to the age of sixty.

36 Borscheid, *Geschichte*, 134.

37 See Čeč, Dragica: *Revni, berači in hudodelci na Kranjskem v 18. stoletju*. PhD Thesis, Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta UL, 2008, 45–64; Židov, Nena: “Časopisi o beračih na Slovenskem v drugi polovici 19. in v začetku 20. stoletja.” *Etnolog*, 22, 2012, 45–64.

epidemics were another major cause of bodily impairment, it seems that the primary association with a deformed and fragile body was linked to images of old people. Ageing was accompanied by biological changes that pathologically altered the ageing body and its physical strength.³⁸ These processes, however, were not necessarily tied to a specific chronological age. Certain biological circumstances were particularly pronounced in women and also affected their outward appearance. Menopause undeniably altered a woman's physical appearance, but it also transformed one of her fundamental social roles—motherhood. Fran Viljem Lipič, analysing fertility data, argued that women's reproductive period in Ljubljana ended at the age of forty.³⁹ However, his findings must be interpreted within the context of the inaccuracy of reported ages of mothers and the cultural constructs of particular life stages, which shaped women's perceptions and subjective statements about their age.

Old age was also associated with declining physical strength, bodily defects, or with individuals suffering from illnesses linked to ageing and to decades of physically demanding labour: joint problems and (partial) disability, reproductive-organ diseases before and during menopause, hernias, rheumatism, pain in the joints and back, incontinence, digestive problems, poor eyesight and blindness, impaired hearing or deafness. Difficulties with breathing—usually described simply as asthma—were also mentioned quite frequently. Sometimes the only description was “age-related weakness,” which, as the city physician Viljem Lipič wrote, was a “common illness of the poor.”⁴⁰ The seventy-four-year-old Mihael Smrekar, who had been discharged from military service at the age of fifty-nine, supported himself by mending shoes until he became completely incapable of work. When his condition was recorded before he was admitted to the poor-relief system, the only remark was that he was completely “exhausted.”⁴¹ The fifty-six-year-old disabled Luka “Žganc,” who had lived in Ljubljana for only the last fifteen years, likely obtained poor relief⁴² after years of begging—an

38 Cfr.: Bratož, *Staro telo*, 102–114.

39 Lipič, *Topografija*, 408.

40 Lipič, *Topografija*, 236.

41 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 15, 1825, n. 63.

42 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, 1820, n. 146.

activity suggested by his nickname. A medical certificate for the military veteran Marko Tomič (Tomiz), who had served sixteen years in the army and later earned a living working for farmers, described him at the age of sixty-one as a “worn-out” and disabled old man (!) suffering from colic and a hernia—very common ailments among Ljubljana’s inhabitants, as F. V. Lipič emphasised.⁴³ The seventy-two-year-old Apolonija Janežič embodied the typical elderly woman: she was mobility-impaired and could move only with the help of a stick, and she ate only easily digestible food. Yet she still looked after children.⁴⁴ Even more frequent among applicants, however, were notes on poor eyesight or complete blindness, as in the case of the sixty-four-year-old Elizabeta Cigler, since such impairments hindered women in the types of work typically performed in old age—sewing and knitting.⁴⁵ Based on the data on blind recipients of support, it is evident that blind women living in the city generally supported themselves in adulthood through day labour. Among the blind and visually impaired individuals who submitted petitions for assistance, there were no young people who had lost their sight—something one might otherwise expect, since petitions for poor relief do appear for younger disabled individuals. As with the rest of the applicants, the majority of blind and visually impaired petitioners had already crossed the threshold into old age. For some elderly individuals, it is possible to discern that they gradually went blind only in old age, as this circumstance is noted either by the officials deciding on their admission or in the medical reports. Another indicator suggesting a gradual loss of sight is the information about the type of work the applicant had performed during their life: former maidservants and craftsmen inevitably lost their source of livelihood as their eyesight deteriorated, and the slow or rapid decline of vision was closely connected to their occupations. Among men, the visually impaired most often came from two artisanal trades: tailors and shoemakers. Some former maidservants lost their employment due to age even before going blind, while in other cases the records show that a maidservant lost her job precisely because her eyesight had begun to fail.

