

**GETTING OUT OF THE CLOSET:
CULTURAL MINORITIES IN POLAND
COPE WITH OPPRESSION***

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This paper is a continuation of my analysis of the situation of cultural minorities in Poland since 1989. At the Oslo EASA Congress in 1994, I presented a paper on the old and new cultural minorities in Poland after the 1989 transition. In that Oslo paper, I briefly discussed two separate systems of the "minorities – dominant group" relations during the pre-1989 era but concentrated on the post-communist period. A provisional typology of the "old" and "new" (in both the literal and metaphorical sense) minorities in Polish society after 1989 was introduced. In the literal sense, the new minorities would be the groups that, in a sociological sense, had not existed in Poland before 1990. In the metaphorical sense, the new minorities would be the groups that had existed before but were kept or stayed voluntarily "in the closed" (Mucha 1996). The particular groups discussed in this paper are "new" in the metaphorical sense.

I use the term "majority" in the purely numerical sense, unlike the term "minority." Following classic ideas of Louis Wirth, I understand minority as "a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination" (1945:347).

Discrimination does not have to be physical. It can have a form of labeling, stigmatization, and exclusion. Minorities, in this sense, imply a dominant group, regardless of the numerical proportions between their memberships. Cultural domination means here the monopolization of definitions of social situations, of the setting the differences between right and wrong, between the proper and improper. It means the imposition of the dominant group's own ideology on the other groups – cultural minorities. I consider minorities as cultural if an outside observer can ascribe to them some

* An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 4th Congress of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in Barcelona in August 1996.

specific value systems, ideologies, customs, ways of life, or if they are treated by the dominant group as having these characteristics.

During the pre-1989 period, most of the relations between the politically dominant group (and its culture) and the minorities had a conflictual character in Poland, but the conflict was rarely overt. On the part of the groups that did not accept the dominant ideology, there was a fear that the exclusion and conflict could cease to be limited to the symbolic sphere and might involve physical coercion. Therefore, the conflict was latent: the dominant groups were active, minorities were passive. They rarely questioned in public the official worldview and rather tried to find a kind of niche for themselves. We could say that the Polish minorities were not of a demanding but of a retreatist, withdrawing character (Mucha 1992:474). Since 1989, democratization of Poland has changed the system radically. The new dominant group is quite often contested by some minorities. Now they feel free and even obliged to overtly present their own specific needs, interests, to manifest their specific value systems and preferred ways of life. Therefore, minorities are rarely of a retreatist character now. The overt conflict that was absent under the former system is quite often observed nowadays.

I will not discuss in detail the character of the Polish dominant culture. Instead, I will concentrate on its two basic, in my opinion, features. The first of them is its stress on the Roman Catholic value system and the second is the stress on the historic national values. In this second aspect, "Polishness" has always been opposed to the neighboring nations, particularly to Germans and Russians. I will return to this issue soon. Due to the first particular character of Polish dominant culture, we could treat as cultural minorities in Poland all groups of the faithful of the non-Catholic religions, as well as the collectivity of unbelievers (for the analysis of the latter group, see Mucha 1989). However, the strong stress on the Catholic values in Poland has very important consequences to some groups that formally speaking are not being distinguished due to their attitude to religion but groups of people whose ways of life are culturally defined as anti-Catholic, and who are therefore singled out and condemned. I mean here homosexuals who have obviously constituted a kind of cultural minority everywhere where they attempt to get out of the closet.

Due to the second of the above-mentioned characteristics, I will present here the German minority, particularly those Germans who live in Silesia, the south-western part of Poland.

There seems to be a very good reason to look at the situation of these particular minorities in Poland in one analysis. They are comparable in size. Poland has about 40 million inhabitants. According to the most conservative estimates, at least one percent of any large population in homosexually oriented. That would mean in Poland about 400,000 people. We do not know the exact number of Germans in Poland (ethnicity is not a demographic category in this country), but according to the conservative Polish estimates there is a least 300,000 of them. Other common characteristics – common not only for these two minorities but for most of them – are the facts that during the communist period they were so severely oppressed that until the late 1980s they did not even dream about getting out of the closet, that nearly no one knew of their existence and that they started to organize themselves only after 1985.

These two minorities seem to differ on everything else. One (the German) is a “legitimate,” privileged and demanding minority, having an “outside ethnic power” (see Gordon 1975:104-5), and the second, the homosexuals, constitutes an “illegitimate,” under-privileged, retreatist minority, having nearly no “outside power.” This analysis will try to show how these differences look like in the social practice, what strategies of resistance are available to these minorities. The paper will consist of a broad overview of the situation and, due to the shortage of interesting field studies, will not contain any ethnographic description, particularly any “thick description” in the sense suggested by Clifford Geertz (1983:20-21). I hope that it can be treated as an introduction to more detailed, interpretative studies.

