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LECH TRZECIAKOWSKI

**Polish Emigrants in Germany. A Phenomenon of the 19th-century Europe.  
An Attempt at Synthesis**

Some years ago in the *Die Zeit* weekly one could read an anecdote on the supposed origins of the inhabitants of the Ruhr district. The story was set in a football club in one of the towns of the German industrial region. The secretary was preparing the list of the newly recruited team members, which read as follows: 'Skrzypczak, Pszeniczny, Kaczmarek, Skrzek...' When one of the boys introduced himself as Muller, the secretary said to him, astonished: 'Your name sounds so awkward... Go on and spell it for me'. The intention behind this simple story was to educate the reader on the complexity of the industrial society development process and the role played in this process by the immigrants from Prussian Poland.

In this context, a question arises: Was the development of the Polish immigrant community in Germany in 1914 a phenomenon on a European scale? What arguments would justify such claim? Most of all, the size of the community of Polish emigrants in Germany. In 1914 it amounted to about 750,000 people, the great majority of which – at least half a million – lived in the Ruhr district. Berlin's share of the population of immigrants was about 100,000.<sup>1</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe there was no other such numerous foreign community as in the Ruhr district. This could be compared only with Vienna, which before the World War I, was home to around 400,000 people of Czech origin<sup>2</sup>.

The uniqueness of the Polish community in Germany was not only a consequence of its impressive size, but also of crucial processes that transformed the mentality of its members. It is possible to distinguish a particular model of its characteristics, which includes for instance the growth in the sense of the national identity as a natural consequence of foreign place of residence. These processes were, however, most typical for ethnic minority groups from countries open to mass immigration. This issue is best illustrated by the U.S. example. Another factor was social advancement of individuals originating mostly from rural areas, deeply marked by feudalism, who suddenly found themselves in an unknown industrialized setting. These characteristics were also in line with the scholarly observation on the growing social activity, manifested by the development of a particular subculture, which contrary to general expectations, did not lead to isolation, but constituted a meaningful stage in the process of integration within the industrial community. The specificity of the Polish immigrant community in the Ruhr

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<sup>1</sup> J. Kozłowski, *Geneza i ewolucja zbiorowości wychodźstwa polskiego w Europie (Polonia w Europie, by multiple authors, B. Szydłowskiej-Ceglowej, ed., Poznań 1992, p. 23).*

<sup>2</sup> P. Csedes, *Geschichte Wiens*, Wien 1990, p. 130.



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district, besides its considerable size, was connected with what was described by the American historian John J. Kulczycki as 'unexpected foreign and native solidarity'<sup>3</sup>.

Chronologically speaking, of the two most prominent centres of Polish immigrant community in Germany it was Berlin that enjoyed the status of a leader. In the 18th century, as the capital city of Prussia, Berlin was considered as the hub of Polish settlement. Among the pioneer immigrant inhabitants were industrialist Ernst Gockowski, and painter and graphic artist Daniel Mikołaj Chodowiecki. An important role in Berlin's social life was played by the members of prominent aristocratic families. Their leading representatives were the Radziwiłł family and count Atanazy Raczyński – a diplomat and most of all a devoted collector of European painting.

Berlin attracted newcomers like a magnet. *Nolens volens*, the city was a capital, also for Prussian Poles, a rapidly growing European metropolis as well as a centre of university education. Not without significance was Berlin's proximity to the territory of Prussian Poland. For the aforementioned reasons it welcomed not only the nobility, both the members of the ruling family and those willing to make contact with it, but also numerous university students.

With time, the reputation of the Polish immigrant community in Berlin was dependent not on the aristocracy or students, but on the ever growing number of economic immigrants who settled by the Spree river. The explosion of population that was initially characteristic for the Northwestern Europe soon expanded to engulf also the territory of the Prussian Partition, Poznań (*Posen*), Pomerelia (*Pomerellen*) and Upper Silesia. At first, the influx of immigrants from the Prussian Poland headed eastwards, to the Kingdom of Poland and Russia. Soon, however, the list of emigration destinations was extended by America and the remote Australia. The trend died down due to the dynamic growth of Berlin and the following development of the powerful industrial centre of the Ruhr district in the 1870s. Germany had now much to offer as far as employment opportunities were concerned. In such conditions, the overseas emigration was instantly replaced by emigration to Berlin and the Ruhr district.