43 Lipič, *Topografija*, 203, 204.

44 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, 1820, n. 171.

45 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11, 1820, n. 31.

The collective of elderly paupers could also represent a social danger because their appearance evoked negative emotions in others.⁴⁶ This was especially true of the elderly with “unaesthetic,” repulsive bodily defects, unpleasant smells, or behavioural disturbances resulting from ageing.⁴⁷ Such figures had to be removed from public space.⁴⁸ This attitude is also reflected in the decision-making practices of the Poor Institute, which, through individual life narratives, simultaneously reveals concrete reactions of society and the immediate community. One such person was the seventy-eight-year-old former day labourer Tomaž Grabnar. His outward appearance was pitiable, as he moved with two sticks due to disability. For most of the year his presence among people was at least tolerable. But because he suffered from urinary incontinence, “they would not tolerate him under a roof in winter,” as the institute’s overseer wrote. Thus, almost every winter he went to Udmat (village near Ljubljana), where “a farmer tolerated him in a remote corner.”⁴⁹ Both the elderly day labourer and the officials were aware of the limitations imposed by his body and of the smells that disturbed those around him. Jera Hubiš, when submitting her petition for support, believed that at the age of sixty-four she would no longer be hired as a child-carer because of cramps and digestive problems.⁵⁰

Personal experiences of old age

Some individuals felt old very early in life due to their physical characteristics or other circumstances, and they described their condition as passive and tragic. This was the case, for example, with the fifty-four-year-old Marija Weis, born in the Slovene village of Javornik in Gorenjska region.

46 *Ibid.*, 250.

47 Čeč, Dragica: “Revščina kot grožnja družbenemu redu v 18. stoletju.” *Acta Histriae*, 24, 2016, 2, 291–312.

48 Compares the discourse analyses for the eighteenth century, even though many elements of this discourse persisted well into the nineteenth century: *Ibid.*, 291–312.

49 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, 1820, n. 78. The direct association between stench or unpleasant smells and poverty was not yet as pronounced as it would become in the second half of the nineteenth century, cfr. Studen, Andrej: *Neprilagojeni in nevarni. Podoba in status Ciganov v preteklosti*. Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2015, 26–27.

50 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11, 1820, n. 19.

She had two children—a son and a daughter—who were in service and therefore unable to care for her. When asked about her previous employment, she said that earlier, when she was “not yet so old,” she had supported herself by sewing and knitting. Her physical frailty was so evident that even the overseers noted she was physically weak. She likely perceived her situation in the same way, as the poor-relief officer attributed her weakness and inability to work to a chronic illness that prevented her from making a living; he did not even mention her age. The question of why Marija interpreted her long-lasting ailments as changes brought about by old age can also be answered by the fact that she had “very poor eyesight”—a consequence of ageing.⁵¹ The image of the elderly woman was also tied to certain petty, low-paid work, which in the examined sample represent one of the few remaining means of survival. The most typical low-paid work mentioned as employment for elderly women applying for some form of support was the combing of yarn.

An individual might perceive a particular life circumstance as especially tragic or associate it with profound fear. If we look beyond the typical rhetoric of the source, the recorded circumstances of some applicants reveal above all a fear arising from altered physical and other conditions that affected certain standards of everyday life which the individual still considered appropriate. For part of the population accessible through these sources, ageing was therefore both a personal and an economic drama, and at the moment of writing also an existential fear. For many people—especially the poor—fear stemmed from reduced or altered possibilities of survival, which often threatened both their livelihood and their housing. The elderly and unmarried Jera Hubiš expressed her wishes quite clearly to the members of the commission: she wanted a roof over her head and food. When new circumstances in her life—illness—arose, she believed that this will change her living standards dramatically. She feared that because of the illness that prevented her from working, she would be left without shelter. She believed that she earned her accommodation in old age through her work – child-minding. According to the physician who assessed her physical abilities, she was not only weakened by age but worn out by labour. Her fear was undoubtedly shaped by the images and experiences of old age

51 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, 1820, n. 115, 13. 6. 1820.

she observed in her surroundings, as she also mentioned unpleasant digestive problems. However, the priest reviewing her petition was unwilling to grant support: she would receive assistance only if no one was willing to employ her.⁵²

