

A Language that Forgot Itself

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In this essay, as a background, I reflect on how the German language was liquidated in post-1945 Poland's region of Upper Silesia where nowadays the country's German minority is concentrated. But the main focus is on the irony that neither this language, nor a genuine German minority education system has been revived during the last quarter of a century that has elapsed since the fall of communism in 1989, despite promises to the contrary.

The mystery persists. In the entry devoted to Poland in the respectable reference on the languages of the world, the *Ethnologue*, the number of native speakers of German living in the country is conservatively estimated at half a million.¹ Until well into the 1990s German sources spoke of one million or a million and a half Germans in Poland. It is noted that the region where they live in compact areas of settlement is the countryside of Upper Silesia. But in the region the local Germans overwhelmingly communicate in the Silesian language.

Silesia Superioris, Oberschlesien, Haute-Silésie, Horní Slezsko, Górny Śląsk, Felső-Szilézia—it is known by so many names, as many homelands in Central Europe were before the powers-that-be minced and fitted this part of the continent into the unbecomingly tight and too-small pantyhose of national polities, each so pure, homogenous through and through, so painfully monolingual. Each, a country of a single tongue, jealously guarded against encroachment by the enemy idioms of its neighbours. Every capital loudly disavowed foreign imposters stealthily laying a claim to its national language. The nation-state's monolingual monopoly on its own

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language was the mantra that seized the day in the twentieth century. The gospel of *cuius regio, eius lingua* spread rapidly, like steppe fire, and still holds Central Europe as its enthralled captive, the Europe that ceased to be able to see further than the tip of the unquiet muscle dancing in its mouth.

I was born in Upper Silesia, or Ślōnsk, as the region's natives refer to their homeland. Today it lies mostly in Poland, extending from Opole to Katowice, while its southern sliver straddles the border and unrolls itself into the north-east of the Czech Republic, between Opava and Ostrava. In the depths of the 1970s, in Kędzierzyn-Koźle, I was a small boy running on the undulating pasture that began where the pine forest on the hill near Chemik Cinema stopped. It extended to the housing estate of almost-stately four-family houses built for the staff of the local power plant by the not-yet-shoddy pre-war architects of 20 years earlier. Friends called out to me; people in the street answered the polite greetings which Mum had taught me to utter. It was she who shouted her heart out calling me to come back home when night was falling. All their tongues worked on and on. We talked, or else we sulked and did not.

Never did I have a need for naming the medium through which we channelled these exchanges. It was Mr. Chyłek, sunbathing on a deckchair in one of the gardens at the back of our house, who pronounced that it was my last carefree summer, and soon some strange “edukeishn” would commence and seize me for good. A word as fearsome and threatening as “riting”. I realized that something was the matter when the word “school” began to pop up with increasing frequency in reference to myself, after I had turned five. In quieter moments before sleep, or after church, on a lazy Sunday afternoon, Mum would take me aside and keep telling me, “You don't say *koło* but *rower*,² not *dej se karnōńć* but *daj się przejechać*,³ not *Ōma* but...”.

I understood soon enough. After starting school, from one day to the next, my friends and I, who played hide-and-seek, war games, or cops and robbers, had to cease saying *jō* for ‘I,’ because in “correct Polish” it was *ja*. So now we knew we spoke “Polish”, and had to speak it “correctly”, because what we had uttered up to now was some “filthy corrupted Polish”, the teacher informed us gently and convincingly. In no time our language was straightened out in our mouths, leaving us in rather straitened circumstances: “Jacek! *Dej se karn...*”

“What d’you want, Tomek?”

“I mean ‘*daj się przejechać*, *gut*?’”⁴

“The teacher said we can’t say ‘*gut*’, only ‘*dobrze*’, remember?”

We almost stuttered. Talking in inverted commas before we were even able to write caused us difficulty. The invisible punctuation marks sliced the happy yarn of our voices into sentences and paragraphs. A block of spoken text for a penny a kilo. The heavy brick failed to fly, at best flapping its stunted wings heavily before keeling over in a puddle. Silences grew. They were not just moments of panting to catch your breath after a quick sprint to the competitive call “Who’s going to be first to the old pear tree?” Our silences grew longer and heavier, pregnant with the meaning of the unsaid. It became impossible to yell a call to play another game when you fancied it. Before yelling you thought how to say it, and often dropped the matter altogether, or lowered the volume of your previously happy yell to drown out the finer points of pronunciation. “Tomek, don’t mumble. Say clearly what you want!”

