



Original text published in Polish:
Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny Sobótka,
1973, vol. 28, no. 1, p. 11-31
PL ISSN 0037-7511

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Union of poles in Germany and its role in the history of the Polish nation

The history of the Union of Poles in Germany is an object of intensive research carried out by Polish historians. It has resulted in a number of studies, source and popular science publications but in few synthetic works¹. The basic facts of the Union's history are known to historical science. Still, there are many question marks left while stated controversial opinions and conclusions bring about discussions and arguments. Such discussions are specifically contentious when conclusions based on critical analysis of various sources formed by historians collide with conclusions or generalisations made by former Union activists². This situation stems not only from the status of the research and complexity of the issues but also from the vivid tradition of the Union of Poles prevailing in the contemporary life throughout the entire history of the Polish People's Republic, especially on the territories situated on the Oder River and in the Baltic Sea region as well as from the political function of the tradition. And the tradition consists not only of the experience related to the organised fight for maintaining the national identity of Polish people in the Weimar Republic but also of the Union of Poles' ideological assumptions.

Following the changes in the assessments of the Union of Poles prevailing in the historiography of the Polish People's Republic we can easily observe that historians' opinions depend on the research development, methodological approach and situation within the country³. Relationship between the assessment of the tradition and contemporary life has often accounted for the unpredictability of conclusions. In spite of acute controversies noticeable in the course of analysis of the Polish historiography covering the entire Post-War Period, historians, politicians and publicists but above all the activists of the Union of Poles, have appreciated a special role and meaning of the Union not only in the organisation and fight of Polish people under the German rules after the World War I but also for the history of the Polish nation. The Union of Poles in Germany was an organisation, the function and importance of which must not be considered from the point of view of the Polish community's internal affairs in Germany but in terms of its role in the life of all citizens of the German state in Polish-German

¹ About the research status cf.: W. Wrzesiński, Polish national movement In Germany 1922—1939, Poznań 1970, p. 13 and n.

² The last quintessence of views prevailing among former activists of the Union of Poles in Germany, formed in many memories and diaries, is presented in an introduction by E. Osmańczyk to *Polacy spod znaku Rodła* publication, Warszawa, p. 5-14

³ The following publications illustrate well these transitions: articles in "Przegląd Zachodni" [Western Review] from 1946—1948; Silesian Conference, Wrocław 1959; T. Kajan, Pod znakiem Rodła, 1922—1939 (Odra, 1962, no. 9—12, 1963, no. 1—4), and publication including papers on seminar in Ruciane, Poles in the Weimar Republic and in the Greater German Reich, Olsztyn 1965



relations taken as a whole as well as in the entire Polish nation not limited to the population living within the borders of the Second Polish Republic.

Before I undertake the analysis of the role and meaning of the Union of Poles I would like to point out a few commonly known facts regarding the entire Polish community in Germany subject to deliberate deprivation of their national identity, which had provided the basis for the activity of the organised Polish national movement. It was Polish community that was one of major subjects undergoing nationalistic transformation in Europe after signing the Treaty of Versailles.

The Polish community settled in Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, after uprisings and plebiscites was one of the most tightly knit Polish communities outside the Second Polish Republic and one of the largest national minorities (in a large sense) in the then Europe⁴. This over one-and-a-half million ethnic group was characterised by homogeneous structure but the level of national awareness, social and political refinement and civilization patterns differed. Regional identities among numerous Polish communities in Germany with vague sense of Polish national identity, who had not yet become Germanized, were as strong as the feeling of distinctness from Germans and from the Polish nation⁵ as well. The Polish community in Germany consisted of two large groups: autochthonous population living on ethnically and historically Polish land, separated only by a border post from independent Polish Republic and of emigrants. Polish emigrants accounted for less than 20% of the total Polish community in Germany⁶ and consisted mainly of immigrants settled in industrial regions of West and Central Germany. It was typical labour-related migration. Still, they were marked by much higher degree of mobilization, political refinement and national consciousness. The Polish community in Germany had already experienced the deprivation of their national identity carried out by Keiser Germany. Its traditions and experience in nationalist activity were mainly focused on self-defence⁷. Events after the World War I accompanying the new political order established in Europe after signing the Treaty of Versailles, especially those related to the creation of the new Polish state reduced the number of experienced organisational leaders of the Polish nationalist movement in Germany, who also previously had been in short supply. Although the greatest losses in this respect were recorded on the emigration territories, the consequences were most severe during the period of laying new organisational rules on the autochthonous territories⁸.

⁴ Cf.: W. Winkler, *Statistisches Handbuch der europäischen Nationalitäten*, Wien—Leipzig 1931; L. Wasilewski, *Skład narodowościowy państw europejskich* [Ethnic Composition of European States], Warszawa 1933

⁵ Such attitude was mainly adopted in Masuria, Kashubia and Silesia.