As soon as in 1860s., the first city to witness an increased influx of new inhabitants was Berlin. Initially the area was populated with qualified labourers, minor craftsmen and merchants. Soon after, the city was overwhelmed by a tremendous wave of immigrants of peasant origin. They constituted as much as 80 percent of the Polish immigrant community in Berlin. Emigration of this particular group was mostly permanent. They mainly dealt with heaviest construction, unloading and transportation works, and were hired in factories. A substantial number of these labourers were women, who mainly found employment in the light industry sector and as housemaids. With some exceptions, like for instance the famous tailoring master Władysław Berkan, whose workshop was located in the high class neighbourhood at the corner of Friedrichstrasse and Leipzigerstrasse, the labourers inhabited worker districts. Poles did not isolate themselves from their environment by forming hermetic communities, which fostered their contacts with Germans and, in consequence, their social assimilation and integration. As years went by, they were becoming more and more affluent, which was manifested in their increasing self-dependence and growing bank

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<sup>3</sup> J. J. Kulczycki, *The Foreign Worker and the German Labor Movement. Xenophobia and Solidarity in the Coal Fields of the Ruhr, 1871–1914*, Oxford, Providence, USA 1994, p. 48.



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deposits, their moving to larger and better located apartments, acquiring houses and taking care of the education of their children<sup>4</sup>.

On one hand, Poles were gradually melting into their new reality, on the other – a natural consequence of detachment from their homeland was their need to seek contact with compatriots. This urge resulted in forming numerous Polish organisations, manifestations of their activity in the bosom of Polish colony in Berlin. Before the World War I there were roughly 300 such organisations<sup>5</sup>. Also, Polish newspapers were published, with the *Dziennik Berliński* daily at the forefront. Polish immigrant community also gave birth to the so-called 'Political Committee for Polish Emigrants on the Right Bank of the Elbe with a Seat in Berlin' with Salezy Krysiak as chairman. In elections to *Reichstag* the Committee was represented by a Polish candidate. The results were unfortunately far below expectations. The total number of votes never exceeded 3,000<sup>6</sup>.

Of crucial importance were the processes of immigrants' social assimilation, however, this subject requires a more thorough study. One should not be, however, biased by the extensive number of Polish organisations that were operating in this environment. A relatively high proportion of Poles was beyond their reach. Many Poles were assimilating very quickly. An important role in this process was performed by the institution of mixed marriages. This phenomenon was characteristic not only to Berlin: it was not a secret that this was also the case with the German minority in Warsaw.

The community of Polish emigrants from the Ruhr district was to some extent very much like its Berlin counterpart, but there were also very distinct differences between them. First of all, its history was much shorter. It all started in 1871, when the Prosper I coal mine in Bottrop welcomed a group of 400 Polish miners from Upper Silesia. What could be observed throughout the subsequent decades was a moderately slow growth in the number of population migrating there from the Eastern province<sup>7</sup>.

A sudden change occurred after 1890 as a result of rapid transformation of the Ruhr district into one of the largest industrial centres in the world. The demand for the labour force seemed to be unlimited. This specific situation had a major influence on the status of Polish immigrant community. Industrialisation entered and settled in the Ruhr district relatively late as compared with other areas. This backwardness was to a large extent caused by the particularly deep burial of coal seams, which, given the primitive coal extraction technology of the time, was impossible to be brought to the surface. Until the 1870s the inhabitants of the Ruhr often migrated to central Germany, frequent were also the cases of emigration to the U.S. When following the advancement of technology there finally appeared an opportunity for the Ruhr district to exploit its coal deposits, the region was relatively sparsely populated. There was an increasing demand for miners, carpenters and bricklayers to work at the construction of the new mines and

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<sup>4</sup> W. Berkan, *Życiorys własny*, Poznań 1923; A. Bitner-Nowak, *Wielkopole w Brandenburgii i Berlinie w XIX i na początku XX wieku (Problemy narodowościowe Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w XIX i XX wieku. Księga pamiątkowa dla Profesora Przemysława Hausera)*, Poznań 2002, p. 149; J. Kozłowski, *Rozwój organizacji społeczno-narodowych wychodźstwa polskiego w Niemczech 1870–1914*, Wrocław 1987, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Polacy w Berlinie. Przyczynek do historii wychodźstwa (sic!) polskiego w Berlinie i po prawym brzegu Łaby. Według materiału zebranego przez Antoniego Gołąbka w opracowaniu profesora Jana Kaźmierczka z przedmową radcy Zygmunta Zaleskiego*, Inowrocław 1937, pp. 512–520.

