

To be a nation? Silesians about Silesia

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Walter Żelazny:**
**„Być narodem? Ślązacy o
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The book was a result of investigation of persons who in 2011 census in Poland declared their “nationality” (or ethnic identity, not to be confused with citizenship) as Silesian. In this census inhabitants of Poland could declare their nationality, and also could refuse to answer this question. They could declare belonging to one nationality (to just one ethnic group) or to two nationalities, pointing out their stronger and weaker identity. The biggest national minority turned out to be Silesians. 362 thousand persons presented themselves as “only Silesians”, 56 thousand as

“predominantly Silesians”, 391 presented their Silesian identity as a weaker one (stronger being Polish or German). Altogether 809 thousand defined their identity as Silesian: 362 thousand as their only identity, 415 thousand as shared with Polish and 32 as shared with German identity. Researchers (led by E. A. Sekuła) asked persons about their census declaration and to further investigation (questionnaires, interviews) took into account only those persons who had declared being only Silesians. Piotr Majewski in his contribution analysed Silesian movement in internet while B. Jałowiecki and W. Żelazny completed the volume with sociological and ethnological reflections putting the Silesian case in a broader context. It should be noted that the book does not concern Silesians in the Czech Republic. It should be also stressed that the persons declaring being Silesians form a rather small minority in the 5-million strong population of the Silesian *voivodship* (region), and consequently “Silesians” do not represent the whole Silesia.

The book is very important, especially for Polish readers, as it analyses a significant phenomenon of emerging of a (ethnic) nation. In the history of the Polish nation (as a cultural community) it would be the third secession (after secessions of Ruthenians – Ukrainians and Zemajtis (Žmudz)-Lithuanians in the 19th century (let alone the episode of the *Gorolenvolk* in Polish Tatra mountains during the German occupation in the Second World War).

The research provides important information on Silesia and

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Silesians, especially valuable is the information which is presented for the first time or was not presented to a broader public. Such information relates, among other things, to sociolinguistic questions: to the attitude of Silesians towards the Silesian idiom (whether it is a language or a dialect of Polish), to its usage, its standardisation, etc. Very important results relate to Silesian identity (to what extent Silesians feel being a separate nation?, to what extent they identify themselves with Poles, Germans, Czechs or Moravians?). According to the results of the research, the situation is complicated, which otherwise confirms correctness of putting the question mark in the title of the book.

An important finding of the research is the division of Silesians into two groups: “traditionalists” who inherited their Silesianness from their homes and who treat it without reflections as something natural and obvious that does not need to be confirmed and demonstrated, and “modernists” (or “new Silesians”) for whom Silesianness is a choice, something that should be protected, promoted and created. It is also a generational divide between the older and the younger population.

One of the problems faced by the “new Silesians”, especially those who declare themselves a separate nation, is an incompleteness of the Silesian culture. While it is not lacking a specific folk culture (with its most outstanding characteristic of songs sung while drinking beer), more problematic is existence of what used to be called “high culture” or artistic and scien-

tific creations. The high culture is either Polish national culture in Silesia, or it was German culture (during Silesia’s belonging to Germany or German Prussia). Some proponents of the Silesian nation try to complete the Silesian culture by incorporating (“borrowing”) German culture once created in Silesia or in Germany by persons becoming from Silesia. This completion should increase national pride and consciousness of Silesians, should present them as a European nation (more European, i.e. civilised, than Poles).

Another problem is the language question. On the one hand most respondents retain that they speak Silesian (Slavonic Silesian variety, not to be confused with Silesian dialect of German) very well (41%) or well (40%) and 88% of them consider Silesian as a language (as a “regional” language or as a “separate” language) and confirm significant vitality of Silesian in the everyday life (“the people don’t feel ashamed speaking Silesian on the street”), on the other hand, however, even the most devoted advocates of Silesian in discussions and political activity use only (standard) Polish. The time will show if the emerging Silesian nation, like some other ethno-regional communities in “serious circumstances” and for “serious purposes” will use a “serious” language (in this case standard Polish) while using its ethnic language for symbolic and decorative purposes.

Readers of the book may have impression that authors of the book had two objectives: to carry out a scientific work, and to propagate

the Silesian case. The latter objective is obvious in their declaration of sympathy for the Silesian movement (notably for its most outstanding representative – Movement for the Silesian Autonomy) which is rather unusual in scientific research, in avoiding of putting difficult questions to the interviewed Silesian activists, in the way of formulation of questions, etc. For instance, all the time they treat Silesian as a separate language and oppose it to Polish (“in your home did you speak Silesian or Polish? Or Silesian and Polish?, do you watch Silesian-language TV programmes?, do you read Silesian-language internet portals?”, etc. p. 187) although for many, if not most inhabitants of Silesia, it is a Polish dialect. Another example of the biased attitude of the authors is the question put to the interviewed whether Poland had *very strongly exploited* Silesia, *strongly exploited* Silesia or not *exploited* Silesia, p. 186, without mentioning even a possibility that Poland in any way helped Silesia, for instance by providing heavy subsidies for Silesian coal mines and metallurgical plants, by tolerating of not paying taxes and other obligations by Silesian firms, etc., which was not the case with firms in other parts of Poland, etc.).

What is lacking in the book is, among other things, an attempt to foresee the further development of the Silesian movement. One may guess that there are two opposing perspectives: that of Moravia and that of Catalonia. The former means that after an initial outbreak of ethno-regionalist sentiments and activity (at the turn of the 1980s

and 1990s) there comes a decline and virtual disappearance of the movement as a meaningful political phenomenon. The other perspective means radicalisation of a regionalist movement and its transformation into separatism conflicting the region with the state and conflicting inhabitants of the region. Silesia have common features both with the neighbouring Moravia in the Czech Republic (Moravian influences in the Silesian movement are otherwise quite evident) and with the distant Catalonia (higher level of economic development than the national average, conviction of being “more European” than the rest of the country, etc.).

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