

The historical interference in the urban discourse

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Silesia, especially Lower Silesia, is the region in the south-west part of Poland (bordering with Germany) where many Polish people were resettled from the east part of Poland after the World War II. In this region they met with the foreign (pre-war) German culture. The process of communication between present Polish and the previous foreign German culture takes place not only in the aspect of time but also in terms of material and mental communication. This process is also crucial when speaking about the identity and roots of the people who settled down in Silesia after the World War II. In Silesia there are many places where the mentioned process is easily observed. For example in a medium sized town Jelenia Góra (German Hirschberg) where the most remarkable features of culture communication in the historical determined space of this city can be defined.

In order to distinguish the fields of the previous foreign cultural impact we have to point out – as above - two aspects of this impact: the material and the mental. At the material field many historical objects of German nature can be treated as signs and patterns of the foreign culture influencing the new cultural and mental development that followed after 1945. The influence can be observed as the direct impact on the so called “zero generation” of Polish people, who were resettled from the east in 1946; and the impact on the second and following generations.

The “zero generation” was confronted with a totally new, foreign, architectonic and infrastructural area. The written signs (e. g. the names of the streets, shops and so on) could not function like “city as a text” (Sawicka 2009; 27) because they could not be understood by Polish people, as the direct written message sent by the foreign culture and received by the Polish that time could not be comprehended and, moreover, it was associated only with the Horror of the War producing the feelings of hostility toward the met signs.

The second generation was born in Lower Silesia in the urban space and grew up in the surrounding which was previously new and foreign to the „zero generation“ but which was then

more and more internalized. In the late fifties and sixties of the 20th c. a great number of the young people in Lower Silesia was confronted with the question why at some walls of their houses and in the churches there exist unknown letters which often had a nature of the old “deutsche Schrift” that was predominantly associated with German military history of the World War II. Contemporary generation do not even ask the question of heritage as they treat the written signs as uncomprehended but theirs.

It must be accented that the German “Geist” (spirit), which was at that time transmitted to the Polish population by different material signs¹, used to be refused but at the same time it was unconsciously internalized. The next generations more and more did not recognize their vicinity as something foreign, they comprehended it as their own cultural surrounding without deeper thinking of the provenience of it. This situation lasted till the nineties of the 20th c. when the political change came. At this time the authorities stopped the propaganda policy which used to popularize Silesia as genuine Polish region. Not repressed any more the recovering of the signs of the foreign culture began.

Speaking about architecture and infrastructure the difference between signs and patterns should be mentioned. As architectonic signs which at the same time can be considered as patterns we can point out churches and cemeteries with historic German tombs that often were destroyed in the past but which today are reconstructed as a part of cultural heritage. People are physically forced to get into the foreign patterns when they enter the churches, the staircases in houses, or the halls in railway stations.

Besides the physical pattern mentioned above the mental pattern can be discussed as well. The example of it is the motif of “Liczyrzepa”, in German “Rübezahl”, a legendary ghost who rules the world of the Karkonosze Mountains² and is still the favourite character of regional literature (e.g. Carl Hauptmann “Rübezahl gesichten”).³ In this case we can speak about a total

¹ The material signs we understand here as a “city furniture” (Posner 2009; 20) which consists not only of big architectural structures but also of e. g. house and flat equipment like coffee mills, butter churns and so on which on the one hand were treated as a product of an enemy; on the other, however, they had an outstanding good quality and therefore they produced positive tights to German nature.

² The Karkonosze Mountains are near the city of Jelenia Góra and can be seen from the city as a huge overwhelming wall, so they have been ever the object of literary output and were strictly associated with that city.

³ Famous German writers who were dealing with the legend of Rübezahl, e. g. Carl Hauptmann in his

internalization of this figure because it has never been treated by the new population as a sign of the foreign culture but it was comprehended as a genuine part of the Polish culture. Most pictures of Liczyrzepa which are used today are, however, of German provenience. It means that the public consciousness in this case is influenced by a German sign though the meaning of it is totally comprehended as Polish.

