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## **THE PROTESTANT MINORITIES IN SILESIA**

Silesia lies in the upper and middle Oder basin between the Sudetes Mountains, the Silesia Beskid Mountains and the Cracow-Częstochowa Upland. It is a multicultural region that was influenced by Polish, German, Czech and Jewish elements. The cultural diversity results from intermingling of cultures of local communities and a specific competition or even confrontation that took place in this area throughout the history. Many times the rulers of Silesia changed: first the region belonged to Poland, than to Bohemia, Hungary, Bohemia again, Austria, Prussia, Germany (after the unification) to finally fall to Poland after 1945. One of characteristics of Silesia is its division into different historical and cultural territories. The Protestants living in the region have greatly added to its diversity.

The Reformation in Upper and Lower Silesia started to spread from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Only a few months after the Martin Luther's pronouncement, his ideas reached Silesia. According to Mazurski (1988) "the local society – not only Germans – very promptly and eagerly accepted the new doctrine. Its success was owed, to a great extent, to high educational level and openness of the Silesian society. Considering the process of formation of the Silesian (in particular the Lower-Silesian) society, this may be regarded as a typical characteristic – described by sociologists – of young, dynamic communities composed of different nationalities".

In 1523 the Lutheranism was introduced in Wrocław and until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish Evangelical church services were held in the Wrocław area. The duchies of Legnica, Brzeg, Żagań, Pszczyna and Olesno – under the rule of Piast dukes – were also centres of the Reformation. In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Silesia was purely Evangelical country. It changed after the Thirty Years' War when the Catholic reaction began. The situation of the Evangelical Church in this area improved again in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The new, Protestant doctrines (the most important of which was the Lutheranism) took roots in Silesia in a peaceful and easy way. Silesians showed, than and later, a wide tolerance and rejected religious extremism. The Protestantism was deeply rooted into the

Silesian society: despite an intense counter-reformation activities right before the Second World War, about 80% of Lower Silesia population was Evangelical or more precisely Lutheran (Augsburg-Evangelical). The followers of the Evangelical-Reformed denomination were much less numerous (Mazurski, 1999). Quite different was the denominational structure of the society in other Polish lands: in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in most regions except Wielkopolska and Gdańsk Pomerania the Protestants made up merely a few percent of the population<sup>1</sup>.

Before the Second World War an overwhelming majority of churches in Lower Silesia, East Lusatia and the Kłodzko region was in possession of the Evangelicals. On January 1, 1945 within the Lower Silesia Province there were 2,032,492 Evangelicals and adherents of other denominations while the Catholics were 923,635. The Evangelicals constituted 85–100% in western districts and 60–85% in eastern districts. At present the followers of all 59 Protestant Churches in Poland are estimated at 170 thousand. Most of them belong to the biggest Protestant Churches: the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran), the Evangelical-Reformed Church, the United Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of Poland, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and the Pentecostal Church. The largest number of believers – 80 thousand – is associated in the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession. They make up, though, only 0.2% of total population of Poland.

Out of 59 Protestant religious bodies in Poland, 39 are active in Silesia (including 10 operating exclusively in this region<sup>2</sup>). They have about 93 thousand members. The biggest Protestant Church in Poland, hence also in Silesia, is the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland (Lutheran) established in 1530. It is divided into 6 bishoprics, 130 parishes and 150 branches. The Church is in possession of 340 worship places including 189 churches, 70 detached chapels and 80 chapels in parish buildings. The region of Silesia is under jurisdiction of the dioceses of Wrocław, Katowice and Cieszyn.

The Dioceses of Wrocław with some 3,500 members has 15 parishes and covers Lower Silesia (parishes at Jelenia Góra–Cieplice, Jawor, Karpacz, Kłodzko, Legnica, Międzybórz, Syców, Świdnica, Wałbrzych, Żary and 2 in Wrocław), the Gorzów Region (parishes at Gorzów Wielkopolski, Zielona Góra), Western Pomerania (parish at Szczecin). The Diocese of Katowice has 41

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<sup>1</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestants (both Lutheran and Reformed) were only 4.6% in the Kingdom of Poland, 0.5% in Galicia, 9.7% in Upper Silesia, but as much as 47.5% in Gdańsk Pomerania, 30.9% in the Great Duchy of Poznań, 27.3% in Cieszyn Silesia, and 70.3% in the Olsztyn Regency (*Historia Polski ...*, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> These are: the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, the Evangelical Bethel 'Syjon' at Dziegiełków, the Life Centre Ministries, the Church at Wodzisław Śląski, the Christian Evangelical Fellowship, the 'Adonai' Christian Church in Wrocław, the Church of the Gospel of Grace, the Evangelical Church 'Horeb' at Żory, the Evangelical Church 'Jerusalem' (*Wyznania religijne ...*, 2000)

parishes and 27 branches in Upper Silesia, Opole Silesia, the Częstochowa region and Małopolska – the area extending from Kluczbork, Opole, Brzeg through Gliwice, Sosnowiec, Bytom, Katowice to Częstochowa, Cracow and Nowy Sącz. Over 18 thousand members of the diocese use 62 churches and 34 chapels. The Diocese of Cieszyn with over 50 thousand members is the largest in Poland. It has 21 parishes and 53 churches. At Dzięgielów near Cieszyn is the unique in Poland a Female Evangelical Diaconate 'Eben-Ezer'. The Church also runs 7 nursing homes (among others at Bielsko-Biała, Miechowice, Konstancin), publishes books and press. Of great importance, not only for the believers, is the state Christian Academy of Theology.