⁶ According to rough calculations regarding the population living on emigration territories, assuming the minimal estimates of 1 280 500 Poles living in Nazi Germany, Polish emigration population counted 216 000 people while according to maximum estimates, Polish emigrants counted 270 000 people out of 1736 500 Poles settled in Nazi Germany, Wrzesiński, *Polski ruch narodowy...*, [Polish Nationalist Movement] p.. 29

⁷ There is no study in Polish literature that presents the issue synthetically. However, there is a great number of detailed studies. Monograph by K. Murzynowska, *Polskie wychodźstwo zarobkowe w Zagłębiu Ruhry w latach 1880—1914*, Wrocław 1972 has been the first attempt of synthetic presentation of the history of Polish emigration to the Ruhr district.

⁸ A situation on the territory of Opole Silesia was specifically difficult. In order to organise the beginning of the Union of Poles District Stefan Szczepaniak was relocated from another place.



The Polish population in Germany did not form one compact settlement but it lived in Diaspora establishing bigger or smaller islands, occasionally adjacent to larger regional settlements on the other side of the border. The dispersion of the population as well as its historical traditions were favourable for maintaining different customs among specific settlements. This had influence not only on the rules of organisational activity but also on traditions accompanying the Polish community in Germany in entering the new era after the World War I, obstructing the organisational and ideological unity of the Polish nationalist movement. Still, at the same time, it encouraged German nationalists to consolidate these identities, set up barriers separating particular settlements thereby magnify differences separating them from the contemporary Polish nation. Activities directed at strengthening Poles' regional separatism in Germany were one of the basic rules of the policy of German authorities depriving the Polish community of their national identity. The importance of the issue had been growing since slogans saying about the need of the organisational integrity and attributing uniformed features to the Polish movement rooted in the common ideological programme were luring more and more supporters after the World War I⁹. Traditions relating to election fights in the Kaiser's Germany¹⁰, the analysis of new legal and political opportunities in the Weimar Republic and the knowledge of the then forms of political life in Germany pointed out to the need of preparing new organisational rules and ideological programme to various Polish populations in Westphalia, Berlin, Warmia and Powiśle, which would allow all regional Polish groups in Germany to form a unified front.

Thus, we have come across one of disputable issues of the history of the Union of Poles, such as the genesis of the birth of the idea, which had led to the organisational unity on a common ideological basis. Related decisions taken during the Berlin Convention on 27 August 1922 were taking shape in three Polish centres simultaneously: Bochum, Berlin and Olsztyn, forming the synthesis of local and independent experiences and reflections¹¹. A historian today is able to reconstruct the stages of the process quite precisely or agree on the views on developing a uniform organisational and ideological programme with the Union of Poles in Germany as an outcome. However, these meticulous and wearisome investigations lead to a conclusion that establishing the Union of Poles in Germany has crowned the process of shaping native unity concepts developed in various regions proving the level of political awareness throughout the entire Polish community in Germany.

The organisational programme of the Polish movement in Germany, which was to provide the possibility for common national activity of all regional groups, was taking shape along with the clarification of the legal status of Polish German citizens and their

⁹ The first proposals of bringing such institution into life were adopted by the Political Committee in Berlin in January 1919: *Polacy w Berlinie. Przyczynek do historii wychodźstwa polskiego w Berlinie i po prawym brzegu Łaby*, based on the material compiled by Antoni Gołąbka in a study prepared by Jan Kaźmierczak, Inowrocław 1937, p. 8 et seq.

¹⁰ Attempts to harmonize the Polish electoral action before the World War One were undertaken by the Central Election Committee and National Council.

¹¹ The Central Archives of Modern Records In Warsaw (thereafter AAN), Diplomatic Mission in Berlin, unit 66, Berlin 2 September 1922, Report on the Convention of representatives of district committees to establish the Union of Poles and School Society. Cf. also W. Wrzeński. *Geneza Związku Polaków w Niemczech* (Przegląd Zachodni, 1962, p. 264—286).



actual situation in the reality of the Weimar Republic¹². It had taken place long before setting up the Union of Poles in Germany, when leaders of Polish regional organisations in Germany observed, based on everyday practical experience and not through theoretical analysis of the rights of the Polish minorities in the republic conditions of the Weimar Republic, that the main goal of the German nationalistic policy during the new regime had not changed and that the aspirations of the German administration and of other allied social organisations and political parties (fighting otherwise with each other) was to liquidate the Polish national identity in Germany and, above all, on autochthonous territories. German national unity, especially of the eastern area bordering with Poland and the exaggeration of the size of German populations on the territory of the former Prussian Partition was to be one of major elements justifying the need to revise the Polish-German borders¹³.

An objective fact of Polish populations in Germany, especially on the borderland, undermined the German line of reasoning which was to substantiate the revision programme of state borders set forth in the Treaty of Versailles. Setting up an organisation, which was to spread its influence on all Poles in Germany, regardless of their place of living, religion and social status, was specifically dangerous for German revisionist tendencies. Calling into being such organisation, regardless of the result of practical activity carried out in national, political, social, cultural and educational terms curbed the possibilities of influencing international opinion with slogans about the national unity of Weimar Germany. It caused the weakening of the direct pressure on the Polish-German borderline. The ideological programme of the Union of Poles was specifically perilous for the hopes of German nationalists because it provided perspectives, not formulated though, for the programme of fight for the unification under one state organism¹⁴ based on a sense of togetherness and joint responsibility for the fate of the Polish nation of all ethnically Polish groups regardless of the place of living, regional identities or differences in the national consciousness. Slogans of German revisionists proclaiming the need to incorporate all territories inhabited by German colonists in the Third Reich even if being in minority, which settled in the course of various historical processes, was defied by the programme of ideological unity of all Polish people especially those, who settled on ethnically and historically Polish land¹⁵.