Many things – all of a sudden – became unsayable, because the teacher had not told us how to say them yet. This predicament did not affect kids who spoke – we now knew – Polish, the plain Polish with no need for the word “corrupted” to stand in front of it. It was a revelation. They played with us now just as they did before, and talked as freely as ever. School did not in the least impede their tongues, but it knotted ours. Who wants to be laughed at for speaking “incorrectly”, like a villager, especially if you *are* from a family of farmers?

But some could not help it, and when they thought they were among their own, they greeted one another with a cheerful *guten Morgen* or a wistful *szczyński Boże*.⁵ Old women – always old women – in village shops operated antiquated scales and cash registers with unusual Blackletter inscriptions on them, machines which declared that they had been manufactured in such antediluvian and forgotten cities as Gleiwitz or Breslau, or far-away destinations of popular desire, hidden beyond the Iron Curtain, like Frankfurt am Main or the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg.

What about the old female shop assistants in village shops? When buying a lollipop with my pocket money, I overheard them counting, under their breath, and doing sums in the same numbers as those repeated by Ōma: *ein, zwei, drei, vier*... in German, or *ańć, cwajf, trzi, sztyry*... in Silesian. In school the teacher told us that in proper Polish we must say: *jeden, dwa, trzy, cztery*... and nothing else.

“Understood?”

“Yes, Ma’am – *Tak, psze Pani*”, we replied obediently in correct Polish.

In school I learned to write exclusively in “normal letters”, but learning how to speak “normally” in Polish took longer. Much longer. My choice of words, their pronunciation, my construction of sentences, my accent all continued to appear to teachers to be ever so slightly “incorrect”, “imperfect” and “faulty”. The holy grail of “real” Polish eluded me.

Likewise, never have I heard people speaking German in Upper Silesia in the street. Neither there nor elsewhere in today’s Poland is there a single locality, however small, whose inhabitants speak to one another in German. That language is nowhere to be heard in daily life. It is gone. Period. How come? Where is this teeming multitude of half a million German speakers from the *Ethnologue*?

Scholars from all over the world zeroed in on newly free Poland in the early 1990s. Their Polish colleagues woke up from the stupor that had been imposed on them by the sole party’s correct line and began probing into all kinds of social issues. Not one of the myriad of sociological polls was devoted to the fear felt by Upper Silesia’s inhabitants who speak “incorrect Polish”. It took a team from the Japanese University of Osaka to sound out the depths of this fear in 2009.⁶ It turned out that even today, a tenth of Poland’s Germans report being discriminated against just because they are Germans. During the communist years the number was 60% and more, as the survey found by interviewing the oldest generation. That is why, out of fear, most did not argue with civil servants who imposed “pure Polish” first and last names on them.⁷ Martin Grögier became “Marcin Grygier”, Johannes Schmidt “Jan Kowalski”, and Heinrich Kroll “Henryk Król”. This Polonizing action, which followed in the footsteps of earlier changes to the names of villages, towns and cities (Brieg became “Brzeg”, Leobschütz “Głubczyce”, and Oppeln “Opole”), tore away the “German façade” from the “timeless Polishness of Upper Silesia”.

At the Potsdam Conference in the wake of the Second World War, Clement Attlee, Joseph Stalin and Harry Truman granted the Kremlin its wish to pass most of the German lands east of the Oder-Neisse line to Poland. Stalin had no desire to surrender the eastern Polish territories he had gained when he had been allied with Hitler before 1941, on the basis of the August 1939 Ribbentrop–Molotov secret protocol that had split Central Europe between the Soviet Union and Germany. The Poles could grudgingly agree to the imposition of the communist system on them, but not to a smaller Poland. A complication was the Germans living east of the Oder River; Warsaw would not want to keep them, because then Poland would have

become a state with a forked tongue, a reptilian possibility to be avoided. Stalin revealed to his companions that almost all the Germans had already fled before the advancing Red Army. At most, according to him, 400,000 stayed put.

