

AN ETHNOLOGIST'S EXPERIENCE: INDOCTRINATION OF  
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN POLAND IN THE 1940s

LESZEK DZIĘGIEL  
Instytut Etnologii  
Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków

UDK 39:32"194"(438)  
Prethodno priopćenje  
Primljeno 17. IV. 1997.

Different kinds of cultural situations that occurred in Polish society under the communism should be the subject of ethnological reflection. Presenting his own experience the author argues that one of them is the indoctrination of secondary school students in the 1940s.

It is amazing to note that most ethnologists ignore the cultural environment in which they grew up and which exerted a substantial influence on their intellectual formation. Engrossed in their observation of the evolution of customs in "other" societies, they fail to notice the transformations and gradual disappearance of the world in which they were educated, started their careers, harboured expectations and suffered disappointments - together with their social environment.

There is no reason whatsoever to overlook even the most elementary kinds of situations connected with daily life, matters of housing, shopping, everyday meals, ecological problems in the big city, forms of recreation, or the sphere of snobbery and fashion.

For a start, let us take a look at our childhood memories of the cultural environment in which we grew up. Why not venture to apply to them methods of ethnological analysis of culture? Let us ask our coevals, former schoolmates and playfellows, about their recollections. Those of us who still have relatives from the older generation should see in them valuable informants capable of enriching our knowledge about the times of our childhood or adolescence.

The study of memoirs and careful perusal of newspapers and magazines from recent past may provide us with ethnological data about everyday life of yesterday and yesteryear. These are times that most historians of culture avoid in their studies as being "too fresh". Admittedly, despite the reservations expressed above, historians specializing in recent times have produced lately some works that should not be missed by the ethnologists. I would like to mention, for instance, the study of R. Grunberger on social history of the Third Reich (Grunberger, 1977) or V. Klemperer insightful memoirs combining reflection on language and politics (Klemperer, 1975). Such books provide a real challenge and intellectual stimulus for our discipline.

Different kinds of cultural situations that occurred in Polish society under the communist rule should, or at least may be the subject of not only historical, but also ethnological reflection. I also believe that similar phenomena might be taken up by ethnologists and social historians in other post-communist states. Our countries shared similar fate, although, of course, there were also considerable differences in the course of socio-political processes in the communist era. Recent developments in Poland have shown us again the persistence of those conceptual patterns in the social consciousness or even, sometimes, in the subconsciousness.

An ethnological analysis of those times should also take account of the innumerable avoidance and dodging techniques, ways of cheating and swindling, and corrupt practices perfected by a society deprived of democratic government. Such practices eroded the system from the inside, but also destroyed the sense of civic responsibility, teaching millions of citizens since childhood that an ordinary man must be able to fool any authority or else the authority will fool him.

Of course it would be a task beyond the capacity of a single researcher to give an account of life in "People's Poland", or in any other country of communist Europe, in its entirety. One could nevertheless begin with the analysis of selected areas. Obviously, an ethnological analysis of Europe under real socialism would not present an idyllic picture of past culture. It may, nevertheless, provide an ethnologist with an attractive field of research and open up opportunities for interesting comparative studies on the international scale.

When the war was over, I belonged to the generation of 14-year-olds. Together with hundreds of my peers, I ended up in Upper Silesia, following forced resettlement from the eastern areas of Poland, annexed by Stalin. In Lvov, where I had spent the entire war, I had experienced the ruthlessness of both the Soviet and Nazi invaders (Dzięgiel, 1991). In Katowice - the capital of one of the largest industrial regions in Europe - I met, apart from the people driven away from the east, hosts of refugees from the destroyed cities of central Poland, mainly Warsaw. They remembered all too well the treachery of the Red Army during the days of the Warsaw Uprising. Our Silesian friends and their

families, in their turn, had experienced cruelty and persecution at the hands of the Soviet troops which "liberated" this part of Poland. Surely, we were anything but gullible children who could be persuaded that everything was going to be fine now that the German occupation was over.

Katowice was thus a place which focused the problems of the entire society of Poland, which was in a state of flux because of wartime vicissitudes and ruthless policies of the new, alien rulers.