<sup>6</sup> K. Rzepecki, *Naprzód czy wstecz. Pobudki wyborczej*, Poznań 1912, vol. 2, p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> K. Tenfelde, *Geschichte der Bergarbeiterschaft an der Ruhr im 19. Jahrhundert*, Bonn-Bad Godesberg 1977, pp. 240–241.



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shafts. Ruhr welcomed miners from all parts of Upper Silesia. They were not, however, a dominant group. The majority of newcomers originated from East Prussia and the Province of Poznań. Third in terms of the number of population belonged to the emigrants from Pomerelia. They were mainly peasantry, who later transformed into a great industrial proletariat. Initially the social structure of the Ruhr district was lacking the middle-class as well as intellectual elite. In the specific conditions of the Ruhr district, which despite the extensive demand for the labour force was relatively sparsely populated, the migrants from the east were not regarded as competition – it was enough work for every one<sup>8</sup>. This factor had an enormous impact on the processes of social integration and assimilation. An important element were religious communities of German Roman Catholics – a group which dominated in this region.

On the other hand there occurred numerous phenomena which spurred the formation of the Polish subculture, which in spite of appearances, in the long run facilitated the process of integration. Poles constituted approximately 5 percent of the total number of Berlin's population, and in the case of Ruhr district – 7.3 percent. They were not, however, evenly distributed. In some districts the proportion of Poles was quite substantial. And so, in seven districts of the so-called *Regierungsbezirk* of Munster, Arnsberg and Dusseldorf they constituted 10 percent of the total population; to be more specific: Recklinghausen Stadt – 23.1 percent; Herne Stadt 21.6 percent, Gelsenkirchen Land – 17.7 percent; Dortmund Land – 12.2 percent; and Buer Stadt – 11.8 percent. Majority of them lived in miners' settlements (*Zechensiedlungen*). Due to the high concentration of Polish-speaking population, some of them were soon named *Polenwinkel* or *Kościuszkowo*<sup>9</sup>. This does not mean, however, that there were no German residents. All in all, the forced concentration of Polish workers in the miners' settlements resulted in their growing isolation from the native community. It resembled a Polish ghetto. On the other hand, as Poles were usually working in large coal mines, where they constituted only a half of the crew, their working companions were often Germans. And this fostered social integration. At this point, it would be suitable to cite the words of renowned sociologist Józef Chałasiński, who was especially dedicated to the research of miners' communities and provided us with a very poetic and accurate description of their strict code of ethics and collective solidarity: 'this was perhaps a subconscious conviction, that during the mining works, and most importantly in the cases of imminent danger, they paid no attention to their origins, political or religious views, education or any other differences that determined their mutual relations when they were on the surface'<sup>10</sup>.

What was of particular importance was that the Ruhr district became a destination for a substantial number of relatively young migrants, who were 'in their prime'. People between 20 and 30 years of age constituted 41.8 percent of the newcomers, and those between 30 and 49 – 22.3 percent. They were young, energetic, persistent, and above all determined to improve their material status. A substantial proportion of them were not married. The growing stabilization of the community of

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<sup>8</sup> K. Murzynowska, *Polskie wychodźstwo zarobkowe w Zagłębiu Ruhry w latach 1880–1914*, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk 1971, pp. 12, 16–17.

<sup>9</sup> Ch. Klessmann, *Polnische Bergarbeiter im Ruhrgebiet 1870–1945*, Göttingen 1984, p. 26; V. M. Stefański, *Zum Process der Emanzipation von Aussenseiter. Polnische Arbeitsmigranten im Ruhrgebiet*, Dortmund 1984, p. 75

<sup>10</sup> *Życiorysy górników*, Introduction J. Chalasiński, Katowice 1949, p. 10.