The Union of Poles in Germany, declaring the need of maintaining and consolidating the ideological unity of the Polish nation, regardless of the place of living of particular persons, was of an opinion that the state borders defined in the Treaty of Versailles should be kept. However, it did not mean that national aspirations for ethnically and historically Polish land, should the favourable conditions emerge, were to

¹² Cf. various materials in AAN.

¹³ Wrześniński, *Polski ruch narodowy...*, p 44 et seq.

¹⁴ Anyway, at the beginning of the activity of the Union of Poles, profound disagreements regarding the operation rules were noted among many active members of the Union. And for instance, A. Fojcik spoke at the first general meeting of the District: "Our population, especially in Racibórz Powiat, was of an opinion that German Upper Silesia should also be incorporated into Poland and this should be done as soon as possible. We did not counteract, on the contrary, such opinions were supported. When it had turned out that this course of action was not possible, people became discouraged and were acting apathetically towards ZPwN", AAN, Opole Consulate, no. 104, cf. 23

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. *Narody, państwa i mniejszości narodowe* (Nowiny Codzienne, 1925, no. 198)



be abandoned¹⁶. The acceptance of existing borders resulted from the attitude to the country of residence and to the entire political order in Europe after the Versailles Treaty. The Weimar Republic was considered as an organisation necessary for providing the proper living conditions for all citizens according to republican and democratic rules. It was connected with the belief that the republican system as well as the system in the Weimar Republic created legal conditions, which theoretically provided proper conditions of development and cultivation of their national identity¹⁷ to all citizens, also to the Polish ones. In practice, the Union of Poles became one of the most unwavering and uncompromising defenders of the republican spirit of the Weimar Constitution. It remained the supporter of republican values also during the National Socialist German Workers' party's rule.

The ideology of Nationalism in Germany after the lost World War I had good ground for acquiring new supporters within various social classes and political parties. Establishing the Union of Poles and presenting its objectives by German factions as the vanguard of the Polish expansive policy towards Germany developed the expansion of the anti-Polish feeling in Germany¹⁸. During public appearances, various German political factions a many times attempted to accuse Polish organisations of pursuing anti-national activities trying to no avail to find the evidence for backing this judgment¹⁹. The Union of Poles based the loyalty towards the country of residence on protecting constitutional republican norms. This function was specifically important during the totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany. At that time, upon the decrees of the authorities, all non-Nazi political factions in Germany were liquidated but the Union of Poles remained as the only legally operating organisation, which preserved not only its organisational independence on the Nazi movement but also expressed firm criticism although considering the existing circumstances not exposed openly to the Nazi ideology²⁰. Thus, the role of the Union of Poles during the Nazi regime was exceeding the organisational and sometimes even national frames.

When the Union of Poles was taking its first steps in organisational activity not many supporters expressed their optimism in judging the vitality of Polish national traditions among the inhabitants of the Baltic Sea and the Oder River region under the German rule. Few scientists, writers and even fewer politicians were aware of the scale of heroic fight for the national future among Polish community in Germany²¹. A

¹⁶ Such postulate was not formulated straightforwardly but it resulted from the comprehensive activity of the Union and from various implicit statements in press articles. Cf. *Typ Polaka w Niemczech* (Gazeta Olsztyńska, 1927, no. 260).

¹⁷ *Martwe „święto konstytucji”* (Gazeta Olsztyńska, 1924, no. 142); *Memoriał Związku Mniejszości Narodowych w Niemczech* (Nowiny Codzienne, 1924, no. 275).

¹⁸ Vivid memory of the Silesian or Greater Poland Uprisings was used to fuel such public feelings and the activity of the Union of Poles was presented as the continuation of those events.

¹⁹ Specifically distinct tendencies were noted during the process of Jan Bauer in Słupsk. Cf. detailed report in: W. Wach, *Na kaszubskim szańcu*, Warszawa 1968

²⁰ Cf. e.g. *Wytrwałości naszej nikt i nic nie złamie* (Naród, 1939, no. 177

²¹ A statement by Osmańczyk that "the only person that voiced the protest against forgetting our land and country-fellows still living in Prussian captivity" was great Polish writer Stefan Żeromski, who died soon after, in 1925 cannot be accepted. Ten years will pass for Poles identified with Rodło emblem before the next generation of Polish writers will turn their eyes to north and west", Osmańczyk, op. cit., p. 6. To mention only ZOKZ publications or "Strażnica Zachodnia", or articles included in "Sprawy Narodowościowe".