This hurdle out of the way, Attlee and Truman agreed to the ‘orderly and humane transfer’⁸ of the rest to a yet-undefined post-war Germany. The map of their state was torn away from under the feet of the very Germans who in the summer of 1945 woke up in a country that unbeknownst to them had already ceased to be theirs. The Oder had already morphed into the Polish river Odra, and the Neisse turned out to be the ur-Slavic Nysa. Further east, Poles in Grodno, Lwów and Wilno suffered the same cartographic predicament. The plates of the political atlas of Europe had run amok. For half a year they had already been streaming from what were no longer their cities of Hrodna, Lviv and Vilnius to the brave new Polish cities of Gdańsk, Szczecin and Wrocław, whose German inhabitants did not feel at home there any more, their old Danzig, Stettin and Breslau hitching a ride westwards.

The expulsions of Germans and Poles were anything but orderly and humane. Millions of the old, young, infirm and pregnant were chased away in a matter of months in the dead of winter. Still, the Polish communist government decided not to expel all the Germans. There were not enough “repatriates” to repopulate the newly “former” German towns and villages.

Poles arriving in Upper Silesia saw autochthons as Germans, and their Silesian interlaced with German words, as a dialect of the German language. To autochthons, the Poles from Lwów and Wilno were not Polish, either, their speech reminding the unexpelled inhabitants in Opole and Katowice more of the cadences of the Russian language of the Red Army soldiers on their way to Berlin than of their own Silesian. It meant that repatriates had to be *hadziaje*, or Ruskies. But they were mistaken; these “Ruskies” were Poles, and swiftly went up the party’s ranks, state offices, schools and onto the managerial boards of nationalized factories.

German books and periodicals were gathered and systematically burnt in heating furnaces in the deep and damp cellars of offices, law courts and schools. In Groß Wartenberg (Syców), Neumittelwalde (Międzybórz) and Kreutzburg (Kluczbork), Lutherans’ Polish-language hymnals, printed in the offending Fraktur, were also condemned to the flames. Whatever was not in the “normal script” had to be German by default. The Catholic Moravians (*Morawzen*) of Katscher (Kietrz) and Branitz (Branice) had made the same inexcusable mistake of printing their religious

publications in the Slavic language of Moravian, but using Blackletter fonts. So they were burned. Gone was the ugly spectre of a past not worth remembering, and forbidden from recollection.

In autochthonous villages and city quarters, silence ruled the day, and a barely audible murmur of whispered words was contained within households. As Poles they had to speak Polish and nothing else. Parents, fearful that their children might not otherwise count on any reasonable future, kept quiet. The handful of Silesian words they managed to recollect were reserved for ploughing fields and milking cows. Children going to Polish schools were “re-Polonized”, growing more foreign to their own parents every day.

Those who failed to keep their tongues in check found themselves dragged out from their houses and apartments, accused of “malicious linguistic crime”. They became an anathema to Polishness. So many insidious traces of undead Germanism were lurking in the shadows, it was believed, waiting for an opportune moment when the Poles would let their watchfulness slip. German could jump out and erase Polish words from newspaper columns, from the pages of books, and – worst of all – from people’s minds. The achievements of “re-Polonization” could easily be reduced to naught.

Never in my life have I seen friends, neighbours or families in Upper Silesia speaking German to one another, unless they were with relatives on a visit from West Germany. But they, too, in the midst of a party thrown in their honour, fuelled by Żytnia, the best Polish rye vodka, began speaking Silesian again. At long last they had really come back home.

Poland’s first post-communist government, after finally settling the matter of Poland’s western frontier with the reunited Germany in the 1990 border treaty, became concerned that if nothing were done, Warsaw would be left with a depopulated region on its hands. The mines were closing down; the miners, formerly cherished by the powers-that-be, were left destitute. The certainties of the previous age were gone. In 1989 the underground grassroots organizations of the German minority, established during the last decade of communism, gathered almost 400,000 signatures of people declaring their German nationality. Hundreds of pages of these declarations were deposited with the West German Embassy in Warsaw, the signatories hoping to emigrate to a better life in West Germany. The event partly vindicated Bonn’s 1982 claim of nearly a million *Heimatverbliebene* (“those

[Germans] who remained in their homelands”) in Poland, the vast majority of them in Upper Silesia.⁹

In the latter half of the first decade of the twenty-first century signposts appeared with bilingual names of towns and villages. The Upper Silesians’ Holy Mount can now be Sankt Annaberg again, not exclusively Góra świętej Anny. Now both the German and Polish names can brush shoulders together. From my village I can drive up the mountain, passing bilingual Zalesie/Salesche, Lichynia/Lichinia and Leśnica/Leschnitz. In Leśnica/Leschnitz, one can even correspond officially with the mayor and his officials in German.

