

POLESZUKS AS AN ETHNIC COMMUNITY

Key words: ethnic community, nation, culture, society

Social, political and economic changes that have been taking place in Europe since the 18th century contributed to the formation of national cultures and directly impacted the emergence of modern nations. The concept of a nation is very difficult to define, and it poses a problematic task for researchers. According to Jerzy Szacki, the concept of a „nation” may denote a variety of communities whose genetic similarity could be debatable. The terms *demos* and *ethos* imply both the population of a state that is undergoing cultural unification as well as a cultural group attempting to form an organised state (Szacki 1999).

There exist vast disproportions in the developmental stages of each national community. The shaping of a nation is a long process, and those processes often take on a different course in the history of particular nations. Both in the past and the present, nations were always in different phases of their development. In addition to „old” European nations that have evolved throughout the centuries as part of a distinctive state structure, there are oppressed nations that make attempts to free themselves from the imposed political framework and form their own states. Yet even the „old” Europe is witnessing the birth of not ethnic, but national groups that press for political autonomy (the Basques) (Turowski 1994).

The historical aspects of the formation of nations are generally known. Each nation has a set of distinctive features, such as language, territory, religion or state. Yet as noted by R. Radzik, the above features had existed in each community for millennia before the concept of nationality was formed. The social and cultural dimensions of those characteristic attributes were very important in the process of forming national identities. The distinctive features of a nation were assigned new functions as the significance of social communication and culture grew, thus providing them with a new social dimension. Subject to the historical and cultural context, different cultural elements contributed to the ascent of a nation. The emergence of objective attributes differentiating one community from another was never a decisive factor in the process of shaping a separate nation, nevertheless,

a greater accumulation of those attributes increased the probability of a distinctive nation being formed in Europe in the last two centuries. In reference to individual communities, it could be said that the same attributes have a different „national dimension” (Radzik 2001).

Despite the above, not all communities were successful in forming a nation. Some of them were even unable to preserve their cultural identity and were often assimilated into the structure of „stronger nations”. One of such communities will be discussed in this study. They are the Poleszuks, the indigenous people of the pre-war region of Polesie. In general, the Poleszuks described themselves as „local” people, and this term was officially used in Poland in the interwar period. A „local” community was usually identified in view of two distinctive attributes: an absence of a distinctive sense of national identity and the use of Belarusian and Ukrainian dialects. In my opinion, the above list of attributes should be expanded to include religion as a vital characteristic of the described community as well as a cohesive and unique natural environment in which it lived. In view of the above, the main objective of this study will be to provide an answer to the following, fundamental question: why a distinctive and unique ethnic group like the Poleszuks was unable to form a national community and why did it lose a previously manifested sense of identity and uniformity?

I will base my deliberations on the available resources, mainly the work of ethnographer and sociologist Józef Obrębski. In the 1930s, Obrębski conducted highly original, pioneer field research in the region of Polesie. His findings are an excellent venture point for a discussion on the inhabitants of Polesie whose descendants have been nearly completely assimilated and today, they identify mainly with the Belarusians, the Ukrainians or the Poles.

Ethnic community

The definition of the term „ethnic community” poses as many interpretation difficulties as the term „nation”. The essence of ethnicity lies in a sense of group identity and a strong feeling of separateness. Ethnic communities are cohesive, they are bound by strong social ties which makes them fit the definition of a „group”. They are sometimes referred to as „ethnies”.

Researchers generally agree that the root of ethnicity is a clear-cut division between „us” and „them”. „We” have a set of unique and characteristic features that boldly differentiate us from others. The set of distinctive features that will continue to describe a given community is determined by coincidence and circumstance. They could be the language, religion, custom, physical appearance, etc. Most importantly, those attributes have to form

a given community's exclusive asset which clearly differentiates it from other groups, including, or perhaps especially, those that share many similarities (Szacka 2003).

According to A. Kłoskowska, the primeval, traditional ethnic community, i.e. an ethnic group, is closely attached to its territory which has practical value as the basis of the community's material existence, as well as symbolic and magical significance. It is a group of direct, habitual ties marked by neighbourhood relations and a traditional folk culture which is shared by the entire community and is resistant to change. Its members lack historical awareness and self-reflection, but due to close interpersonal relations and habitual similarities in behaviour, they form a tight community (Kłoskowska 2005).

