Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa, *2024*(56), Article 3339

The Process of Adaptation and Assimilation after 1957 as Remembered by the Descendants of the Czech Brethren in Lower Silesia

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.3339

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Abstract

Based on nine independently conducted oral history interviews, in this article I analyze the process of adaptation and assimilation of the descendants of the Czech Brethren in the area of Strzelin (formerly German Strehlen) in Lower Silesia between 1957 and 1989. The main objective is to answer the question how the descendants portray and value the process of assimilation into the new social reality after 1956 in their biographical narratives. First, I briefly present the state of the community in 1957 and outline the reasons why some of its members decided to remain in Lower Silesia. Then, I describe the various dimensions of how community members functioned during the period of People's Poland: firstly, in a minority organization, the Social and Cultural Association of Czechs and Slovaks, and, secondly, in the parish community of the Evangelical Reformed Church, as well as in mixed families and the local community. The presented research contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of family, neighborhood and local government relations

The study was conducted at the author's own expense.
No competing interests have been declared.
Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences.
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in a post-displacement region. The study adopts the approach known as rescue history (*historia ratownicza*) at the level of microhistory.

Keywords: Lower Silesia; Strzelin; Czech Brethren; oral history; assimilation

Introduction

As a post-displacement region, due to heavy concentration of displaced persons from the Eastern Borderlands (the *Kresy*) and lack of autochthons (i.e. native inhabitants), Lower Silesia had an environment favorable to the emergence of local communities with very specific characteristics. In this region, it was a rare situation for a large group of prewar inhabitants to remain in compact settlement after World War II. When this occurred, however, it resulted in establishing specific ties with the immigrant population and led to complex assimilation processes.

One case in point is the Strzelin (formerly German Strehlen) district. Since 1749, the area around Strzelin has been inhabited by a once numerous – but since 1945 melting – community founded by members of the Unity of the Czech Brethren who fled Bohemia as religious refugees during the First Silesian War, 1740–1742 (Szczepankiewicz-Battek, 2010, 2013). Their life revolved around the village they established, Husyniec (today: Gęsiniec), named after the founder of their religious community, the religious reformer Jan Hus. Until the advent of Nazi rule in Germany, they were a close-knit group, already partially assimilated into the German environment through mixed marriages and education in local schools.

They managed to maintain their distinctness and unity by continuing to use the Czech language and cultivating the Czech Brethren faith in the parish community of the Evangelical Reformed Church. Until the end of World War II, the community life revolved around the church on the outskirts of Strzelin and the community center in Gęsiniec. The 1930s and the period of World War II were a time of particular forms of repression, mainly targeted at the Czech language; this strengthened the ties with the German majority, especially among the younger generations.

After 1945, the Strzelin community, then approximately 3,500 people strong, had to face revolutionary political and social changes due to the takeover of the region by communist Poland, which forced them to address their own identity in national terms (Olejnik, 2003). Most of the descendants of the Czech Brethren left voluntarily or under coercion for Czechoslovakia and for the occupation zones in Germany, and about a thousand people remained in the Strzelin region. After the nationality verification procedure was finished in 1947, Poland officially recognized the remaining descendants as members of the Czech minority, protected by the bilateral agreements with Czechoslovakia (Pięczka, 1969; Rozpędowski, 2015; Vaculik, 2004). This laid down quite favorable foundations for the continua-

tion of their social life in a minority organization, the church, and the Czech-language school in Gościęcice, which had existed since 1949. The political changes brought by the thaw of 1956, which enabled many minority groups to leave Poland, provided the impetus for the last major wave of departures by descendants of the Czech Brethren (Stola, 2010). An additional factor was the arson attack on the Czech community center in Gęsiniec by unknown perpetrators on the night of 3/4 September 1957 (Czachorowski, 2018).

This article aims to examine how the memory of the community life after the last wave of departures in 1957 reflects the process of adaptation and subsequent assimilation of the descendants of the Czech Brethren in the times of the Polish People's Republic. The primary research question is how the descendants portray and value the process of assimilation into the new social reality after 1956 in their biographical narratives. Using biographical approach makes it possible to observe the identity transformation of this small group, which was caused by the last mass wave of departures.

The present article begins by providing a summary of the state of the community in 1957 and the reasons why some of its members decided to remain in Lower Silesia. From there, I proceed to delineate the various facets of the community members' activities based on a minority organization and the parish community of the Evangelical Reformed Church. I also elucidate the cultural divergences that existed in comparison to the Polish majority, particularly in the domain of language and the social capital accrued through familial ties abroad. My analysis is based on nine individually conducted oral history interviews, including five with community members. In the analysis, I often distinguish between two categories of interviewees from the community: the first generation, born before the end of World War II (CB1, CB2), and the second, postwar generation – with postmemory of their parents (Hirsch, 1997) – already brought up in mixed Polish-Czech Brethren families (CB3, CB4, CB5). This distinction is driven by significant differences in their experiences of the community of descendants, as well as the disparate linguistic and cultural environments in which they were brought up. In the case of the second generation, the accounts also convey mediated memories of their older relatives, often born in the late nineteenth century. Additionally, I conducted interviews with non-community individuals who had substantial interaction with the community in the postwar era. These included representatives of the Evangelical Reformed Church in Poland (RC1, RC2) and Polish residents of the Strzelin area who are involved in local life and contribute to shaping the local collective memory. The interviewees gave written consent to participate in the study and were informed about its purpose; their names were anonymized; quotations were not authorized. The research was carried out in accordance with ethical requirements of the Polish Oral History Association (Gałęziowski et al., 2018). Oral history enables me, to a certain extent, to give subjective voice to those who have remained unnoticed and unheard until recently due to a Polish-centric vision of the history of Poland and the region. In conducting the interviews, I was inspired by the method of autobiographical narrative interview developed by Fritz Schütze, but I did not apply it strictly as a starting point (Kaźmierska & Waniek, 2020).

