
INTRODUCTION

On both sides of the border – the cultural heritage and identity of Cieszyn Silesia

When we say “Cieszyn Silesia”, we do not always talk about the same. What is concealed in this name for a historian would not mean the same for a geographer, whose understanding of Cieszyn Silesia does not agree with what that name tells a sociologist, ethnographer, ethnologist or anthropologist. Thus, what does the name Cieszyn Silesia entail? Do we mean a region of particular beauty, as the area of Cieszyn is commonly recognized? So beautiful and friendly to people that 1200 years ago three Polish princes, Leszko, Bolko and Cieszko, infatuated with this piece of land and happy with their meeting, decided to establish the town of Cieszyn? And what does the name Cieszyn mean? A pretty town used to be called Little Venice? That beautiful Cieszyn Silesia and its capital city Cieszyn belong to history and are just myths. There is no one single Cieszyn Silesia and one Cieszyn. This has lasted for 89 years, since (after long disputes) the region was divided between two countries: Poland and Czechoslovakia, which both were dissatisfied with the conditions of this split. Although from the point of view of geography and history, one Cieszyn Silesia should be discussed (now stretching on both sides of the Polish-Czech border), the cultural determinants force distinguishing two Cieszyn areas, which are linked by some features but separated by even more. After the division of the region, the name Cieszyn Silesia survived only in reference to the Polish side. On the Czech part, the name *česke Slezsko* or *Těšinsko* is applied and the piece of the part of Silesia which comprises two counties inhabited by numerous Polish population is usually called (mainly in Poland) *Zaolzie*.

The Cieszyn area has always been referred to by the term “borderland”. Unchangeably, it has been situated in a place where different countries, nations, cultures and religions meet. This can be easily noticed in its contemporary image, which has been shaped by Polish, Czech, German, Slovak, Austrian, and even Hungarian influences. What ceaselessly occurs in the geographical and social space of this borderland is the cultural clash, the interpenetration of cultural values and patterns, the exchange of lifestyles, and quite frequently – the rivalry of these styles, values and patterns. The centuries-old process of melting cultures has generated a specific culture in Cieszyn Silesia – of syncretic character and comprising various elements, which once were “alien” but currently are adapted to the native culture as the “own”. This has taken place despite the fact that the Polish-Czech border, running through the middle of the region, has always been a difficult frontier. Until early nineties of the 20th century

it was a tightly closed border – crossing it was an exceptional situation and required overcoming numerous difficulties. Many years of isolation resulted in complete drifting away of both the bordering sides – Poles and Czechs, and it was impossible to notice any cooperation in the Polish-Czech borderland. It is often mentioned that the border does not only divide but can also link two social and cultural organisms. However, for several decades the Polish-Czech border could only divide and its rigorous nature brought about the discontinuation of the earlier cultural unity of this part of Silesia. Nowadays, its inhabitants are making attempts (still rather shy and timid) to tie these torn threads together. Still, they must face the awareness that the return to the former unity of Cieszyn Silesia is impossible. Two separate societies with different values, norms and lifestyles have been formed on both sides of the borderline. The echoes of the previous integrity may only be found in the language and in these areas of life where tradition is often brought back.

Contemporary processes which take place in the Polish-Czech borderland and their dynamics depend on various present and past factors. Exploring these determinants in depth is not feasible; however, it might be tempting to indicate the most influential factors which seem to determine the current situation in all ethnic, national and state borderlands, including the Polish-Czech one in Cieszyn Silesia. These determinants result both from the situation in which the region has been functioning and from the worldwide situation.

1. The residents of Cieszyn Silesia live in several dimensions of the borderland. Firstly, they live in the borderland between two countries and two nations – in the space where cultural models, value systems and ways of life diffuse from one side of the border to the other. Secondly, they lead their daily life in the space of religious borderland, which is filled with the models of original, mainly Catholic and Evangelical religious culture. Several dozen thousand Lutherans live in the area of Cieszyn, making it the biggest Evangelical community in Poland. Only here villages can be found where Protestants (from different Protestant rites) prevail among the inhabitants.
2. Such complexity of influences makes the identity of borderland people the same as their culture: complex, heterogeneous, shaped out of rich material, and constantly reconstructed in the same rhythm in which changes occur or new socio-cultural processes appear in the borderland.