declaration expressed by the then Premier, Wincenty Witos, to a delegation of Poles from Warmia in summer 1920 was characteristic for governmental circles: “The Polish government is preparing a bill on an option for Poland. Each Pole can take up this option. The one who is Polish — will come back to Poland ... We are not going to conduct war with the Germans because of a few Poles”²². Many years had to pass, many vital changes took place in international situation along with meticulous, strenuous, humdrum organic work of the Union of Poles and social organisations in the country to change this attitude. It should be noted in this place, that earlier, the role and meaning of the work carried out by the Union of Poles in Germany was better understood and appreciated by social organisations than by official governmental circles²³. When social organisations, and especially Związek Obrony Kresów Zachodnich (the Western Borderlands Defence Union) shaped its attitude to the Union of Poles or rather to the entire organised activity of the Polish community in Germany primarily by the recognition of the obligation of the Polish nation towards this part, which, if left alone, would be doomed to failure, later interest of Polish governmental circles mainly related to principal assumptions of the Polish internal policy²⁴. Political activity of the Union of Poles and cooperating organisations in the circumstances when Poland was losing its advantage on international arena while implementing its own policy after 1925 aroused more interest of governmental spheres in the Union’s work. In the calculations of the leaders of the Polish foreign policy the subject role of the Union of Poles in Germany had been growing simultaneously with the development of German revisionist tendencies. The Union of Poles knew how to propound such ideological assumptions and organisational forms, which allowed to support basic concepts of the Polish foreign policy towards Germany without violating applicable regulations of the German state and above all, without irredentist activity²⁵.

A slogan taken up relatively later, “We Are Poles”²⁶ in everyday Union’s activity provided the ideological basis. The slogan prevailing in everyday work of the Union of Poles was not only of temporary meaning. Vitality and activity of Poles in Germany, addresses made by Polish Members of Parliament on the podium of Prussian Sejm, heroic struggles of Polish peasants and workers against the machine of state serving the Germanization system, the truth of everyday hardships of Polish organisations, schools, institutions, presence of Poles from Germany at various patriotic manifestations in the country, ceremonial character of the marriage of the Union of Poles’ banner with the Vistula — all this contributed to shaping and strengthening of the awareness of the Polish nation of strong Polish influences reaching far beyond the Oder River. It all showed that Poles living there are not just the Last of the Mohicans as if one might

²² J. Baczewski, *Wspomnienia Warmiaka*, Warszawa 1981, p. 105.

²³ Cf. e.g. *Wystąpienie posła Brzezińskiego* (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej polskiej. Sprawozdania Stenograficzne, 1924, no. 101, CI, columns 53—54).

²⁴ J. Krasuski, “*Stosunki polsko-niemieckie w latach 1918—1925*”, Poznań 1962, p. 177

²⁵ „*O zasadach polityki mniejszościowej (Polak w Niemczech)*”, 1925, no. 10); “*Mniejszość polska wobec rządu*” (*Katolik Codzienny*, 1923, no. 21)

²⁶ Osmańczyk, op. cit, s. 13, quotes interesting statements regarding the origin of *Prawdy Polaków*, (Poles’ Truths) adopted at the Congress of Polish People in Germany, March 1938. We Are Poles slogan was underlying the entire programme of the Union of Poles but in organisational practice it was used during the preparations for the Congress.



presume referring to the above-quoted statement by Witos but a part of living Polish nation artificially pulled apart by a border post.

Methodical work of the Union of Poles in Germany enabled the Polish population in Germany and public opinion in the country to perceive declarations published in Polish newspapers in Germany a few months before the outbreak of war as obvious and reasonable: "We, the Poles in Germany, are still in Germany, still living on the land of our fathers and there is no doubt that we shall live on this land a good several thousand years... The one who thinks that one-and-a-half million-strong crowd of Poles in Germany are weak people doomed to die, that it is a handful of people keeping their heads above water is wrong in his hopes. The one who counted a few thousand Polish names changed in 1938 into German thinks that Polish identity in Germany had been destroyed is wrong in his calculations. The one who enjoys a number of removed designations in Polish in 1938 or the number of prayer books for children changed from Polish into German is wrong in his calculations. And the one who counts Polish names changed into the German ones in 1938 is very wrong in his calculations"²⁷. These words were written, as the history proved, not only to cheer people's hearts. It was the judgment of leaders of the Union of Poles about the situation and the national living perspectives of Poles in Germany. Here come the words, so meaningful today, which were published in one of Polish newspapers in Germany in summer 1939: "Let's not complain. Let's not shed tears. Everything was there. A slight turn towards nearing future will provide evidences full of bitter truth. Bismarck was there and not sparing victims »Kulturkampf«. There was an act of expropriation, Drzymała's wagon. There was plebiscite and Maks Worgitzki. These are not just empty words falling on deaf ears. These are symbols of the terrible turmoil of history, which rattled Poles planted by God's will in Germany to wipe them out from the scene. Bismarck and »Kulturkampf« had passed and Poles remained steadfast in their belief²⁸. The Union of Poles was preparing the Polish community in Germany to survive terrible days of inevitably approaching war, trying to inspire unfaltering faith in the future.