My familial connection to the region proved to be a significant factor, both facilitating and impeding the conduct of interviews and the accurate assessment of the phenomena under study. I was born and raised in close proximity to the location where I conducted my research. However, prior to this, I was not particularly familiar with Gęsiniec. My status as an outsider, a person who is not entangled in internal discussions, proved advantageous in carrying out the interviews, while allowing me to gain insight into the region's historical context and topography. Conversely, a relatively high degree of certainty in the field may have diminished my capacity to fully attend to the more complex or tacit elements of my interviewees' biographical narratives.

Most of the interviews were carried out in Dębniki, Gęsiniec, Gościęcice, and Strzelin, which are located in close proximity to one another and represent the historical settlement center of the Czech Brethren in Lower Silesia. Three interviews were conducted in Wrocław and Warsaw. In the case of interviewees from the community, most of the meetings took place in their family homes. As for the remainder of the interviewees, the meetings took place in their place of work or the community center. In addition to the interviews, the method of ethnographic observation was employed as a subsidiary method when visiting places of historical significance to the community, including the Czech community center in Gęsiniec and the Evangelical Reformed cemetery in Strzelin.

Research on the population that remained in Lower Silesia after 1945, referred to as autochthons, was primarily conducted during the period of People's Poland and is thus entangled with the ideological goals of proving the Polishness of the so-called Recovered Territories. The process of reinterpretation of this research field began after 1989 (see Misztal, 1990; Strauchold, 2001), and the present analysis is a part of this process. I follow Robert Traba's (2012) proposals to expand the study of interethnic relations in Central-Eastern Europe to include questions about the tactics of community functioning and factors determining assimilation, including the importance of institutions and organizations in the process. I pursue these goals at the level of micro-historical analysis of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) of my interviewees. Although the community of descendants of the Czech Brethren has already been studied in recent years (Franzkowski, 2018; Lárová, 2017; Rozpędowski, 2015; Štěříková, 2005), the dynamics of change of that part of the community that chose to stay in Lower Silesia remains unexplored. At the same time, my research is a different way of interpreting the concept of autochthony in the region, because it goes beyond the ethnic spectrum of Pole-German.

Furthermore, I made use of the scarce archival sources for the period after 1957 produced by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the local administration (Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance), hereinafter AIPN; Archiwum Państwowe we Wrocławiu (State Archives in Wrocław)). Considering the issue of the gendered structure of the post-1957 community, the article presents reflections informed by gender studies. A key issue is the extent to which the gender order may have influenced the decisions made, the shaping and remembering of particular experiences,

and the construction of identities. Most of the interviewees from the community were women, which contrasts with the written sources about the Czech Brethren community in Lower Silesia – they were created mostly by men, usually members of the Polish majority and the communist chain of command.

In approaching the researched topic, I adopt a perspective that Ewa Domańska (2014) termed "rescue history" (*historia ratownicza*). In this case, this approach is not only about a participatory construction of local history: it is also an activity aimed at translation, in the identity-memory dimension, between the local community of descendants of the Czech Brethren and the Polish majority. Therefore, it is possible that the research carried out will impact the development of the local identity of the Strzelin region in the future.

I would like to highlight a terminological issue. The terms "Czechs" or "Bohemians" are avoided wherever possible, and only used when it is deemed appropriate in light of the measures taken by the institutions that have ascribed such a tag. Nevertheless, the national category does not, in my view, accurately reflect the group under study, which I discuss in more detail in the course of the analysis. In turn, the designation "Czech Brethren" would be anachronistic in the Polish research context, given the absence of a discrete ecclesiastical authority governing the continuation of Jan Hus's teachings. However, to underscore the lineage from which the community under examination stems, I have opted to apply the term "descendants" (see Dworzaczkowa, 2005).

The terms "assimilation" and "adaptation" have limited use in research similar to the one I carried out, as they usually refer to communities that migrated somewhere. Although the community I describe has not migrated anywhere, its members experienced analogous processes as the groups who came as settlers to the "Recovered Territories". The course of these processes has been the topic of interest to biographical researchers for some time (see Kłoskowska, 2023). As I approach it, adaptation and assimilation are the next steps in the relationship with the Polish majority in the times of People's Poland and involve the negotiation of one's status in the local community. The descendants' identity became socially performed. After World War II, the group under study started to be described in national, linguistic, cultural, and denominational terms as used by the Polish majority and the state institutions. This process was reflected in how the group started to describe itself as well.

The Consequences of the Thaw of 1956 and the Arson Attack

In the local community, it is commonly believed that the arson attack on the Czech community center in Gęsiniec on the night of 3/4 September 1957 was the direct cause of the last wave of departures of the descendants of the Czech Brethren. The interviewees from both the pre- and postwar generations do not know much about the fire, but some see the event as a cause of panic in the community at the time. After 1945, due to extensive damage the local Evangelical Reformed church suffered during the war, the community

center served not only as a venue for secular meetings but also as a place of worship. A mixed choir and brass band met there and dance parties were held. This space had a great social and symbolic significance as a center of community life, and it holds a prominent place in the collective memory of the descendants.

The official findings indicate that the center was deliberately set on fire, but the perpetrators have never been identified. The interviewees from the community, at least during the conversations with me, did not speculate on the matter: "It is unclear how the incident occurred. Some speculate that [as a result] the community was frightened, which may have prompted the remaining residents to leave in 1958" (CB2). There are two most likely explanations of what happened. The first is that the arson was committed by a third party acting at the instigation of the local security apparatus, which intended to get rid of a group of autochthons who were an inconvenience to the local authorities. The second is that it was carried out independently by one of the Polish inhabitants, driven by hostility towards his Czech Brethren neighbors.