Our living standards were, generally, low. We were often short of food or money. In summer, many of us walked about barefoot, unable to afford shoes. We wore clothes made from old garments, turned inside out, bought at the flea market. Most of us had lost fathers at the front line or in concentration camps. The widowed mothers were forced to take poorly paid jobs to eke out a living for themselves and the children, often below the poverty line. In 1946, thousands of starving Polish families received aid from the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), which distributed assorted cans from American military stores.

Most of us lived in old, cramped flats, each occupied usually by several unrelated families, among never-ending petty quarrels and conflicts.

For the six long wartime years we had been admonished in our homes to be cautious, and after the war, once again one could not be too cautious. Hundreds of people died in Poland each year shot by the police, the military detachments of the Internal Security Corps (KBW) or by firing squad. Thousands were tortured, imprisoned for many years or secretly deported to the Soviet Union. Some of the victims were our peers, even our school friends.

Our schoolmates of local, Silesian origin formed an interesting group. Most of them, though not all, came from the old working class. They lived in the suburbs of Katowice or in dozens of other industrial towns and settlements which formed in practice a single giant conurbation, connected by means of a network of tram, bus and railway lines. Their parents saw education as an honest means of social advancement for their children. No one had instilled in them as yet disrespect for intellectual efforts or lured them with prospects of an easy career of a communist-party activist. It was the ambition of many working-class Silesian families to educate a daughter to become a teacher, and a son to become a technician, perhaps an engineer, or, better still, a priest.

It is noteworthy that despite the great diversity of social background of secondary school students in Upper Silesia, there was no friction or antagonism of any kind between students from different regions. Between themselves, Silesian students used their local dialect; newcomers from the east had the characteristic "Lvov" accent - yet those dialectal or even cultural differences did not in any way disrupt the friendly relations between students (Dzięgiel, 1991:298-301).

Some students were better off than others: those whose parents had avoided total impoverishment under Nazi occupation or had started small businesses after the war. To be sure, their miniature firms and shops were put out of business towards the end of the 1940s by injurious taxes and administrative chicanery. Still, those small post-war businessmen managed to salvage enough money to secure their children better standards of everyday living.

In spite of the immense losses sustained by Polish schools during the war, as teachers had been the object of particularly fierce extermination on the part of both the Nazis and the Soviets, some of the pre-war educators had survived and returned to their profession in 1945. These people usually had extremely high standards of professional ethics and good qualifications. Owing to them, our generation - educated in primary schools and at all kinds of underground courses during the wartime days - could immediately resume education at the end of the war.

But teachers at our lycée faced difficulties, too. Textbooks were practically nonexistent, as most of them had been confiscated and burnt by the Nazi authorities. Publication of new ones was hindered by the communists, who wanted to adjust them to the "new ideological spirit". This took longer than they would have liked.

Secondary school curricula may have provided for some form of indoctrination, but the old teachers, with their hostile or at best reluctant attitudes towards the communist regime, ignored them completely. They endeavoured, on the other hand, to adhere strictly to the good, pre-war standards, and set us exacting requirements.

The weak control of the communist system over schools in the first post-war years was attested to by the presence of religious instruction in the curricula. In Katowice, it was abolished only in 1949, in the wake of yet another atheization campaign. The priests who taught religion invariably enjoyed a high status among the teachers. The percentage of secondary school graduates who decided to study theology was relatively high until the early 1950s. One of the organizations functioning among secondary school students was St Mary's Sodality. In Cracow, also the Eucharistic Crusade was present in schools, until it was banned at the end of the 1940s.

Membership in youth organizations was purely voluntary. The most popular of these was the Scouts, whose programme accentuated patriotism, national independence and Christianity. It overtly drew on the wartime partisan tradition, which caused concern of the communist authorities.

By contrast, leftist organizations, supported by the authorities, such as the Association of the Fighting Youth (ZWM) - the youth organization of the communist Polish Workers' Party (PPR) - remained totally unimportant. Initially, we simply ignored their presence.

