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THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION OF THE GERMAN MINORITY IN POLAND*

The general situation and social awareness of the question of ethnic minorities and their languages in Poland is undergoing a process of significant change after fifty years of official political hypocrisy and minority rights abuses (cf. Majewicz & Wicherkiewicz 1990, 1991-1992). Until the 1980's, Poland was officially regarded as a monoethnic ('national') state where minority questions had been definitively solved in 1945 through the shift of the Polish borders to the west and through large scale migrations (forced and voluntary) of Poles, Germans, Jews, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Lithuanians, and numerous minor groups. These political and demographical changes, however, have left a surprisingly rich kaleidoscope of ethnic minority groups in the country.

One of the most important minority issues, not only from the sociolinguistic and ethnographic point of view, but also as a problem of international significance, has been the question of the German minority in postwar Poland. It is in the last decade that this problem has gained a new dimension, due mainly to the process of political and social changes in the country.

Historical and statistical survey

After World War II, almost all of the 3.5 million Germans then in Poland were to be expelled from the country as a result of the formal decision of the Allied Control Council taken in Berlin in November 1945. The only group exempted from expulsion were German citizens of Polish origin or those who had connections with the Polish nation (the so-called

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'autochthons'). In the first four years (1945-9), 3.2 million Germans left Poland (cf. Sakson 1991). In 1950 there were 160-200 thousand ethnic Germans in Poland (100 thousand in the Western and Northern Territories, and some 80 thousand in the area belonging to Poland before 1939), and over 1,104 thousand autochthons.

Results of the tentative census of 1968 indicated that 18.7% of the autochthonous population in some northern and south-western provinces declared German nationality. Worth noticing is the fact that such a declaration was an expression of uttermost courage in a country where, officially, no German minority existed.

At the end of the 1960's, the Polish administration estimated the number of ethnic Germans in Poland to be about four thousand, regardless of the continuous, new waves of 'ethnic' migration to Germany within the 'Aktion Link' undertaken by the Polish and West-German governments.

The first independent sociological research carried out in the 1980's showed that some 25% of Masurians and Silesians declared themselves to be ethnic Germans. At present, the number of the ethnic Germans is estimated at 10 thousand (cf. Sakson 1991: 15). The number of autochthons is estimated at respectively 10 thousand Masurians, 5 thousand Varmians, 330-400 thousand Silesians and 200-300 thousand Kashubians (cf. Sakson 1991: 20). The group of Slovincians, very small in number even before the War, has ceased to exist.

Official German figures for the German minority in Poland are based on Article 116 of the FRG Constitution, which grants German nationality to all German citizens, as well as refugees and emigrants of German origin together with their spouses and descendants, from the territories of the German Reich within its 1937 borders. Their number, according to this criterion, is estimated at 1.1 million, and is officially quoted by German politicians and the Landsmannschaften (cf. Born & Dickgießer 1989: 164). The largest groups live in Upper Silesia (800 thousand), southern East Prussia (30 thousand), and West Pomerania (50 thousand). The last number seems, to this author, much overestimated. West Pomerania had been entirely abandoned by the ethnic Germans by the 1960's. There have been no significant groups of the autochthons living in this territory, the ethnic group of Slovincians having ceased to exist by the 1960's.

German minority organizations in Poland often give the number of 400

to 800 thousand when estimating the size of the German population, which is concentrated mainly in three Upper-Silesian provinces: Opole/Oppeln (180 thousand), Katowice/ Kattowitz (150 thousand), and Cz_ stochowa/Tschenstochau (100 thousand).

The German minority was only granted full political rights as late as in 1990. In the November, 1991, elections, the German minority won one seat in the higher and seven seats in the lower chamber of Parliament. In the provinces inhabited by considerable groups of the minority population, new posts of provincial minority experts have been established. In the municipal elections in Spring, 1990, the Germans in the Opole Silesia were elected to the councils of thirty five communes; in fifteen communes Germans have been elected to serve as town or commune mayors (cf. Berli_ska 1991: 38). In the September, 1993, Parliamentary elections, the German minority won five seats in the two chambers.