Subsequent reports from the Ministry of Internal Affairs indicate that over the course of several months, approximately 700 individuals departed from the Strzelin area for destinations in West and East Germany and Czechoslovakia (AIPN). Such an extensive wave of departures was possible thanks to the so-called Polish October of 1956. The relations between People's Poland and West Germany – the primary destination for migrants – were becoming more amicable. The borders were opened for those seeking to emigrate to West Germany under the family reunification scheme, which is also recalled by the community as one of the drivers of the last wave of departures.

In the interviews, the decision to leave was considered to have been voluntary, as can be seen from the following statement: "The borders were opened. Those who wanted to relocate to Germany were permitted to do so, and the same was true for those who wished to settle in the Czech Republic. Only three families remained in Dębniki" (CB1). As for her parents' decision to leave, Interviewee CB1 attributed it to her German mother's longing for her son, the interviewee's brother, who had been wounded during World War II and subsequently was in hospital in the depths of Germany, where he stayed after the war. Another frequently mentioned motivation for leaving was that the families wanted to reunite with their fathers who had left Soviet captivity in the 1950s (CB2).

The specific characteristics of the group that decided to stay are very complex, but some common elements can be identified. First of all, it should be noted that the decision to stay was usually taken by several family members rather than by individuals. These were usually women: elderly women whose husbands had already died, old maids, war widows, and girls who were newly married to Poles or who intended to get married. The topic of old people who did not want to die and be buried far from their homeland recurs in various studies and in conversations. As a rule, the decision to leave resulted in families being separated. For instance, a daughter decided to stay because she was already engaged to a local Pole, while her mother and brother left. As far as the gender structure is concerned,

my interviewees were only able to identify two younger men who had stayed because they were married to Polish women. Therefore, after 1957, the community was heavily feminized. Also, women were more involved in religious activities in the community than men, which reinforced the image of the group as a highly feminized one.

All interviewees from the community interpreted the decision of the young girls to stay in strictly romantic terms. Such decisions were often associated with strong feelings towards their future husbands. A woman born after the war stated: "My mother's decision to stay was motivated by her desire to be with my father, because that was the only argument or the only reason why she stayed" (CB3). However, it should be noted that not all families accepted the young girls' decisions. Further on, the same interviewee reflected on her mother's decision to stay in relation to her own experience of motherhood:

> My grandmother, my mother's brother, and the rest of the family had a long-standing disagreement with her [the interviewee's mother] for many years. A young girl may choose to leave because the situation is unsafe, but then suddenly changes her mind and declares she will stay. This is a decision that any mother would find challenging. As a mother myself, I can empathize with the feelings of distress that such a decision would cause me. (CB3)

According to these interpretations, the decision of the younger community members to remain in Lower Silesia was not driven by fear of a new country, a declaration of nationality, or attachment to the region, but rather by a more universal value: love. Apart from this, representatives of the Evangelical Reformed Church offered religious interpretations: "They regarded it as a kind of destiny, as if it were God's will that they remain in the region. This was seen as a divine mandate, and the idea that they were to stay put was widely accepted" (RC2). The explanation of one's reasons for staying in Lower Silesia provides a narrative framework for individual experiences, according to the descendants' interpretation of the history of the Czech Brethren. By contrast, among the current population, explanations based on economic considerations have emerged, including the stereotypical view of the remaining native inhabitants as guardians of German treasures (Tańczuk, 2017).

The interviews with members of the prewar generation (CB1, CB2) illustrate the complex rationale behind the decision to stay in the country, including the romantic, emotional, and pragmatic factors. This choice entailed a deliberate acceptance of lower living standards and diminished civil liberties in a communist country, despite the signs of gradual liberalization. Regardless of the explanation of the motivation of individual decisions, with the departures in late 1957 and early 1958, the history of the Czech Brethren in the Strzelin region as a large, close-knit community came to an end.

From the late 1950s onwards, there was a gradual process of melting those who stayed into Polish society. They completed their education, took up jobs in Strzelin workplaces, and some joined the Polish United Workers' Party. This means that their occupational background was not likely to differ from their Polish peers. However, clear differences can still be seen at the level of private and social life.

The Czech Minority Association

Among the many consequences of the last wave of departures in 1957 was the suspension of the Association of Czechs (Związek Czechów), which had existed and operated locally since 1948. It was replaced by a local circle of the Social and Cultural Association of Czechs and Slovaks (Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Czechów i Słowaków), formally established in 1962, but in the process of formation from 1960 (Olejnik, 2013; Pałys, 2009). After a year of activity, the circle had as many as 62 members (AIPN). The community was involved in successive forms of the nationwide association of the Czech and Slovak minorities but was far less active compared to the period prior to 1957 (Olejnik, 2013). The life of the community continued to revolve around the center in Gęsiniec, which the community rebuilt under the leadership of lay preacher Fryderyk Pultar in 1960 – with its own funds and support received from the Voivodship and District National Councils. Apart from the community center, the primary school with Czech as the language of instruction also continued on a limited scale, but it was finally closed down in 1962 due to lack of students (Techmańska, 2019).

Thanks to the fact that the local circle in Gęsiniec was part of a nationwide association, we have a written source which shows in fine detail the degree of community integration and provides a perspective that is unattainable from oral history interviews. The source in question is a note by Adam Chalupec from the end of June 1963, that is, a few months after the establishment of the association's circle in Gęsiniec. Chalupec was a member of the editorial team of *Život* [Life], a magazine of the Czech and Slovak minorities in Poland at the time. He wrote the note while preparing an article on the community, and it reached the chairman of the general board of the association. From there, it found its way, as operational material, to institutions such as the Third Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, responsible for the prevention of anti-state activity in the country (AIPN).

