



SILESIA – OBLIVION: TERRITORY AND ITS PAST IN CONTEMPORARY LOWER SILESIA'S IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS

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This study focuses on explaining an important element of identity constructions – that is the history of the inhabited place, in this case of Lower Silesia. Time and space continuity constitutes a fundamental component of any identity concept – at the same time they remain problematic in the case of Wrocław and the region of Lower Silesia. Relying on fresh qualitative and quantitative data from an extensive research project this paper evaluates the multiple dimensions and contexts of this regional identity. Although it does not cover all components and aspects of the Lower Silesians identity (which is determined by the scale of the paper), the author believes that this text improves the understanding of Lower Silesians' attitudes towards their territory and its past as identity building components. The territorial – administrative reform undertaken in Poland in late 1990, stimulated the rediscovery of regional (and local) specificities within the national space supposedly homogenous – according to the almost half-a-century long communist regime propaganda. In the region like Lower Silesia, which for centuries remained outside of the Polish territory and culture it became a double challenge. But one cannot understand the region without its history – however today's inhabitants of Lower Silesia try hard to do so, focusing much more on other (then space) components of their identity building, localising the gravity point of their identifications in a secure (from the Polish point of view) ethnic and negative identity concepts.

Key words: region, identity, Lower Silesia, oblivion

Introduction

The article refers to the contemporary region of Lower Silesia in Poland, its inhabitants and their identity constructions. The author aims to shed light on the dynamic regional identity in a specific location – at the borderland of German and Slavic cultures – with a special emphasis given to the historical references to the territory. History, due to the complicated and troublesome Polish-German relations in the past, is not a uniting factor between the two nations. The history of Lower Silesia also does not help its current inhabitants in the identity building process. There is a growing body of literature, both in Poland¹ and Germany² as well as internationally³ which focuses on the historical and contemporary developments of the regional identity in Silesia. This study contributes to the up-dating of our understanding of this development a decade after joining the European Union. It aims at evaluating the multiple dimensions and contexts of this regional identity. By doing so it answers the question on if and how important is the history of the inhabited place (for today's inhabitants of Wrocław and Lower Silesia).

1 See for example: Maria SZMEJA, *Czy Ślązacy są narodem?*, in: *Granice i pogranicza nowej Unii Europejskiej. Z badań regionalnych, etnicznych i lokalnych*, edd. M. Malikowski and D. Wojakowski, Kraków 2005.

2 See for example: Gregor THUM, *Uprooted: How Breslau Became Wrocław During the Century of Expulsions*, Princeton 2011.

3 See for example: Norman DAVIES – Roger MOORHOUSE, *Mikrokosmos. Portret miasta środkowoeuropejskiego Vratislavia, Breslau, Wrocław*, Kraków 2011.





In 2014, at the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the European Union (EU) Eastern „big bang” enlargement, the author if this text was asked to prepare a research design to investigate the phenomenon of Europeanisation in the region. In specifics the unit commissioning this research project, Center for Social Monitoring and Civic Culture in Wrocław / Breslau (CMSiKO – Centrum Monitoringu Społecznego i Kultury Obywatelskiej we Wrocławiu), was interested in the transformations of the local and regional societies after ten years of diversified Europeanisation pressures. The research objectives focused on the sphere of civic culture and in general on the everyday lives of Lower Silesian inhabitants. The research design was developed in the Spring of 2014, the research was conducted in the Summer months and the final report was printed and presented in the Autumn of 2014. The overall research project was quite an ambitions and costly undertaking – it involved a multiple research methods (a mixture of qualitative and quantitative ones), a large team of researchers investigating in the form of desk research but also a large-n survey questionnaires as well as individual and focus group interviews. It resulted in an extensive report which summarised the results on more then one hundred pages, additionally there are available a couple of hundreds of pages of in-depth interviews transcripts, also quantitative data aggregated from the questionnaires and large amount of other analytical material.

This text is based only on a narrow part of the data available extracted for the purposes of the research question of this article. It answers the question if and how the contemporary inhabitants of the Lower Silesian region refer to the past of their territory when narrating about their identity constructions. The tenth anniversary of EU enlargement was a good occasion to investigate the European identifications of Lower Silesians and the research revealed many other interesting components and contexts of their identities.

The structure of the article proceeds as follows: the introduction includes – apart from the already presented objectives and the general context – the short overview of the most recent history of Wrocław and the Lower Silesian region, the next part includes some description and characteristics of the research that was conducted in 2014 (methods). Then some selected items of a rich literature on identities are discussed, and in their context the data generated through the research are presented and discussed.

Historical context

It is certainly impossible to have an effective short overview of history of a city like Wrocław and a region like Lower Silesia. Their rich and dynamic history attracted the attention of the greatest European historians, including Norman Davies and proved to be a good reason for numerous valuable volumes⁴. Some authors claim that the transformation of Breslau into Wrocław was one of the most dramatic developments in the twentieth-

4 Marek CZAPLIŃSKI, *Social Capital and Democratisation: Roots of Trust in Post-Communist Poland*, Warsaw 2002; Beata HALICKA, *Mein Haus an der Oder: Erinnerungen polnischer Siedler nach 1945*, Paderborn 2013; Andreas R. HOFMANN, *Die Nachkriegszeit in Schlesien: Gesellschafts- und Bevölkerungspolitik in den polnischen Siedlungsgebieten 1945–1948*, Bochlau 2000; G. THUM, *Uprooted: How Breslau*.





century European history⁵. It is however possible to point to some crucial elements of its most recent history which are specifically important from the point of view of the here conducted analysis.