(Intergenerational) solidarity, social networks

Intergenerational solidarity—understood, in contrast to earlier and especially sociological research, not only as solidarity among family members and relatives but also within the wider community, or in more contemporary terms, within the relationship between the individual, the welfare state, and the community⁵³—constituted an important element of coexistence in urban environments. It was particularly crucial for the poorer strata of the population and for those who were ageing or already elderly, who lacked accumulated capital and whose physical strength was declining, since solidarity within the community, alongside kinship, was one of the main forms of security in old age. Although European historiography still often maintains that the European marriage pattern shaped family formation and that the EMP—with its late age at marriage—also influenced the development of public poor-relief systems, which included a considerable number of elderly people.⁵⁴ On the other hand, the southern part of Europe is generally described as lacking broader institutional support for the poor and the elderly. The region under consideration, situated at the boundary between these two models, still lacks a comprehensive demographic analysis for the period in question. Despite the assumption that the southern European marriage pattern was characterised by multigenerational households, the key finding in the analysed case is that only one of

52 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11, 1820, n. 19.

53 This represents an extension of Hareven's concept, as the examined cases clearly demonstrate the significant role of the community in shaping and determining the quality of intergenerational relationships, especially in old age (Hareven, Tamara K: Introduction. In: *Ageing and Generational Relations over the Life Course: A Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Hareven, Tamara K., ed.). Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1996, 1-12). Cfr. also French, Henry: "How dependent were the 'dependent poor'? Poor relief and the life-course in Terling, Essex, 1762–1834." *Continuity and Change*, 30, 2015, 2, 193–222.

54 Bouman, Annemarie, Zuijderduijn, Jaco, De Moor, Tine: *From Hardship to Benefit: A Critical Review of the Nuclear Hardship Theory in Relation to the Emergence of the European Marriage Pattern*. Working Papers, 2012.

the 267 recorded recipients of assistance in 1819 lived with his adult son; all other beneficiaries of the poor-relief fund were tenants and did not live with their adult children. These administrative practices were also reflected in the structure of those receiving care.

In 1819, 34 percent of the elderly under the care of the Poor Institute were single people. As in other urban centres, the environment under study was characterised by a high proportion of temporarily or permanently single individuals—one of the fundamental features of household labour and the urban labour market,⁵⁵ where employment as domestic servants was not only in demand but also conferred a certain prestige on the employing family. Because of legal and economic constraints, it was typical—also in the sample examined—that such individuals migrated to the city, married late, and many remained single for their entire lives (life-long servants). The social group of servants—those employed in households and, as such, legally counted as members of the household during their period of service—was statistically significant in the city. According to the 1831 population census, the physician Lipič estimated that they made up as much as 26 percent of Ljubljana's permanently settled urban population. Nor should we overlook Lipič's comment on several years of marriage-trend analyses, in which he noted that part of Ljubljana's population was "inclined toward a single way of life."⁵⁶ Even if this figure is high compared to some other urban environments, it nevertheless indicates that servants formed a noticeable part of the urban population.⁵⁷ Lipič already noted that all workers in the domestic sphere were "predominantly from the countryside," a point also confirmed by the records of the Poor Institute.⁵⁸ The demands of domestic service shaped the lives of many servants. In descriptions of their life stories, we frequently encounter the typical phrase that they had spent their best years in service as household helpers, and urban environments developed a

55 According to a very general estimate, between 10 and 20 percent of the population remained "permanently unmarried" (Studen, Andrej: "Nekaj drobcev iz vsakdanjika ljubljanskih služkinj pred prvo svetovno vojno." *Kronika*, 42, 1994, 3, 42–46).

56 Lipič, *Topografija*, 397.

57 *Ibid.*, 166. According to the 1754 census, in the wealthier and exclusively urban Ljubljana parish of St Nicholas, the share of households headed by the elderly accounted for 22.16% of the town's population (Valenčič, Vlado: "Prebivalstvo Ljubljane pred dvesto leti." *Kronika*, 2, 1954, 3, 191–200, 197).

