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## **THE DISTRIBUTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF TATAR ETHNIC GROUP IN POLAND.**

One of the subtitles of the conference is: 'Regions in ethnic and cultural borderlands – new centres of multicultural development or zones of confrontation?'. This is why before starting strict considerations on Tatars I would like to define the term 'borderland' to precisely state the range of our interest. According to sociological sources (Sadowski 1991) it is a territory of contact of two or more different cultures, languages and nations. Contact means usually a sharp boundary which can be found between Poland and Germany, Hungary and Slovakia and in many other places. But the marginal area can also mean a not precise transitional zone with many different, but usually somehow connected with one another groups of people co-existing on such area. Such zone may be so wide and significant that the perception of such regions is impossible without distinguishing a new category of people - border people. They call themselves 'local people' and their consciousness of their own identity is limited to such name. For example, as much as a few percent of eastern part of bialostockie voivodship inhabitants label themselves this way (Sadowski 1991). The reason is that probably on this area the co-existence of many groups and nations has been a fact for several centuries and it created a new category of people - marginal people, not Polish and not Bielorussian. It is important to add that state border is not always delimited in the axis of cultural marginal zone what is reflected by even about 10 thousand Lithuanians living in two counties of north-eastern Poland (Rąkowski 1994). In the further part of the report I will try to answer the question whether Tatars are border people or not.

The main questions I asked myself preparing the report were:

1. whether the Polish Tatars can be numbered among nations or rather they create a smaller organism
2. how they are distinct, how they differ from the surrounding people
3. what is their contribution to the culture of the regions they live
4. whether the differences mentioned above are a source of conflicts
5. what is the perspective for the Tatar community in Poland

Historical part of the paper below is based mainly on some publications on Tatars written by both scientists and amateurs, chiefly people connected with Tatars with their ancestors. Most of the other information is a result of my research done within the academic year 1997/98.

(1) To answer my first question I must first make a draft of Tatar history in Poland. Polish Tatars came to settle down in Poland about six centuries ago, in the times of Witold, The Great Duke of Lithuania (Maciej z Miechowa). In 1997 they celebrated the 600th anniversary of presence in Poland. Since that time still more and more Tatars were staying in Poland. Each significant event or ruler change in Crimean Khanate raised the rate of migration to Poland (Jadczyk 1986, Podhorodecki 1987, Edwards 1997) which was considered to be a fertile and friendly country in comparison to Crime (Podhorodecki 1971). After 200 years the number of Tatars in Poland reached a dozen thousand or so (Podhorodecki 1987) and according to other sources even 70 thousand (Podhorodecki 1971). They took part in the country political life, gave many talented officers and generals and some regiments of brave warriors fighting from Grunwald in 1410 to each of Polish 19th century uprisings and also in the Second World War (Jadczyk 1986, Miśkiewicz 1990). They had their own formations in the army, dress different from Polish one, own tradition.

But the Tatar population in Poland started to decrease very quickly. There were many reasons of that tendency. Two of them considered the most important were the following process of assimilation and the Russian occupation on the eastern part of the Polish territory where Tatars lived (Miśkiewicz 1990). First, the assimilation process was always very strong, mainly because of constrained marriages between Tatars and Polish women - the Tatar warriors had not any wide choice because there were always lack of women among Crimean population (Miśkiewicz 1990). The percent of mixed couples is one of the best indicators of the stage of assimilation (Sadowski 1991). There had been almost no inflow of native Tatars to Tatars in Poland for over a century that time and the differences became obliterated faster and faster. Second, Russian authorities wanted to Russify Tatars and offered them well-paid clerk jobs. Many of them got into that trap and lost much of their descent (Miśkiewicz 1990).

In the early twenties of the 20th century Tatars tried to create an organisation uniting Tatars on the new territory of Poland. Fortunately, most of the cities and villages they had lived before were inside Polish borders. The Cultural-Educational Union of Polish Tatars (CEUPT) founded in 1926 could have 13 thousand members if all Tatars joined it (Podhorodecki 1987). The CEUPT ended its dynamic activity with the beginning of the Second World War and after the war did not reorganised any more. Only in 1992 a new Union of Tatars of the Republic of Poland (UTRP) took over most functions of the CEUPT (Sakowicz 1997). Both these Unions had and have an important purpose: to unite Tatars, to maintain their group identity and to remind them of their history. I dare to suppose these aims speak for themselves: if all Tatars were conscious of their separateness nobody would have to remind them of it.