The whole region of Silesia entered the XX century as a predominantly German land⁶. Wrocław (at that time Breslau), was the second largest city of *Reich*⁷ and enjoyed a reputation of an important cultural centre with its recognised university as a very illustrative example. Both Breslau and the whole region was German not only in administrative terms, but it was German by language, culture in any other dimension. That was the result of a couple of centuries long German domination in this area which came after the Polish Piasts (in 1335), Czech Luxemburgs and Austrian Habsburgs.

Everything changed in 1945, when the Red Army “liberated” Wrocław (6th May 1945).⁸ With the defeat of the *Third Reich* and based on the great powers’ agreements in Potsdam (17.07-02.08.1945), this region⁹ became a part of Poland – which at that time started its unwilling belonging to the communist East block.¹⁰ In the years 1945–1948 (and in a lesser extent also later) massive population (of app. 600 000 inhabitants only from Breslau¹¹) transfers marked the history of not only this region but many others in Central and Eastern Europe. Depopulation of the Germans was followed by the repopulation of the Poles who, in turn, were expelled from the Eastern parts of the pre-IIWW Poland (today – Western Ukraine) which became to belong to the Soviet Union.¹² The natural feeling of uncertainty must have mixed with the feeling of relief after the traumatic time of war but also the sense of triumphalism of the IIWW winners – which justified the take-over. The ruins of Breslau became the fundaments of Wrocław. Any reflection about the justice of these maneuvers was overshadowed by the non-alternativeness of this situation emerging from the brutal reality guaranteed by the Soviet power. A sense of historical continuity had to be re-imagined, just like the city and region re-established from the ruins of war. The dominant narrative became the “Polish one-thousand-years Silesia discourse” (reaching the Piast dynasty) with a strong “Polonising”, and “de-Germanizing” tone.¹³

The newly populated inhabitants of Wrocław took over the houses, lands and other property that had belonged to their German predecessors and started to live their regular

5 Dariusz NIEDŹWIEDZKI, *Regional, Ethnic, European? Complex Identity Construction of Silesians in the Context of the Cultural Borderland*, RECON Online Working Paper 33, 2011.

6 Timothy WILSON, *Frontiers of Violence: Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia, 1918–1922*, Oxford 2010.

7 After the capital city of Berlin.

8 Festung Breslau capitulated as one of the last cities of Germany – four days after Berlin.

9 The territory of 10100 square metres became Polish.

10 Andreas R. HOFMANN, *Die Nachkriegszeit in Schlesien: Gesellschafts- und Bevölkerungspolitik in den polnischen Siedlungsgebieten 1945–1948*, Boehlau 2000.

11 Altogether the lands gained by Poland after 1945 were inhabited by app. 7,1 mln Germans and 1,5 mln Poles as well as less than one milion of other nationalities.

12 B. HALICKA, *Mein Haus*.

13 G. THUM, *Uprooted: How Breslau*, p. 385.





lives.¹⁴ However still many decades after 1945 the feeling of uncertainty remained alive.¹⁵ There is a number of sociological and socio-psychological scientific works being conducted both in the communist times as well as in free Poland after 1989, which prove the attitude of the new-comers (also the new generations of them) towards their new flats, houses and belongings as to something strange and not-owned.¹⁶ Many houses remained not renovated as the new owners, not being sure of their property (anyway weak in the communist state), avoided any sort of investment in a post-German property. Many pre-border sub-regions remained under-invested for the same reasons (additionally also because of the communist authorities' strategy of planning and regional development).¹⁷

It is only the post-1989 revival of Wrocław identity that seem to reject this grey picture. Many sociologists claim it to be – among others – a side effect of the mobilisation that accompanied the 1997 flooding.¹⁸ A large scale flood (*millennium flooding* – as it was named shows the scale of the disaster) that endangered the city and ruined huge parts of it, generated a sense of belonging and strengthened the relations between the city and its inhabitants – the local people fought with the water together to protect their city (the context of Warsaw adolescence seem to be important too). And Wrocław is only one element of this numerous examples from 1997 – the same happened in many villages, towns and communities across the Odra river.

Also the regionalisation trend of the 1998 administrative reform in Poland played a role. The decentralisation brought some empowerment to the people – one of the elements of the post-1989 democratisation process Poland-wide.¹⁹ Wrocław as a city enjoyed quite successful self-government authorities who managed to attract many foreign investments, absorb effectively the massive EU-funds and develop the city economically. It became one of the symbols of success of the Polish transformation and the EU enlargement. The people, especially the younger generations, started to identify with it stronger and stronger. Ten years of membership in the EU became an important time marker which suggested some advanced research on the Lower Silesians and their region. Therefore the research questions of this analysis position themselves in a rich historical context as well as the great body of literature in many disciplines, including history, sociology, anthropology, economic and political science. The added value of this paper is the application of political science and European studies perspective in analysing the contemporary developments of regional identity in Wrocław and Lower Silesia.

14 The post-German property issue was regulated by a legal act signed by the temporary Polish government and the USSR on 16.08.1945.