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immigrants in the Ruhr region was evident in the increase in the number of women and children. In 1890 the ratio of men to women was 100 to 40, in 1910 the number of women rose to 77. Growing was also the number of children below 14 years of age. In 1910, 33 percent of the Ruhr district community were Poles who were born there<sup>11</sup>.

The mentality of Polish immigrants in the Ruhr district was rapidly evolving. Within a short time span, peasant immigrants from villages located in the far east of the state, were transformed into great-industrial labourers. This was a substantial social advancement. And it was manifested in the growing progress of civilization. This shift was dependent upon the working conditions, and most importantly on the salary. Money offered to the mining industry workers in the Ruhr district were much bigger than in Upper Silesia. On average their annual income was 500 marks higher than the income of the Upper Silesians, for instance in 1913 the ratio was 1755 to 1204 marks. Out of this sum it was possible to save around 500 marks a year. Another evidence of advancement was a change in living conditions – moving from the settlement to newly purchased houses. In the case of Polish community, this process occurred relatively late and was most perceptible between 1908 and 1914. Until then most of the labourers were sending their savings to their natal households in villages of their origin. The reason was that many Polish emigrants were planning to secure their future by building their own households in their homeland. As a result of the so-called 'Germanisation policy', which effectively hindered these plans – Amendment of the Settlement Act of 1904 r., and soon after of the Expropriation Act of 1908 – immigrants started to invest their savings in building households in the area of the Ruhr district<sup>12</sup>.

Immensely important was the transformation of immigrants from subservient farmhands, agrarian workhorses and minor peasants into self-confident members of industrial community with a strong sense of national and social identity. When I'm writing these words, what I recall are numerous photographs from that period – which constitute an extremely valuable historical source for the examined issue. They are contained in a book by John J. Kulczycki, which is also cited in this article. These photographs illustrate the everyday life of the Polish community from the village Mengede not far from Dortmund. First of them is entitled *Polish Music Band of Mengede near Dortmund, 1910*. The band comprised 18 musicians, playing various wind and percussion instruments. All the members are neatly dressed, in line with the fashion of the period. 16 of them are wearing bow ties, and two of them – ties. The second photograph depicts members of the Musical and Dramatic Society. Its title is *Vivat Ars! Theatre play entitled Muslims and a Christian woman*. In the photograph we see 21 group members, including 6 ladies. Some of them are wearing Muslim-style outfits, other – the 18th century European-style outfits. The third photograph, entitled *In the restaurant* depicts five gentlemen drinking beer. All of them are wearing elegant frock coats and bow ties. Their faces show contentment and dignity. We can only imagine how many things must have happened within the short time span, when in 1891, the Bochum magazine entitled *Wiarus Polski* criticised the Polish immigrants, whose behaviour was viewed as contemptible and expressed their sense of inferiority: 'Do not grope knees, do not kiss the hands of taller women. When at church, do not stand against the walls<sup>13</sup>.'

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<sup>11</sup> Klessmann, *op. cit.*, p. 42; Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 62–63.

<sup>13</sup> After Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, p. 77. Original photographs are part of a collection of the National Research Centre of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Poznań.



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At the beginnings of the formation of the Polish community in the Ruhr district, the German public opinion, the clergy and the authorities had all been favourable towards the influx of the Eastern labour force. They expected that, due to the newcomers' social and economic backwardness, they would quickly melt into the German community. Businessmen saw them only as a source of cheap labour and potential blackleggs. In consequence, Polish immigrants were initially treated by the German labourers with reserve.

It soon turned out that the predictions about the newcomers were far from truth. Initially, there seemed to be no indication of possible future radical changes within the Polish community. The situation was very complicated. First of all, in the area there were no Polish clergymen to offer support to their compatriots. German clergy and the activists of the so-called 'Catholic Centre Party' were encouraging Poles to join German organisations. Poles were becoming members of German trade unions, especially Catholic ones, but also those with strong social-democratic influences. They could be also found in organisations of reservists and veterans. These latter ones were strongly focused on propagating Prussian patriotic ideas, but, at the same time, their great merit was a high degree of political tolerance<sup>14</sup>.