Contrary to what might be expected, foreign language instruction did not become in the post-war years a vehicle of indoctrination, sovietization or russification. First of all, until the early 1950s, Polish schools had no qualified Russian teachers. Thus, students were taught Latin and, most often, English. French was also taught, but not on such a scale. Separation of Poland from the rest of the world by the Iron Curtain did not allow us to apply in practice the conversation skills acquired at school. Still, there was a welcome opportunity to use our knowledge of English: selected large bookshops sold some British magazines, such as *Leader*, *Picture Post*, *Everybody's* and *The Illustrated London News*. American press was nowhere to be bought, while French titles included only communist press, mainly *Les Lettres Françaises*. In this way, diligent foreign language learners had some access to uncensored news and political commentary from the West. In 1950, we became cut off from non-communist western press. Numerous reports and memoirs were being published, written by Polish veterans returning from Great Britain. They symbolized the milieu of Polish veterans who had fought in the West. In those years, the authorities would not dare yet to ban those wartime books.

Apart from accounts of fighting in the West, other publications included memoirs of Polish resistance fighters and partisans, and stories about the heroic tragedy of Warsaw or the underground military organization of scouts fighting in the streets of the capital (Kamiński, 1991).

The communist propaganda of the 1940s was unable to present the young generation with a viable alternative to the imagery of the heroic battles in the West or triumphs of the underground Home Army.

It was with laughter and contempt that we greeted all kinds of "socialist realist" works, regardless of whether the author's intention was to be serious or satirical.

Neither our parents, nor we ourselves could treat the official mass media as a credible source of information. We relied instead on programmes in Polish broadcast by some western stations. The most popular was the BBC. In time, "listening in to London" became fairly common, although the authorities tried first to ridicule and then to condemn this practice as "giving in to the hostile propaganda of western warmongers". As time went by, however, the London broadcasts, attempting not to give offence to anyone, lost popularity in favour of the far less ceremonious *Voice of America*.

The older generation sometimes preferred broadcasts from Paris, abounding in pre-war popular songs and cabaret skits from times long gone. What we were after was information and sharp political commentary. Hence the popularity of the daily, 30-minute-long evening broadcasts of the *Radio Nacional de España* from Madrid. There were other stations, too, but with a much narrower following. *Radio Free Europe* was yet to come on the air; soon it would capture for many years the attention of listeners all over the enslaved part of Europe.

One way or another, we absorbed news - or scraps thereof - from the free world. For the authorities, following the Soviet example, began regular jamming of foreign broadcasts. The regime tried in vain to block this channel of information exchange, making it criminal to engage in "whispered propaganda" and, occasionally, sentencing the culprits to long terms in prison or in forced-labour camp.

We were thus a generation which, out of necessity, took an early interest in politics. We, the young people, tried to live our own, normal lives. The popular saying: "Once we survived the occupation, we'll survive 'democracy' as well"<sup>1</sup> adequately reflected the feelings of Polish society in the second half of the 1940s, both among the older and younger age groups.

But the authorities of the "People's Republic of Poland" were not willing to leave us alone. On 3 May 1946, they showed us their perfidy, when the police (officially called in those times "Citizens' Militia"), troops and communist party groups unexpectedly attacked in Cracow and Katowice the patriotic marches of school students who wished to celebrate, in the traditional way, the anniversary of the adoption of the first Polish Constitution. As minors, we did not participate in the election, but we shared in the hopes and frustrations of the entire society. At the same time we were old enough, in the eyes of the law, to be given harsh verdicts if someone was found (or declared) guilty of any "crime posing a particular threat to the reconstruction of the State", punishable even by death. Thus several of our schoolmates, members of the scout organization, disappeared from school one day.

In the summer of 1948, the youth organizations existing in Poland were forced to unite, forming the so-called Association of the Polish Youth (ZMP). It was modelled strictly on the structure and functions of the Soviet *Komsomol*. In autumn of the same year, school authorities began to exert informal pressure on all secondary school students to join the organization. Gentler forms of persuasion were used interchangeably with intimidation and threats. Such practices took place particularly often in the case of students whose parents had served in the Polish armed forces in the West during the war or had fought in the resistance movement. In those times even this kind of family connections could be used against a young non-conformist. "Friendly advice" was also given to sons and daughters of former landowners, doctors with a private practice, lawyers, shopkeepers and small businessmen - they were cautioned to prove their loyalty to the new system by joining the ranks of the new communist organization. Otherwise they risked being treated as "elements of the enemy class". Less courageous members of the scout organization were, in turn, reminded of their colleagues who had ended up in jail for alleged subversive actions against the state (Dzięgiel, 1996:90-92).