58 Lipič, *Topografija*, 167.

particular form of collective solidarity toward them. Only some women were explicitly recorded as former maidservants, although it is evident that many who later listed peddling, day labour, child-minding, or other petty women's work (such as combing yarn, knitting, or sewing) as their sources of livelihood had initially been employed as maids. Although maidservants as a social group were heavily stigmatised, this did not exclude particularly intense forms of solidarity—rooted not only in moral expectations but also in specific emotions and interpersonal bonds that developed over long periods of service between employer and employee. In mature adulthood and old age, as their physical strength declined and they became unable to perform full-day and often physically demanding work, this occupational group was even more dependent than others on their ability to establish and maintain interpersonal ties in order to secure shelter and occasional work. Especially those servants who had remained with the same employer for a very long time were, in some cases, recipients of special solidarity from their former employer as well as from members of the poor-relief commission. Thus, the sixty-year-old former maidservant Marija Mak, who had been immobile for five years, was provided with a bed free of charge by her former employer.⁵⁹ The case would not stand out in the city's everyday life were it not for the fact that the woman was described as worn-out or having “served her time” (*ausgedienstet*⁶⁰) and ill.⁶¹ What is also interesting in such cases is the attitude of the members of the poor-relief commission when assessing the applicant's social circumstances and her eligibility for support. The poor-relief officer and the priest would have granted Marija Mak a higher allowance than the other two members of the commission, though one of the commissioners himself stated that she was unable to earn anything at all and would have approved four kreuzers of support for her. We also find other, though rarer forms of community solidarity, such as employing elderly servants or providing lodging for older people. Uršula “Milnerca” was employed as a maid at “over seventy years of age.” She was evidently still able to perform the tasks her employer required, as she had been in his service for twelve years, meaning she had been hired

59 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, n. 151.

60 It was a term that meant “having served one's time.”

61 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, n. 151.

when she was well over fifty. In the petition for her support, her employer added that she was almost entirely incapable of performing the heavy work usually expected of maidservants.⁶² Her last employer, the official Johann Baptista Novak, submitted the petition for her support when he was leaving Ljubljana.⁶³

As an indicator of the limits of intergenerational and neighbourhood solidarity, let us consider one final example—that of the maidservant Jera (Ira) Kvasovka, who had served highly respectable employers. This could have benefited her in old age and in securing support from the poor-relief fund, even though she remained single and, unlike most elderly servants, lived with relatives. A member of the poor-relief commission, contrary to the priest's opinion, argued that the applicant deserved support because she had "lost her best years" in service as a servant, and the money she had saved had lost its value,⁶⁴ as she had kept it in banknotes that had depreciated significantly in the second decade of the century. Owing to the network of acquaintances she had built through her work, she ultimately received support despite the differing views among the commission members.

Individual solidarity was built on the basis of a person's social capital, which included the social ties cultivated throughout life and which served as an important safeguard against falling below the level of mere subsistence. Magdalena Pinter, born in Domžale, thus developed excellent social capital during the thirty-six years she spent in Ljubljana. This helped her even when, at the age of fifty-six, she applied for assistance from the Poor Institute. While the poor-relief officer would have granted her only the lowest allowance, the parish priest Janez Krizostom Pohlin—who in other cases proved to be a very strict evaluator of applicants—showed her particular favour, noting that she had distinguished herself as especially diligent and loyal. He was the priest of the parish of St Jacob, where many craftsmen as well as many former maidservants and farmhands lived. He pointed out to the other members of the commission that Magdalena was willing to undertake various kinds of work, despite being limited by

62 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 15, 1825, n. 44.

63 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 15, 1825, n. 44, 12. 12. 1824.

64 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11, n. 56, 1820.

a crippled arm. All of this, together with her pious way of life, “speaks loudly in her favour,” he concluded in his assessment of her standard of living.⁶⁵ The solidarity network and the social ties an individual built over a lifetime were shaped by various events: migration, economic and cultural circumstances, and political and legal demands and restrictions, yet individuals continually adapted to them. Solidarity was equally important for women, whom society marginalised and controlled for longer periods of life than men. In urban settings, the question of solidarity is particularly complex, as it reflects economic and political conditions, moral expectations and emotions,⁶⁶ belonging to a particular social group, and gender. Intergenerational solidarity, moreover, depends on numerous social patterns that define and constrain life in the city.