At the time of the foundation, the Union of Poles in Germany was one of few of this kind of organisations, both among Polish emigrants worldwide or among emigrants of other national origins. Attempts to learn by following the experience of the German minority in Poland practically did not work²⁹. Experiments in outlining organisational and programme-related concepts by the Union of Poles were closely watched by other minority populations in Europe, especially in Germany. Practical activities of the Union of Poles indicated a possibility of working out principles different from those set by German minorities, principles based on deepening the ideological links with the fatherland without the violation of legal norms applicable in the country of residence and without resorting to irredentist activity³⁰. Basic ideological assumptions of the Union of Poles, although expressed profound patriotism, were free from nationalistic traits. These assumptions had created a situation, in which the programme of the Union

²⁷ *Jest siła w Polactwie* (Gazeta Olsztyńska, 1939, no. 1).

²⁸ "Gazeta Olsztyńska", 1939, no. 1128.

²⁹ Initially, experiences of Deutschtumsbund were followed while working on the development of basic organisational and programme-related assumptions but quite soon this idea was abandoned.

³⁰ Addresses made by Jan Baczewski in the Prussian parliament in 1923 were specifically interesting for the leaders of the Danish minority in Germany; Wrzesiński, *Polski ruch narodowy...*, p. 11117 et seq.



of Poles could provide the basis for the organisational programme of other national minorities not only in Germany. This practically universal character of minority concepts of the Union of Poles enabled its leaders to present a programme of creating homogeneous organisation for all national minorities in the Weimar Republic implemented by calling into being the Association of National Minorities in Germany. Setting up the Association of National Minorities in Germany, an organisation which united all organised minorities except the Jewish one³¹, was not only of instrumental character, as it is sometimes interpreted, but it was a practical test of the maturity of basic concepts of the Union of Poles related to the minority issues. It was an important element in forming a consolidated front of republican forces in Germany against nationalistic factions. The influence of those programme concepts was evidenced by the fact that the Lithuanians had joined the Union in spite of negative attitude of their mother country, and so had the Danes, although the Danish government expressed some doubts³². An initiative taken by the Union of Poles in order to set up the Association of National Minorities in Germany was an attempt, which had not gained enough support to counteract Weimar Germany's taking advantage of the problem of minorities to destroy the then balance of forces and borders on the European arena. Experience gained in the course of the Union's work related to the Association of National Minorities. Sharp disputes with German minorities on the minority congresses' arena³³ were underlying the Union's initiative regarding the collaboration among Polish minorities in the world under the homogenous Union. It started with the collaboration among European minorities to wind up this process, obstructed by internal political fights³⁴, by setting up the World Association of National Minorities in 1935. It is worthwhile to add that establishing of the Union was possible only after the organisational consolidation introduced on the basis of consistent political concepts of Polish minorities in particular countries and after calling into being national leading organisations based on the patterns set by the Union of Poles in Germany.

The Union of Poles in Germany was an organisation with a political programme rooted in liberal and democratic ideas throughout the interwar period, additionally based on the conclusions derived from the socio-political Christian doctrine. Such ideological assumptions were sometimes in contradiction with processes, which the Polish community was undergoing in Germany, namely, developing class consciousness. It was one of the main reasons contributing to the restriction of the Union's influence among Polish peasants and workers, who did not want to acknowledge solidarity-

³¹ German citizens of Jewish origin remained outside the Union due to their programme-based attitude towards the minorities-related issue. Also the Czech minority remained outside the Union due to internal organisational insufficiencies.

³² Wrzesiński, *Polski ruch narodowy...*

³³ Detailed reports on the Minority Congresses highlighting the role of representatives of the Polish minorities were included In "*Sprawy Narodowościowe*"

³⁴ A delay in establishing the World Union of Poles was mainly related to the attitude of representatives of Polonia from the United States, where political opponents of the Sanation circles had strong influence. At the same time, activists connected with the Sanation circles were managing the preparations for setting up the World Union of Poles. We cannot agree with statements made by Osmańczyk, who thought that the reasons of attitudes of Polish organisations in the United States towards the establishing of the World Union of Poles were attributed to the specifics of the development of the Polonia problem in the United States, according to the opinion of local leaders. Osmańczyk, op. cit., p. 8



related assumptions of the social programme of the Union of Poles as satisfactory for the interests of the Polish community³⁵. The character of the Union's social ideology was often the source of growing reluctance of Polish workers towards the Union, especially in large-scale industry regions during the acute economic crisis³⁶. The problem took on a totally different character during the Nazi regime in Germany. The total character of activity aimed at the deprivation of national identity during the liquidation of all German organisations with social class programme with the use of agasting terror against the members of these organisations contributed to the reinforcement of internal unity within the Polish community around the Union of Poles and its subordinated organisations³⁷.