---

<sup>1</sup> In Polish, the two key words rhyme, so the saying takes the form of a graceful couplet.

Pressure continued in the following years, as not everybody was willing to give in. In fact, most of us managed to avoid joining the ZMP, using various pretexts. In the long run, this turned out to be fairly advantageous, as it was mainly the organization members who had to bear the humiliation of participating in the ever longer street marches and official meetings, called "spontaneous rallies". They had to take part in political meetings and instruction courses, which often dragged on for hours, make declarations of loyalty and self-accusations of the lack of so-called "revolutionary vigilance", which should have manifested itself by spying on friends. Contrary to their early expectations, the system made greater and greater demands. Also penalties for insubordination or mere tardiness were far more stringent.

Resignation from membership in the ZMP was practically impossible. It would have been treated as an overt act of hostility towards the regime.

The daily existence of those who withstood the initial pressure and did not join the ZMP was far more peaceful. Of course, they too had to take into account the possibility of becoming subjects of surveillance or political provocation. Every student had his or her personal file at the town committee of the ZMP and possibly also in the local Office for Public Security.

Soon a new type of student - the ZMP-activist - appeared in schools. Usually, it was a mediocre, lazy individual who wanted to graduate from school effortlessly, thanks to his political sponsors. In some lycées, groups of such opportunists managed to terrorize and dominate the teachers, and thus acquired enormous power. They appraised not only their colleagues, but also the teachers. Sometimes they would have an uncooperative teacher or headmaster fired. They were also ardent supporters of the claim that what People's Poland needed was not professionals or diligent students, but politically loyal individuals, keen on the building of communism.

Pressure was exerted not only on students, but also on teachers. Not all of them had enough determination and mental strength to risk losing a job shortly before retirement age. Some circles were quite opportunistic, too: the authorities needed not so much to intimidate as to buy them. Forms of reward included assistance in obtaining a flat (this all-important sector of the economy was entirely in the state's hands), pecuniary bonuses paid under various pretexts, and - in the first year of post-war impoverishment - even free allowances of food, clothes or free holidays in state-owned centres. In vocational schools, some of the teachers represented the dwindling group of craftsmen with their own workshops: their obedience was easily enforced by the authorities who used the threat of penalty taxes.

St Mary's Sodality was banned from schools, but religious instruction, as has been mentioned before, continued until 1950. Religious feelings of the inhabitants of Upper Silesia, young and old alike, found expression in the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Piekary near Bytom. The authorities did not dare to ban this march, in which thousands of

people participated, as its tradition was very strong among Silesian workers. Students of Silesian schools joined this "pilgrimage of men and boys", too. The more openly the system attacked the church and religion, the more firmly we clung to religious practices, often treating them as a means of political protest against the hateful, arrogant authorities. The church in the central part of Katowice where services used to be held for the armed forces and for schools had long been out of bounds to soldiers now, but for students it made a favourite meeting place on Sundays.

In an atmosphere pervaded with various forms of pressure, menacing innuendos and the official enthusiasm of the media, totally incongruous with reality, we took our *matura* - the school-leaving exams - in 1950. Two years before, Poland and Central and Eastern Europe witnessed a spectacle of ideological exorcisms and Stalinist anathema cast at the recalcitrant Yugoslav dictator Josip Broz Tito. He was described - also by Western radio stations - as "resembling, physically and in all probability also morally, Goering". "Titoism" and "nationalist deviation" were now favourite catchphrases - bearing an endorsement of the authorities - of our colleagues from the ZMP.