But who does? The most tenacious from my father’s generation, or the last ones who attended the first grades of German elementary school prior to 1945. At present they are pushing 80, and are bound not to be with us much longer. Now you may ask, “What about the youngsters? The graduates of the German schools.”

I consulted the yearbook again. In the fine print at the foot of the table there were references to legislation, which I sought out. Soon enough it became apparent what the numbers game was about. Any school is a minority school where a minority language is taught as a mother tongue. And the law provides that teaching a language as a mother tongue can mean devoting as little as just two school periods (of 45 minutes each) to teaching this language per week—not a very high threshold. In today’s Poland foreign languages are taught in all schools. Under this act every school in the country, with no actual changes or investment needed, could be declared a minority one, should the situation require it.

I scratched deeper beneath the surface. What is left to show from the couple of hundred million Deutsche Marks spent by Germany in Upper Silesia in the 20 years after 1990? That is, apart from the sewage and water systems, which serve everybody to the same extent, irrespective of nationality or the language one may speak. Are there any schools where German is the medium of education? I had a look at the website of the *Deutsche Bildungsgesellschaft* (German Educational Society). It was not a promising start. The website was in Polish and had no German-language version.¹⁰ I called them up in 2008. No clear answers were forthcoming: “We are working on the problems... We are striving to improve the situation... Soon, a brochure with the data you are interested in will be published...”. I have not received any since the phone call. Nor have I seen any trace of a German website.

I had better luck with the provincial Department of Education in Opole. They had no qualms about the situation, and even sounded proud to inform me that there were just three Polish–German bilingual schools in Racibórz-Studzienna, Raszowa (near Tarnów Opolski) and Solarnia. (In 2012 another one opened in Kędzierzyn-Koźle’s peripheral district of Koźle-Rogi). They added that they were not really fully bilingual, meaning that more subjects and school hours were taught through the medium of Polish than German. At the present rate German will never be revived as a community language in Poland. The bottom line is the language of everyday life. The German minority can be recognized, but as long as they keep speaking Polish and Silesian, it is just about appearances. Going through the democratic motions so that Germany and the world can see and nod approvingly.

What about the *Ethnologue* and its estimate of a quarter of a million German-speakers in Poland? How could they commit such an egregious error? Upper Silesia is not in the middle of the inaccessible Amazon rainforest. It is wide open for everybody to visit and see for themselves. The problem is that the *Ethnologue* sends teams to do field research in “developing” countries; in the case of the “developed world”, or the West, it relies on state-produced statistics. Maybe the *Ethnologue* bases its findings on the 2002 Polish census. In it, 102,000 people declared German nationality and German as their language of everyday communication within the family; 103,000 people declared German language, but Polish nationality; lastly, 51,000 declared German nationality, but Polish as the language they spoke to their relatives in. The three numbers add up to slightly more than a quarter of a million, and correspond closely to the number of Polish citizens who are also holders of German passports. But even when taking these declarations at face value, the self-declared speakers of German amount to around just 200,000.

Why do they declare German as their family language when German words do *not* audibly cling on in a single locality, however tiny, in today’s Poland? After the “humane and orderly transfers” of the first half of the 1940s, followed by half a century of “re-Polonization”, almost half of the Germans and people of German descent living in Poland are afraid to admit they are German. Their parents, they themselves, their siblings and their children were incarcerated, maltreated, shouted at in school and in the army, beaten up by peers, discriminated against, barred from traveling to or leaving for West Germany, jeered at and ridiculed for their inability to speak in “correct Polish”, for not being Polish enough. Being an autochthon was a

curse. Who knows what being a German in free Poland may mean? You need to be wary. As the past shows, democracies can morph into authoritarian and totalitarian regimes within just a couple of years. And then what happens when the census returns land into the lap of an eager team of patriotic and nationally-minded social engineers?