For a few hundred years, Silesia has been a borderland between Poland and Germany. At least three groups of the population could be distinguished on this territory. In Silesia there here have been: (1) people considering themselves Poles (mostly post-1945 immigrants from Eastern and Central Poland), (2) Germans, and (3) Silesians the “local people,” of a regional and not national consciousness. Most Silesians have spoken a local dialect; some have also spoken Polish, German, or both. During the last few hundred years, the territory belonged to Germany so the inhabitants went to German schools and the military, and on the everyday level had to deal with German administration. Also during the interwar period, most of Silesia belonged to Germany. After the war, due to international agreements, the whole region was transferred to Poland.

Several million people lived in Silesia. Following the post-war treaties, Polish authorities began the "verification" process. Its goal was to distinguish Germans from Poles and the "local people," and to send the first category to Germany. Most of the inhabitants of the region who had no clear and positive German identity preferred to stay in new Poland. Germany was more destroyed than Silesia and it seemed that the post-war recovery would go faster in Poland. Moreover, the Polish authorities were interested in keeping as many people who declared that they were Poles as possible. In order to legitimize the incorporation of Silesia, they wanted to prove that the "local people" were actually Germanized Poles. After the verification process was completed, the authorities declared that all the remaining-in-Poland people were Poles and that no single German stayed there. It should be added that most of the Silesians had relatives in Germany and that between 1945 and 1956 it was extremely difficult to go abroad from Poland, even for a short visit.

Two other interesting facts should be mentioned: firstly, that not only the communist state authorities but also the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church confirmed, until the mid-1980s, the opinion that there were no Germans left in Poland and secondly that social scientists were continuously declaring that no more than ten thousand people of German nationality had stayed in Poland.

In order to homogenize the population – the beloved idea of the communist authorities – a process of oppression against the remaining signs of "Germanness" began in the late 1940s and actually continued until the late 1980s. In many cases, Silesians were forced to change their German-sounding names. Speaking German in public was strongly forbidden. German was not taught in schools. There were no German language services in churches. There were no German language mass media. Silesians were not promoted if a Polish immigrant to the region was also interested in a higher position. Silesians were not offered any authority positions in the local politics, nor in the military nor in the state police. Rural Silesians, when comparing themselves with Polish newcomers from the former Polish Eastern territories, after the Second World War transferred to the Soviet Union, felt culturally and technologically superior, but were treated by the authorities and by the immigrant Poles as second-class citizens.

In the meantime, the German economy was growing incomparably faster than the Polish. After 1956 it became possible to go

abroad to visit relatives. Many Polish Germans took advantage of this opportunity. They saw the difference between the lifestyle of economically-successful democracy and the lifestyle of authoritarian communism. Many Polish Germans worked in Germany for a while and brought hard currency back to Poland. Many were bringing valuable gifts from their relatives. The German minority in Silesia was becoming much better off than its Polish neighbors, despite the oppression mentioned earlier. Many Silesians were emigrating, following the official program of "family reunion." Family reunion in Germany meant, however, a disorganization of many Silesian families. Moreover, as a consequence of this program, more and more Silesian families had very close relatives in Germany. In the 1970s, about 180,000 people emigrated from Poland to West Germany (only an extremely slight minority went to East Germany) claiming German nationality. The so-called "German option" (or national identity) was more and more popular in Silesia, but according to the official position of Polish authorities, there still were no Germans in Poland. Therefore, it was forbidden to establish any German associations. During the entire post-war period, the authorities of the Federal Republic of Germany were clearly presenting the opinion that there was a very large (between one and two million, according to them) German minority in Poland (for a detailed overview of the situation of Germans in Poland, see, for instance: Kurcz 1995; Lecki et al. 1995; *Niemcy w oczach ...* 1996; Sakson 1991). The demands on the part of the German government that the German minority in Poland become recognized and their emigration allowed were treated by the Polish government as interference in the internal affairs of Poland. However, when anyone inside Poland tried to organize a German club, etc., he or she was nearly immediately granted a passport and sent to Germany.

Personal help in the form of money orders, parcels and illegal jobs in Germany as well as the appeals on the part of the German government could be treated as two levels of the "outside power" of the German minority in Poland.

At the end of the 1980s, when it became clear that the democratic transformations will take place in Poland, the German minority intensified its attempts to organize itself. *Deutsche Freundeskreise* were established in 1988, but they were illegal for about two years. In July 1989, after the systematic transformation began, the court of justice in Opole refused registration of an asso-

ciation of the German minority. The court stated that there was no minority in the region, despite the fact that the instigators produced twenty thousand individual signatures under the application. Only in 1990, the first associations were registered. There were problems not only with the registration but also with the names of associations. The courts preferred the phrase "Poles of German origin" to the phrase "Germans," even if the phrase "Ukrainians" or "Slovaks" was accepted in the names of respective organizations.