In theory, Chalupec represented an organization intended to support the community, but in practice, from the late 1950s, any interest in the Czechoslovak organization involved transfer of information to the security apparatus. The association was dominated by Slovaks from the regions of Spisz and Orava, and Czechs were largely outnumbered. From the late 1940s, the community in the Strzelin area was accused of being "covert Germans", both by the local authorities and security services. Contacts with other Czech communities in Poland were sporadic and were initiated mainly at the level of the Evangelical Reformed Church. For these reasons, a visit by a reporter from a magazine should be seen in terms of a subtle kind of control over the community by communist authorities.

In the opening, the author of the note states that the ethnic structure of Gęsiniec is complex: apart from Poles and Czechs, there are people of German, Ukrainian, and even Greek nationality living there. He emphasizes the help and support from the Polish state, and he

sees no connection between the departures and the arson attack on the community center, at the same time pointing out the high tensions surrounding its recent reconstruction. Local residents accused the branch of the association in Zelów (the largest Czech community in communist Poland), to which the circle in Gęsiniec was subordinate, of failing to provide funds set aside to support the project. According to residents quoted by Chalupec, neither the board of the branch nor the main authorities of the association took much interest in the community. The reporter from *Život* shows the complete atrophy of the activity of the circle in Gęsiniec. Its board was incomplete, as two members had left the country. It should be noted here that the leadership positions in both the association's circle and the parish community were held by men, although they were largely outnumbered by women. Serving on the organization's board did not translate into the position of authority figure in the community, and the interviewees did not remember the names of successive chairmen.

At the time, the community center in Gęsiniec was treated by its manager, and previously the manager of its reconstruction, Fryderyk Pultar, practically as his own property. He and his wife occupied a three-bedroom flat adjacent to the community center free of charge, and had established a private fruit and vegetable garden around it. He restricted the use of the building for dance parties and entertainment, much to the dissatisfaction of the younger generation. For the older members of the community, the center only had a religious purpose: it was used for religious services, and organizing entertainment events was considered unnecessary. This indicates a gradual secularization of customs in the younger generation of the community. Observations similar to those made by Chalupec were reflected in my interviews: "After it [the community center] burned down, when they left, there was nothing after that. Then they rebuilt it again; there were still some of these elderly people here. And there were just some old women here, just a few people" (CB2). This quotation illustrates that the fire became a distinct point of reference in terms of the timeframe of the community.

In passing, the author of the note also mentions acts of vandalism against the community. During the winter of 1961/62 alone, the windows in the community center were smashed twice. This indicates further tensions between the community and at least some members of the Polish majority, which did not come to an end after the mass exodus of 1957. In another act of hostility, a monument important for the community was toppled; it was dedicated to the inhabitants of Husyniec who lost their lives in World War I. The incident probably took place in 1965 (Radetzki, 2016).

Other observations made by the security services include those from 1968, which, due to the events in Czechoslovakia, was a time when the Ministry of Internal Affairs was particularly interested in public opinion among the members of Slovak and Czech minorities. The community under surveillance, however, allegedly did not take much interest in what was going on in Czechoslovakia. In an official memo, the head of the Third Department stated: "Czechs living in Poland are more pro-German than pro-Czech" (AIPN). He attributed this mainly to their family connections.

The Evangelical Reformed Church and Religion after 1957

One of those who left Lower Silesia in the last wave of departures in 1958 was lay preacher Henryk Wittwar. He was replaced by Fryderyk Pultar, who, as mentioned above, was the driving force behind the initiative of rebuilding the community center. During Wittwar's ministry, Pultar was the church lector. As a representative of the Reformed Church (RC2) recalled, Pultar used sermons in German sent to him from West Germany to conduct services. He prayed daily at home listening to West German religious broadcasts for Protestants. He spoke mainly German and had very little Polish until the end of his life. Pultar performed his function of lay preacher until his death in 1989 (Rozpędowski, 2015). He is often mentioned as the leader of the community after the last wave of departures – not only in his religious role, but also as the leader of the Czech community center. After 1945, there were no strong leaders or authority figures stemming from the community. To some extent, such a role was fulfilled by pastors from other Polish Evangelical Reformed parishes occasionally visiting the community; the most frequent visitor to Gęsiniec from 1952 was Rev. Zdzisław Tranda, pastor of the Reformed parish in Zelów. From the 1970s onwards, lay preachers Władysław Scholl and Krzysztof Bandoła also came from Warsaw (Radetzki, 2016).

In 1962, the parish had a membership of about a hundred people, more than the association's circle, but only a small proportion of parishioners attended services regularly: "It was mostly women who came; there were a few men, but mostly women; it was about 20–30 people who sometimes came to services" (RC2). The community lacked the means to maintain the church in Staromiejska Street, which had been damaged during World War II and was slowly deteriorating, with the roof, windows, and the church organs in poor condition. To make matters worse, vandals repeatedly broke into the church and damaged the furnishings. Some interviewees explained this by thoughtlessness and by the fact that the formerly German church was frequently associated with Nazism – a situation common in postwar Poland, where Protestants were believed to be German, and Germans were believed to be Nazi. Until the 1970s, in the summer, services were still held in the side aisle. In cold weather, people gathered for worship in the reconstructed Czech community center, which had a heating system.

Church services were held every Sunday and were attended mainly by older people. More members of the community gathered when the pastor came to the parish every few weeks. After 1956, the parish choir was no longer active and there were no Bible circles, so characteristic of other Protestant congregations. As the years passed and older members passed away, the group of active parishioners became smaller and smaller – children born in mixed marriages received Roman Catholic religious education and sacraments. The last confirmation in the Strzelin Protestant community took place

as long ago as the late 1950s. Unfortunately, there is no detailed data that would allow a more precise reconstruction of daily religious practices during the period of the People's Republic of Poland.