In view of the above, an ethnic group may be defined as a community that shares a number of cultural elements, but which has not developed a sense of historical oneness and intergroup solidarity. All of the above attributes exist and can be identified in the life of every community, but as noted by R. Radzik, the sense of solidarity that binds individuals to the group follows from the relationships between individuals and other group members, rather than the an individual's relations with the group as an ideological whole (Radzik 1996).

The next chapter analyses the constituent features of the Poleszuku's ethnicity in view of the above definition of an ethnic community.

Structural dichotomy of the Poleszuku community

As it was the case throughout the entire *Kresy* region (the borderline territory stretching along Poland's eastern frontier), the social division into two generically separate and isolated social groups of the gentry and the peasants who did not intermix and coexisted side by side only mechanically, was most clearly and radically manifested in Polesie. It was in Polesie that the two opposing social poles came into direct contact: the most noble Polish lords – the princes of the *Kresy* region, and the lowest strata among peasants – the Rusyn *muzhiks*. No other Polish region had a social system that was as powerfully divided into the social castes of *Kresy* lords and their peasant subjects. The two groups did not develop even the most fundamental of social relations, they spoke different dialects and had a completely different set of religious beliefs. In no other Polish region did the gentry flourish with equal vehemence, while the peasants were reduced to a social strata that constituted the perfect antithesis of the lords' excellence. The social structure of Polesie was the purest example of social dichotomy that was characteristic of Poland. It was the most highly developed symbiotic relationship

between two different, alienated and antagonistic worlds that created a single social system of lords and peasants. Throughout Polish history, this region was marked by the most extreme manifestations of both gentry and peasant traditions. It was a region of princes and *muzhiks* (i.e. peasants – W.R.) (Obrębski 2007).

Polesie witnessed the birth of social centres which furthered the development of the noble culture and the refined traditions of grand lords and magnates. The most notable examples of the above were Dawigródek, Pińsk, Nieśwież and Słonim.

The only type of human settlements other than grand palaces and noble manors were primitive huts where semi-naked and semi-savage Rusyn *muzhiks* huddled in the smoke of an open fireplace. Lordliness, nobility and Polishness were synonymous in this context. Polishness and culture were synonyms. In no other region, the grand culture of the Polish nobility reached such heights of sophistication as it did in the eastern borderlands where Polishness was limited exclusively to lordly residences and noble manors, and it never reached the still predominantly Rusyn countryside. In no other region, the noble culture was equally oppressive on the local peasant community. Grand manors accumulated all that was most refined, worldly and expensive in Poland and abroad, but the source of that luxury, sophistication, excess and extravagance was the unrewarded labour of the Rusyn *muzhik*. Bonded by servitude in noble manors, the *muzhiks* were forced into hard, physical labour and used primitive, self-designed tools to turn local crops into commodities exported to the same foreign markets that supplied the lavish embellishments of the noble lifestyle. In large magnate estates, an army of servants, stewards and administrators guarded the process in which the life and work of peasants was reduced to the contents of the magnate's treasury, and the magnate's treasury became an essence of the lordly lifestyle (Obrębski 2007).

The lordly economy combined two opposing poles and two separate worlds into a single system. From the structural point of view, it was a social, rather than an economic system. Social ties dominated over material ties. The relations between lords and peasants were not shaped by a free and voluntary exchange of goods and services. The opposite applied: the material functions of the lord and the peasant were assigned based on tradition and a strictly defined set of social roles of the lord – the land owner, and his faithful subjects. The lord reigned supreme. He owned land, people and assets. The peasants' only purpose was to generate that wealth. The lord made a living from peasants' toil, and peasants – from the lord's land. There was no exchange of goods and services between the lord and the peasant, and there was no room for economic circulation. The relationship

between lords and peasants was one of subjugation between the ruler and his subjects, and it created room solely for the peasant's rent and the lord's favour. For this reason, a lordly economy was a tight and self-sufficient economic organism in which production and consumption merged into a continuous and inseparable process, „flowing” side by side (Obrębski 2007).