Now, in the mid-1990s, there are nearly 50 organizations of the German minority. The total membership is about 300,000 people. Some of them are local organization of the German population of the given region, some are occupational organizations, religious organizations, organizations of the German youth in Poland. It should be mentioned, that some members of the associations are the Polish spouses, that the Germanness of the members is never "verified." On the other hand, there are people who are evidently Germans but do not belong to any German club or association.

The German aspirations to self-organization and ethnic freedom were treated as legitimate and supported by Solidarity leaders and by the post-1989 Polish cabinets and the parliament. First, the German leaders ran for the local and parliamentary seats on the Solidarity ballot, later on the ballots of the German electoral committees. According to the national and local election documents, the German constituency in Poland was in 1991 about 137,000 people and in 1993 about 110,000 people (Kurcz 1995; Sakson 1991). The number of pupils of schools with German as the language of instruction grew from 1,300 in 1992 to 10,500 in 1996 (*GUS o edukacji* 1996). The German government is still financially supporting the German minority in Poland (it does not want its emigration to Germany now, though).

By 1997, the basic goals of the German minority seem to have been realized. It became a very important social factor in the public life of the regions of its concentration. It is well represented in the local institutions and local government. It overtly presents its demands and has resources to enforce the realization of some of them. It still has problems, obviously, and they are discussed even in the national newspapers. There is between 50,000 and 60,000 of former *Wehrmacht* (German army during the Second World War) soldiers who are very old now and have no pensions. There are conflicts with

the Polish population over the German inscriptions in public places, over the monuments to honor German soldiers who were killed during the two world wars. It should also be mentioned that the German identity has its own shades and the ties between members and the organizations are not always very strong: nowadays, fewer and fewer people pay the dues, the national ambivalence is again growing.

Let me move on to my second case, the homosexuals. There is no reason to discuss the problem of stigmatization, exclusion and oppression of homosexuals throughout the modern history of the West, in both democratic and totalitarian regimes. After World War II, the Polish case differed slightly from many others in the sense that on the one hand the communist political system discriminated against everybody and everything considered to be a social and/or cultural "deviation," and the Roman Catholic Church has always played a very significant role in Polish culture. The teaching of this Church and particularly of the current pope about sexual conduct in general and about homosexuality in particular is sufficiently known and does not have to be summarized. The joint effort of the communist and Roman Catholic education has resulted in the socialization of at least two generations of Poles toward low tolerance of any "otherness."

As everywhere else, there have always been homosexuals in Poland, even under communism. Some of them were relatively prominent people and their sexual orientation was known to those who were interested. It was never discussed in public, however, and there was a kind of aura of scandal around these public figures. There have always been the so-called "pickets" – outdoor places (parks, public toilets) where homosexuals could find each other. There have always been partly homosexual coffee shops and public baths. However, until the mid-1980's, there had never been any homosexual community, any organized social minority, having its own way of life, institutions, etc. The police have had files with names and addresses of people known to them as homosexuals.

There are very few sociological and anthropological studies of the gay community (see, e.g., Jankowski 1995; Adamska 1996), but for this particular article, ethnography is less important than the presentation of the attempts and failures of the "newborn" community as a whole to win a social tolerance – to get out of the closet.

It seems that the beginnings of the homosexual community date to November 1985 when the police made a raid on all known to them coffee shops, bars, baths, pickets and even private apartments throughout major large cities, searching for homosexuals. A large (but unknown precisely) number of people were detained and interrogated; finger prints were taken. An unexpected consequence of this police raid was the integration (even if quite weak) of the collectivity of homosexuals. Already in 1985, probably in Gdansk, gays printed a short leaflet about safe sex. In 1986, an informal Wroclaw gay group got in touch with the Viennese ILGA (International Organization of Gays and Lesbians) members. In the fall of that year, the first issue of a semi-legal brochure *Filo-Express* was published in Gdansk. The Lodz group became the liaison with the East European Information Pool, a branch of the above-mentioned Viennese association. This association seems to have been a go-between between the Polish regional groups. In 1987, the first meeting of various regional groups was held in Warsaw. In 1988, the Warsaw gays applied for registration of their organization in the Warsaw regional court. The application was to wait two years until the decision, eventually positive, was taken. In 1989, the third all-national congress of gays was held in Warsaw. About 50 people participated. It was illegal but tolerated. After the political Round Table talks in 1989, it was hardly possible in Poland to overtly discriminate against any social minority.