Some studies present the "Union of Poles" term as a synonym of the "Polish movement in Germany". What are the reasons of using such terminology interchangeably? The Union of Poles in Germany based its organisation programme on recognising the need to operate in two directions: on one side a principal organisation to manage the comprehensive national activity of Poles in Germany, work out basic line of conduct on all platforms of public life, and on the other hand, specialised organisations implementing ideas of the principal organisation. The principal organisation was to be an all-party organisation in order to remain faithful to the principles of the national solidarity and to acquire the right to representation vis-à-vis third parties as an organisation representing all Polish German citizens, and not only the members of the Union³⁸. At the first stage of the Union of Poles' activity, its leadership admitted an option of various political parties incorporated in the Union hoping for exercising the influence on these factions³⁹. However, when the daily routine had proved that that the all-party character of the Union was not consistent with reality and that the existence of any political party leads to differences in the programme, the Union of Poles had changed its attitude and dissociated themselves from their earlier declarations and acted decisively against any party activity⁴⁰.

Social and national concepts of solidarity within the Union of Poles were spreading simultaneously with growing influence of political factions connected with the Polish government, exercising more and more influence on the leadership of the Union after the May Coup. Attempts to consolidate the monopolistic position of the Union of Poles in managing the Polish movement in Germany had to lead to the development of decentralist tendencies towards the Union of Poles within the social community in the Weimar Republic, usually of minor importance⁴¹. Establishing opposition organisations practically did not undermine the influence of the Union of Poles, on the contrary, it

³⁵ Wrzesiński, *Polski ruch narodowy...*, p. 220 et seq.

³⁶ Cf. e.g. WAP Katowice, U. Woj. Si., Wyd. Prez., no. 1378, cf. 4, J. Grzegorzek, *Sprawozdanie o przyczynach i przebiegu klęski polskiej na Śląsku Opolskim*

³⁷ At that time, it was often noted that Polish communists were endeavouring to join the Union of Poles. The Union of Poles' management adopted special directives recommending that great caution should be exercised while admitting members of the liquidated German Communist Party, fearing repressions exercised by the Nazi regime against the entire Union.

³⁸ *Nasz program organizacyjny* (Dziennik Berliński, 1927, no. 15).

³⁹ An attitude to the Polish Socialist Party in Germany, which initially was to participate in an electoral block jointly with the Union of Poles was of particular characteristic.

⁴⁰ Cf. e.g. *Mniejszość polska a partie niemieckie* (*Nowiny Codzienne*, 1927, no. 221)

⁴¹ Wrzesiński, *Polski ruch narodowy...*, p. 232 et seq.



provided an incentive for looking for new forms of action adapted to rapidly changing internal conditions in Germany, new international situation and transformations in political and national awareness of Poles in the Weimar Republic as well as in the Third Reich⁴². The changes in the management of the Union of Poles were another factor having dynamic impact on the attempts of transformation within the Polish movement in Germany. The Union's leadership was joined by a large group of young people raised in the atmosphere of the Union's ideology, often graduates from various Polish schools, politically educated in the conditions of the republican rule. They were contributing new elements to the Polish movement not settling for the existing situation. It seemed that in the last months of the Weimar Republic internal stagnation within the Union would be overcome and the organisation would develop new concepts of activity which, modifying the old programme to adapt it to the need of the hour, would open the way for greater influence of the Polish movement in proportion to the size of the Polish community in Germany⁴³.

Gaining power by National Socialists stopped these transformations. The Nazi terror and the peril of introducing an administrative ban on activity of Polish organisations inhibited any attempts of introducing changes into life⁴⁴. But the Nazi regime brought transient changes in interstate relations. The Nazi German state, giving up rapid but only partial revision of the borders defined in the Treaty of Versailles in favour of the total revision, was trying to improve relations with the People's Republic. It meant breaking with open coercion measures, brutal acts on the part of state administration, and illusory national freedom, which had to be reflected in the policy towards the Polish minorities. In practice, Germanization expanded but its forms had changed. The applied methods produced better results than those used during the republican period. This policy of "fake feelings", as Nazi leaders described it⁴⁵, created conditions for shaping new organisational forms and ideological transformations of the Union of Poles. These transformations were not too far-reaching. And during the Nazi period, reflections and proposals of the Union of Poles' leadership relating to the formulation of basic programme and organisational ideas proved right.

The Union of Poles in Germany was an organisation in the life of the Polish community settled in the Reich, which not only developed the programme, defined the trends of work but it also directly carried them out either through the Union's own field units or through organisations and institutions actually controlled by the Union. The organisational system of the Polish movement in Germany was of such a character that although it did not have influence on other organisations reserved in the articles of association, still, in result of actual personal relations and ideological concepts of solidarity, it provided conditions for managing almost all organisations and institutions. In this place we are approaching an important issue, such as determining the Union's influence on the Polish community in Germany. On many occasions, when the influence

⁴² Cf. e.g. the assessment of the meaning of setting up the Union of Poles in Silesia made by the Polish Ambassador to Berlin, J. Lipski: AAN, Ambasada Berlin, w. 101, z. 3, Ambasada Berlin, 1 II 1936

⁴³ AAN, Konsulat Berlin, nr. 210, k. 316—333, Konsulat Olsztyn, 1 XII 1932, referat: *Akcja kulturalna wśród starszego społeczeństwa polskiego w Niemczech*

