

The debate on the Upper Silesian identity

We, Silesians



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A common language, culture, and historical memory are markers of the identity of inhabitants of Upper Silesia

For over two decades, Poland has seen ongoing public debate on the identity of Upper Silesia, geographically defined as an area covering the region around the cities Katowice and Opole. It is a fragment of historical Silesia, whose boundaries stretched from Gorlitz in Germany, to Zgorzelec, Legnica, Wrocław, Opole, Bytom and Katowice in Poland, and to Opava and Krnov in the Czech Republic. Here we do not wish to deliberate the precise boundaries of the region in a geographical or historical perspective; we are merely describing the existing discussion concerning a significant region of Poland, and formerly of Prussia and Germany.

Markers of identity

In the past, the region was one of the most important industrial centers, first of Prussia, and then of unified Germany. It was home to one of the continent's first steam engines, and one of the first to have a tram network; here Nivea cream was developed and the shower

was invented. In spite of widespread illiteracy in the region, it also produced twelve Nobel Prize laureates in physics, chemistry, and economics. Today's Upper Silesian landscape includes a highly-developed infrastructure (motorways, road system, transport, telecommunications) and infostructure (information superhighways, optic fiber networks). Upper Silesia is also a cultural-borderland region, on the peripheries of major political and administration centers, with a clear awareness of a social distinction reflected in the area's identity. It is built upon a cultural, political, and economic past, characterized by a combination of several axiological and normative systems. The emerging image of contemporary Upper Silesia shows a clear cultural diversity and ambivalent national identities.

As such, the identity of Upper Silesia is based on regional traditions, stemming from clearly defined territorial boundaries, the region's location, and its specific social, cultural (symbolic), economic and topographical features which all make it stand out from among other regions. It is an emotional identity, experienced through and based on people's everyday experiences, as well as a functional one, resulting from common interests. Upper Silesia has its own symbolic universe, based on accumulated values of regional identity. They should be read from the long-term perspective, known as *longue durée* – a scientific term developed by Fernand Paul Braudel, co-founder of the French Annales School. According to this postulate, Silesian identity is a multitude of carefully remembered facts, which have come together over the centuries to form the present-day image of the region.

Historical perspective

The history of Upper Silesia dates back to the days of the Piast dynasty, when the colonization process increased the German population living in cities and rural areas. The use of German language was on the rise, and there were growing numbers of German knights and clergy at courts and



manors across the region. This brewed discontent among the Polish population, which remained the majority until the 17th century. The subordination of Upper Silesian duchies to the Czech Crown shifted the region into the domain of a Czech/German culture, in which Czech was the main language until the 18th century, accompanied by German since the 16th century. Following the Silesian wars of the 18th century, the Upper Silesian lands found themselves largely within the boundaries of Prussia. However, this did not affect the cultural image of this region, inhabited by Polish, German, Moravian (Czech), and Jewish peoples.

With the progressing industrialization, Upper Silesia became home to growing numbers of Germans working in technology, education, and trade. The lives of inhabitants of Upper Silesia, and the entire local milieu, evolved over the passing years and centuries.

Its most tragic period was the Second World War and the years immediately afterwards. The German population of the region was resettled to Germany, while Silesia became home to people migrating from central and eastern Poland. Upper Silesia remained a cultural melting pot, mixing cultural and historical experiences of local inhabitants,

subject to intense scrutiny by the Communist authorities in the wake of the national "lists" that had been created by the Nazis (the Deutsche Volksliste), plus migrants from central and eastern Poland, people resettled from the lands of the Second Polish Republic which had just become part of the Soviet Union in 1945, and repatriates from France and Belgium. The region became home to growing numbers of Poles arriving from various cultural regions of the country in search for work and a better life.

During the period of "real socialism" in Poland (1944-1989), many attempts were made to homogenize the culturally and nationally varied population of Upper Silesia. The efforts of regional and national authorities focused mainly - although not exclusively - on introducing an educational and cultural system that might help achieve this goal. It was claimed that the region was essentially Polish, and the presence of other political and cultural systems was simply the result of unfortunate historical events and conflicts, periods of partitions and occupation. The cultivation of traditions maintained by national and ethnic minorities mainly took place in private, frequently supported by local churches. The domination of Polish national culture became obvious, and the

The overground portion of a mining shaft towering over a town - a scene typical of Upper Silesia

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Corpus Christi
procession in
Lipiny, a district
of Świętochłowice
(Silesia)

Arndtise, Gola

hegemony was in no way threatened by the cultures of national minorities. It wasn't until Poland attained genuine independence and democracy that an atmosphere of cultural pluralism arose, resulting in today's cultural heterogeneity of Upper Silesia forming a clear marker of the region's identity.