Intergenerational solidarity has often been highlighted in the study of family history as an indicator of the quality of family relationships—first and foremost the relationship toward children, which initially attracted the attention of historians. To a certain extent, solidarity among family members was also required by law (the Austrian Civil Code - *Allgemeines Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*), albeit with limitations. In historical overviews of the family, the co-residence of several generations was associated with a guarantee of care and nursing for physically frail and ailing parents. Yet research on the elderly has shown that there was considerable variation in the family structures of older people, even when a particular family type predominated in a given environment.⁶⁷ Studies have demonstrated that elderly people in towns rarely lived with one of their married children.⁶⁸ In urban settings, poor families typically lived in sublet accommodation,

65 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, 1820, n. 145.

66 Fevert, Ute: *Emotions in History – Lost and Found*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011.

67 In many respects, the characteristics revealed by the sample under study overlap with the general demographic features of urban populations: Sieder, Reinhard: *Socialna zgodovina družine*. Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis, ZRC, 1998; Goody, Jack: *Evropska družina: zgodovinskoantropološki esej*. Ljubljana: Založba / *cf., 2003.

68 Cfr. Alter, George, Cliggett, Lisa, Urbiel, Alex: Household Patterns of the Elderly and the Proximity of Children in a Nineteenth-Century City, Verviers, Belgium, 1831–1846. In: *Aging and Generational Relations over the Life Course: A Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Hareven, Tamara K., ed.). Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1996, 30–52, 30, 31.

which further hindered multigenerational co-residence.⁶⁹ In the records of the Ljubljana Poor Institute, cases in which adult children of applicants lived together with their parents are rare. In the sample from 1819, only 11.6 percent of applicants had a child older than nine—old enough to help the parents but not yet of legal age—living with them. If we consider only elderly couples and widows or widowers, children over the age of nine are mentioned in just 23 percent of supported households. It remains unclear how many of these children actually lived with the beneficiaries, since the records list the number of children but not whether they resided in the same household as the recipient of assistance. Only two elderly widows were cared for by a daughter or a son, and one married woman cared not only for her own children but also for two elderly individuals over ninety years old. In the petitions for admission to care, where the applicants' lives are described in greater detail, only 29.8 percent of applicants had children; two women reported that all their children had already died. Seven married applicants still had minor or otherwise dependent children, and one widower and two widows also had a minor, dependent, or underage child. A full 81 percent of applicants did not indicate that they had ever cared for children.⁷⁰ Volunteers of the Poor Institute conditioned the provision of assistance on the requirement that an adult child leave the parental home and enter domestic service. There is also evidence of a practice in which elderly couples without their own children cared for a foster child who was still a minor—both because of the potential financial support and perhaps also because such a child could assist the foster parents as their strength declined. The care of such children was the responsibility of women, and it brought couples certain advantages within the poor-relief system that they would otherwise have had difficulty accessing. There is even a case in which the benefits generally associated with caring for a foster child were arranged directly by the volunteers of the Poor Institute: they secured a foster child for an elderly woman who would not have been eligible for support from the fund, and she was expected to support

69 Troyansky, David: The 18th Century. In: *The Long History of Old Age* (Thane, Pat, ed.). London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, 175–210.

70 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11 and 12.

both herself and the child with the allowance granted for the child.⁷¹ Partly, the environment under study also reflects the broader pattern that elderly men were small minority within the poor-relief system—only 10 percent. Of these men, only 33 percent were without family members (and therefore were not household heads), and only 11 percent had never married. A further trend is visible: male offspring from poor families were often sent into military service. Among members of the urban middle class who, through their profession, were in regular contact with the poor, the remark by the Graz topographer Benditsch—that the marriages of poor people could expect God’s wrath rather than God’s blessing—was seen as reflecting the everyday reality of impoverished families.⁷²

Many applicants for admission to the Poor Institute had migrated to the city, and some of them had remained single throughout their entire working lives.⁷³ Poverty or low family income, mobility in search of work, and the resulting distance from relatives—or the absence of kinship networks in the place where the elderly lived—together with higher age at marriage and bureaucratic restrictions on the marriages of the poor, which resulted in fewer children, were all factors that hindered, if not prevented, inter-generational solidarity within the family. Local authorities harboured numerous reservations about the marriages of the poor. After the restoration of Austrian rule, local authorities spent more than a decade interpreting the provisions of the *Allgemeines Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch* in their own way—despite the fact that the code did not envisage any restriction of the freedom to marry—and used marriage permits to significantly limit marriage among the poorer strata of the population.⁷⁴ High infant mortality may also have contributed to these dynamics—or, conversely, the family circumstances of adult children, who often had to prioritise supporting their own offspring, a point frequently emphasised by the volunteers of

71 Rhodes, Emily: “Women as Child Carers: Arranging and Compensating Mothering in Early Modern Lancashire.” *The History of the Family*, 30, 2025, 1, 108–124.