15 Felicitas SOEHNER, *Vom Konflikttherd zur Modellregion – Selbst- und Fremdbilder entlang der Hohen Straße in Schlesien*, Dresden – Breslau 2013.

16 B. HALICKA, *Mein Haus*.

17 The new territorial status was first recognised internationally by the GDR on 06.07.1950. Western Germany recognised it only on 07.12.1970, however the christian democratic CDU claimed that only United Germany can recognise the new border, which happened 14.11.1990.

18 Małgorzata SKOTNICKA, *Powódź tysiąclecia – wrocławska fala wspomnień*, Kwartalnik Pamięć I Przyszłość, nr. 16 (2/12), p. 21–26.

19 M. CZAPLIŃSKI, *Social Capital*, Warszawa 2002.





Methods of the research project

As it was already indicated, this research project comprised of both quantitative and qualitative analysis, which reflects the current trend in social science to combine two or more methodological approaches. Complementary methods allow to draw a more detailed and nuanced picture of the analysed reality. The whole project started with some desk research, however in this article no material from this phase of the project is presented. This text focuses on the qualitative data gathered in the form of interviews and only occasionally refers to some quantitative data when necessary.

The survey was conducted among 1118 adult inhabitants of the Lower Silesian Voivodship (administrative region in Poland) using the CAPI method (*Computer Assisted Telephone Interview*). The sample is representative due its participants were selected (in RDD – *Random Digit Dial* method) in accordance to the balanced age, sex, income, education and other criteria as well as geographical distribution among the different sub-regions. Applying quotas within the sample in line with the general demographic and economic characteristic of the region's population, allowed to reconstruct its features in statistical manner.

The qualitative component comprised of two elements. First one, the FGI – *Focus Group Interview* was organised in ten sessions with altogether 81 participants. They represented all the sub-regions of Lower Silesian Voivodship and were organised in line with some important social characteristic, like for example: students, working from an urban area, working from the peripheral area, the unemployed, farmers, NGOs representatives, the elderly, etc.

The second qualitative method were IDI – *Individual In-Depth Interview* was conducted with 30 persons representing the opinion leaders, experts and others informed individuals (teachers, journalists, NGOs activists, priests, businessmen, etc.) from Wrocław and the other sub-regions of Lower Silesia. The questions were blocked in five groups and related closely to the pre-defined research questions.

The data was collected in the second and third quarter of 2014 and external monitoring audit covered the whole research process. The diversified method allowed to reconstruct an information-rich picture of the Lower Silesian society to be confronted with the important research questions on identity, its constructions and place as one of its vital constitutive components.

Theoretical context

The concept of identity (including the regional one) presented and discussed in the literature is a rather equivocal and multidimensional term. As a consequence, one could overview a long list of texts illustrating the rich academic and intellectual discourse about it. One of the side-effects of the richness of this debate is the lack of a standard, commonly agreed definition and measurement of this key concept. Therefore for the purposes of this analysis the social identity theory will be applied as an interpretative vehicle. This broad theoretical stream acknowledges the links between a multifaceted notion of the self and the wider social context. It argues that identities are composed of multiple meanings. At its heart is





the notion that individuals' membership in social groups (and categories) constitutes an important aspect of the individuals' self-concept.²⁰ It also emphasises three fundamental elements: categorisation and / or differentiation (a cognitive process of simplifications leading to some stereotypic perceptions with reference to the self), identification (with a group to which individuals we perceive themselves to belong) and social comparison (which implies the comparison of the group of belonging to other groups).²¹ The self, as it is illustrated with the empirical material later in the text, seems to be constructed without any reference to the physical space in the case of Lower Silesians. Their identifications are almost exclusively Polish – this domination of national identity overshadows any other form of complementary supra- or sub- national points of reference. As a consequence, the social comparison on regional level seems invalid in the analysed case.

It is also possible to understand identity as a collection of qualities (characteristics) ensuring the individual or group to remain the same in a changing environment. Some of those qualities (characteristics) are given by birth, some are developed with the process of growing up and socialization. The sense of identity allows the individual function in various collective configurations, at the same time holding subjective conviction on its own uniqueness and unrepeated-ness. Collective identity provides the sense of belonging to a group by its symbols, history, heritage – including the history of inhabited place.

Social identity theory may help us to understand the specific Lower Silesian identity rooted so deeply in the dominating in Poland national identity. The nation builds on an identity concept driven by a process of demarcation from others, very often triggered by the experience of defence against enemies (stronger, superior neighbours – in the case of Poland). This phenomena is sometimes called the *negative identity*²² in which the citizens are held together by a common political culture, a set of myths (about historical heroic struggles against the outside aggressors) and other components in opposition to *others*. According to social identity theory these myths and stereotypes may interfere with the perceived behaviour of *others* further strengthening the feeling of *us* as a group characterised by some typical features.

The previous paragraph may refer easily to the characteristics of a Polish national identity – so much based on the negative relation towards the others (Germans, Russians, etc.). But also in a smaller scale, the process of constructing a regional identity may be linked in many respects to these of nation building. If a modern nationalism is a discourse about time and space, a "(...) mode of constructing and interpreting (...) social space and its historical past".²³ So is the construction of the regional imagined communities.²⁴ The identity

20 Marco CINNIRELLA, *A Social Identity Perspective on European Integration*, in: *Changing European Identities: Social Psychological Analysis of Social Change*, edd. Glynis Breakwell – Evanthia Lyons, Oxford 1996, pp. 253–74.