⁴⁴ Cf. e.g. AAN, Ambasada Berlin, w. 26, t. 5, Konsulat Olsztyn, 25 IX 1933; *ibid.*, w. 23,teczka 1, Konsulat Kwidzyn, 20 IV 1933

⁴⁵ Ossolineum, rkp. 13241 III, k. 235—250, address of Silesian Ober-President J. Wagner in April 1935, during BDO course for agitators in Bochum



of the Union of Poles was considered as insufficient, two figures were compared in a number of studies - on one side, over one-and-a-half-million Polish community and on the other hardly 45 000 Union members in the period of the greatest organisational development⁴⁶. Such comparison must lead to false conclusions. Two general principles observed by the Union's leadership should be pointed out. One of them was to restrict the membership to a group of population with well developed sense of national identity and the second one was to perceive the Union as an organisation of the cadre structure⁴⁷, especially during the Nazi regime. In spite of a number of various postulates put forward by the Union members, the Union of Poles was not able to develop organisational forms or ideological assumptions needed for exercising the influence on the Polish German citizens living in all regions, who did not have the sense of national identity⁴⁸, which was crucial to counteract German plans of deprivation of national identity based on attaching great meaning to the possibility of the Germanization of this specific class of population. The Union of Poles in Germany, although observed various degrees of national-self consciousness, did not draw practical conclusions based on such observations. What's more, as evidenced by its attitude to the Union of Masurians, it was reserved and reluctant towards organisations cultivating their regional autonomies⁴⁹. Such assumption, especially during the Nazi period when the Nazi authorities tried to put an equation mark between the Polish nationality and the membership in the Union of Poles, had to trigger further restrictions in the Union's influence.

The Union of Poles had trained people, who were ready to make sacrifices in the name of their treasured national ideals and capable to operate efficiently and independently. They represented a large potential that could be used in suitable circumstances for the organisational expansion of the Polish movement. The outbreak of the war or rather the policy established earlier by the Nazis, aimed at the total liquidation of the Polish movement, prevented the execution of plans at that time. According to theoretical assumptions eagerly accepted by National Socialists, one of the main conditions of successfully conducted Germanization was to sever links between generations in the Polish movement by preventing the youth to join the Union of Poles. The deprivation of national identity in young generation, determined attempts of national stratification even within families, work carried out by German schools, social organisations, and state administration had obviously produced concrete results⁵⁰. The leadership of the Union of Poles noted the threat coming from that direction. Fight for the national future of the Polish youth was one of the main areas of the fiercest national struggles. Organisers of the Union of Poles were aware of the meaning of the fight for young generation. They demonstrated this awareness on the very day of setting up the

⁴⁶ Wrzeński, *Polski ruch narodowy...*, p. 83.

⁴⁷ It was expressed by restrictions imposed on the membership in the Union. Each candidate applying for the membership after the Nazi coup had to be introduced by two persons. An attempt had been made to introduce the trial period and after that period final organisational decisions were made.

⁴⁸ Time and again local activists in Masuria and in Silesia put forward proposals to organise a Polish newspaper in German treating it as a basic element of having influence on this ethnically Polish population. All such proposals were met with reluctance demonstrated by the Union's leadership.

⁴⁹ Cf. e.g. AAN, Poselstwo Berlin, w. 333, Konsulat Olsztyn, 16 II 1931

⁵⁰ Cf. e.g.: AP Wrocław, RO I 2100, k. 409 et seq., Niederschrift über das Ergebniss der in der Sitzung am 18. Mai 1936 ausgetauschten Erfahrungen zur Feststellung einrichtlichen Richtlinien in Fragen der polnischen Minderheit



Union by calling into being the Union of School Society in Germany⁵¹. It were the very leaders of the Union of Poles, who applied to German authorities for decrees enabling them to organise Polish schools, and when appropriate statute had been passed, the Union of Poles in Germany was actual organiser and protector of Polish schools in Germany. In spite of a special organisation managing the affairs of the Polish educational system, without the organisational, curriculum-related, and material efforts of the Union, Polish schools in Germany would not have existed, even those very few.

The Union of Poles often pointed out to a double course of the deprivation of the national identity carried out through brutal actions and through quiet, slow but fruitful assimilation. The internal work of the Union and collaborating organisations aspiring to educate the Polish community that would develop the sense of pride in national heritage, recognition of the role of the Polish nation in the history of human race and its important place in the contemporary European civilisation were the best to counteract the assimilation. A trait of pathos, so characteristic for all public speeches delivered by the Union of Poles served its purpose. A diffident but at the same time proud motto of the Union being the central line of the Union's programme "We Are Poles", was nothing else but the courageous challenge thrown down on nationalistic anti-Polish forces.