Between Russia and Poland

In the peasants' eyes, the lord's exploitation of his subjects stood in contradiction with lordly generosity and favour, the same favour which was utterly prodigal and uneconomical when it came to satisfying the lavish lifestyle and culture of a noble manor. This was robbery, and the only difference from an ordinary robbery was that this act of crime was organised, tightly controlled by the police, a substitute for law, and governed less by legal regulations and customs than the need to protect the victim to ensure the continuity of the process. For this reason, the peasants' memories of serfdom were wrought with a feeling of constant danger and uncertainty. „The subjects were punished by mob action. If a lord wanted to kill a man, he would kill him. If he wanted to sell him or exchange him for a dog, he was free to do so. If he wanted a man to live, he would live, if not, his days were numbered” (Obrębski 2007).

The lords' tyrannical power over Polesie peasants gave rise to the stereotype of the lord-oppressor and the „lord's servants” who were directly responsible for the peasants' bondage, suffering and poverty. The Polesie tradition knows no other lords than the „Lachs” (Poles). In a tradition where lordly rule and the lord-oppressor had the most negative connotations on the peasants' scale of collective values, a lord symbolised a Pole, and serfdom was synonymous of not only lordly, but also Polish law. In Polesie, the historical origins of Polishness were associated with oppression and peasant bondage. Serfdom was not a product of spontaneous evolutionary processes of the local Ruthenian and Lithuanian community. It was imported from Poland, it was transferred and installed with the Polish nobility's expansion to Ruthenian territory. Before the Polish-Lithuanian union, Ruthenian peasants, Ruthenian *boyars* and even the Ruthenian *knyazes* (princes) shared the burden of Lithuanian princes' autocracy. The nobleman's Poland may have freed the Lithuanian lords and lordlings, but it also subsumed Ruthenian peasants under serfdom and bondage.

The Polesie peasants' fate was somewhat changed only after 1831 when the Russian authorities realized that the country folk could be an ally in Polish agricultural relations. They imposed a rent on peasants farming land that was awarded to the Russians under a majorate, something that the Polish

authorities had been unable to do since 1790. In 1846, peasants farming private land were subsumed under government control. In 1864, they were granted property rights to the land. A manifesto was published to demonstrate that only the Russian government was capable of effectively amending the peasants' fate.

According to W. Grabski, the country folks' worship of emperors did not originate during the partitions of Poland. It followed from the successive Polish governments' complete inability to provide its common citizens with any kind of legal protection and terming the care exercised by grand lords as favour whose effectiveness was steadily declining (Grabski 1938).

The land reform not only freed the peasants from lordly control, giving them a deserved share of their land and a vast degree of physical freedom. Above all, it revolutionised the peasants' traditional views on the social hierarchy of the world which were shaped within the tight boundaries of a lordly economy. The Russian authorities' intervention into the serf-lord relationship introduced the peasants to the concept of the supreme ruler and lord, the Russian tsar who embodied the traditional features of a grand and beneficent ruler, the peasants' benefactor and vanquisher of their oppressors. The tsar's favour and care superseded everything that the peasants had previously owed to their local lords. It toppled the existing foundations of the hierarchy of lordly rule, turning a lord's serfs into the faithful subjects of the tsar.

From the perspective of the tsar's decree, even the most generous and beneficent Polish lord was a small, vile, „stupid and wicked” man. The tsar's decree dethroned grand lords and replaced them with the one and only super-ruler who reigned on the peasants' social horizon (Obrębski 2007).

Those events left a lasting imprint on the local peasants' memory. They symbolised their perseverance, the victory of Polesie's indigenous people over the grand lords and Russia's victory over Poland. Those events gave rise to myths depicting peasants as indigenous, local people who were strongly attached to the land of their fathers and grandfathers. This was the cradle of their culture which was meticulously passed on in the form of customs and traditions to the successive generations. It was probably at that time that the people of Polesie began to develop interpersonal and neighbourly relations based on a shared fate and a common place of residence. The place of residence became a distinctive feature and a symbol of Polesie's community which later gave rise to the concept of „locality”.