Difficult conditions for practicing their own faith, coupled with the uniqueness of the religious culture of the community, amounted to the experience of otherness. In some respects, for representatives of the Evangelical Reformed Church coming from cities like Warsaw or Łódź, the Strzelin community bore the aura of being archaic, supposedly preserving the core of the Czech Brethren faith. The factor of geographical isolation, the persistence of traditional Czech Brethren religious practices and chanting, and the attractive landscape of the Czech villages spread across the Strzelin Hills contributed to the quasi-exotic image of the community.

Participation in services, especially ones led by the pastor, had a very strong integrative effect on the community. Services provided an opportunity for people of different ages from Czech Brethren families to meet regularly. As the interviewees recalled on several occasions, the meetings after services turned into long gatherings over homemade cakes, with people reminiscing about the old times, singing to the accompaniment of the piano in the community center, and even dancing from time to time. It was an opportunity to freely communicate in their own language: "The service would end, they would switch to German or Czech" (RC2). Despite the clearly perceptible otherness, some pastors were convinced that the language of the liturgy should be Polish. Non-attendance at services resulted in a loosening of relations with community members, especially those living further away (RC2).

In mixed families, denominational issues clarified at different stages. Many younger people, mainly women in mixed marriages, participated interchangeably in Catholic and Reformed services, depending on the availability of a priest or a pastor and the decisions concerning the religious upbringing of the children. One of the interviewees (CB1) converted to Catholicism before her marriage (in 1958) and is a practicing Catholic to this day. Another one (CB2) never formally joined the Roman Catholic Church, but she raised her daughter in her husband's faith.

The descendant born in 1954 (CB4) and her sister were first baptized in the Protestant Church shortly after birth. Then, on the advice of the parish priest, they were baptized again and received First Communion in the Catholic Church. Interviewee CB4 recalled her second baptism: "We even giggled a bit, because she [my sister] was twelve, and I was ten. We were there… Just that water, some salt on the tongue. I don't know, there was something about it, and we started to giggle because we were already so grown up for baptism, I would say" (CB4). This illustrates that being introduced to the two denominations, first Protestant and then Catholic, was perceived as a strange experience. The attitude of the clergy varied from case to case, but there was no strong pressure to convert women in mixed marriages to Catholicism. However, at times, Catholic priests displayed a dismissive attitude towards Protestant believers.

My interviewees, when discussing differences between the two religious communities, focused on liturgical issues, clerical prerogatives, and the cult of the saints rather than moral doctrine or soteriology. From the perspective of the converts, changing their religion did not affect their Czech Brethren identity; more importance was placed on the consequences for their children. This parallels the progressive privatization of religion since the second half of the twentieth century, which, by disappearing from the public sphere, became invisible and thus less significant for identity performance (see Luckmann, 1967). The discursive attribution of identity value to faith appears to have diverged from everyday practices during the People's Republic of Poland. Religion became a means of maintaining community integration and manifesting distinctness, but did not differentiate the descendants of the Czech Brethren from Polish Catholics in terms of the transcendental understanding of life or the moral values they upheld.

The Protestant pastors, due to their rare visits, had little understanding of the community's situation: "I only found out years later that one of these ladies is a Catholic, that she attends our services and participates in them, but she formally belongs to the Catholic Church" (RC2). According to a representative of the Evangelical Reformed Church, it was the change of religion that led to the gradual Polonization of the community and its eventual disappearance, as faith was seen as the key element distinguishing the descendants of the Czech Brethren from both Poles and Germans. However, another interviewee from the Protestant community insisted that there were virtually no cases of conversion to Catholicism, a statement that contradicts examples pointed out by other interviewees and described above. This denial of the Catholic Church's potential influence reflects the selective approach of the descendants in their understanding of what it means to be a descendant of the Czech Brethren.

In the context of Catholic spouses, one interviewee noted the appeal of the Evangelical Reformed Church: "It was sometimes the case that these married Catholics attended our services more often than their own" (RC2). For children from mixed marriages, a key moment was the start of schooling, as this brought up the question of religious education. In all the cases I know of, children from mixed families attended Catholic religious education due to the absence of Protestant one in Czech-speaking schools, which operated until the mid-1950s. Often, the children themselves wanted to attend lessons taught by Catholic priests, just like their Polish peers. At the same time, however, they also attended Protestant services, mainly following their religious grandmothers of Czech origin. The parents were guided by a certain pragmatism. As one woman said: "I think to myself, my boys will go to school at Biały Kościół. Religion was part of the school, so what – are they going to stand in the corridor for an hour while the other kids learn about God? Well, it was about the children" (CB1). Often, women from Czech Brethren families chose to attend Catholic services with their whole family, as Protestant services were generally held without a pastor. When in the 1980s and 1990s pastors came more frequently to Strzelin, the services became more popular.

The period of the People's Republic of Poland saw a process of the universalization of faith values among community members. Interviewees emphasized that elements like the "Our Father" prayer and the Nicene Creed are the same, with differences arising primarily at the level of ritual. This is how a woman from the first generation described her faith:

> The Our Father is the same; I know it in Czech, German, and Polish, and it depends on how I wake up. If I wake up feeling sad, I pray in Polish. And sometimes I think, "Let my mum up there be happy; she taught me German", so I pray in German, and in Czech too. It's the same thing. (CB1)

Thanks to their participation in services of the two denominations, the interviewees from the community are familiar with these prayers in different languages and have a broader knowledge of religious songs, including older Protestant hymns from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One could say that the above interviewee developed a patchwork faith, combining elements from both the Protestant and Catholic traditions. Generally, my interviewees avoided dogmatic discussions, although they did mention differences, such as the absence of the veneration of saints and Mary in the Evangelical Reformed Church. The prominent role of Marian devotion in the Catholic Church is, in fact, a key reason why Interviewee CB1 persists in this faith. She sees her own motherhood reflected in the figure of Mary and seeks protection for her children and grandchildren through Mary's intercession.