72 Lipič, *Topografija*, 397.

73 Lipič thus observed that from around 1790 onwards, “due to political and religious strictness,” which hindered marriages on account of poverty and immorality, the number of marriages noticeably declined (Lipič, *Topografija*, 397).

74 Valenčič thus cites the responses sent in 1825, in which the Ljubljana gubernium explicitly defended the supervision of marriages among the poor (Valenčič, Vlado: “O ženitni svobodi in njenih omejitvah od fevdalizma do liberalizma.” *Zgodovinski časopis*, 22, 1968, 3, 225–260, 243, 244; Lipič, *Topografija*, 397).

the Poor Institute. At times, conclusions about an applicant's inability to provide for themselves were also drawn on the basis of their social ties and their belonging to a particular social group.

A large share of those supported by the Poor Institute—no less than 43 percent in 1819—were widows and widowers. Their life trajectories were shaped by various demographic circumstances. Although the death of a spouse was not necessarily linked to the couple's old age, it could be perceived as particularly tragic for certain social groups. This is also reflected in the structure of beneficiaries in 1819: the proportion of widows and widowers was the highest among all recipients, and in both analysed data sets they accounted for more than 40 percent of those receiving support. The death of a spouse was regarded as especially tragic for women, as it could mean the loss of their primary source of livelihood and the occupational identity they had acquired through marriage. Yet this was not always the case: some women took over their husband's craft, even if they were unfamiliar with the work, and in some instances managed it successfully for decades, as shown in the petitions analysed here. These women applied for support from the poor-relief fund only in advanced old age. Some widows inherited and managed particularly strong social capital from their husbands. Their social capital was tied to the social esteem and goodwill that their deceased husbands had enjoyed within the community. Thus, in the petition of the sixty-year-old widow Marija Roskopf, it was noted that her husband had been an exceptionally skilled artisan, but that due to the war—which caused a shortage of work—he had lost his sanity and died some time later, leaving his widow with debts. Nevertheless, solidarity within the craft community was so strong that the artisan Fatig cared for her, although at the time she submitted her petition to the poor-relief officers he himself was giving up his craft due to old age.⁷⁵ Even when a widow was already receiving some form of support, all members of the commission agreed that she should receive almost the highest possible allowance, despite not being completely incapacitated. In addition, widows of craftsmen had another safeguard in the form of guild regulations, which allowed them to remarry and transfer the craft to their new husband. The vulnerability of widows—and at the same time the community's solidarity

75 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, n. 104.

toward this group of residents—was particularly evident in 1819, both in the support they received from the Poor Institute and from the fund of civic hospital.⁷⁶ Many widows had been married to day labourers, servants employed by officials, or other wage-earning workers whose social capital depended entirely on their occupation. The large share of new female applicants in 1820 suggests that they, too, sought to make use of this form of social capital. This segment of elderly couples and widows/widowers belonged to the group of poor former servants, day labourers, and other impoverished strata who married late and thus fell into the category of so-called “nuclear hardship”—a term used to describing situations in which couples, marrying late and having children late, left those children unable to care for their elderly parents. The situation was different for some widowers, especially craftsmen, even in trades that were not particularly profitable and were described by officials as “tailors’ patchers” or “shoemakers’ menders.” These men most likely remarried at a relatively advanced age and still had small, dependent children in their sixties. Adult children—married or earning their living through a craft or other work—appeared more frequently in the households of craftsmen. By contrast, adult children are almost never found living with married day labourers, who often reached old age without children. Even those day labourers who did have children generally did not live in the same household or residential community as their elderly parents. Elderly people who were not yet completely incapacitated could still earn something through their labour. In addition to the applicant’s physical and economic incapacity, supervisors also recorded the economic incapacity of adult children. Sometimes this was because the children themselves faced economic or housing difficulties due to supporting their own young families. More often, however, it was because they were so poor that they had not been granted permission to marry, or because they held occupations that made caring for elderly parents impossible (soldiers, domestic servants, apprentices, and occasionally pupils or students). In the rare cases where unmarried daughters cared for