Alas, there is not enough space here to present the extremely interesting anthropological question of ethnic identity and ethnic revival within groups declaring themselves the German minority in Poland.

Linguistic situation

The *linguistic situation* of the present-day German minority in Poland has been quite intricate and heterogenous. We should note here that it is neither standard Hochdeutsch nor standard Polish that has played the most crucial role in ethnic processes within the discussed groups. It is, rather, regional language varieties, various dialects, and other ethnolects that have shaped the regional ethnicity which is now being converted into a unified sense of German nationality in Poland. Examples here would be the Silesian and Masurian dialects of Polish, or the Silesian, East-Prussian, and Pomeranian dialects of German. We should not forget the key importance of ethnolects with no clear language or dialect status, as e.g. Kashubian (developing into a separate West-Slavonic language), Low-German (Plattdeutsch - often regarded as a separate language), or the micro-ethnolect of Wilamowice, regarded by linguists as an archaic variety of Silesian German but, as a separate language, also called Anglo-Friso-Saxon or Flemish, by the inhabitants of Wilamowice themselves (research on the language and culture of Wilamowice is being

carried out at the University of Poznań).

This great linguistic variety has been disappearing since World War II: at first enforced Polonisation and, later, voluntary and remote Germanization have caused a significant decline of the ethnolects mentioned. Developments in recent years have stopped this decline.

Silesians, for example, want to be bilingual, as they used to be for centuries. After 1945, bilingual Silesians (in Silesian and German, without good knowledge of standard Polish) stopped speaking and transmitting German, which limited its domain to the situations when the vernacular of an older person would not be understood by children or strangers. The empty space in this bilingual structure was soon filled by standard Polish, as it was the only medium of instruction at school and the only language used in the mass-media. The sudden decline of German was followed soon by a slow decline of the Silesian dialect of Polish. At present the members of the bilingual generation are older than 60 years, while the linguistic situation among the younger generations can be characterized as a standard Polish/Silesian dialect diglossia. It is children now in their pre-school age who could actually go one step further, and achieve trilingualism, with Silesian as the home language (*Dachsprache*), German as the native language (*Muttersprache*), and Polish as the state language. We should keep in mind that even the standard German (*Hochdeutsch*) spoken by the elderly Silesians and Masurians has kept its form from the 1930's and is perceived as slightly archaic by Germans from the Bundesrepublik.

Some sociolinguistic research has shown that it is mainly the Silesian dialect that has remained the key factor of regional (*Heimat*) identity. German is still gaining new language use domains, but it seems that it will not replace Silesian entirely.

To sum up, the present language process in Upper Silesia is not a language revival of German in its proper sense, although numerous developments could be seen as such. It is, rather, a kind of discrete language shift from bi- and/or trilingualism (1. Silesian dialect, 2. standard German and 3. Polish), through monolingualism in Polish, towards bi- and/or trilingualism in 1. German, 2. Silesian being a core value of the regional ethnicity (that could eventually prevail over German or Polish national options), and 3. Polish as the official language. It is surprising that the Silesian dialect, being such a significant factor in ethnic and national

processes in the region, has not upgraded its quite low sociolinguistic status.

The Silesian Institute in Opole has carried out some preliminary sociolinguistic research in the area of the former Oppeln administration district of the Provinz Oberschlesien. The 1988 inquiry concerned, among other issues, the degree of knowledge of and fluency in Silesian among the young people - very good or good knowledge and daily usage of the dialect was reported by 87% of young people. In 1990, the same research team inquired into the degree of knowledge and fluency in German. The target group was expanded to include all the autochthonous inhabitants of the pre-War Oppeln district. Almost 25% declared fluency in spoken and written German, 19% could not speak or understand German at all; the remaining 56% chose one of the following answers: 'fluent in spoken German', 'good in spoken and written German', 'only spoken German', 'does not speak but understands German'. The 1991 sociolinguistic field work among the German minority in Upper Silesia was carried out jointly by the Silesian Institute and the Institute of Geography of Oxford University. 100 people were asked, among other questions, about their mother tongue (Polish, German, or Silesian), language domains and situations of the language choice, as well as the national, ethnic, language, and cultural identity. The statistical results of this inquiry have not been published yet, but this author has been allowed to analyze some samples; a conclusion that can be drawn from this preliminary overview is that there seems to be a considerable increase in the degree of identification between Silesians and the German language and culture, and the constant decline of the choice of Polish as an ethnic identity. The important role of the Silesian dialect as a core value of the regional and ethnic identity has been maintained.