The Reformed services were also attended by people of German origin, as there was a lack of pastoral services from the Church of the Augsburg Confession in the area. This was facilitated by a shared knowledge of German and a common experience from the interwar period and World War II. As a result, the small number of Germans remaining in the Strzelin area became strongly integrated into the community of descendants of the Czech Brethren, blending in so seamlessly that, at times, my interviewees were unsure of the background of a particular individual they mentioned.

Having concluded the discussion of religious themes, it is worth summarizing the state of the faith community as it entered the transition period. In 1980, Fryderyk Pultar recorded 28 descendants of the Czech Brethren living in the Strzelin area, while the Evangelical Reformed parish counted 48 members (Radetzki, 2016; Tobjański, 1994). After Pastor Tranda, Rev. Mirosław Jelinek took over the pastoral care; he commuted from Zelów until 1995 (Rozpędowski, 2015). The faith of the descendants after 1957, especially women in mixed families, was constantly negotiated with both their local environment and themselves. There is no evidence that attendance at both Protestant and Catholic services was condemned by other descendants of the Czech Brethren or older family members who had left Poland. The moral values of my female interviewees from the first generation were rooted in the Protestant faith, which served as a point of reference for their identity. However, these values were not so divergent from the habitus of their Polish husbands and neighbors. Protestant services provided an opportunity for social contact with other

descendants of the Czech Brethren, helping to maintain a sense of unity and integrate the second generation. However, they were not essential for developing their piety and did not offer an alternative vision of the transcendental value of life.

The Language and Other Dimensions of Cultural Differences

The lives of young girls who married Poles increasingly gravitated towards Polish rather than Czech elements of culture, including language and religion, due to the influence of their husbands' families. In many cases, their Czech relatives left Poland, and the Czech- or German-speaking environment was highly limited. Previously, the descendants generally received education in two languages: they spent the first few years in a primary school with Czech as the language of instruction, and later attended secondary school in Polish. They were able to maintain contact with the Czech language by attending church services and, above all, through personal relationships, e.g. with their childhood playmates. On a daily basis, however, my interviewees from the first generation communicated in Polish in the family – with their husbands, in-laws, and children – as well as in the work environment. In some cases (CB1), the presence of older family members who spoke Czech and German to members of the second generation, was crucial. Indeed, Czech Brethren identity is still visible today primarily in those families where, after 1956, an older relative was present who practiced only the Protestant faith and had little or no command of Polish.

The two codes, Polish and that of the Czech Brethren, coexisted to various extent throughout the adolescence of the interviewees from the second, postwar generation. As the interviewee born in 1959 said: "On the one hand, I knew my mother's acquaintances and [on the other hand] my father's family, who came here from the L'viv area, and these neighbors of mine. And they were different worlds" (CB3). She saw significant differences between her mother's and father's families. The relatives who came from the Eastern Borderlands and did not know what the war looked like in Lower Silesia, could live in the present, while the Czech grandmother and her friends focused on the past and viewed Gęsiniec through the lens of wartime destruction and change.

However, the interviewees viewed the past not only in a negative way. The interviewee born in 1959 remembered the social gatherings her mother had used to arrange for her friends from Czech Brethren families: "They were so very cheerful, very optimistic, laughing, sociable" (CB3). As a child, she learned Czech and German in this environment. She recalled her mother's friends as very energetic and cheerful, often doing embroidery and crocheting in their spare time, despite the demanding agricultural and industrial work they did every day. This image contrasts with her Polish father's gatherings with colleagues, where they argued about resettlement and political changes. Among the second generation of interviewees, the motif of a strong work ethic, rooted in the traditional Protestant faith, is still prominent. As explained, they inherited this

value from their parents and grandparents. Interviewee CB3 mentioned two types of mediated memory from her mother and father. Due to her father's untimely death, she associates her childhood mainly with the Polish side of the family, while her youth was more closely connected with the Czech-German side, as this was when visits from relatives abroad became more frequent.

These memories make it clear that maintaining the integrity of a group with a shared identity was primarily achieved not through the public display of one's belonging – for which there was virtually no opportunity after the Polish October of 1956 – but in the informal private space. It was the occasional religious services, the celebration of birthdays instead of name-day celebrations observed by Poles, and, above all, spontaneous social gatherings that provided opportunities where descendants of the Czech Brethren maintained their group ties. This became all the more important because – as Adam Chalupec wrote in the aforementioned note – the function of the Czech community center was restricted by its manager to religious purposes only, despite the needs and expectations of the younger members of the community.

However, cultural, linguistic, and denominational differences did not remain entirely insignificant, at least from the perspective of the visiting representatives of the Evangelical Reformed Church: "This Polish husband, well, he did not always treat his wife well, and the Polish family, I mean, the in-laws, did not always treat them [well]" (RC2). Differing wartime experiences in some families were occasionally a source of domestic conflict. However, the discussion of these issues remained at a general level in the interviews with representatives of the Church, while interviewees from the community did not raise them at all. A conversation with a member of the community included the following comment: "Some people had it very hard, but I can't say I did" (CB2).

Thanks to the presence of members of older generations with a Czech Brethren background, children born into mixed families were able to learn cultural contexts known only to the autochthons. During walks with their grandmothers and aunts, they learned the local toponymy in Czech and German, as well as stories and legends related to the area. This is how one of the descendants recalled it: "I knew that there was a spring here, and there was a well there, and there are bells buried somewhere, and here something was haunting, all sorts of stories, true, here… Here some black dogs were jumping, and there was a skeleton, and so on and so forth" (CB3). This helped to shape their distinct habitus compared to the descendants of Polish settlers, particularly in terms of regional knowledge and a sense of familiarity. Children also visited older relatives of other community members, which not only supported the acquisition of Czech and German but also, as part of communicative memory, allowed them to learn about the past of their Czech Brethren community.