It must be stated that the forces engaged in the national fight were not balanced. On one scale, there was a huge state machine supported by numerous rich social organisations, heavily subsidized by state budget, supported by state administration and local authorities and special legislation, and on the other one, Polish organisations, totally isolated inside Germany and on international arena, deprived of any equal legal help and without sufficient material resources. In these circumstances, the Union of Poles was forced to turn to its natural ally, to Poland. The Union did not pay for this help directly with irredentist actions as was the case of other national minorities but with certain restrictions upon the independence and compliance with the policy of the Polish Republic. Recognising the primacy of the interests of Poland, the Union's leaders, in the name of national interests acknowledged by the ruling authority, often had to give up the efforts of satisfying the needs of Poles in Germany⁵².

What was the contribution of the Union of Poles on the eve of the war? In spite of adverse circumstances, the Union managed to form and maintain quite a substantial group of Polish population which, regardless of harassment, violence and other acts of terror it had been subjected to, did not break down, did not surrender and relentlessly even ostentatiously demonstrated the faithfulness to Polish national ideals not abandoning hope for the victory of the Polish nation. The existence of this group created a barrier against the processes aimed at the deprivation of the Polish identity. The Union of Poles had managed to develop the sense of community and shared responsibility for the future of the nation among the Polish community in Germany and in the country. And when on 1 September 1939 first shots were fired, national consciousness was so great that not only the battle for the national future of Poles living in the Second Polish

⁵¹ AAN, Poselstwo Berlin, w. 66, Report on the convention of representatives and district committees in order to establish the Union of Poles and the Union of School Society.

⁵² Many examples of such conduct could be specifically noticed after 1934, when the Union of Poles' leadership having its own opinion on the lines of action gave up the implementation of its own concept in the name of defending the rights put forward by Polish diplomats not to aggravate relations between Poland and the Third Reich.



Republic started, but also the fight for the national future of Poles on the Oder River and at the Baltic Sea; it was above all the result of work performed by the Union of Poles in Germany and the result of their effort⁵³.

Administrative liquidation of all Union of Poles' districts performed by the Nazi authorities during the first days of the war, imprisonment and deportation to concentration camps of a great number of leaders of Polish organisations officially wound up the activity of the Polish movement. In the atmosphere of complete triumph of Nazi Germany celebrating the victory over Poland, the Union of Poles still passed the most important test of national, political, ideological, and organisational maturity. The Nazi authorities were carefully watching the situation among Poles, who were known for their activity in the Union of Poles or in other organisations. The Nazis did not spare bloody repression in case of any suspicions of the continuation of patriotic activity. In this place, it is worthwhile to quote a German chronicler, who in the summer of 1940, at Dąbrówno, a village of powerful tradition of Polish national activity registered as follows: "The Polish population still believes in building the state of Poles and now and then shows passive resistance. It is especially noticeable during winter charity collections for school. In August 1939, not a single child dared speak Polish, now, during breaks, practically only Polish can be heard. Parents are also trying to raise their children according to Polish traditions. Occasionally, pupils can be persuaded to break the regulations. The Polish language is more and more frequently heard in the street, in shops and in dining places⁵⁴". Similar accounts were coming from all localities, where the Union of Poles had their districts. Faith in the final victory of Poland was reflected not only in passive resistance and language demonstrations but also in active armed fight either in a form of guerrilla warfare or at various fronts of World War II.

The vitality and power of tradition of the Union of Poles was revealed after the liberation. Although the history of this organisation was a closed episode, still, the memory of its national work and the programme helped to shape the national identity in Poland reborn as a country. The truth of the Union of Poles' history facilitated the diplomatic fight for the territorial shape of the Peoples Republic. Carrying on the tradition of the Union of Poles not only enabled many former members to join social and political activities in the rebuilding of Poland but it allowed to shape new vigorous, ambitious community on the Regained Territories. According to the judgment verified by history, surprising vitality of the Union of Poles' tradition reflects in the best way the role and meaning of this organisation for the history of the entire Polish nation even today.

DER BUND DER POLEN IN DEUTSCHLAND UND SEINE ROLLE IN DER GESCHICHTE DER POLNISCHEN NATION

Der Bund der Polen in Deutschland entstand als Ergebnis selbständiger Überlegungen und organisatorischer Erfahrungen der polnischen Bevölkerung mit deutscher Staatsangehörigkeit, die nach der Festlegung der polnisch-deutschen Staatsgrenzen nach dem ersten Weltkriege in den Grenzen der Weimarer Republik geblieben ist. Der Bund stellte sich die Aufgabe, die polnische Bevölkerung in Deutschland vor der

⁵³ Cf. e.g. M. Dąbrowska, *Przygody człowieka myślącego*, Warszawa 1970, p. 363

⁵⁴ W. Wrzesiński, *W przededniu drugiej wojny światowej* (Pogranicze i Kaszuby w latach terroru, Koszalin 1970, p. 8).



NARODOWY PROGRAM
ROZWOJU HUMANISTYKI

WOJCIECH WRZESIŃSKI : **Union of poles in Germany and its role in the history of the Polish nation**

Entnationalisierung zu schützen. Gegenüber den deutschen Behörden vertrat der Bund nicht nur seine Mitglieder, sondern die gesamte polnische.

Translated by Katarzyna Hussar