There are as many definitions of the term 'nation' as many authors we can find. But the vast majority of

them uses three main distinctions a group should have to be considered a nation: own language, a consciousness of own, individual character, own history and culture (Otok 1996). If to compare Polish Tatars with this definition we can clearly see they cannot be treated as a nation because they meet only the last condition: 1/ on the territory of Poland their language has not existed since the second half of the 18th century - they speak Polish now (Bohdanowicz, Chazbijewicz, Tyszkiewicz 1997); 2/ they say they are Polish of the Tatar origin. Contemporarily there is a problem to be solved if they are an ethnic group or only a regional or ethnographic group. National minority does not have on the territory of the state it lives any forms of formal autonomy, but it has a well-developed feeling of group separateness and wants to maintain it through cultivating its language, religion, tradition and demonstrating its separateness (Byczkowski 1976). An ethnographic group is usually defined as a group of people living on a fixed territory, having separate cultural features and having a feeling of group integrity thanks to cultural separateness consciousness (Miśkiewicz 1993). An ethnic group is located somewhere between a national minority and ethnographic group, but the differences between these ideas are not clear and sharp what lets some discussion appear. Just after the second World War Tatars in Poland were treated as a national minority, but now it seems to be improper. The Tatar language still exists where larger concentrations of Tatars are located, for example in Russian Tatarstate or Turkey, but in Poland nobody knows it now.

(2) As it was said before, Tatars lost their language about three centuries ago, they feel Polish and speak Polish. They are not even already mentioned 'border people', a product of partial assimilation in the conditions of two or more cultures and languages. So what is the difference between Polish Polish and Tatar Polish? Maybe it seems to be a little risky conception but in my opinion it is only their religion - Islam. UTRP activists admit that without the religion so different from any Christian religion surrounding people believed in, Tatars would have assimilated much over a century ago. Now they are trying to maintain their beliefs thanks to sending young people to study Islam and learn Arabic in Paris and other places in western Europe. Last year first of them came back and he is probably the only one of Polish Tatars who knows the language of Koran and all Muslim services. Yes, it is true that strictly nobody of Polish Tatars knew Arabic till last year. According to Muslim theology all services must be served in Arabic and nobody even tries to raise proposals of using national languages instead. The result is that Polish Muslims use special prayer-books called 'khamails' where original Arabic text is written with Latin letters and phonetics. It is supplemented with Polish translation aside to let everybody understand the sense of what they are saying. Only sermons are given in Polish. Presently a Muslim Podlasie community hosts a Turkish imam who helps them with understanding the religious rules and with leading all ceremonies.

Polish Muslims are doomed to skipping many Koran rules because of the special situation they have. For

example, they accept mixed marriages, however they are not contented with them, for every marriage with anybody outside the Muslim community causes danger of losing a believer. In practice, almost all mixed marriages result in such a loss. Nobody makes up any statistics, but usually after a few months ex-Muslims convert into Christian. Polish Muslim Tatars say that Christian Tatars are not real Tatars anymore, as being Tatar has always meant being Muslim. Besides such Tatars gradually lose contact with their group and melt into Polish majority.

Since 1925 Tatars in Poland have their religious representation called Muslim Religious Union (MRU) (Sakowicz 1997). After the Second World War it has continued working since 1947 (Miśkiewicz 1993). It is an important link between Muslim Tatars and other Muslims in Poland, mainly foreign students, both Shiites and Sunnites and also Bosnians and emigrants from northern Caucasus. Thus MRU rallies Polish Muslims and UTRP rallies Polish Tatars, most of whom are also Muslims and only they are treated as Tatars when the number of the Tatar population is given - it is approximately 3-4 thousand (Miśkiewicz 1993). MRU relation to the state is determined by the Parliament Act dated 1936. Many of its paragraphs should be renewed and the 1993-96 Parliament was about to pass another act but it have not happened till now.

Why are Tatars identified with Muslims? Probably because only thanks to the religion they are still a little different. Maybe because non-Muslim Tatars do not have any signs of being different from Polish. Even their physiognomic features are much the same because of mixing with native Polish during last centuries (Miśkiewicz 1990). Each Polish Tatar being asked about anything connected with civil aspects of being a Tatar sooner or later comes to religious aspects of it. The conclusion is that these two elements are inseparably connected with each other. This is why they try to maintain their religious life for all their worth not to lose their identity.