This being said, the linguistic dimension of life in Polish-Czech families proved to be an important factor in perceiving the region, its history and life conditions there. Terms from various languages, i.e. Czech, German, and Polish, were in circulation, often with a generational dimension. For example, in one of the families, the great-grandmother was referred

to as *mala baba*[1] – in Czech, while the grandmother was already called *Oma* – in German. This reflects the language shift that took place in the first half of the twentieth century.

People who did not know each other's mother tongues, originally acquired in childhood, often married and were living under one roof and communicating freely. Two interviewees' fathers (CB3, CB4) spoke only Polish, while their great-grandmothers spoke only Czech, yet there were no problems in communication. One of them recalled how languages had mixed and merged: "We are sitting at the table and *Oma* says to me: *Holka, bież na zahradu, przyjmes tomaty* [Girl, run to the garden, fetch the tomatoes]" (CB4). One can see the combination of languages in this quotation of the grandmother's words: most of them are in Czech, but tomatoes, unknown at the time of the exile in the eighteenth century, are named in German. The situation varied across generations: "Ladies who were, let's say, 10–15 years older than me and had also always lived here – you could hear that they didn't speak Polish well" (CB2). This proves that the oldest generation often did not learn Polish until the end of their lives, or had a poor command of the language.

Even in the interview situation, some of my interviewees, while speaking Polish, had difficulty discussing certain experiences or events that they had previously talked about only in German or Czech. One of them, for example, happened to interject Czech and German words: "How do you say it in Polish? In Czech, it's *kazatel*. Well, with us, there are pastors. […] God, how do you say it in Polish? I forgot how… He was doing all those services there… [I mean] the preacher; the preacher is… I forgot [laughs softly]" (CB2). Thus, I claim that at least some of the biographical narratives of the interviewees could have been different if the interviews had been conducted in German or Czech. However, I chose not to do so because documentation in these languages had already been collected in the community, and the Polish language environment has prevailed in the lives of my interviewees since 1956 and continues to play a dominant role today.

In the times of the People's Republic of Poland, there were considerable difficulties caused by the spelling of the first and last names, as was the case with many other autochthons. As many as three of my interviewees encountered such problems. One of them recalled how her mother, who had a German name, had used to cope with the fact that Polish clerks were accustomed to women's names always ending in the letter "a", which meant that, in administrative work, they sometimes added an "a" at the end of her name or confused her with a man. Later, after 1989, these distinctive names became a source of admiration among outsiders. The spelling of surnames was also problematic.

Adaptation processes were more difficult in cases where home languages were other than Polish, especially in the postwar generation (Skawiński & Tworek, 2003). One of the interviewees (CB5) remembered that although his father had mainly used Polish at home, his grandmother and aunt, who lived in the other half of the house, primarily

1 I transcribe the words in Czech using Polish characters, which reflects the social context of this speech as it functions in a community that has virtually lost the ability to write it.

spoke German and sometimes Czech between themselves. His aunt, i.e. his father's sister, even taught him German vocabulary, which later helped him learn the language at technical school and find his way around in Germany when visiting relatives. The older generation often sought opportunities to teach Czech and German to children born to mixed marriages. They also sought contact with fluent speakers of these languages to have the opportunity to speak.

Later on, as described, the complex language network operating in the families caused great difficulties for the spouses of members of the second generation. One of the interviewees recalled:

> When my husband would come over to my place to court me, he used to say when leaving, "What language are you guys speaking? What language is that, anyway? What is it?" […] It was a weird language, so my husband was a bit shocked because he couldn't really understand it… Later, he got used to it, because when we were sitting in the kitchen like that, we just spoke our own language. (CB4)

For members of the second generation, the multilingualism of the family home also caused difficulties at school. The interviewee quoted above had difficult experiences with spelling in high school Polish lessons: she wrote some words according to the Czech pronunciation, e.g. *nedziela* instead of *niedziela* ("Sunday"), *nej som* instead of *nie jestem* ("I'm not"). Another important linguistic factor was the strong presence of German at home, including West German press, which motivated another interviewee (CB3) to learn the language and later become a German teacher in primary school in Strzelin.

Interviewees from the second generation remember many other cultural differences between their families and their Polish neighbors. One of them (CB5) recalled that the descendants of the Czech Brethren had celebrated birthdays and, on these occasions, often visited each other, while the Poles celebrated name days. The older women of the community were distinguished by their somewhat archaic attire, including, for instance, long skirts and large shoulder pads. Despite these minor differences, as well as the understated ethnic tension, there was a far-reaching integration of the Strzelin community of descendants of the Czech Brethren with the Polish majority after 1957. The relationships became increasingly close, and acquaintanceships and friendships emerged even between the older members of the community and the Polish resettlers. One of the descendants (CB1) recalled her grandfather, who, even though he did not speak Polish, got along very well with his neighbors – communicating in Czech. Another interviewee (CB4) recounted the events after her grandmother's death, when Polish neighbors from all over the village had come in crowds to bid farewell at the deceased's home and at the Protestant service. She was moved while telling this story.

It should also be noted that interviewees from the second generation were sometimes exposed to harsh treatment by their peers on the grounds of their origin. One of them (CB3), as a teenager, found it very difficult to take part in history lessons about World

War II, during which other students talked about the achievements of their fathers, uncles, and grandfathers, whereas her family had fought on the German side. This experience affected her self-esteem.