21 Thomas CHRISTIN – Alexander TRECHSEL, *Joining the EU? Explaining Public Opinion in Switzerland*, *European Union Politics*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2002, p. 415–443.

22 Hanspeter KRIESI, *Introduction: State Formation and Nation Building in the Swiss Case*, in: *Nation and National Identity*, Hanspeter Kriesi – Klaus Armingeon – Hannes Siegfried – Andreas Wimmer, Chur – Zurich 1999, p. 13.

23 Collin WILLIAMS – Anthony SMITH, *The National Construction of Social Space*, *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 7, 1998, issue 4, p. 502.

24 Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, London 1983.





constructing discourses are located within a specific territory. The new interpretations of history need to be bound to some geographical locations. The newly invented framing must be consistent and compatible with the continuity in time and space. One cannot understand the region without its history – history of its people but also the history of the territory. Some scholars claim that it is the geography of the area that constructs and reveals identities. Some even claim “a spatial turn” within the social sciences and humanities²⁵ when pointing to the fact that despite globalisation undermining the territorial powers, identities remained strongly incorporated into the spatial reality. In fact, the place of space in the scholarship on identity is well grounded and may be found in many classical works. In response to the Heideggerian’s concept of place, the social geographers define a positive relationship between place and identity in terms of a *progressive sense of place*. It means that places are important in the articulation of social relations happening in a particular locus. And not only as *physical containers* but as a series of alternative interpretation of places. “(...) What gives a place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus.”²⁶ This argument is a justification for stating that place is constitutive for personal and social identities. Silesia, being a cultural borderland, carries a strong awareness of separateness. It was a place of interaction of Polishness, Germaness and Czechness which were linked to various political and economic influences that led to the creation of the original Silesian culture.²⁷

The territorial – administrative reform²⁸ undertaken in Poland in late 1990. undoubtedly stimulated the rediscovery of regional (and local) specificities within the national space supposedly homogenous – as it was portrayed by the fifty years old communist regime propaganda. Such a rediscovery opens up new windows of opportunities for collective self-definitions and declarations of belonging.²⁹ Just the very naming of the region (from the old name Wrocław Voivodship – much smaller in scale to the new region named Lower Silesian Voivodship) brings back the historical heritage – including events, episodes and memories. It also “reproduces” the region as territorial unit in a recycled historical interpretations. It acts as a projection of regional identity.

The data discussed below prove the existence of multiple identities in a single situation or location. At the same time they attempt to deliver (by a support of complementary qualitative data) a more nuanced picture of identities construction in the Lower Silesian region – its proportions, layers, dimensions and factors.

25 Elfie REMBOLD – Peter CARRIER, *Space and identity: constructions of national identities in an age of globalisation*, National Identities, vol. 13, 2011, issue 4, p. 361–377.

26 Doreen MASSEY, *Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place*, in: Mapping the futures: Local cultures, global change, edd. Jon BIRD– Barry CURTIS – Tim PUTNAM – G. ROBERTSON – Lisa TICKNER, London 1993, p. 66.

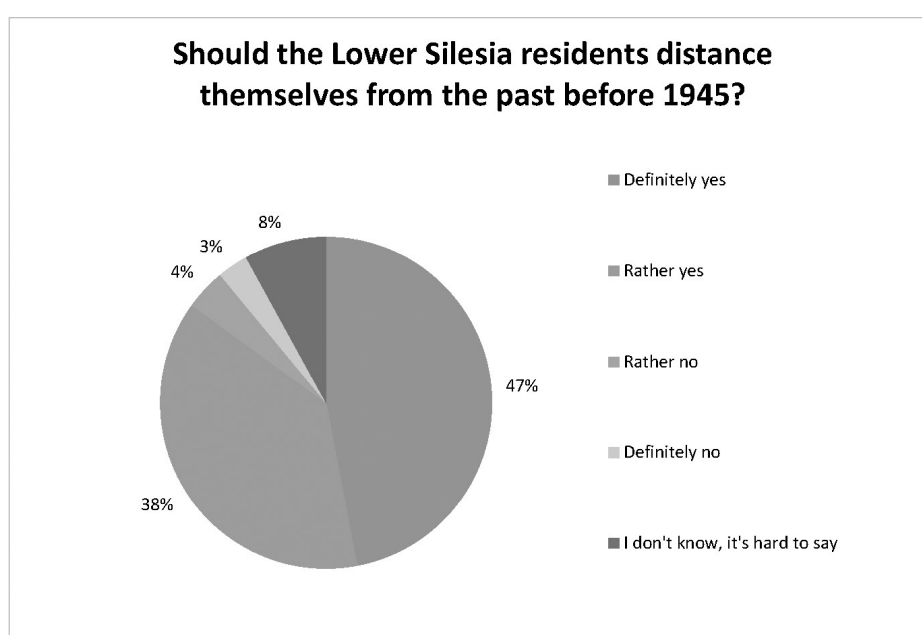
27 Dariusz NIEDŹWIEDZKI, *Regional, Ethnic, European? Complex Identity Construction of Silesians in the Context of the Cultural Borderland*, RECON Online Working Paper 33, 2011, pp. 2–3.