Language as a distinctive feature

The census of 1921 showed that a vast number of Polesie's inhabitants were unable to define their national identity. 38565 people declared themselves to be „locals”, Poleszuks and Rusyns, 375220 claimed to be Belarusians, 156142 – Rusyns, and 214052 – Poles. The following census, held ten years later, produced an even higher number of respondents who were unable to define their native language. When asked about nationality, many of them pointed to their religion and claimed to speak a „local” language. This answer was given by 707100 people, i.e. around 63% of the surveyed population. Belarusians and Poles had a visibly smaller share of the local community in comparison with the census of 1921 (Tomaszewski 1985).

A low level of national identity was also a characteristic feature of the counties of Nowogród, Wołyń and Białystok, adjacent to Polesie. It was not uncommon in other regions of Poland. An ethnographic study of Polesie's community was carried out in the interwar period. It involved direct field work with the aim of mapping differences between Belarusian and Ukrainian languages. This was no easy task as only some northern Ukrainian (Poleszuk) dialects preserved the characteristic features of this language group in a relatively pure form. The majority of dialects were transitional forms between the southern group of Ukrainian dialects and the neighbouring Belarusian dialects. The results of the study suggested that all of the above dialects, although marked by significant differences, should be regarded as a „separate dialect in the Slavic language group”.

The study investigating the national identity of Polesie's indigenous people had to be based predominantly on the statements of „outsiders” rather than the very few documented declarations of the Poleszuks themselves. The inhabitants of the Wołyń region had a deeply rooted sense of separateness from both the Belarusians and the Rusyns (Ukrainians). In northern Polesie, the people of Łuniniec declared themselves to be Poleszuks, but referred to their neighbours from the nearby area of Kleck as Belarusians or Poles residing in the country of „Pol” (...). For reasons of simplification, the indigenous people of Polesie were sometimes divided into two linguistic groups: the northern Belarusian group and the southern Rusyn (Little Russian or Ukrainian) group. The criterion applied in the above classification was the „softness” (Belarusian) or the „hardness” (Ukrainian) of pronunciation. The river Prypeć, considered to be the natural boundary separating the two language groups, could not prevent the mutual permeation of influences. The culture of the Little Russians inhabiting the Wołyń area of Polesie differed substantially from the traditions of the Rusyns settled further down to the south. Their dialect from the north Ukrainian group became decomposed into „several transitional dialects moving in the direction of the

Belarusian dialect or related to it". The Poleszuku's weakly developed national identity was characterised by a sense of separateness and unique syncretism. This dilemma was often encountered by people who declared themselves to be Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles or Russians, subject to circumstances (Wysocki 2009).

Religious beliefs of the Poleszuk community

In the pre-Christian era, the Slavic people were not familiar with church structures, and they did not have a defined concept of priesthood. They worshipped mostly astronomical phenomena and forces of nature, building wooden and stone statues for their gods. The cult of Perun, the god of thunder and lightning, was most widespread among the eastern Slavs. The difficult weather conditions encountered daily by the tribes inhabiting the area between the rivers of Prypeć and Niemen shaped a concept of beneficent and maleficent spirits in the collective consciousness. The Slavs were familiar with many spells for keeping evil spirits away, cursing or blessing people.

According to W. Szafranski, farmers ascribed souls to all forces of nature and relied on magical practices to influence the „spiritual” atmospheric phenomena and celestial objects to win their graces and guarantee the success of their business endeavours.

The life-giving sun was the object of the highest worship. It was depicted as a solar ring, a solar disc, but it also took on the form of various animals, such as the ox, horse, swan or duck. Those zoomorphic representations were a relic of totemism which is characterised by a belief that man is related to animals or that mankind has animal ancestors (Szafranski 1988).

After the Christianisation of the Kievan Rus, the local people were converted to a new religion. Christianity arrived from the Byzantine Empire, and the descendants of the Poleszuku's became natural followers of Orthodox Christianity.