The Reformed Evangelicalism appeared in Poland in the 1540s when the ideas of Swiss Reformers started to take root. Established in 1550, the Evangelical-Reformed Church in Poland is highly dispersed: it has 10 parishes and 6 flexible posts but its members are spread all over Poland. In Silesia the parishes are among others in Katowice, Pstrążna near Kudowa and Strzelin. They congregate some 170 members. The Church runs a nursing home for aged persons and issues the *Jednota* journal.

The United Methodist Church in Wrocław was founded in 1897, although the Methodist appeared in Silesia earlier. It is a middle-sized congregation with some 4,400 members including 550 inhabitants of Silesia. It has 44 parishes, 8 of which in Silesia (at Bytom, Ścinawka, Wrocław, Bielsko-Biała, Gliwice, Katowice). The Church publishes the socio-religious magazine *Pielgrzym Polski* and the religious bimonthly *Wieczernik*.

Founded in Poland in 1858 the Baptist Union of Poland is active in Silesia since 1846. At present it has 92 parishes (22 in Silesia) and 66 churches (12 in Silesia) and nearly 4,300 members (1,000 in Silesia). The Church runs the Baptist Theological and Biblical Seminary, a nursing house and publishes the *Nowe Słowo* magazine and the quarterly for women *Pryscylla*.

Nearly a third (3,300 persons) of the members of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church live in Silesia. Founded in Poland in 1880, the Church has 141 parishes (43 in Silesia). The Church runs the Theological Seminary, radio-television station, a nursing house and publishes the magazines: *Znaki Czasu*, *Głos Adwentu*, *Lekcje Biblijne*.

The Pentecostal Church of Poland is very popular in Silesia. Established in 1910, it gathers 20 thousand adherents (more than 7,500 in Silesia) in 180 parishes (55 in Silesia). It is divided into 6 provinces (among others the Western Province with the seat at Oleśnica and Southern Province with the seat in Katowice). The Church issues the magazines *Chrześcijanin*, *Samarytanka*, *Punkt Zwrotny* and runs treatment centres for addicted persons (e.g. near Jelenia Góra).

The other Protestant Churches and congregations are adhered by much less believers, in some cases their number is negligible.

Table 1. Members of Protestant denominations in Poland and Silesia in the years 1998–1999/2000

Denomination	Poland	Lower Silesia Voivodship	Opole Voivodship	Silesia Voivodship	Silesia
1	2	3	4	5	6
Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland	87,300	-	-	-	71,700
Evangelical-Reformed Church in Poland	3,610	85	-	85	170
United Methodist Church	4,359	111	4	440	555
Baptist Union of Poland	4,238	657	5	351	1,013
Seventh-Day Adventist Church	9,303	762	218	2,336	3,316
Seventh-Day Adventist Reform Movement	70	5	-	45	50
Church of the Christians of the Sabbath Day	260	-	-	-	-
Christian Pentecostal Community	1,400	-	-	-	-
God's Church in Christ	1,628	121	-	151	272
Pentecostal Church of Poland	19,410	2,989	1,060	4,490	7,539
Evangelic Pentecostal Community	529	21	-	-	21
Bible Students Association in Poland	283	36	12	48	96
Congregation of Free Bible Researchers	2,346	63	33	504	600
Laymen's Home Missionary Movement	1,748	125	37	220	382
Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ	27	5	-	22	27
New Apostolic Church	5,433	581	29	623	1,233
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)	1,100	-	-	-	-
Churches of Christ	3,943	-	-	681	681
Church of Christ in Poland	3,342	209	60	48	317
Evangelical Brotherhood Church in Poland	570	-	-	40	40
Church of Free Christians	2,744	23	10	1,958	1,991
Association of Christian Churches	325	-	-	275	275
Unity of Polish Brethren	196	123	11	-	134
Christian Church in the Republic of Poland	20	-	-	-	-

Table 1 (continued)