The story of forced Polonization and of the ban on German in communist Poland is increasingly becoming one of the myriad grains from which the ever-changing kaleidoscopic tapestry of the past is composed. It changes depending on who is looking and asking. To some, the ban and the program of Polonization are just a myth constructed for the sake of the German minority leadership by scholars beholden to German funding organizations.

But after 1997, in the fervour of the post-flood reconstruction, Wrocław made peace with its past, however ideologically unsavoury. It became reconciled to having been Breslau before 1945. But Wrocław *is* monolingual, with just a handful of aged indubitable Germans huddling in their Lutheran church. Most of them married Poles and decided to stay when the time had come for them to go west after 1956.

In Opole it could have been different; the headquarters of Poland's German minority organizations are located in this city. Its main street, *ulica Krakowska*, is a literal translation from the German *Krakauer Straße* for "Cracow Street". It is part of the old medieval route from the Black Sea, running through Lviv and Cracow to Opole, and then onward to Wrocław, Erfurt, Frankfurt-am-Main and Paris. How many languages have rung out alongside it? Through the windows of how many faiths has God has been praised, or cursed? But because of the German presence indelibly associated with the autochthons (who one day are Poles and another day Germans), Opole has to be content with a safe generic past, almost a plastic past. Somewhat European, somewhat medieval and renaissance, without however any reference to the Oppeln past inscribed in Fraktur. The *Opole* old town, renovated after the 1997 flood, is spick and span, its old veneer an imaginary past, though not too vehemently pushing the myth of primordial Polishness. The nominal Polishness of the generic past is expressed through plaques in memory of a pre-1945 Polish minority organization, a Polish cooperative bank and a newspaper, liberally hung on the old buildings which housed their headquarters. So, there is precious little to show for all the eight centuries of Oppeln.

It all makes perfect sense to those who live today in Opole. After the successive coming and going of German and Polish façades, the time has come for

assuming yet another façade, true to globalization and forward-looking, the mantle of English shared with scores of polities across the world. Polish is an old-fashioned language, spoken in just a single country. What about German? Have you not heard, it is our Polish land, Opole *is* Polish.

Notes

1. Languages of Poland. 2012. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=pl. Retrieved: Jul 22, 2012.
2. *Koło* (“wheel”, see German *Rad* for “wheel” and “bicycle”) and *rower* are Silesian and Polish for “bicycle”.
3. *Dej se karnōńc* and *daj się przejechać* are, respectively, Silesian and Polish for “let me ride your bike”.
4. The word *gut* for “good” is shared by German and Silesian, due to the numerous German linguistic loans in the latter.
5. *Guten Morgen* – German for “good morning”; *szczynść Boże* – Silesian for “God bless you”.
6. *Niemcy w województwie opolskim w 2010 roku. Pytania i odpowiedzi. Badania socjologiczne członków Towarzystwa Społeczno-Kulturalnego Niemców na Śląsku Opolskim. Projekt zrealizowano na zlecenie Uniwersytetu Osaka w Japonii* [Germans in Opole Province in 2010: Questions and Answers: The Sociological Poll Research on the Members of the Social-Cultural Society of Germans in Opole Silesia: The Project Was Carried Out on Behalf of Osaka University, Japan]. Opole and Gliwice: Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej, 2011.
7. *Badanie Socjologiczne Mniejszości Niemieckiej w Polsce* [The Sociological Poll Research on the German Minority in Poland]. Opole: Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej, 2010: 22-25.
8. Art XII in Potsdam Protocol. 1945. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/decade17.asp. Retrieved: Mar 28, 2014.
9. Reichling, G. *Die deutschen Vertriebenen in Zahlen* [The German Expellees in Numbers] (Part I: Umsiedler, Verschleppte, Vertriebene, Aussiedler 1940-1985 [Evacuees, Displaced Persons, Expellees, Resettlers 1940-1985]). Bonn: Kulturstiftung der deutschen Vertriebenen, 1986: 62-64.
10. Deutsche Bildungsgesellschaft [German Eductaional Society]. <http://www.dbg.vdg.pl/de/index.php>. Retrieved: Jul, 25 2012.