In 1303, Halicz prince Jerzy I was granted the consent of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to establish a separate metropolis seated in Halicz. This led to the creation of dioceses, archpriestships (decanates – administrative districts of ten churches) and parishes. Historical sources indicate that archpriestships were seated in state capitals, administrative and judicial units, regional and provincial capitals. Administrative centres with a high number of Orthodox churches and priests were a natural candidate for this role. One of the archpriestships was seated in Brest (Mironowicz 1991).

The above suggests a high number of Orthodox parishes in the Brest area. The establishment of parishes led to the gradual management of land

and Rusyn settlement, but it did not always reflect the religious needs of the local population. Prestigious and property considerations played a very important role in the process. The founders of Orthodox churches had the right of patronage which gave them practically unrestricted control over the clergy. The aristocratic strata of society had different origins, and they exerted a massive influence on the social and religious development of the local people. The most notable aristocratic families in Polesie were the Sapiehas, powerful estate owners in the area of Kodeń and Bociiek, the Sanguszkis and the Chodkiewicz.

The Catholic church had a different status in the discussed region. When Władysław Jagiełło became the king of Poland, he vowed to Christianise the people of his country. After the formation of the Polish-Lithuanian union, Jagiełło personally led a Polish clergy's mission to Lithuania (Kłoczkowski 1986).

The first Catholic dioceses were established in Vilnius and Halicz in the late 14th century, but they were quickly moved to Lviv. According to J. Kłoczkowski, the above paved the way to a peaceful coexistence between Catholic and Orthodox church followers and the merging of Western and Eastern Christian traditions (Kłoczkowski 1990). A great number of parishes were built on Rusyn and Lithuanian territories in the 14th and 15th centuries, yet they differed in size and affluence. Small Catholic congregations were served by a very modest number of priests.

In the 16th century, the Catholic church made attempts to subjugate Orthodox followers in the eastern borderlands of Poland. Polish kings also had an interest in this process. They hoped to strengthen the rule of the state by bonding the Rusyn Orthodox population to Poland. The Union of Brest was proclaimed in 1596. Rusyn bishops from the territory of Poland acknowledged the Pope's supremacy and Catholic dogmas, but they retained the Eastern liturgy, the Julian calendar and Orthodox traditions (...). The union was to cover all Orthodox dioceses in Poland, but it was finally set up in 6 dioceses, and it was rejected by the bishops of Lviv, Przemyśl and Łuck (Wójcikowski 2005). The dispute between Eastern Rite Catholics and Orthodox followers continued for many years. It was used by Tsarina Catherine who, already in 1795, dissolved Eastern Rite dioceses on Polish territories annexed by Russia under the pretext of protecting the Orthodox church (Wójcikowski 2005).

The voluntary and compulsory conversion of Eastern Rite Catholics to Roman Catholicism soon gained speed, but the real issue at stake was more than religious beliefs. Linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences were still an obstacle to the equal treatment of the Eastern Rite Catholics who were discriminated in legal, property and daily life matters. The above was a conse-

quence of the Eastern Rite priests' belief that they were a part of the Catholic clergy. Unfortunately, the Catholic clerics did not subscribe to this sense of spiritual unity (Mironowicz 2005).

The material status of the Orthodox Church did not change after the dissolution of the Union of Brest. The authorities placed the landowners under the obligation to build shrines, keep the clergy and Orthodox schools. Catholic landowners were not interested in the spread of Orthodox influences. In 1842, the Tsar deprived the clergy of their property and became the sole supporter of both Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests. This decision did not give equal rights to Orthodox and Catholic clerics. Most Orthodox followers were inhabitants of rural areas, while Catholic believers constituted landowners and the nobility. The latter gave generous financial and political support to the Catholic clergy. The belief that the Orthodox faith was a religion of the common folk, while Catholicism was a faith of the nobility became deeply rooted in social consciousness (Mironowicz 2005).