28 However one needs to remember that this process of decentralisation and regionalisation was to a large extent superficial and did not lead to any sort of federalisation – Poland remained a centralised country after the reform.

29 Luiza BIALASIEWICZ, *Upper Silesia: Rebirth of a Regional Identity in Poland*, Regional & Federal Studies, vol. 12, 2002, issue 2, p. 111–132.

Data discussion

The starting point of the data presentation is quantitative. It is at the same time one of the very few quantitative pieces of data (out of a very rich statistical material collected in the overall research project) that is going to be delivered in this article. The representative sample of Lower Silesians (in a CATI survey), when asked about the past in a form of a question: “Should the inhabitants of Lower Silesia cut off from the past before 1945?” answered massively positive: 47% definitely yes, 38% rather yes and only 3% definitely no and 4% rather no.



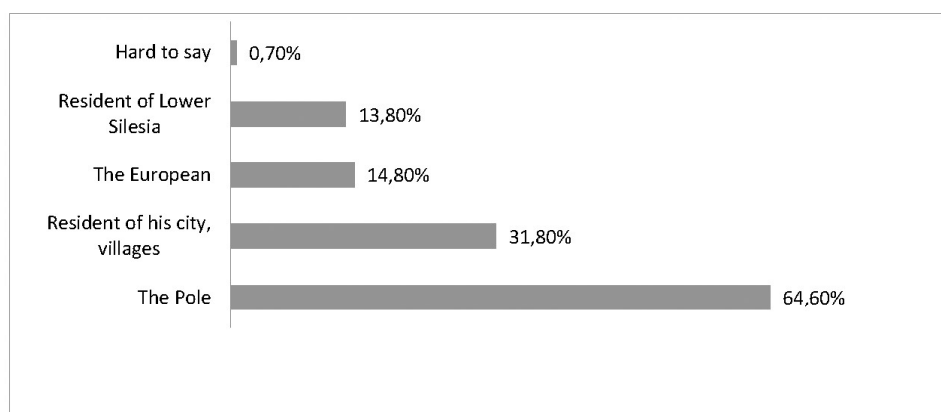
Source: Data from *Wpływ dziesięcioletniego członkostwa w Unii Europejskiej na kulturę obywatelską i życie codzienne Dolnoślązaków*, Raport z badań CMSiKO, wrzesień 2014

On one side, there is nothing special about it. Even from the German population one could expect a general move towards cutting off from the troublesome past. However the ethnically Polish population was not responsible for the war past. Why would they intend to forget the great pre-IIWW history of their city and region? An answer to this question can be found in the qualitative part of analysis. In many different contexts the informants questioned in the form of semi-structured individual interviews as well as in the focus group moderated discussions, they revealed interesting thoughts and ideas delivering some brighter picture about their relation to the past and its place in their identity constructions.



However still in the quantitative parts of the research there were revealed some important background information. Lower Silesians represent predominantly Polish and most often exclusively Polish self-identifications. This is typical in a traditionally centralised state, with the balance of the communist past in which the vision of a unitary Poland was strongly propagated. At the same time Poles build their identifications strongly on ethnic grounds.³⁰ And in the post-1945 reality of this region their existence / living there was somehow justified by their Polishness and the “historical justice” of the nations. The ethnic components of these identity constructions seem to overshadow any other elements, especially the spacial component (like for example the city, region, its history, etc.).

When the Lower Silesians are asked about their primal identity reference they answer in the first place (64,4%) they are Polish, then (31,8%) inhabitant of their city or village, the (14,8%) European and only in the fourth row (13,8) they feel Lower Silesian.

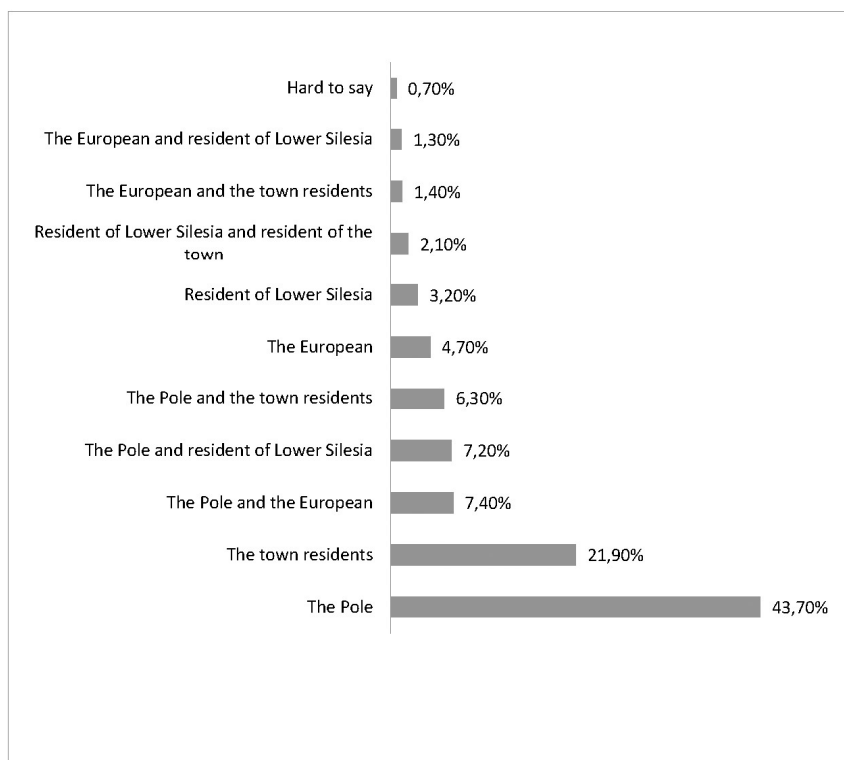


Source: Data from *Wpływ dziesięcioletniego członkostwa w Unii Europejskiej na kulturę obywatelską i życie codzienne Dolnoślązaków*, Raport z badań CMSiKO, wrzesień 2014, s. 37.