1	2	3	4	5	6
Church of Evangelic Christians in Apostolic Spirit	100				-
Bethel Evangelical 'Syjon' in Dziegielow	17	-	-	17	17
Christian Church in the Spirit of Truth and Peace	138	-	-	115	115
Church of Radical Christians in Poland	300	30	-	245	275
Evangelical Christian Church	2,710	40	60	280	380
Life Centre Ministries	64	-	-	64	64
Mission of Grace Church	126	-	-	-	-
Reformed Seventh-Day Adventist Church	30	2	-	1	3
Reconciliation Christian Fellowship	35	-	-	-	-
God's Churches of the Seventh-Day Christians	108	5	-	82	87
'Agape' Evangelical Church in Poznań	50	-	-	-	-
Church in Wodzisław Śląski	74	-	-	74	74
Christian Evangelical Fellowship	170	-	-	170	170
Biblical Centre 'Christ is the Lord'	150	-	-	-	-
Christian Community 'Christ is the Lord'	25	-	-	-	-
Church of Free Christians	25	-	-	25	25
Christian Church 'Arka'	106	-	-	-	-
Campus Crusade for Christ International	70	-	-	-	-
Jesus Christ Church in Werkowice	37	-	-	-	-
Church 'Christ For All'	216	-	35	-	35
Unitarian Uniwersalist Community in Poland	216	7	6	84	97
Bethel Evangelical in Warsaw	53	-	-	-	-
Church in Radom	24	-	-	-	-
Evangelic Church 'Ichthus' in Września	19	-	-	-	-
International Churches of Christ	52	-	-	-	-
Adonai – Christian Church in Wrocław	40	40	-	-	40

Table 1 (continued)

1	2	3	4	5	6
Church of the Gospel of Grace	43	-	-	43	43
Bible Baptist Church	34	-	-	-	-
Evangelic Church 'Jordan' in Gdynia	15	-	-	-	-
Apostolic Church of Free Christians 'Kanaan'	420	390	-	-	390
Jesus Christ Church in Lublin	50	-	-	-	-
Evangelic Church 'Horeb' in Żory	54	-	-	54	54
Upper Room Church 'Wieczernik'	90	-	-	-	-
Evangelic Church 'Jeruzalem'	33	-	-	33	33
Anglican Church in Poland	50	-	-	-	-
Total	169,988	6,430	1,570	13,604	92,314

Source: *Wyznania religijne ...*, 2000.

The above table shows that the presence of Protestantism in Silesia and in Poland alike is rather marginal. Out of 170 thousand Protestants in Poland more than 92 thousand live in Silesia (that is respectively 0.45% and 0.24% of total population of Poland). On the other hand Silesia is home to 54% of all Protestants in Poland. Although nowadays the Protestant community in Silesia is small, there are plenty of traces of secular presence of this denomination once predominant in the region. Among the traces are cemeteries, old churches – some of them closed down, buildings, statues and other monuments, sometimes of great value. Probably the most interesting among them are the Peace Churches.

There are only two Peace Churches in the Wrocław Diocese: at Jawor and Świdnica. These unique sacral structures were classified in 2001 as World Cultural Heritage sites. They remain witnesses of past importance of Protestant community in Silesia and betoken the tragic history of members of different religions who used to live side by side.

After the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) the ardently Catholic Austrian Emperor Ferdinand III allowed to construct three Peace Churches at Głogów, Jawor and Świdnica. However, several conditions were attached to the permission: the churches were to be situated outside the walls, deprived of towers and bells, should have been completed within a year and only wood, clay, sand and straw were allowed as building materials. Imposing such drastic restrictions the Emperor hoped that the churches either would never be built or deteriorate soon. The results ran contrary to his intentions: the churches came into being as huge structures (because they had to serve the believers living within a vast territory) and survived till now (except the one at Głogów).

The church at Jawor was built in the years 1654–1655 and the one at Świdnica in 1656–1657. Both were designed by Albrecht Soebisch – the municipal architect of the town of Wrocław. Thanks to the half-timbered construction the churches are stable and solid. The Świdnica church with the surface of 1,090 m<sup>2</sup> has room for 7,500 persons (3,000 seated and 4,500 standing). Soebisch used an innovatory construction: he executed huge, complex timber framework. Such structures were never used in wooden architecture either before or after Soebisch. Both churches were built as galleried basilicas, although differing in forms and interior decor. The churches together with surrounding structures: cemeteries, dwelling houses, etc., form architectural complexes of rare occurrence. Their uniqueness and high artistic values distinguish them among the architectural realisations in Europe in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In Europe only the churches at Ciausthal, Lower Saxony, and at Kerimaki, Finland, are comparable to the ones at Jawor and Świdnica.

In conclusion it should be said that the exchange of population after the Second World War led to formation of a new, predominantly Catholic society in Silesia. The traces of Protestantism in the Silesian landscape, however, have not been completely erased. Likewise, the vestiges of other denominations have not disappeared: they still co-exist with older or more recent works of Polish, German, Czech, Italian, and Austrian architects. This is exemplified by the above mentioned Peace Churches as well as border and refuge churches – unknown in other part of Europe.

Polishness has survived among Evangelicals on Wielkopolska-Silesia borderland, to great extent owing to German priests. It is shameful that these Poles, annoyed by new Polish settlers, decided to leave Poland after 1945 and emigrate to Germany. The same is true for other parts of Silesia.

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