Questions surrounding the existence of the petite bourgeoisie in socialist society arouse considerable controversy. To avoid purely semantic misunderstanding therefore it might be as well to state at the outset that this paper will consider the following problems:

1. Is the petite bourgeoisie in socialist society a class or a stratum?
2. What are the relationships between the petite bourgeoisie and other adjacent social groupings in socialist society?
3. Does belonging to a particular social group result in the acquisition of a set of cultural features which affect people’s thinking?

The Socio-Cultural Background of the Petite Bourgeoisie in Polish Society

The contemporary petite bourgeoisie undoubtedly carries the heritage of earlier periods in the development of Polish society. The present day petite bourgeoisie rests upon a different social base but its social consciousness is part of an historical tradition. Traditionally, the term ‘petite bourgeoisie’ did not exist and the term which was used – ‘lower middle classes’ – implied a certain kind of town dweller. Traditionally, the term ‘lower middle class’ referred to a group of people of unspecified socio-economic status who differed from the rest of society in their style of life and specific interests. We can say that their style of life went hand in hand with their wealth but we should also notice that the members of the learned professions and the more senior clerical workers, while their wealth might be equivalent only to that of shopkeepers, had a more exalted life-style (Kaczynska, 1976, p. 92). In this particular context, the lower middle class was identified by prestige based on the social consciousness of the structure of society and its economic relations.
The Petite Bourgeoisie in Socialist Society

This structure of society, and its representations in social consciousness, differed from historical period to historical period and also from region to region, thus giving variable meaning to the term ‘lower middle class’. In the 19th century, the Polish lower middle class consisted mainly of ‘small manufacturers’ who were small capitalists working alongside their own employees. The so-called nouveau riche whose social background and manners were not acceptable to the bourgeoisie and ‘declining’ members of the bourgeoisie, people who sold their labour but nonetheless cultivated the traditions of their former order, were also part of this social grouping (Kaczynska, 1976, p. 95).

The petite bourgeoisie in the current context, however, is to be taken as referring chiefly to all those persons holding an intermediary position in the Marxist dichotomic class model as applied to capitalist society. This dichotomic model consists of course of two social groups opposing each other; the one, working people who do not own any of the means of production, and the other, those who do not work but own the means of production. However, small manufacturers, shopkeepers, craftsmen and farmers own their means of production but also work themselves, only sometimes hiring labour in addition to their own. The term ‘lower middle class’ has thus included (with the exception of farmers) that petite bourgeoisie – but generally had a rather broader meaning covering also clerks, teachers, pharmacists and so on (Kaczynska, 1976).

As we can see then from the historical sources, the petite bourgeoisie in the sense in which we use it here was only part of a broader group which had the character of a stratum. This lower middle class constituted the so-called intermediate stratum which occupied a position in the prestige structure immediately below the intelligentsia. In the historical literature which discusses the structure of Polish society we also come across the German term ‘lumpenbourgeoisie’ which we could translate as ‘marginal bourgeoisie’. They formed a marginal social grouping characterised by very low income, a low cultural level and little education, far less than that of the lower middle class. They had the further characteristics of lack of tradition, a strong drive towards the acquisition of wealth at all costs, and, before the war, hostility towards the state and its apparatus (Zarnowski, 1969). In the small towns the lower middle class formed the second largest group after the proletariat. According to historians, we may estimate the composition of Polish society in small towns at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to be as shown in Table 4.1.

According to this table, the lower middle class along with the marginal or lumpenbourgeoisie accounted for 43 per cent of the population. In both these groups people of Jewish origin predominated. As must be obvious, these data are approximate referring as they do to a particular region and historical period but nevertheless they may be taken as illustrating roughly the role played by the lower middle class in