Among these 64,6% who define their identity through the prism of the nationality, majority (43,7%) do it exclusively – it means they do not claim any other level or dimension of identity. 21,9% see themselves as members of their localities and almost equal combine their Polishness with Europeaness (7,4%) as well as the Polishness with Silesianess (7,2%).

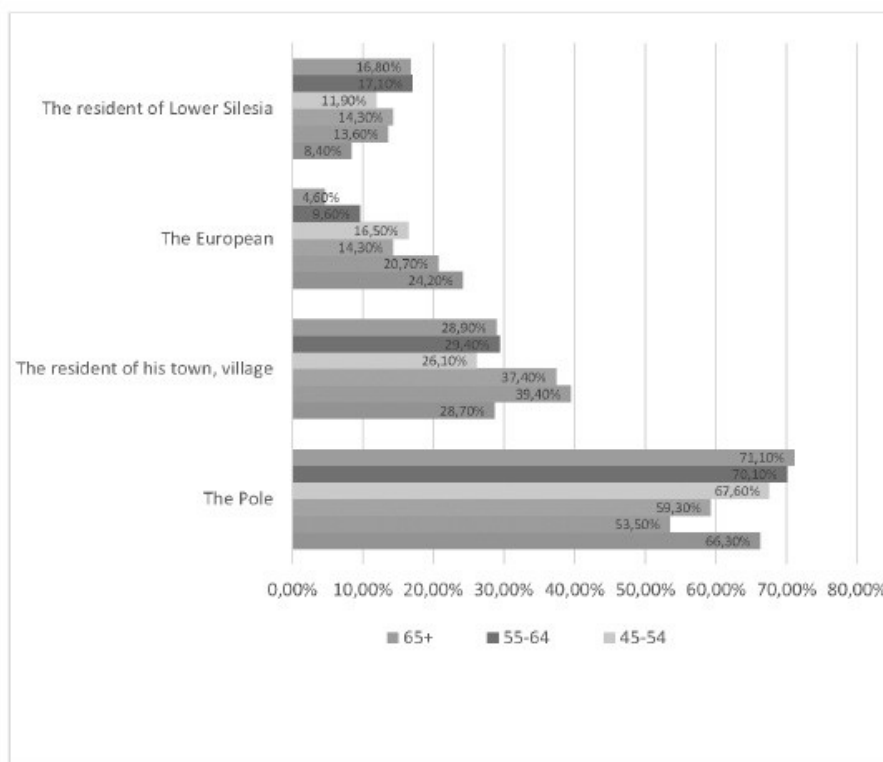
30 Krystyna ROMANISZYN, *Europe and the Formation of the Polish State, Nation, and National Identity*, in: *Entangled Identities. Nations and Europe*, edd. Atsuko Ichijo – Wielfried Spohn, Ashgate 2005, p. 154–171.





Source: Data from *Wpływ dziesięcioletniego członkostwa w Unii Europejskiej na kulturę obywatelską i życie codzienne Dolnoślązaków*, Raport z badań CMSiKO, wrzesień 2014, s. 38.

As regards the distribution of these identity declarations among age groups, it occurs that there is an observable pattern that beginning from 25 years old respondents the self-perception of Polishness grows together with age – namely the older the member of the society the more Polish he/she feels. This does not characterise however the younger group (aged 18–24) since in this group is at least as Polish as their 55+ fellow citizens.



Source: Data from: *Wpływ dziesięcioletniego członkostwa w Unii Europejskiej na kulturę obywatelską i życie codzienne Dolnoślązaków*, Raport z badań CMSiKO, wrzesień 2014, s. 39.

Another interesting pattern can be identified among these who declared their Europeaness – here the younger the generation, the more European self-perceptions. On the opposite in the case of regional declarations – the least popular in the youngest group were the Lower Silesian identity constructions. These two observations lead to the conclusion that in the future we may expect some increase in the pro-European and some decrease in the regional identifications.

In the qualitative part of analysis there were interesting explanations given to the above mentioned patterns and observations.³¹ The relatively high level of exclusive Polish declarations among the youngsters was explained by them with a comparison to their parents generation (55+) who had to rebuilt Wrocław “from the ashes” after the IIWW. The youngsters compared this endeavour with the process of building from the ruins of

³¹ The below given examples of narrations from the transcripts of individual semi-structured in-depth interviews as well as focus group interviews are only illustrative and selected representatively from the rich material collected during the project in 2014.





communism and claimed that the generations in-between – born, brought up, educated and socialised in the “*dark times of communist rule do not have it*” (FGI 140714 student i absolwenci Wrocław).