Another example of the German pre-war literature regarding the city of Jelenia Góra is the books by Fedor Sommer and Hermann Stehr who spent a part of their life in this city. Their texts⁴ regarding the historical development of the city can be treated in the multicultural aspect as the mental signs of foreign culture which is nowadays consciously incorporated by Polish as a part of their own historical heritage. On the contrary, the first decades after the war can be seen as a willful step into the previous foreign cultural patterns. Nowadays the growing interest⁵ in German historical culture causes that the literary regional output is more and more recovered, translated and discussed. An interesting phenomenon is the novel by Fedor Sommer, “Zwischen Mauern und Turmen” (*Between Walls and Towers*) in which the historic development of Jelenia Góra in the 18th century is presented. The author describes also, among other things, the process of building of the protestant church, which is today the biggest Catholic Church in the city. Reading the book the reader is able to receive a knowledge which can reshape his perception of the sign of “The Garrison Church” which, on one hand, is normally seen as a previous German church, because of German old inscriptions within; but on the other, it is never associated with the protestant confession⁶. Furthermore, in the novel the streets of the old town of Jelenia Góra are presented to cause déjà vu sensation; I widely explained the phenomenon in my article on Fedor Sommer (Zaprucki, 2009; 62). Some streets presented by Sommer have names which in Polish have the same meaning as in German, as the names of the streets were in many cases only direct translated into Polish after the World War II (e. g. Lange Strasse – Long Street – ul. Długa). The awareness of this fact can also result in feelings which were vividly described by

“Rübezahls geschichten”

⁴ Some of them are being translated into Polish: Fedor Sommer, Rokokopult und anderes

⁵ The books by Małgorzata Lutowska the regional writer like “The confided key” (Powierzony klucz) where she describes the history of the Silesian Protestants, or books for children by Maria Nienartowicz in which many motives of German history are described: among other things the palace of Gerhart Hauptmann, a German Nobel prize winner in literature in 1912.

⁶ The protestant Churches in Silesia were strongly neglected after the WW II as a sign of the foreign confession and many of them became ruins.

Camelia-Mihaela Cmeciu (2009; 13) who reported the process of renaming of streets in Bucharest.

An astonishing phenomenon regarding the novels of Sommer and Stehr is the fact that they fell in obscurity by the German readers but now they are translated and read mostly by inhabitants of Jelenia Góra and they are also read by students of German philology to deepen the knowledge about the region. An important question is how far the message that was clear to previous German population⁷ is now comprehended, which could be perhaps also the main question to all literature⁸ of this provenience. While the so called country literature (Heimatliteratur) of this region was predominantly an affirmation of the native land, it is today much more a literary document describing the region without creating strong emotional reactions. This seems to be a general problem of the new population which is lacking a clear defined identity. The Polish Silesia has not own dialect, genuine food or folk costumes⁹. There are groups of people in Silesia trying to establish a Polish Silesian tradition which in a way seems artificial but on the other hand it points on the deep need in the society to possess roots and own context of the landscape. All these aspects cause that the voluntary searching for the signs of the German culture. As a conspicuous example we can consider the idea of integrating the historical German Silesian folk costume as an own folk costume, or the idea of hanging of old German postcards and landscape pictures with old foreign inscriptions on the walls of the restaurants. The very similar process is to copy the literary love expression towards the natural and architectural landscape which were extremely popular in the German society before 1945. Many poems regarding the architecture or the mountains are being released and, – surprisingly – they are being also translated – in a way back - into German using the old German names of e. g. the significant landscape spots, like Śnieżka (Schneekoppe, Snowpeak) in the poem “Magischer Berg” (*The Magic peak*) by Elżbieta Śnieżkowska-Bielak (2008; 20):

Die blaue Kuppel der Schneekoppe

⁷ This regional literature called by Germans “Heimatliteratur – country literature” was mostly received before the WW II as an expression of a deep feeling towards own region

⁸ Umberto Eco, in his *De Bibliotheka* (1983; 9), asks that question which seems to show on the problem of an impossibility to define strictly the impact of such novels as a “multi sign”.