(3) Religion is not only beliefs, it is also tradition, culture and rites. Recently Tatars seem to complain they are perceived as something exotic and they do not feel good with it. Some of them joke that only thanks to out-of-their-group interest in their distinctiveness they are still distinct. On the other hand such perception is a mean of expressing and emphasising the differences Tatars depend on so much. Others may treat them extraordinary and fascinating or just different, enriching a cultural mosaic of regions they live and it may really help them stay different.

Presently the largest concentration of Polish Tatars is located in Bialystok, the capitol of the Podlasie Region and the seat of the most numerous Muslim community - their number is calculated at 1800 persons. Most of the rest of Tatars live in the Podlasie Region, mainly around two mosques being a seat of Muslim communities, located in the villages of Kruszyniany and Bohoniki. These mosques were built in the end of 17th

century when Tatar soldiers got these lands as a form of pay. Out of Podlasie Muslim communities function in Gdansk, where in 1990 a new mosque started operating, in Warsaw and in Gorzow Wielkopolski (Miśkiewicz 1993). But the full Muslim service can be delivered only in two old Podlasie communities: there is no cemetery in Gdansk, no mosque or imam in Warsaw and no cemetery or mosque in Bialystok. The community of Gorzow is not very active and it does not have either a mosque or an active cemetery. The three mosques are supplemented by eight prayer houses (Rocznik Statystyczny 1997). In the times of the great splendour there were almost 400 mosques in Poland (Podhorodecki 1997).

One of the most arduous problems of Muslim society is a shortage of cemeteries. There are only three still operating Muslim cemeteries in Poland: in Warsaw, Bohoniki and Kruszyniany. The result is that in Bohoniki where the most active community is located Muslims from all over the country are buried (Miśkiewicz 1993). Funeral is one of the most important ceremonies Tatars celebrate in their own way. The dead is covered with green canvas and laid down on a transportation platform. After coming to a graveyard it is put down near the grave and the prayers begin. Before they start imam faces Mecca direction and all attendants must stand behind him. After that part of the ceremony the dead is lowered to the grave without the platform he was brought on there before. Then a cemetery worker starts building so called 'little house' for the dead. It consists of boards which are set like a wooden, panelled wall around a grave hole and one of the two longer sides is leant to create a kind of tent over the dead. Then the grave is covered with the ground. Traditional Muslim graves are not finished with granite or any other polished stone. A small mound is raised and covered up around with common field stones. In the centre of the mound the ground is not covered up and some flowers are often sowed. The monument is decorated with Muslim symbols of the star and the half-moon.

Unfortunately this expression of Muslim culture has been downgraded lately. Many Muslims want to show everybody around they can afford a new style, richly decorated and expensive monument. The most impressive grave in Kruszyniany belongs to that community imam and many follow his example. It was adopted from Christian culture and it is contradictory with the tradition of Islam. That is another story that in the Middle East countries the dead are buried directly into the sandy ground, without any constructions like 'little house' described above. Islam tradition does not include a well-developed dead-worship and there is not even a special dead-day. The result is that even the three still active cemeteries have two sectors: the first - decorative, new and clean and the second - overgrown with bushes and trees, with letters on monuments covered with moss and almost impossible to read. There are more old Muslim cemeteries in Poland but most of them are neglected or even devastated. Counties authorities allocate sometimes funds to renovate or at least fence them in and usually provide them with a label saying: 'antique object'.

In the twenties and thirties still existed some jobs considered Tatar, like tanner, gardener, horse-breeder (Miśkiewicz 1990). There are no differences between Tatars and Polish in the matter of kind of profession they carry on. Tatars in Poland usually pray at home instead of mid-day prayers or do it imperceptibly, so they are unobtrusive. UTRP activists keep that an average level of education, wealth, average family size or any other features do not differ Tatars from Polish.

(4) As only religion is an element differentiating Polish and Tatars, there are not many conflictory situations. Tatars do not complain of wrong treatment or any signs of discrimination. They have their own, paid by the state, religion teachers for school children. They are allowed to build their temples or prayer houses - one of them, in Białystok, was delivered to Muslim community by authorities of the local building society. Before the political changes of the 90-ties they also had not any problems. Now they say they were even snuggled by those governments because that way they were an example of a very well treated, not numerous minority. It had to be a proof of good intentions of the Polish authorities.