Statistical surprises of the Census

In Upper Silesia, many different cultures come together, proudly displayed by national and ethnic minorities. According to data gathered as part of the National Census in 2011, the region is home to 809,000 people identifying themselves as having a Silesian nationality, with 109,000 declaring themselves members of the German minority. More precisely, of the 809,000 Silesians, 362,000 people identified themselves as exclusively Silesian, 415,000 as having a joint Silesian and Polish identity, and 418,000 indicated Silesian as their primary identity. Of the 109,000 declaring themselves as being part of the German minority, 49,000 indicated this as their primary choice.

This image of the region combines facets of a traditionally-perceived identity (as an attachment to a specific territory and to strong historical traditions) with the outcome of contemporary processes occurring on a global scale, which increasingly reduce the sig-

nificance of physical space, replacing it with powerful ties in a symbolic sphere. These processes indicate that identity formation is a fluid process which is becoming increasingly inclusive. In this context, the identity of Upper Silesia is mainly expressed through the potential of its inhabitants, whose backgrounds lend the region its unique character. It is these inhabitants who make efforts to strengthen the Silesian identity. One example is the construction of a new building for the Silesian Museum in Katowice. An important development in the struggle to strengthen Silesian regional identity is the movement aiming to have the Silesian form of speech recognized as a regional language, and for the political and economic activities of the Silesian Autonomy Movement working for Upper Silesia to be recognized as an autonomic region in its pre-war boundaries. However, it should be remembered that a regional identity also has a flip side: it may engender socially-responsible attitudes, but also egocentric and divisive ones as well.

The present discourse on Silesian identity has been ongoing since the 1990s, and mainly focuses on confronting the centralist model of managing society with a model based on the acceptance of regional variation. This tension has led to the formation of numerous organizations, associations, and social movements,

and it is especially popular among people who identify with the Silesian and German minorities. The Social and Cultural Society of the German Minority in Opole Silesia supports the social lives of the German minority through the development of a German language and bilingual education system in the region, and promoting its presence in regional media. In September 2012, the Association of People of Silesian Nationality was registered at the Opole courthouse; its main aim is to preserve the traditions, language, and ethnic and national elements of people who identify as Silesian. The Organization for Silesian Nationals was registered in Katowice on 24 June 1997, although the act was challenged by the governor of the Silesian Voivodeship. The registration was repealed; the Organization continues striving to be recognized, although it has not gained support from the Plenary Court in Strasbourg.

People who identify as Silesian strive to protect the culture and traditions of their region; at the forefront of their activities is the effort to have Silesian recognized as a regional language under Poland's Act on Ethnic and National Minorities and Regional Languages of 6 January 2005. Work is ongoing in the Polish parliament, the Sejm, to amend the provisions dealing with regional languages in order to classify Silesian accordingly, since it meets the criteria of a regional language as listed in the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages adopted in Strasbourg on 5 November 1992. The Charter states that a regional language is traditionally used by nationals of a country in which they are a minority, is not a dialect of the official language (in this case Polish), and is not a language of recent immigrants.

For several years, the Sejm has been debating whether to recognize Silesians as a national minority and their language as a regional language. The dispute and controversy continues to engage politicians, linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists. The most recent heated debate on the Silesian language took place in late August 2012 during a sitting of the Sejm Committee on National and Ethnic Minorities. Once again, Silesian was not granted regional language status, although we are certain that such efforts will continue.

The drive to protect Silesian is supported by the Silesian Autonomy Movement, even though its key aim is to attain an autonomy for Upper Silesia modeled on the region's autonomy during the interwar period, when the Silesian Voivodeship operated as part of the Organic Statute granted by the Legislative Sejm; the region had its own Silesian Sejm and Silesian Treasury.

Fragments of identity

The contemporary identity of Upper Silesia manifests itself in the region's difficult and complex historical memory, as well as all activities aiming to present the Upper Silesian uniqueness in cultural, socioeconomic, and political contexts. We see efforts to preserve cultural diversity as stemming from the ethnic and national minorities in the region, including work done to formalize the status of the local way of speech as a Silesian language. In the context of regional identity, we must also remember the unique landscape of Upper Silesia with its red-brick *familok* tenement buildings and mining shafts, increasingly being used as symbols of retail centers (Silesia City Centre) and museums (Silesian Museum). Other important aspects are religion, local heroes and artists, and traditional cuisine. Upper Silesia is also a powerful economic region of Poland, in which a part of the political class is striving to attain an autonomy within the borders of today's Republic of Poland. The identity of Upper Silesia manifests itself in many facets of everyday life, creates a powerful sense of community among "us Silesians," and forms a foundation strongly distinguishing the region among other parts of Poland. ■

Further reading:

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