Towards the end of the 1940s, the system, which had initially conducted ideological indoctrination of secondary school students in a half-hearted fashion, began to make up for the lost time. We learned that the school-leaving examinations would comprise, apart from the regular subjects, also a whole complex of political and ideological issues under the rather hazy heading of "Knowledge about Poland and the modern world". In practice, it was hardly a knowledge about the situation in the world, but rather propaganda claptrap based on official views on current developments in Poland and abroad. It was meant to be a kind of political creed of loyalty and had nothing to do with reality. And now precisely this kind of "knowledge" was to be a measure of our final results in at least 50 per cent! Wrong answers to questions asked by the party representatives during the final exams could ruin the chances of an otherwise even best prepared student. This new, ideological subject made its appearance in school curricula shortly before the school-leaving exams. Our kind-hearted teachers hardly knew how to help us. No textbooks were available to go with this subject and the official interpretation of facts often changed from month to month, depending on the meanders of the policy of the Kremlin and its satellites. Thus, we were advised to study for the examinations using all kinds of current propaganda pamphlets printed on coarse paper by the communist-party publishing house. A fairly useful compendium of knowledge about the non-reality decreed by the bureaucracy was the so-called *Workers' Calendar* - a bulky volume published annually as a kind of handbook intended for low-ranking activists in charge of propaganda in factories and other institutions. Aggressive and vulgar in tone, it presented the current official interpretation of everything that there was (or was supposed to be). The authors (there were usually plenty of them: it was the way of avoiding



individual responsibility in case of shifts in official ideology) gave an account of the situation within the "international workers' movement". It was an invaluable mine of information about the world, Europe and Poland as perceived by the centralist ideological bureaucracy. Still, one had to be careful, as the *Calendar* was published once a year, while the Kremlin denounced some new "enemies of mankind" every month. To be sure, there were some permanent enemies too, like American imperialism, symbolized during May Day celebrations by caricatures of President Truman cradling an atomic bomb in his arms. Another one was the West German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, shown in the cloak of a Teutonic Knight. From 1948 this was also the fate of Marshal Tito, invariably depicted with a blood-stained hatchet. Yet another one was the unfortunate Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek, seeking refuge in Taiwan. The infallible *Workers' Calendar* published also biographies of communist leaders, including Josef Stalin. Besides, one also had to learn by heart biographies of Polish dignitaries, like President Bolesław Bierut and Hilary Minc (the man responsible for the implementation of the communist model of industry and agriculture), or Russian generals of Polish origin sent from Moscow: Karol Świerczewski and Konstanty Rokossowski. We were advised not to content ourselves with this single source, but also peruse the daily papers, which was becoming an unbearable task. Another recommended reading was a history of the Bolshevik party in dark blue covers (*Historia WKP(b)*, 1948), popularly known as the "Brief Course". No author was officially mentioned, but it was known unofficially to have been written by Generalissimo Stalin himself. Young and inexperienced as we were, our generation had learnt the fundamental principle of dealing with the ideological propagandists from outside school: never to start a discussion with them. They were the most mediocre sort of petty indoctrinators who, in some cases, had completed barely a couple of years of school education plus some primitive course of ideological instruction. They were not prepared to hold any kind of dispute; nor would they have considered it politically safe. What they expected from us was fragments of some silly formulas, learnt by heart, which, combined together, constituted "the only legitimate world view", as they had been taught during accelerated courses for propaganda activists. In the environment of an urban school, where their social background was all too plain to see, they felt lost. They often compensated for their sense of insecurity with arrogance and persistent ill will.

As the final examinations drew near, more and more students of both sexes joined the ranks of the ZMP. This policy was especially popular with those who intended to choose studies where admission was particularly hard to obtain, such as medicine, architecture, painting, or history of art. Meanwhile, activists of the communist youth organization began to receive offers of getting one step further by joining the Voluntary Reserve of the Citizens' Militia (ORMO). Volunteers were issued uniforms and were trained in

the use of firearms. They could count on preferential treatment after leaving school.

In 1950, the school-leaving examinations resembled for the last time the pre-war model, or at least our old-time teachers strove to make it look so. Still, the authorities had the examinations supervised by the previously mentioned representatives of the party, whose status on the examination boards was equal to that of the teachers. They often resorted to provocation and abused their powers in order to eliminate students whose political views were disapproved of. Confidential documents on each of the examinees piled up on the tables, carefully studied by the official political supervisors. It was hardly a coincidence that nearly all the students who had declared an intention to study theology failed the final exams in the first attempt. But the recruitment procedures at institutions of higher education would be even more complicated and beset with political pitfalls than the secondary-school years.