There are not any documented cases of problems Tatars have or had because of their dissimilarity. The only example was just after the Second World War when Tatars were repatriated and displaced to western Poland where they were new and not known what sometimes caused problems with acceptance of catholic Polish. Tatars solved them becoming Christian or moving back to Białystok region where they were well-known and fully accepted (Miśkiewicz 1993). A few years ago a council of Christian-Muslim co-operation came into being and it helps them to communicate with each other. Now the understanding is much better than before John Paul II became a pope, when Muslims were treated as pagans despite the many well-known facts like fairly close connection between Christianity and Islam roots.

(5) Answer to the last question is probably the hardest and the most delicate one. To create a general background for the further considerations there is a need to notice that most of the regions of the world, whatever is called a region, are multicultural. In some cases this phenomenon is carefully maintained as an expression of the region's rich culture but sometimes it is being destroyed or downgraded as an undesirable deviation from standards dictated by majority. But the basic problem to be arbitrated always remains unsolved. It is a choice between a tendency to establish many small national organisms, which are cultural and national monoliths, or multinational conglomerates, where many cultures peacefully co-exist despite of their different roots. The first seems to be represented more markedly in contemporary world. Large national minorities or even ethnic groups attempt to gain sovereignty by various strategies. To recall only a few situations, like in 1/ Belgium where some representatives of the Flemings majority has started considering separation from south-western, Walloon part of

the country and integration with the Netherlands; 2/ noticeable movement of German Franks, inhabitants of the northern Bavaria, who want to have another, the 17th land separate from Munich; 3/ Spain where Catalans and Basques with different ways head to sovereignty or at least autonomy within the shape of a state; 4/ Canadian Quebec; 5/ former Yugoslavia, and many others.

Smaller ethnic groups do not have any chance of creating a separate state so they are somewhat doomed to building a mosaic enriching a cultural landscape of states dominated by larger nations. Tatars are an example of such small group. In Poland before the Second World War they sometimes performed important diplomatic functions, mainly serving as a link with Turkey and other Islamic countries (Podhorodecki 1971). Now they also have good contacts with many foreign organisations or even countries representatives in Warsaw embassies but - as they say - nobody wants to use them.

Activists of the UTRP estimate that there are about 10 million Tatars in the former Soviet Union, mainly in Tatarstate, and next 10 million all around the world. Once a year in Kazan, the capitol of Tatarstate a World Tatar League congregate giving Tatars from various countries a possibility of coming into contact with one another. Unfortunately, the contacts of Polish Tatars with their foreign cousins are not broad. Polish Tatars founded a regional Tatar organisation in co-operation with Lithuanian and Bielorussian Tatars but because of the present political situation in Bielorussia the organisation does not work.

The current problems of existence do not leave much time and energy for a vigorous activity. Polish Tatars are somewhat forced to evade some of the Islamic rules to let their group exist. For instance, the summer camps organised for the young are coeducational to let them meet and become acquainted with one another. In other case Tatar children would know their Christian contemporaries much better and Tatar couples would become a scarcity. It would of course lead to a very fast, complete assimilation and extinction of the rest of Muslim tradition.

Trials to summarise the perspective Tatars have are made quite often. They fluctuate from extremely different opinions painting the future in bright or dark colours. They depend mainly on their authors own attitude and not on anything new, not known to the others. Some say, following the Tatar vigorous activists of the twenties and thirties, that Tatar ethnic group becomes stronger and stronger, that there is a need of young people to identify themselves with their roots and that Tatars' culture will last long. But the opposite group seems to be larger - they complain of still less interest in cultural life they observe of the young; they understand the problems of every-day life and see it as a reason why Tatars move away from the tradition. The conclusion is sad but they perceive Tatars as a group becoming extinct - the time will evolutionally obliterate all differences between Tatar and Polish that still exist (Miśkiewicz 1990, Miśkiewicz 1993, Tyszkiewicz 1989). According to

MRU data, in the western part of Poland the religious life of Tatars has already declined. Both groups agree that Tatar group tries not to melt into Polish surroundings but they have different opinions on the results of these trials. What is interesting, the first group consists almost exclusively of Tatar activists and the second is represented by both Tatars and not-Tatar scientists and scholars. What they have in common is that they all say the religion is the only way of maintaining the existence of Tatar society. It is hard not to agree with the last expression as Islam is really the only distinction of Tatars in Poland.

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