Language relations have also been examined in a transfer camp for immigrants from Poland to Germany, who declared themselves to be of German nationality - some 30% knew German to varying degrees, the remaining 70% did not know German at all (cf. Born & Dickgießer 1989: 145).

Preliminary sociolinguistic research has also discovered that some 10-15% of the autochthonous population of the former Provinz Ostpreußen know German to varying degrees.

An important sociolinguistic factor that should be mentioned here is

the question of German personal and place names. Of course, no official bilingualism was allowed during the whole period of communist rule. The 1990 German-Polish treaty did not create such an opportunity, although personal names are now officially allowed to be used both in their German and Polish form. Another problem concerns the use of topographical names: German minority organizations, as well as *Landsmannschaften* often use the place names created by the Nazi administration in 1938, instead of recorded historical names in German. The Association of German Organizations in Poland promotes the use of the historical German names and aims to dispense with the Nazi forms.

Education

An official educational system for the German minority existed in communist Poland only in the period 1950-63 (cf. Majewicz & Wicherkiewicz 1990). This school system, however, did not include the areas inhabited by the bilingual autochthons, where the teaching of the German language *in any form* was totally banned till the 1980's (as in the part of the Opole province situated on the right bank of the Oder river). This ban has resulted in a situation where a significant number of people identifying themselves with the German nation and belonging to German minority organizations hardly know German.

It was in 1991 that the German minority started organizing a new school system in Upper Silesia. At present there are fourteen schools providing German lessons at mother tongue level in the Opole province, and twelve in two other Silesian provinces: Katowice and Cz_stochowa. The curriculum there includes three hours of German per week. Declarations of parents who are willing to have their children taught German as a mother tongue have been made in fifty schools - the main obstacle, however, is the shortage of well-qualified teachers. Most of them come to Silesia from Germany, or are trained there by the Goethe-Institut. There are about twenty teachers from Germany, but they are usually not located where those in Silesia who want to learn German live. It is commonly thought that Poles take German teaching aid for general Polish schools, as German has become the second foreign language in the whole country. A cooperation program stipulates training for 180 teachers from

Poland in Germany during the next three years. The teachers working as teachers of German in Silesia at present do not have proper qualifications - only forty-nine have an academic qualification in German philology.

There are no German-language secondary schools, although attempts to start up such schools have been undertaken by almost all German minority organizations. The most advanced preparations are in Wrocław/Breslau, Racibórz/Ratibor, and Toruń/Thorn. The main obstacle here is that a rather small number of students are willing to attend such schools without good knowledge of German as a mother tongue. Bilingual classes are to be held next year in a secondary school in Opole.

What can be observed country-wide is a significant increase of schools and classes providing education in German as a foreign language, especially in the western part of Poland. In the Opole province, German is being taught in 230 primary schools (of 622), and 35 secondary schools. The College of Foreign Languages at Opole University has also initiated study programs in German philology.

Pre-school children are taught German as a foreign language in several kindergartens, but the language of instruction is exclusively Polish.

There are no attempts to introduce the regional dialects of Polish and German to schools.