76 The newly established parish poor institutes also did not receive the endowment capital of the civic hospital, even though on 31 March 1787 a central poor-relief fund was founded to administer all charitable institutions and funds. From the interest generated by this capital, up to fifty Ljubljana burghers were supported in the first half of the nineteenth century, and they received higher allowances than those granted by the parish poor institute.

their elderly parents,⁷⁷ this occurred more often in households that could afford such an arrangement. There are also cases in which maidservants left their positions for a period of time in order to care for their elderly parents. Most examples of unmarried daughters caring for ageing parents are found in craftsmen's households, which corresponds to the general behavioural patterns of families within this occupational group. Among them was the unmarried daughter of the peddler Helena Terseglav, who, together with her sister, evidently took over their mother's trade as well as her care. The daughter—or both daughters—attempted to obtain means for their mother's support from the Poor Institute. Because the daughter (apparently) had an illegitimate child, the mother, a hatter's widow, was granted support.⁷⁸ Yet the daughter's immorality was not mentioned, nor was the child described as illegitimate. One of the rare cases in which a woman receiving poor-relief assistance referred to her numerous grandchildren—whose existence prevented her children from caring for her—was that of the widow of the city night watchman, Marija Lastnik (Lastnig). At the age of seventy, her daughter was caring for five children of her own, and her father had married her to a clerk who earned his living in Ribnica. His annual salary was only twenty gulden higher than that of a sacristan, a wage already considered low.⁷⁹

Another demographic factor posed a risk for ageing individuals in urban centres: the high mortality of children. Deaths of children and adolescents up to the age of twenty accounted for as much as 40 percent of all deaths in Ljubljana. This statistical reality was experienced by the widow Marija Grohar. Although she had been born in Ljubljana, she came from the very bottom of the social hierarchy and spent the first part of her life as a maidservant. She served for twenty years. According to her own account, she was able to marry only in her late twenties or early thirties, yet she nevertheless gave birth to five children—all of whom died.

A very important element of intergenerational solidarity in urban settings was the community in which people lived. Numerous circumstances

77 Quantitative analyses reveal similar patterns as well, cfr. Alter et al., *Household*, 37.

78 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11, n. 61.

79 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, List of the Poor, Šentpeter Suburb.

described by applicants for support therefore indicate that intergenerational solidarity must be understood more broadly and in a more complex way, which is why it will be illustrated below through examples of individual life stories. Elderly single people or those who had become single again did not necessarily live alone. Above all, they wished to preserve their independence⁸⁰ for as long as possible, and in this regard, they relied on the widely recognised solidarity of the community—solidarity that was, after all, also required by law through the demands of domicile rights. Unlike unmarried servants, Marija Grohar possessed a different kind of property. At the age of seventy-nine, her assets consisted of a cow, and she apparently supported herself with the milk it produced. She nonetheless asserted that others were supporting her, despite paying up to two gulden a year for a modest attic room.⁸¹ One of the motives for requesting poor-relief support for the sixty-year-old mentally ill Elizabeta Hvaleta was certainly the need to ensure supervision over her, which would be made possible precisely through granting support to whoever would care for her. Not only did individuals living in her neighbourhood write a petition for her admission to the Poor Institute, but her application also reveals other forms of community solidarity: she was allowed to sleep in the attic of a house “outside the city walls” free of charge, and she received food—though not every day—in different households. At the same time, Mrs Čehovin, the mistress of the house in the city where this elderly woman had previously been receiving food but not lodging, committed herself to caring for the applicant if she were granted support from the poor-relief fund.⁸² Among the forms of informal solidarity was the employment of infirm individuals. Certain employers were willing to hire elderly people and recipients of poor-relief support because older workers were cheaper than other labour. Sources only rarely indicate that support from the Poor Institute benefited the entire household in which the recipient lived. A different strategy for securing subsistence in old age was adopted by the sixty-four-year-old servant Štefan Vidmar. He cared for an orphaned boy, perhaps with the intention that the child would support him once he became infirm. Yet fate intervened. The

80 Ottawa, Susannah R.: *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

81 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, n. 129, 8. 8. 1820.

