Zbigniew Kurcz

German minority in Poland: origin, structure, expectations

After the downfall of nationalist theories ethnic problems were thought to belong to the past. The new main drive of a country was to be its economy and technological development. It was to be the economy that determined politics and new relations between ethnic societies. This process is becoming more and more important, but is accompanied by the old and new tendencies to ethnic separatism and political self-confirmation.

In the USSR ethnic problems were overlooked and underestimated, even by administrative means, as the new nation was to be the socialist nation without any ethnic past. The socialist nation theory let distinguish between the nation of the German Democratic Republic and that of the Federal Republic of Germany, the first one being the developing, socialist German nation, gradually more and more different from the capitalist nation of the FRG.

In the US, on the other hand, dominated the theory of Melting Pot, which determined the origin of the American nation. New settlers from different countries, continents, and cultures integrated around the values of free market and civil rights, blended without any conflicts in spite of different religions, races, and nationalities.

In Western Europe, along with economic development and growing consumption, ethnic issues became less important, all the more ethnic minorities had much more freedom in the West than in the multimillion nations of the East.

However, the theories proposing to ignore the ethnic issues nowhere came true. In the US the Melting Pot theory failed, and the most important reasons of ethnic renaissance were the non-Anglosaxon Whites aspirations for power, violent protests of Blacks, and common searching for one's roots. *Sui generis* of the American nation remained untouched, but it is obvious it can only develop taking into consideration ethnic issues. In the USSR the suppressed ethnic conflicts broke out in the late 80-s. They became visible also in Western Europe in Belgium, France, Spain, Italy (separatist ideas, defense of national identity and nationalist movements).

The social and political changes in Poland influenced also social and ethnic relations. Active and aware ethnic minorities appeared, among them the German minority, which is special because of many factors, such as the number, structure, expectations, and participation in social and political life of the country.

As for the terminology, I am mainly using the term 'German minority', and I do not consider such terms as Germans, German minority, original inhabitants, or people of local origin as synonymous. It would be logical to consider all people who belong to German minority associations to be Germans. However, most of them were until recently only Polish citizens, some were important figures of Polish political life, and to call them automatically Germans is difficult. They call themselves people of German origin, which is also stressed in names of many associations. The 'people of German origin' almost always appears in the name of an association, as do 'German minority', names of regions, and sometimes only the word 'German' at the beginning (e.g. the German Socio-Cultural Society of Breslau). As for the terms 'original inhabitants' and 'people of local origin', meaning autochthons, I do not mean all the original inhabitants, but only those who identify themselves as Germans. The phrase 'German minority' was often used for political reasons concerning minority rights when registering an association, and later in names of associations the phrase was changed into 'Germans'.

Today (1996) the German minority in Poland is structured within nearly 70 associations which number circa 300 000 members. In 1992-96 the number of German organization was growing, while the number of members was constant – numerous small organizations appear, while the larger ones lose their members. The biggest number of new members appeared in the Province of Olsztyn.

Membership in the associations is the right source of the number of Germans in Poland, as the declaration form requires that a candidate should declare his/her nationality. However, the declared German nationality is often difficult to prove, and the associations' criteria are not too strict – otherwise they would lose 90% of members. As one of the leaders claims, it's important to gather people who posses true bonds with German culture.

However, disregarding the statistics, the real number of Germans in Poland may either be smaller or bigger than 300 000. Following facts speak for the smaller number:

- In Górny Śląsk and Śląsk Opolski minority associations gather Silesia people, who are indifferent as far as nationality is concerned, but they see the organizations as potential spokesmen for their local interests,
- Membership in minority organizations is seen as a protection against the possibility of losing one's German status, German nationality, and a possibility to leave to Germany in case of any economic problems in Poland,
- In small country and village communities conformist attitudes and pressure by relatives and friends may be important when considering accession,
- In regions where a few such organizations exist people tend to enrol to a few associations,
- Some associations accept as members people of German nationality but non-Polish residents.

Some Germans stay outside the minority organizations for following reasons:

- German national identity today can be sustained in many different ways, as contacts with German residents, trips, watching German TV,
- Some may still remember the persecution against Germans after WW II and may be afraid of being victims of Polish neighbours in case of new conflicts,
- Others, still, after the communist times may feel reluctance to any form of association, may be of advanced age, or live far from seats of any German organizations.

A question arises: to what extent was the turn of the German-origin people towards German identity a matter of spontaneity, and to what extent was it influenced by external factors? It seemed to me that the self-identification process was partially driven by disgust with Polish identity. However, it seems that external influences were of significant importance. Here are some of them:

- one of the associations (Bund der Vertriebenen - Association of the Expelled) strived for the well-being of Germans who stayed in Eastern Europe. If at the beginning it was about reuniting families, later AE aimed at the minority status to be granted to Germans. It exerted pressure on the FRG government, e.g. making financial help to Poland dependent on German minority rights. AE contributed financially to creating the structures of minority associations in Poland, helped to legalize double nationality, exerted pressure on German government to grant the Germans living in Poland suffrage in the FRG, propagated the idea of autonomic and bilingual Silesia.
- Similar aims had Schlesische Jugend – The Youth of Silesia, for example: introducing German language to schools, right to establish German organizations, services in German, access to German literature and school books, etc.

- Various other organizations with similar aims and publications accessible in Poland influenced the renovation of German minority.

The exact number of German minority associations is difficult to state, as they are continuously appearing and vanishing. New associations appear where no such organizations existed, or where the existing ones disintegrate because of internal disagreements, or where there's a need to create an association of more local character.

The oldest association is the German Socio-Cultural Society in Walbrzych, established in 1957. At the beginning it numbered nearly 3000 members, and in 1988 only 47 members. Most of the associations were established in 1990-1992, and they number from 180000 to several members. Most of the associations have their seats in the border provinces (south, west, and north). Their main aims are: promotion of German language and culture, representation of the needs and interests of the members in relations with the authorities and state institutions, strengthening fraternal, or at least neighbourly relations with Polish inhabitants, care for the monuments and relics of German culture. Others include: social care, promotion of sports activities, organizations of the members' leisure, and, more and more often, participation in the development and economic changes in particular provinces.

There are also organizations that coordinate the activities of German minority associations. In September 1990 the Supervisory Board of German Associations in The Republic of Poland (Rada Naczelna Stowarzyszen Niemieckich w RP) was established, which was followed by establishing other similar bodies due to splits and internal controversies. In 1993 another organization was established. The Association of German Minority Societies of the Regions of Olsztyn, Gdansk, and Torun with the seat in Olsztyn wanted to coordinate work of the associations from the north of Poland. However, shortly afterwards a new organization appeared – German Minority Associations in the former Eastern Prussia, and in 1994 it gathered 20 associations.

As late as in 1992 a youth organization was established – Association of German Youth in the Republic of Poland. In 1994 it numbered 15000 members aged 16-35. The main aims concerns German culture and identity, but also friendly relations with the Polish youth and common ventures.

Expectations of German minorities concern mainly freedom of religious practices, using German language, participation in German culture, access to mass media, access to power, mainly local. There are also 'internal' expectations, concerning the minority members themselves, to use the mother tongue properly and teach it to the children.