According to J. Obrębski, in addition to the deep-rooted principles of the Poleszucs' family life, the Orthodox faith is the second most important factor that prevented individuals from adopting new social ideas and values. The above holds true despite religious indifference or laicisation which leads to the rejection of rural Orthodox dogmas, even agnosticism. The Poleszucs' religious revolutionism was based mainly on the rejection of old rules, moral and legal standards which were discarded as the former principles of social life became obsolete. The fact that the peasants' traditional legal and moral norms had powerful religious connotations made those manifestations of individualism a sacrilege. Despite the above, the religious organisation of life was not affected and it continued to thrive despite many transformations. Through ritual and ceremony, religion pervaded nearly every area of the peasants' life (Obrębski 2007).

Obrębski claims that religious traditions bordering on the realm of magic were closely related to various areas of daily life (family, business, social, recreational), thus introducing a certain degree of order without which rural life would have descended into chaos. Orthodox followers were not the people who performed their religious practices in Rusyn, they were not the people who emotionally participated in the religious and magical rituals of the rural Orthodox tradition, but those who began and ended their work with others, those who observed calendar holidays and participated in social life, in short – those who synchronised their lives with the existence of others in line with traditional, becoming active members of the rural, local and provincial community (Obrębski 2007).

Protestantism was the third Christian movement to have spread in the Poleszuc community. The exact number of Protestants in Polesie is un-

known due to an absence of reliable data. Many Protestants were never registered, while others were often listed as Orthodox believers. Polesie's Protestants buried the dead without the involvement of the parish priest, many of them did not report stillbirths, as the result of which parish records ceased to be an accurate reflection of the local population. The numbers describing each religious congregation quickly changed over time, some groups were marked by a growing tendency, while others seemed to disappear. Selected statistics could, at least in part, make a reference to the same communities under different names. According to official sources, the number of Protestants in Polesie increased from around 0.5% of the total population in 1921 to 1.5% in 1931.

In general, the vast majority of the Poleszucs identified with Eastern Christian traditions in the Orthodox or Eastern Rite form. Those movements were more consistent with the local people's expectations as regards both their daily lives and religious needs.

To conclude, a brief reference should be made to the Poleszuc community's attempts to stage a nationalist campaign. The most recent and probably the best known national organisation in the region was the Poliszje Social and Cultural Association of the Poleszuc Community, founded in 1988 by Mykola Shelahovitch. According to R. Oryszczyszyn, the transfer of the nationalist rhetoric to local ground did not bring the anticipated results, mainly due to problems with establishing the Poleszucs' national identity. According to the association, the Poleszuc population, estimated at 1.5 million, descended from the Yotvingians. This claim was probably made in an attempt to set a clear ethnic boundary separating the Poleszucs from the neighbouring Belarusian, Ukrainian and Polish communities, which seems highly improbable in the light of scientific evidence. The Poliszje Association considered the Polesie dialect to constitute a separate language, and it even published a magazine in this dialect. A minor campaign was staged for the creation of a separate Polesian state covering a vast area of Belarus and Ukraine as well as the eastern edge of Poland. The leaders of the movement proclaimed the Poleszucs' ethnic separateness from the Belarusians and the Ukrainians. The movement had very limited coverage, and it did not gain the support of Polesie's people (Oryszczyszyn 2003).

I am aware that this article paints a very selective and fragmented picture of the unique ethnic group of the Poleszucs. I would like to address the following postulate to researchers representing various scientific disciplines: the region of Polesie requires an in-depth investigation to preserve from oblivion the history and culture of the Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian borderland which profoundly impacted its contemporary people.

Abstract

The contemporary Poleszuk community is a poorly documented ethnic group with a weak sense of national identity. This study aims to describe the characteristic features and the culture of this unique ethnic community. It discusses the way of life, the typical activities and the relations binding the indigenous people of the former Polesie voivodeship. By living in harmony with nature and overcoming the hardships of daily life, the Poleszucs formed a unique and separate ethnic enclave. Despite its scientific inaccuracy, the term „local” has a wealth of meanings that encompass tradition, language, customs, material culture, religion, way of life, cultural values and world views.

The presented discussion is based in its entirety on the work of interwar ethnographer and sociologist Józef Obrębski. His findings are an excellent venture point for a discussion on the inhabitants of Polesie whose descendants have been nearly completely assimilated and today, they identify mainly with the Belarusians, the Ukrainians or the Poles.

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