For younger generations of students, the situation was getting worse and worse from year to year. First of all, most of the old teachers had been discharged. Others resigned their posts of teachers of their own accord, in view of the increasing influence of ZMP activists and brutal interference of the communist party with the schools. In September 1950, new curricula were introduced in secondary schools, "based on the Marxist-Leninist method" (Roszkowski, 1994:195; Kuroń i Żakowski, 1995:291).

Another channel of indoctrination through which the idea of the Polish-Soviet friendship began to penetrate into the minds of young people was songs translated from Russian: they were either intended for the "masses", to be sung during celebrations, or represented a sentimental type, devoid of any reflection. The latter - like many Russian tunes - were often quite melodious and catchy. The loud, thundering mass songs, performed during school ceremonies, camps and "evening gatherings", were meant to convey the sense of power constituted by the community and struck triumphal tones.

In June 1950, the Korean War broke out, the reflection of which in public life was a series of officially organized, hysterical rallies, the motto of which was "Hands off Korea!" The war gave rise to even more pathological forms of propaganda, involving pupils at schools, who formed a group which was most easily controlled and subjected to administrative pressure. At the same time, however, this unexpected conflict in the Far East stirred hopes - among the old and the young alike - for a political change.

As secondary-school graduates of 1950, we lived in a different socio-political reality of Stalinist Poland than our younger colleagues, still at school. It was clear from our school experience that the communist rulers of Poland attached no value to intellectual effort of any kind. Still, we did not take the whole situation too seriously and persistently awaited a change for the better. The prospect of a future professional career seemed extremely distant and hazy to us at the time. In our naiveté, we imagined that it would materialize in a

different, non-communist reality. After all, that situation couldn't last for too long...

But the regime did last and apparently was doing better and better. Over the years, it managed to intimidate - or corrupt and bribe - many an educated young man. One thing it clearly failed to achieve - impress anyone.

(Translated by Krzysztof Kwaśniewicz)

#### LITERATURA

DZIĘCIEL, Leszek: *Lwów nie każdemu zdrow* [There's no place like Lvov - though not for everyone], Polskie Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze, Wrocław, 1991.

DZIĘCIEL, Leszek: *Swoboda na smyczy. Wspomnienia 1946-1956* [Freedom on leash: Memoirs 1946-1956], Arcana, Kraków, 1996.

GRUNBERGER, Richard: *Historia społeczna Trzeciej Rzeszy* [Social history of the Third Reich], Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa, 1987.

HISTORIA WKP (b): *Historia Wszechzwiązkowej Partii (bolszewików)*. Krótki kurs, ed. by Commission of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik), Książka, Warszawa, 1948.

KAMIŃSKI, Aleksander: *Kamienie na szaniec* [Entrenchment builders], Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław, 1991.

KLEMPERER, Victor: *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1983.

KURON, Jacek i Jacek ŻAKOWSKI: *PRL dla początkujących* ["People's Poland" for beginners], Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, Wrocław, 1995.

ROSZKOWSKI, Wojciech: *Historia Polski 1914-1993* [A history of Poland: 1914-1993], PWN, Warszawa, 1994.

## ISKUSTVO ETNOLOGA: INDOKTRINACIJA GIMNAZIJALACA U POLJSKOJ ČETRDESETIH GODINA XX. STOLJEĆA

### Sažetak

Kulturne situacije u poljskome komunističkom društvu valjalo bi podvrgnuti etnološkoj analizi. Krajem četrdesetih godina XX. stoljeća politički je sustav u Poljskoj počeo nadoknađivati izgubljeno vrijeme: kako su se približavali godišnji završni ispiti gimnazijalci su sve više bili prisiljavani da pristupe komunističkoj omladinskoj organizaciji. Godine 1950., također tijekom ispitnoga razdoblja, vlasti su nastojale eliminirati političke nekonformiste. Etnološka analiza toga razdoblja treba uzeti u obzir nebrojene načine varanja koje je društvo lišeno demokratske vlasti usavršilo.