82 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11, n. 59, 20. 3. 1820.

servant had already become quite frail by the age of sixty, while the boy he cared for turned out to be an excellent pupil. This case is one of the few in which the mayor himself guaranteed that he would ensure the eleven-year-old boy would be trained as apprentice in crafts.⁸³ Given the importance of child-rearing as a female task, this form of mothering granted ordinary women authority they might otherwise have lacked. Women understood its wider significance and skillfully leveraged it in their petitions.⁸⁴

The poor formed a wide variety of living arrangements that differed from the households of the wealthier classes, and for this reason scholars of family types often overlooked them, especially when they approached the family primarily as a basic social unit whose main function was the production of offspring.⁸⁵ Older women in particular entered the households of co-lodgers, where they contributed to the shared household through their labour and occasional poorly paid or unpaid work (childcare, cleaning, sewing, knitting, and similar work), in exchange for food and a roof over their heads. At times, as already mentioned, they took in orphans or illegitimate children. Some of the better-off elderly took in students or other lodgers, or they were granted free use of living quarters in which soldiers were billeted; in return, their obligation to the property owner was to accept the duty of housing soldiers. A market for servants (and day labourers of both sexes) developed, and it was not limited to married women but also included ageing individuals with declining physical strength. The solidarity of the neighbourhood was not merely the result of expected, morally conditioned, and traditionally inherited patterns of mutual aid on the one hand and stigmatisation on the other, but also of many other circumstances; for this reason, community and family solidarity should not be idealised. A noteworthy example is the fate of the Ljubljana baker Katarina Ljubič, who was only forty years old but already suffered from urinary incontinence. Although the poor-relief commission did not explicitly

83 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 12, n. 95, 1820 and 10. 4. 1820.

84 Rhodes, Emily: "Women as child carers: Arranging and compensating mothering in early modern Lancashire." *The History of the Family*, 30, 2025, 1, 108–124.

85 Botelho, A. Lynn: The 17th century. In: *The Long History of Old Age* (Thane, Pat, ed.). London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, 113–174, 159; Studen, Andrej: *Stanovati v Ljubljani. Socialno zgodovinski oris stanovanjske kulture Ljubljančanov pred prvo svetovno vojno*. Ljubljana: ISH - Institutum studiorum humanitatis, 1995, 147–150.

mention unpleasant smells, they claimed she could no longer obtain work. This was likely the reason her husband abandoned her. Her illness was also used to justify her high rent. She was evidently in poorer health, as she was described as “physically weak.” Because she was becoming a burden to the community, the officials appealed to the person who, according to the Austrian Civil Code, was legally obliged to care for her—her husband. He was formally summoned and instructed to provide for his wife.⁸⁶

Conclusion

The representation of old age, based on selected themes and on the analysis of petitions submitted by recipients of poor relief, proved to be far more complex than the images conveyed solely through political, moral, and other textual or visual sources, which tend to follow certain stereotypical or archetypal notions of ageing. The data provided by applicants for admission to the poor-relief system reveal a range of images and experiences associated with different stages of old age. They demonstrate that both the perception of ageing and the response to changing circumstances were highly individual. The documentation of the Poor Institute shows that perceptions of old age were shaped less by chronological age than by the outward physical and mental condition of the individual—conditions that were the result of the intensity of the work they had performed, something well understood by both society and the medical profession. The appearance of an elderly person and their physical and mental state were also the consequence of the living conditions in which they had spent most of their lives. Although the elements examined in this article cannot capture the full complexity of experiences of old age in an urban population, they nonetheless reveal part of the life circumstances of elderly people. In certain cases, precisely because of atypical entries characteristic of the initial phase of entering the relief system, it is even possible to distinguish between an ageing individual’s self-perception as “old” and the perception held by the surrounding community or by relief supervisors, who—regardless of biological age—did not yet regard the person as old.

86 SI_ZAL_LJU/0508, b. 11, lists of relief recipients in 1819.

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