In border areas, the type of borderland man with a specific social consciousness and individual identity is created. Such man shares the cultural life of two, or more, different societies and sometimes changes the nationality¹.

These are people torn apart inside, often unable to choose out of many different ways of life, but acquiring (through socialization and upbringing) the ability to move freely in two or more cultures, as well as the skill of selecting out of these cultures the elements for constructing their own identity. Cultural valency of borderland people (their feeling of particular closeness with national culture and the ease in applying its

1 A. Sadowski: *Pogranicze polsko-białoruskie...*, s. 46.

contents both in everyday life and in exceptional situations²) becomes dual and even their national identity is not homogeneous. Speaking metaphorically, such people always live on the borderline, they always become others, frequently alien, for someone, and exposed to the unlikeness and strangeness of others. Thus, the “new” man has appeared, irrevocably marked with “alienage” and possessing a new identity – heterogeneous, complex, shaped by two sides of the border.

3. The social and cultural context in which national identity of modern societies is shaped is constantly changing, which is particularly visible in borderlands – heterogeneous and multicultural spaces. In the past, the individual’s identity depended on belonging to a bigger group and was closed within the membership of a particular class or nation. Nowadays, this identity is fluctuating and multi-dimensional as the influence of the heritage and tradition weakened and people’s mobility increased. This was triggered by the liberation of people from relatively homogeneous societies, in which cultural models were handed down from generation to generation. Traditional lodestars indicating our way in life have lost much of their significance and the contemporary world offers us an extremely wide choice of possibilities of who to be, how to create one’s own self and how to shape one’s identity³.
4. Rapid transformations in the significance and function of the border are taking place nowadays. This process seems to be particularly intensive in Europe. Here and especially among the member countries of the European Union, the borders substantially lose their sharpness, become more and more open and, in this way, less and less tight. The Schengen Treaty (which Poland, the Czech Republic, and some other countries joined in 2007) gives the borders almost a symbolic character. This has also occurred in the case of the Polish-Czech frontier. For three years, it has been becoming as if invisible – it can be crossed without realizing the fact of moving into the other side. What seems particularly characteristic for East-Central Europe is the birth of some new borders and borderlands, which have come into being over the last several years. As regards Poland, this means changes in the Eastern borderland after the demise of the Soviet Union and in the Southern borderland, after the demise of Czechoslovakia. The number of centres influencing these areas increased, which enlarged the range of values, cultures and behaviour patters.
5. Transfrontier processes are intensified in Cieszyn Silesia. Transfrontierism is understood here broadly as all the international communication of different countries and nations, as well as cultures, above their borders. In the space of European borderlands, new forms of institutionalized transfrontier cooperation have appeared in the form of euroregions, which came to existence also with the participation of Poland. After several years of their activity, it can be claimed that they have been successful – the basic goals at which the representatives of

2 A. Kłosowska: *Kultura*. W: *Encyklopedia socjologii*. Warszawa 1999, s. 107.

3 A. Giddens: *Socjologia...*, s. 53.

local and regional authorities aimed have been achieved, mainly in the field of developing joint methods of problem solving and overcoming the underdevelopment and arduousness characteristic for peripheral territories. Euroregions organize and enhance the cooperation not only in the economic, but also in the social and cultural field. The observation of borderland life allows for concluding that euroregions definitely have dynamized these areas and have broken their peripheral character. There are five euroregions in the Polish-Czech borderland. One of them, the Euroregion “Cieszyn Silesia - Těšínské Szlezsko” comprises 60 Polish and Czech districts and its head offices are currently situated in Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn. Both Polish and Czech offices of the euroregion administer the funds of micro-projects, for which all borderland non-profit organizations with legal entity need to apply. Transfrontierism, which is increasingly visible in Cieszyn Silesia, also entails the fact that the residents of both sides of the border, more and more boldly, enter the other side with their interests and needs, at the same time reacting infallibly and quickly to the needs of its inhabitants. They not only do shopping on this other side, but also seek jobs, establish firms, rent or even buy flats, use the services, etc. This results from several years of the open border but, first of all, it is an effect of the European Union membership of both countries and their joining the Schengen group in 2007. As it is specified by the basic principles of the treaties establishing the European Communities, free flow of people, capital and goods takes place through the Polish-Czech border. There is also freedom of providing services, which gives rise to more and more frequent use of this opportunity by Poles and Czechs, not only from the borderlands.