⁹ This situation generates difficulties when translating the texts written in German Silesian dialect, because there is no Polish Lower Silesian dialect.

wartet
wie das traute Heim
wie ein Wegweiser für die Vögel
und die verlorenen Söhne
sie lauscht in die Stille hinein
unter den Winden
lockt die Sterne
den Ausbruch erwartend
den Erdstimmen hörig
in ihrer magischen Majestät.

It is astonishing how similar the impact of the Karkonosze Mountains on both contemporary Polish and previous German poetry is. The best example can be for instance the poem of Carl Hauptmann, a famous German writer and poet, “Und meine Berge leuchten wieder” in which he deals with similar motives and gives them a similar emotional character. If we treat the poetic output regarding the landscape as a multi-sign of natural phenomena, we have to state that this kind of signs shows a strong connection between Polish and German perception of nature of the native region.

Coming back to the prosaic literature regarding the very well-known spots of our region, in the books we are often given new information which has got two fields of meaning: the first that tells us something more than we used to know about an object and the second that on one hand reminds us of the foreign origin of the object, and on the other hand forms our intention to see it as our inherited cultural roots. Moreover, the novels mentioned above carry a message which both supports our knowledge of history and also provides us with esthetic values that strengthens our sense for historical art objects which are normally often overseen. In this context the literature plays the role of an instrument that not only enhances the features mentioned above but at the same time it gives an insight into universal values (humanistic and esthetic) being carried by the historical objects.

„Wie lieblich liegt da unten die alte Stadt im Kranze der grünen, schön bewaldeten Berge, mit ihren Türmen, Dächern, Zinnen und grauen Mauern! Und im weiteren Kreise um sie her die Gigantenmauer des Hochgebirges! Umschlingt sie nicht alles, was in dem weiten Zirkus des Tales webt und lebt, wie mit Mutterarmen und schließt es schier unübersteigbar von der übrigen Welt ab?“ (Sommer 1949; 14).

We should see the literary texts, especially in this case, not only as means for supplying us of different esthetic values but as well as phenomena with their semantic autonomy (Ricoeur 1989; 112) and as conglomerations or even systems of signs which possess their own dynamic (Pelz 1984; 43). The existence of these texts as signs of foreign culture in the mentality of Polish population is dependent on cultural and psychological¹⁰ needs which the contemporary society has got. From this point of view the German novels mentioned above are used by the Polish as receptacle of ideas-signs which are wanted to meet the need of identity in that society.

A significant example of looking for identity, using the cultural patterns of previous German time, is Maria Nienartowicz's book: "Bajkowy przewodnik dla dzieci" (*The fairy-tale guide for children*) (2009) in which among the other things, the author presents the building of the State Museum of the famous German writer, Gerhart Hauptmann, and his literary output as a material and mental background for telling stories, which can be seen as a kind of semantic remake.

As a conclusion, it must be stated that firstly, the process of communication in the urban discourse takes place not only at the contemporary axis but also in large extent between the past as a sender of a message and the present as a receiver. Secondly, this process proceeds on many fields: the material and the mental plane which means that both the material relicts like old buildings or installations and the mental ones, like literary output of the past epoch were understood as signs that had a certain impact on shaping the cultural presence of the Polish Silesia.

¹⁰ The psychological side of this phenomena would need a separate approach because of its complexity; nevertheless, there are some patterns of behavior of Silesian people which can be easily observed and they are psychologically connected with the direct and indirect impact of the previous German cultural surrounding which is in to influence the way of thinking or feeling: e. g. many people claim that they feel strange or uncomfortable traveling to central Poland, especially to Warsaw or to other cities in the east of Poland.

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