The processes of the newcomer's social assimilation turned out to be long-lasting. Contrary to expectations of the authorities Polish immigrants from the East were developing a unique subculture, leading, as it soon turned out, to the seeming isolation. The formation of this subculture was favoured by the size of the population, origins, language, customs of its members, as well as their religion which, especially in the Ruhr district, was a crucial factor to usher the integration of Poles with their new surroundings. Another important issue was the current system of values and the sense of belonging to the Polish national minority. What was also important for the formation of Polish subculture was the attitude of the natives towards the newcomers. This attitude depended on a number of factors, such as immigrants' origins, language, lower (in most cases) level of education, as well as some negative features of character and behaviours – tendency to exaggerate and generalize, drinking problems, criminal offences, provoking wildcat strikes. There appeared a contemptuous nickname '*Pollacken*', and the so-called 'Polish jokes'<sup>15</sup>. Important was also the attitude of Church representatives, which far exceeded the expectations of Polish Roman Catholic community, as well as the increasingly discriminative, sometimes even persecutive, government policy.

For the immigrants from the Eastern provinces it was natural to seek support from their religious congregation. To their disappointment, there was not a single Polish clergyman in the area. Their substitute became the labourer-focused church organisations, virtually unknown in the immigrants' homeland. They were modelled after their German counterparts, but, simultaneously, catered for the specific needs of their potential Polish members. First such organisation was founded at the very end of 1876 (its statute is dated to the 7th of January 1877). This was the so-called '*Jedność*' – Educational Society of Polish Labourers in Dortmund. To become a member, one had to meet the following criteria: 1) to be a Roman Catholic; 2) to speak the Polish language; 3) to have an unblemished reputation. The organisation was established by Hipolit

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<sup>14</sup> Klessmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–51, 93.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem.* pp. 50–51, 93.



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Sibilski, who had previously owned the first Polish bookshop in Bochum. The association was enjoying rapid development. Soon other organisations of this kind appeared in Gelsenkirchen, Schalke, Wattenscheid, or Herne<sup>16</sup>.

A key role in the further development of Polish organisations was played by Polish priests. They had to face major challenges. The main problem was that Polish clergymen were acting in support of the Polish immigrant community, whereas local Church authorities were interested in possibly quickest assimilation. Other Polish priests were also very active. Rev. Józef Szatkowski, despite his short stay in the Ruhr district (1884–1890), managed to initiate the establishment of 15 associations. He informed the Polish public opinion on the situation of Polish immigrants in the Ruhr district. In 1891, he delivered an extensive report on the topic during the famous catholic rally in Toruń. He strongly fought the false picture of the Polish immigrant community. He said: 'The majority, a huge majority of Polish immigrants in Westphalia are not a lazy rabble; on the contrary, they are hardworking, serious, honest people... they do not seek fun and pleasures abroad but they work as hard as they have never worked at home'<sup>17</sup>. Rev. Szatkowski did not stay in the Ruhr district for long. According to his superiors, he had too much initiative, and he was transferred to the Kashubia. Similar was the fate of Rev. Franciszek Liss who, like his predecessor, stayed active in the Polish community only for several years. Bishopric of Paderborn expected Liss to focus on his ministry. He however, without neglecting his priestly duties, engaged in intense nationalist activity. On his initiative, on the 25th of December 1890 the first issue of the *Wiarus Polski* journal was published. It was a crucial moment in the history of Polish immigration in the Ruhr district. Rev. Liss was the editor. In the journal, he started an action aiming at reassuring immigrants' self-esteem as patriots and educated people, members of the industrial society, and highly moral individuals<sup>18</sup>.

The number of Polish organisations was also rising quickly. In 1892, it reached ca. 50. Establishing the 'St Joseph Association' (*Towarzystwo pod Wezwaniem Św. Józefa*) was an important event which proved that the need for education was well understood. The aim was to raise funds for youth fellowships, with the support of 'regular donations of the poor students of St Theology'. Initially, German priests cooperated with Polish catholic organisations. This was possible because the activity of the organisations was within the scope of the papal social program, as expressed in the encyclical of Leon XIII, 'Rerum novarum'. Also important was the fact that Polish parishioners were generously donating to Church<sup>19</sup>.