6. Many researchers attribute rapid contemporary transformations of borderlands to generally understood globalization processes. Close observation of the main determinants of globalization, indicated by experts in this field, confirms this relationship. In the socio-cultural sphere, globalization brings about the constantly growing mobility of people, who more and more freely move from one society or culture to another. Therefore, the identity of individuals and groups becomes fluctuating and multidimensional as the influence of socio-cultural heritage and traditional succession of cultural models is weakening. Most prominent watchwords of globalization have been: liberty, variety, pluralism, ambiguity, regionality, the consent to the multidimensional man. At the same time, what gets intensified is globalization – the process of mutual permeating of what is local and universal, understood also as the process of protecting the local cultural or ethnic identity.

According to experts exploring these issues, one of the consequences of globalization processes in multicultural societies – such as Cieszyn Silesia – is the problem of the identity of individuals and groups, which becomes especially noticeable here because borderland people lead their daily life in the contact area of two or more cultures and in the ceaseless contact with the “other”. Members of multicultural societies permanently commune with a culture different from their own and they integrate, often unconsciously, into their own identity the patterns of the other culture, which they implement in their everyday life.

The present day of Cieszyn Silesia as the state, national and cultural borderland has been shaped by past influences - the original cultural heritage of this region. This legacy may become the key to creating an image, a specific mosaic, of social (individual and group) identities of this area. Thus, it is worth seeking an answer to the following questions: What self-portraits (individual and of their community) do the inhabitants of Cieszyn Silesia build on both sides of the Polish-Czech border? What does being a Cieszyn Silesian mean and what qualities and life patterns determine this? What attitudes do the residents of Cieszyn area present to the past of their region and its tradition? How are regional traditions passed down in families and which institutions deal with this transmission, especially in the case of the young generation?

These questions were raised by researchers from the University of Silesia, working for the Faculty of Ethnology and Education in Cieszyn, and the Congress of Poles in the Czech Republic. They decided to design a joint project entitled *Dziedzictwo kulturowe jako klucz do tożsamości mieszkańców pogranicza polsko-czeskiego na Śląsku Cieszyńskim. W 1200 lecie Cieszyna (Cultural heritage as the key to the identity of inhabitants of the Polish-Czech borderland in Cieszyn Silesia - at the 1200th anniversary of Cieszyn)*, which was accepted and which, owing to the Euroregion Cieszyn Silesia - Těšínské Slezsko, resulted in financial resources for its implementation from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The undertaken studies gave birth to the presented volume – a collection of interesting texts, which comprise different aspects of life in the Polish-Czech borderland, have the roots in different scientific disciplines, and constitute a reliable basis for solving the problem questions.

The research design, implemented by ethnologists, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, pedagogues, political scientists and linguists, comprised the following issues:

- cultural wealth of borderland towns;
- the identity of Cieszyn Silesia residents on both sides of the border, its symptoms, determinants and transformations;
- present reminiscences of the past – of conflicts, arguments and animosities;
- ethnic stereotypes;
- religious differentiation of Cieszyn area as a distinctive feature of its multiculturalism;
- intercultural education in Cieszyn Silesia and its prospects;
- borderland culture, tradition and folk art as the common heritage of the divided land.

We submit an important publication to our Readers. On one hand, it presents all the directions, motifs and fields in which Cieszyn science researchers, together with their partners from other centres in Poland and the Czech Republic, conduct their studies on the past and present of the Polish-Czech borderland in Cieszyn Silesia and on its transformations. On the other hand, this publication can become a source of reliable knowledge, confirmed by empirical data, concerning various spheres of life of people inhabiting Cieszyn Silesia – a territory split by the border. The study also provides information concerning the views of local residents on themselves, their neighbours from the other side, and the future of their little homeland.