In February 1992, the Association of Lambda Groups was registered in Warsaw. Its regional groups were organized. Soon, twelve branches became active in some large cities. Five other major organizations were also established. Only one of them gathered both female and male members. The goals of these groups have been similar. First was to help the members in the acceptance of themselves as gay people and in "coming out." The second goal was to get in touch with the media in order to change the former negative public image of homosexuals and to get in touch with the Roman Catholic Church authorities. Most Polish gays are Roman Catholics and they wanted to be accepted by their Church. They requested the Primate appoint a special chaplain for them. That has never been granted to them and the Church's negative standpoint has never changed. The third goal was the publication of a "report on discrimination" of homosexuals. It was prepared but actually never presented to the general public. Sport and tourism should also be

named as important activities. Last but not least, the associations have been active in anti-AIDS campaigns.

Associations have very few members; only some of them rent office spaces. Unlike many Western gay associations, they have no money for rent. Another reason they have no offices is the reluctance on the part of the landlords to "pollute" their property. The gay associations cooperate with some Western consultants in the field of non-governmental organizations, and participate in the training courses.

Despite the problems mentioned above, Polish gays have the baths, coffee shops, clubs, discos where they meet. However, they can be utilized by gays only as long as they are not known as "gay places" to the landlords and to the general public. Then, when the "polluted" character of this space is revealed, they are closed. Not all of these problems are caused by the unfriendly milieu. In Warsaw, in 1995, the gays wanted to celebrate Gay Pride Day, to march in the Gay Pride Parade. Due to very poor organization, it did not take place. Moreover, they alienated some sympathetic and willing-to-cooperate heterosexuals.

There are four magazines published by gays and for gays now. Two of them are actually of a pornographic nature, but two others (*Filo* and *Inaczej*) are regular periodicals. They publish articles on safe sex, AIDS, gay social life, coming out, religious life, etc. They publish short stories, letters, personal ads. The content of these magazines proves that the community is very heterogenic if seen from the sociological perspective. No information about the number of printed and distributed copies is available. It is not difficult to find them in regular newsstands, however.

The way of the regular media coverage has changed little since the mid-1980s. Sometimes, a neutral short film on gay social life abroad is shown on television very late at night. Sometimes a talk show with homosexuals is aired. The proposal of the new Polish constitution initially stated in one of its articles that nobody should be discriminated against because of his or her sexual orientation.

In comparison to the situation of the pre-1985 years, the public position of the gay community in Poland has changed a lot. However, most of the old problems still exist. Moreover, due to the democratization, gays can (if they want) demand overt participation in public life, but the opponents of their public visibility can overtly present their attitudes as well. The Roman Catholic Church still

describes homosexuals as deviants and continues to present a very negative attitude to sexually-active gays. The Church as a community of the faithful has a strong influence on public opinion and is also a very influential social institution. This causes problems because many homosexuals are religious people. The above-mentioned article in the proposal of the state constitution, which still is under public discussion, became a target of numerous attacks on the part of the right wing parties and their constituency (left wing parties have been relatively sympathetic). It is also strongly criticized by the right wing mass media organizations. The police are still watching homosexuals and collecting data about them. They are treated by the police as the so-called criminogenic element. The overt homosexual has no career chances in the police, military, education, public administration, and actually in many other professional fields. Even if the public media occasionally present some programs on homosexuals, they do it under the label of exotic problems and the public reaction is very often very negative. It is very difficult to rent an apartment as a gay couple or to rent space for a gay office or club. Parents and siblings create problems, too. They often react very negatively to the coming out of their children/siblings.

One can safely say that there is neither cultural nor institutional legitimation of the homosexual minority in contemporary Poland. Its situation is incomparably better now than it was ten years ago, but it is still stigmatized, excluded and has neither internal nor external power. Most of the activists are very disillusioned. Perhaps these are the reasons why the gay movement is in crisis now. The previously-mentioned Lambda Association was dissolved on 1 June 1996. Only eight members came to the final meeting.

As a conclusion I would again like to present a short comparison of the situation of the two collectivities. Since 1989, the institutional opportunity structure in Poland has changed for both of them. However, the dominant value system in the country accepts the ethnic differentiation as legitimate but does not accept the differences in the area of sexual orientation. This traditional value system is changing, but it continues to be supported by a powerful institution – the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, one group has a strong (foreign, but at least partly legitimate in the eyes of many Poles) outside power on the institutional and personal levels and the other has nearly no outside power (it has only some foreign assistance and is considered to be illegitimate). Therefore, one of these minorities

can be described as of a “demanding” character that sometimes leads to local conflicts, while the other is of a “retreatist” character and prefers to withdraw from conflictual situations, probably waiting for changes in the value system of the society at large.

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