Both state and Church authorities felt uncomfortable with the activity of Rev. Liss. Eventually, he was ordered to close down the *Wiarus Polski*. In response, Rev. Liss appointed as the editor a young journalist, Jan Brejski, who came from the Pomorze Gdańskie, as Liss himself. Jan Brejski studied at the Jagiellonian University. Also in Krakow, he started his carrier as a journalist. He was soon joined by his brother Antoni. The Brejski brothers played a major role in the Polish immigrant community in the Ruhr district. As a result of his uncompromising attitude, Rev. Liss was forced to leave the region<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, p. 65; Kozłowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 77–78, 86.

<sup>17</sup> After Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem.*, pp. 74, 76–78.

<sup>19</sup> Kozłowski, *Rozwój organizacji...*, pp. 138–140; Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 80–81.

<sup>20</sup> Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, p. 99.



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The following years were characterised by a further increase in immigrant population, and by changes in the social structure: the emergence of an educated and a lower middle class. Changes in the mentality of Polish immigrants were also important. The Poles became self-conscious members of the industrial society. On the other hand, for many representatives of the younger generation, who were already born abroad, the region was becoming their homeland. The community also found its important intellectual centre at the *Wiarus Polski*. The quickly developing network of Polish organisations included educational and economic organisations (banks), the *Sokół*, and most importantly the Polish trade unions. In 1902, initiated by the Brejski brothers, *Zjednoczenie Zawodowe Polskie* (Polish Trade Union) was established. With 31,000 members, it was the strongest Polish organisation in Prussia<sup>21</sup>. When in 1909 the Polish trade union movement was united, its headquarters were located in Bochum for a few years, to be later moved to Katowice. The Mining Department of the *Zjednoczenie Zawodowe Polskie* was a member of the International Miners Federation<sup>22</sup>.

The several-thousand Polish community in the Ruhr district was a powerful voting force, much desired by the representatives of the Catholic Centre party and the social democrats. The 1890s saw a rapid deployment of initiatives aiming to engage Poles in political campaigning. It was clear that winning a mandate was virtually impossible because of the size of the Polish community. The manifestation of one's independence also had other important values. Most of all, it was obvious that it would motivate the Polish community and at the same time constitute a form of pressure on the Centre party itself. It could also bear fruit in satisfying the demands to launch the Polish pastoral activity and reaching compromise in local government elections. The campaign was led by the General Polish Election Committee for Rhineland, Westphalia and the neighbouring provinces, founded in 1897 in Bochum. An attempt to cooperate with the Centre party, based on the principle '*do ut des*' (I give so that you give back) did not bring any results. Poles started to introduce their own candidates. They often supported the social democratic party, viewed by them as a persistent opponent of Germanisation. In some cases Polish votes determined the SPD's success. In return for this favour, they could count on the support of Polish candidates in Upper Silesia. Despite not winning the mandate in his natal territory, Jan Brejski, a representative of the Polish immigrant community, was a member of Reichstag from 1907 to 1912, from the Kościerzyna-Stargard-Tczew district<sup>23</sup>.

Important for the Polish community were the elections for the bodies of local government and school supervision. Their Polish members facilitated both the decision making on a local scale and were a tangible proof of the acceptance of Polish immigrant community by the German inhabitants. Poles had many reasons to be proud of: they were members of municipal and rural councils, as well as Church administration and supervision bodies. In some parishes the number of Polish activists was more than one half of the total number of their members<sup>24</sup>.

However, one shouldn't be too optimistic about the initiatives of the Polish immigrants, as not all of them found a fertile ground. For instance, quite fruitless were

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<sup>21</sup> Kozłowski, *Rozwój organizacji...*, pp. 188–190.

<sup>22</sup> Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 184–193; K. Rzepecki, *Pobudka Wyborcza*, Poznań 1907, p. 134; L. Trzeciakowski, *Posłowie polscy w Berlinie 1848–1928*, Warszawa 2003, pp. 204–205

<sup>24</sup> Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 193–194.