The only undisputed identity among the informants was Polish. About the European identity, they were much more hesitant or arguing against it. However still, the majority were sceptical about the Lower Silesian identity. Much more often would the informants claim to be attached to Wrocław as a city not Lower Silesia as a region.

(...) Maybe we are Polish – by ethnicity, maybe we are European – by belonging to the European Union, but we are not Lower Silesians – this voivodship (an administrative region in Poland – author’s comment) is ... artificial.” (IDI, Wrocław, teacher)

Another specification stemming from the complementary qualitative part of the research – the European declarations were clearly connected with the European Union. Many of the informants emphasised that there are many faces of Europe and Poland was equally European also before the EU enlargement, however the vast majority agreed that the EU entry meant a kind of validation of Poles as Europeans.

“(...

- Maybe it was difficult to travel, we did not have access to many things... but as a nation we felt Europeans.

- But others did not consider us Europeans.”

(FGI 220714, inhabitants of Legnica)

In practical terms, it was visible and most often mentioned in the case of “travelling without passports”.

“(...) there was such a picture from the airport. Two queues. Maybe it is a funny example, but for the first time we did not have to stand in the line but we could go through without showing the documents ... Oh gosh, I thought... we are in Europe.” (FHI 150714, Wrocław inhabitant, 45+).

The informants also emphasise that Poles have a tendency to build their identifications “in opposition” to the dominant one (as a characteristic of Polish individualism, non-conformity and need for freedom). In the FGI session with the NGOs activists it was clearly highlighted:

“(...) Depending in which surrounding we find ourselves, we define ourselves differently. When acting on the Poland-wide scale, they feel more Lower Silesian. When acting on the regional level, they feel more as representatives of their local community. Maybe this is a hint why so much European declarations among the youth... Almost all their conscious life they had in united Europe, they treat it as a given and look for some more in closer to their skin and identify themselves as the Polish.” (FGI 170714, session with NGOs representatives).





In case of the older generation, another important factor occurred to be interesting – it is the vital attachment to the pre-IIWW Polish East peripheries. One of the NGOs activists when speaking about her mother:

“(...) Even though she has been living here for more than 50 years, still when she says “at my place” she means her family areas. For the older generation the place of birth seems decisive”. (FGI 170714, session with NGOs activists).

Many other informants referred to the older generation roots – “Roots, the place of birth is a high value for them”.

“(...) Here I live because it is a kind of choice of mine. But it is not my primary place. I have my roots somewhere else, my heart is there, it was left there” (FGI, 170714, Wrocław inhabitant, 45+).

The younger generation do not share this sentiment towards the East though:

„It is understandable that if something like this happened to us, we would miss the old place too. When I go to Ukraine with my parents, I do not know these areas, these people... after staying one day however... I feel... I do know... a kind of a pity that I cannot stay longer.” (IDI, Wrocław, Student 25+)

If we realise that the modern nations emerged in the XIX century (Poles are convinced that their nation has lasted at least one thousand years – which is the official version of the educational programme at schools), then historical references to the history older than 600–700 years does not make much sense. The informants however would look for such deep historical roots, at the same time acknowledging that this link is very weak.

“(...) The Polish Piasts ruled this land too long ago... it is too distant past ... I cannot refer to this ... I do not feel it...” (IDI, Legnica inhabitant, 65+, retired)

“(...) The history of the place is German. And we are Polish” (IDI, Wrocław, student)

Many other inhabitants of Wrocław also pointed to the argument, that their city is a great city, with great history but since it is predominantly German history, to some extend Nazi history (Breslau had one of the highest percentage of votes for NSDAP in 1930.) they are not proud of it and neglect it. Not only that it is not their history – it is simply not a point of reference, only the post-1945 history counts.

“(...) I know the beauty of the city comes from before the war times, all the churches, the historical buildings, streets ... It is not ours however. For us the history started after 1945 here.” (IDI, student – Legnica)

Some will even extrapolate it and develop this argument into a claim that there is not anything like Lower Silesians today.





„There is no such thing as Lower Silesian. When you say Lower Silesians, you mean – I guess – all type of inflow people from the East who overtook this area after 1945? The autohtons escaped before the Red Army. The new ones pretend to be Lower Silesians today”. (IDI, opinion leaders, aprox99)

An interesting thing – the tensions between these inhabitants of Wrocław who came to the city most recently and those who are there some time longer are also contextualised in the history of massive populations move after 1945.

„It is enough to see how the Wrocław inhabitant are „hospitable and open” (sarcastic – author’s note). I do not know how many times I have heard that I take their jobs (...) They behave as if they have been here for centuries. I wonder where your grandparents come from in 1945? I know history good enough ... your families do not inhabit the place for centuries” (IDI, Legnica inhabitant, mandolinka.bramborova)

The above quoted abstracts of the transcribed larger narratives are representative illustrations of much wider analytical material which was collected in the process of the research project in 2014. In the context of the quantitative data which provide some background information about the identity declarations given by Lower Silesians, they act as a complementary material showing the lack of attachment of the informants to their new territory. They also show some neglect of their territory past – before 1945. They do not include it in their identity constructions even though references to spaces and their histories belong to some important components of people’s identifications. They openly express that the Polish history of their region is too distant for them to feel any form of attachment based on this. As a compensation they stick to their Polish identifications, which are rooted very much in ethnic dimension.