For my interviewees, the linguistic and cultural differences between the Polish and Czech sides of the family were clear and easily noticeable. Immersion in a multilingual environment allowed members of the second generation to acquire unique knowledge and skills that set them apart from their Polish neighbors, e.g. easy communication with German tourists visiting the region from which they were expelled. In adulthood, this potential was occasionally exploited, but sometimes it could have become a problem. For instance, different war experiences and their assessments affected the relationships with the families of the Polish spouses. However, the mere command of Czech in the Strzelin minority version was what made them feel connected to the larger community and their ancestors.

Conclusions

The community of descendants of the Czech Brethren in the Strzelin area resists classification according to the conventional national categories commonly used in grand narratives. The identity of the community varies along generational lines and thus differs between individuals born in different periods. Therefore, in my analysis, I distinguish between the prewar and postwar generations. Furthermore, it is evident that individual identifications have evolved over time. The majority of my interviewees indicated that the process of defining themselves in terms of nationality or culture was subject to ongoing negotiation with themselves, their families, and their social environment. The community identity underwent a series of shifts, initially gravitating towards German cultural circles, subsequently embracing Czech identity, and currently centering on a sense of local belonging and focusing on a small homeland. This was driven not only by the political situation but also by individual experiences of contact with members of these nationalities or relationships with relatives, spouses, children, and grandchildren. Furthermore, even in the case of those born before 1945, it should be noted that they are people from mixed Czech-German families, which adds another layer of complexity to the situation.

The study group was small but sufficient for oral history analysis. In light of the interviews, it becomes evident that the Czech Brethren background gives the interviewees a unique insight into the post-displacement region, which is largely inaccessible to the descendants of Polish settlers. The economic potential of family connections with relatives in Germany and Czechoslovakia was successfully exploited by the interviewees to improve their own situation, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. However, participation in a community shaped by the institutional framework of a minority association and the Evangelical Reformed parish did not ultimately ensure the long-term survival of relationships within the community of descendants of the Czech Brethren. Social contacts in the community were of great

importance to the oldest generation, but this type of social network in the Strzelin area is gradually disappearing. The second generation is losing their knowledge of Czech and German and distancing themselves from the Protestant values derived from the Czech Brethren faith. However, in individual cases, these values will continue to have an impact for years to come and serve as identity determinants.

The study has clearly illuminated the gendered determinants of the adaptation and assimilation process. The post-1957 predominantly female community was typically led by men, including lay preachers, chairmen of the association, and individuals from outside the community, such as teachers sent from Czechoslovakia or Reformed Church pastors. Women were also overshadowed by men in the domestic sphere. Over time, the language and culture brought by the husband, which were dominant in the environment, prevailed. Consequently, it was a historically feminized community for almost the entire post-1945 period, but only in demographic terms. However, women were able to co-create informal spaces from below, in which they independently realized their identity needs.

The continued existence of a community of descendants of the Czech Brethren in the vicinity of Strzelin after 1945 resulted in the formation of its socially agreed collective memory. This collective memory was disseminated not only by the descendants themselves but also by local activists. It is an alternative to both the Polish and German memories of the region, which have so far been the focus of studies. The results presented in this article come in answer to the proposals and research questions that Robert Traba (2012) put forward regarding the study of relations in borderland areas. The process of adaptation and assimilation that commenced in 1957, although not without instances of conflict and violence, occurred in an evolutionary manner, often with the acquiescence of the descendants of the Czech Brethren themselves, who decided to remain in Lower Silesia, marry Poles, and raise their children in the Catholic faith. However, for several decades, the Czech Brethren heritage of these families influenced their descendants, who were responsible for transmitting this memory and enabling the community heritage to emerge in the local consciousness after 1989.

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CB3 – descendant of the Czech Brethren born after 1945, woman, Gościęcice, 2 May 2022

CB4 – descendant of the Czech Brethren born after 1945, woman, Wrocław, 1 September 2022

CB 5 – descendant of the Czech Brethren born after 1945, man, Strzelin, 30 October 2022

LPA1 – local Polish activist, man, Gęsiniec, 3 September 2022 (not quoted or cited)

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Proces adaptacji i asymilacji po roku 1957 w pamięci potomków braci czeskich na Dolnym Śląsku

Abstrakt

Na podstawie dziewięciu samodzielnie przeprowadzonych wywiadów w ramach historii mówionej analizuję w niniejszym artykule, jak przebiegał w latach 1957–1989 proces asymilacji i adaptacji potomków braci czeskich w okolicach Strzelina na Dolnym Śląsku. Moim głównym celem jest odpowiedź na pytanie, w jaki sposób te osoby w swoich narracjach biograficznych przedstawiają i wartościują proces asymilacji w nowej rzeczywistości społecznej po 1956 roku. Na początku podsumowuję sytuację społeczności w 1957 roku oraz przedstawiam powody, dla których poszczególne osoby pozostały na Dolnym Śląsku. Następnie opisuję różne wymiary funkcjonowania członków wspólnoty w okresie Polski Ludowej w organizacji mniejszościowej, zborze ewangelicko-reformowanym, a także rodzinach mieszanych i społeczności lokalnej. Badania te przyczyniają się do zrozumienia dynamiki relacji rodzinnych, sąsiedzkich i samorządowych w regionie postmigracyjnym i stanowią zastosowanie tzw. historii ratowniczej na poziomie mikrohistorii.

Słowa kluczowe: Dolny Śląsk; Strzelin; bracia czescy; historia mówiona; asymilacja

Citation

Zawistowski, M. (2024). The process of adaptation and assimilation after 1957 as remembered by the descendants of the Czech Brethren in Lower Silesia. *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa*, *2024*(56), Article 3339. https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.3339

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1954–2024

Publication History: Received: 2024-08-06; Accepted: 2025-01-16; Published: 2025-05-29