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the attempts to create a higher body to manage the Polish affairs, that is the Association of Poles in Germany (1894). The role of this unit was not as meaningful as it was expected by its founders. It turned out that the functioning of the Polish organisational system was based on a number of associations, and that this did not involve any top-down decisions<sup>25</sup>.

All in all, within the short period of its existence (a little more than two decades), Polish immigrant community managed to develop a well-functioning system of Polish organisations. Their total number (including branches) was 1340. They associated about 10 percent of the Polish population in Germany. One should not forget, however, that this total number needs to be trimmed down by the number of children and almost all women, who in most cases did not participate in any type of social activity. With these circumstances in mind, it can be assumed that every fourth masculine member of the community belonged to one of the Polish organisations<sup>26</sup>. This ratio was higher than that in the territory of Polish Prussia. Participation in organisations' activity was a manifestation of one's identity. At the same time, it facilitated the process of social integration between the members of the Polish and German community. Firstly, activity in Polish organisations resulted in the boost of self-confidence and propagated the virtues of contemporary society, such as diligence, frugality and, naturally, religiousness, which was especially highly valued by the Germans. It also allowed to develop competences, which proved crucial in holding public functions. A positive impact of Polish organisations on the conduct of emigrants was increasingly appreciated by the authorities that discriminated them. It was emphasised that 'Where Polish organisations came to life, especially the Polish trade unions, there was observed a 50 percent slump in the number of criminal offences.'<sup>27</sup>

Polish organisations were a thorn in the side of the Prussian government, who would always find a good reason to hinder their public speeches or disrupt their meetings conducted in Polish. In such cases the Polish activists sought justice in courts, which, luckily, declared all these actions as unlawful. A substantial degree of freedom was taken away from the Polish organisations together with the introduction of the Act of 1908, concerning public meetings and organisations, and containing the so-called 'muzzle paragraph', which prohibited immigrants from conducting open meetings in a non-German language in locations where German community constituted more than 40 percent of the total population. One of the remedies for this problem was organizing some of these meetings in the territory of the Netherlands<sup>28</sup>.

What was of particular importance for the existence of Polish immigrants in the Ruhr district were the relations with the local community. An initial negative picture of the Eastern immigrants had undergone a positive transformation. A firm proof of acceptance were the mixed German-Polish marriages. In 1908, the number of Polish men from the Ruhr region who married German women was 2.8 percent, and in 1912 – 5.3 percent<sup>29</sup>.

A phenomenon that was particularly important for the social integration of the newcomers with the local German community was the commitment of Polish miners to

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<sup>25</sup> Kozłowski, *Rozwój organizacyjny...*, p. 192–197; Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 95–98.

<sup>26</sup> Klessmann, *op. cit.*, p. 269; Kozłowski, *Rozwój organizacyjny...*, pp. 181, 183–184.

<sup>27</sup> After Klessmann, *op. cit.*, p. 82:

<sup>28</sup> Kozłowski, *Rozwój organizacyjny...*, pp. 202–203

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 280



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improve the general material status of all the Ruhr district inhabitants. On the other hand, their participation in the three massive strikes of 1889, 1905 and 1912 resulted in granting the *Zjednoczenie Zawodowe Polskie* organisation with the status of a trade union. John Kulczycki emphasizes: 'A theoretical conflict between the social and national or ethnic identity did not occupy the minds of the Polish-speaking miners. Their ties based on the common culture and origins did not refrain them from joining forces with other labourers in the fight for the interests of their community'<sup>30</sup>.

Surprisingly, very soon after settling down in the new environment, Polish immigrants, the majority of whom derived from rural areas, felt obliged to show solidarity with their fellow workers – the German miners. It was this phenomenon, next to the size of the Polish community, which determined its unique character, also on a European scale. Throughout its almost 25-year-long existence, the Polish hub located in the very centre of the Ruhr district had experienced major transformations. Polish immigrants, initially lost and dazed by the radically different new reality and economic conditions, eventually evolved into individuals not only fully aware of their national identity, but also into community workers, rightful members of the industrial society and the co-founders of one of the most prominent industrial centres of Europe.

Translated by Katarzyna Hussar

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<sup>30</sup> Murzynowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 260-261.