Conclusions

The presented and discussed empirical material shows the oblivious state of memory of today’s Lower Silesians (when referring to the history of Wrocław and the region). Each place, a city or a region, have their history, which is important for its identity and the identities of their inhabitants. In the case of Wrocław and Lower Silesia however, this history is very limited and is artificially cut in 1945. Contemporary Lower Silesians neglect the rooting of their land older than seventy years – which is in a living memory of a human being. This oblivious negativity is interesting from the point of view that the rich pre-1945 history of Breslau could be a natural point of reference. Many old architectural sites of the city, like the famous Jahrhunderthalle (built in 1913, got back its name (in Polish translation though – “Hala Stulecia”) after the years of communism when it was called “Hala Ludowa” – Volkshalle in German), are the symbols of the city. Their historical past do not seem however to construct any social space. Lower Silesians’ identity discourses are predominantly ethnically rooted and are dominated by the national, Polish references, without much bounding to the geographical locations.



Interestingly, in today's Germany the *Vertriebene* discourse is captured by the right-wing and the extreme right-wing circles and as such, it got eliminated from the mainstream public debate. It is almost politically incorrect to reveal any sort of sentiment to the *Verlorene Gebiete*. A risk to be understood as revisionist effectively killed the intensity of this discourse.³² In Poland, the strong communist propaganda before 1989 was conducted with a very anti-German rhetoric. It aimed at justifying the "historical justice" which brought Poland back to these territories. The official history thought at schools totally ignored eight hundreds years of history of this land – only because it was German history. An average Polish pupil still learns about the "old Piast" dynasty who lead this land up to XIV century and then the post-WWII developments – not much in between. The results of this are still present in the minds of people in the form of identity constructions revealed by this research. The dominant Polish nation identifications are shown in various societal groups and the ethnically based nature of this identifications neglect the history of the space. The older inhabitants of Lower Silesia refer to "the lost territories in the East" when talking about "our place". The younger also do not feel very Lower Silesian – the Polish identification seems to dominate any other. And because the modern Polish history of this land started in 1945 – they do not feel any need to build on any deeper historical references. This characteristic of Lower Silesians is very much different from the autochthonous population of Upper Silesia or Opole Silesia, where the national identifications are treated in a reserved way and there is observed a strong regionalist, or even nationalist and separatist awakening.³³

It is somehow ironic, that the visitor of a very well organised Silesian Museum in Zgorzelec / Goerlitz (the best of all Silesian museums – in the author's opinion) on the today's German side of the Odra river, is able to see the exhibitions which end in ... 1945 only. As if the history of these lands ended in 1945 – at least from the German perspective. On the Polish side, the newly populated inhabitants of these lands see it exactly in the opposite way and refer to the post-1945 history only when constructing their identity narratives. In a sense, it is understandable taking into account the dramatic changes of the II World War and the post-IIWW period as well as the history that followed. Still however, in the middle of united Europe, between the two nations who supposedly went successfully through the difficult process of reconciliation, there is identifiable division line which is represented in the historically important year of 1945. It is less and less problematic in the legal or political terms but remains hugely important in people's minds – three generations after the War.

32 Juergen JOACHIMSTEHLE, *Abschied von Schlesien. "Schlesien" in der Wahrnehmung der westdeutschen Nachkriegsgenerationen vor 1989*, in: *Europäischer Kulturraum Schlesien*, edd. Engel Walter – Honsza Norbert, Wrocław 2001, p. 273–291.

33 Jacek WÓDZ, *Ślązaków problemy z samoidentyfikacją społeczną – socjologiczna i antropologiczna analiza jednego życiorysu*, in: *Eseje socjologiczne*, ed. Władysław Jacher, Katowice 2001.



**Slezsko – bezvědomí: Území a jeho minulost v konstrukcích identity současných obyvatel
Dolního Slezska**
(Shrnutí)

Výzkum prokázal převažující absenci vztahu obyvatel Dolního Slezska k historii regionu před rokem 1945. Ačkoliv mnohé architektonické objekty z předválečné éry patří k často veřejně prezentovaným symbolům regionu, vazba k době jejich vzniku je relativně slabá. Kolektivní identita Dolnoslezanů vychází především z etnické sebeidentifikace, přičemž geografické aspekty hrají minimální roli.

Příčinu tohoto stavu lze spatřovat především v přetrvávajícím vlivu silně zakořeněných stereotypů vytvořených komunistickou propagandou před rokem 1989, které vyznívaly silně protiněmecky. Tato interpretace prezentovala připojení Dolního Slezska k Polsku jako „historickou spravedlnost“. I současné polské školství věnuje dějinám regionu mezi vládou Piastovců a rokem 1945 jen minimum prostoru.

Starší generace Dolnoslezanů dosud pocítuje sentiment ve vztahu ke „ztraceným územím na východě“, odstoupeným po druhé světové válce Sovětskému svazu, o nichž hovoří jako o „své zemi“. Ani mladší generace se většinou nepovažuje za Dolnoslezany, převládá širší polská národní sebeidentifikace. Silný regionalismus, charakteristický pro Horní a Opolské Slezsko, ve zkoumaném regionu nezaznamenáváme.