Culture

It is only in the last three years that the German minority has been given access to the state mass-media. The first effort to create a German-language newspaper in the 1980's was attempted by *Unsere Muttersprache* which was published in Gryfino/Greifenhagen. At present, several newspapers are published by various organizations. The most important are: *Oberschlesische Zeitung* (formerly *Oberschlesische Nachrichten*) - a bilingual bi-weekly for the German minority, published in Opole, *Masurische Storchenpost* - a bilingual periodical published by the Masurische Gesellschaft in Olsztyn/Allenstein, *Unsere Hoffnung* - in Katowice, *Schlesischer Kurier - unabhängige Heimatzeitung* - published only in German in Racibórz, and the internal bulletin of the *Verband der deutschen Sozial-Kulturellen Gesellschaften in Polen*.

Special radio programs in Polish and German, *Unsere Heimat*, are

broadcast every Friday from Opole; the broadcasting station in Katowice has a weekly program of the local German organization. Katowice TV broadcasts, at present only one program for the German minority, *Oberschlesien Aktuell*. Certain initiatives have also been undertaken by a private TV broadcasting company in Opole.

The cultural revival of the German minority is certainly one of the main objectives of various organizations, most of which operate in Silesia.

There are already more than thirty libraries affiliated to local branches of minority organizations, and fifteen German language collections in public libraries, with almost 10,000 volumes altogether. A central library is designed as a part of the planned Centre of German Culture in the castle of *Yrowa*. The castle of Mikolin is to house the first scholarly centre of the German minority in Poland.

Folk choirs have always played a special role in Silesian culture, and at present there are some thirty-five German choirs in the region.

Religion

The German minority population in Poland is mainly Roman Catholic. The Masurians, the so-called ethnic Germans, and some inhabitants of Cieszyn/Teschen in Silesia are mostly Lutheran (Evangelical).

With the tacit approval of the local bishop, the first official Catholic mass was held in German in June, 1989, in Góra *w. Anny/Annaberg*. Public German-language Lutheran services started in April, 1988, in Wa_*brzych/Waldenburg*.

At present, Catholic masses are held in German in 50% (according to the provincial administration) to 80% (according to minority organizations) of the German minority-inhabited parishes in Silesia. However, knowledge of German among the priests is rather low and, as a result, only the unchanging parts of the mass are said in German. Sermons are given mainly in Polish with short summaries in German. There is no German-language catechesis for children. Very few Evangelical churches provide services in German, and those are mainly in the region of Cieszyn.

Minority organizations

Up until the end of the 1980's, the only legal minority organization had been the German Socio-Cultural Society in Wa_brzych, with some 800 members.

The first independent organizations appeared in the mid 1980's in Warsaw, Gda_sk, Katowice, Rybnik, Opole, Wodzis_aw/Loslau, Bytom/Beuthen, Zdieszowice/Deschowitz, Gorzów/Landsberg, Pi_a/Schneidemühl, Szczecin/Stettin, and Bydgoszcz/Bromberg. In 1988, the first *Deutsche Freundschaftskreise* were founded in Gliwice/Gleitwitz, Racibórz, Zdieszowice, as a transitional kind of organization, which strove for minority rights for Germans. These associations had more than 300 thousand members. The first officially recognized and registered organizations were the Socio-Cultural Associations of the Population of German Origin in the provinces of Katowice, Cz_stochowa, Opole Silesia, and the Association of Polish Citizens of German Origin in Gda_sk, then in Masuria, Varmia/Ermland, and Pomerania (cf. Sakson 1991: 21).

In September, 1990, various German minority organizations were affiliated to the Central Council of German Societies in the Republic of Poland with its seat in Katowice. The Council had planned both cultural and economic initiatives for schools, banks, trade, and industrial associations. As a result of internal disputes between various factions and the consequent schism between different Silesian German lobbies, the Council disbanded.

At present there are about forty German minority organizations in Poland; twenty-two of them are associated in the *Verband der deutschen Sozial-Kulturellen Gesellschaften in Polen* in Opole. The biggest one is the Opole Silesian organization with almost 200 thousand members. The *Verband* has already a well developed regional structure, a youth organization (*Bund der Jugend der deutschen Minderheit* in Wroc_aw), a farmers' society (*Verein Deutscher Bauern* in Gogolin), and a regional branch in Northern Poland (Gda_sk, Toru_, Olsztyn).

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