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GROUP IDENTITY OF OLD BELIEVERS IN NORTH-EASTERN POLAND

Introduction

The north-eastern frontier voivodships of Poland are the region where representatives of a few other nationalities and religions exist, next to Poles. They are, among others: Byelorussians, Lithuanians, Russians and Tatars. Some of those groups compose numerous and well-organized societies which are supported by compatriots or coreligionists living abroad. Some others are small and additionally scattered over vast areas. Amongst Poles they constitute “islands of dissimilarity” within which they have to take care of their religion and customs by themselves.

The excellent example of such a minority are Old Believers who live in barely several towns and villages in Podlaskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship. The main indicator of difference of this group is religion. In spite of the fact that they tend to preserve their original identity, they cannot avoid interferences of elements of Polish culture into their own culture. Also every-day life conditions and necessity to adjust to the general rules in Poland make them resign from many old customs.

The problem whether Old Believers will be successful at retaining their cultural identity depends on strength and relation between two groups of factors: the first one - differentiating Old Believers from Polish neighbours and the second one - leading to assimilation with them. As the elements which determine distinction between Poles and Old Believers, one can reckon: history, religion and attachment to traditional customs. The main threats for the minority result from new tendencies within the society itself. Besides, they are connected, to great extent, with the present economic and social situation of the group.

Beginning of Old Believers movement

The history of Old Believers began in Russia and is dated back to the middle of the 17th century. At that time Orthodox patriarch Nikon, having support from the Tsar Aleksy Michajlovicz, decided to undertake reorganization of the Russian Orthodox Church. The most

significant changes were to concern matters of faith, but the Tsar wanted also to take advantage of an opportunity to achieve his own political goals (Iwaniec 1977, Grek-Pabisowa 1999).

The most important aim of the reforms was to standardize church liturgy which had become significantly differentiated over ages. The reformators intended to use help of the Greek priests and the monks from Kiev who were invited to Moscow for this purpose. On the basis of the old eastern manuscripts, they introduced consecutive changes which were then validated during special ecumenical councils. Nikon's reforms included primarily amendments to Russian liturgical books in accordance with Greek patterns. The other modifications concerned church service and forms of prayers: double "hallelujah" were replaced with the triple "hallelujah", three fingers were used instead of two in making the sign of the cross, the four- and six-armed cross was to be adored in place of the eight-armed one and proper direction of procession as well as manners of baptism and marriages were fixed. Moreover, Nikon forbade to admire icons painted in Poland or in the west of Europe (Iwaniec 1977, Jaroszewicz-Pieresławcew 1996).

The reforms were opposed and rejected by believers concentrated around a local priest Avvakum. They refused to acknowledge revised liturgical books and new rituals. They also insisted on the sanctity of old forms of worship and supremacy of the Moscow tradition over other branches of the Eastern Church. In spite of their intensive actions, all the changes were finally ratified in 1667, on the great Greek-Russian council in Moscow. It provoked an official schism within the Russian Orthodox Church (Iwaniec 1977, Jaroszewicz-Pieresławcew 1996, Grek-Pabisowa 1999). The followers of Avvakum were called *raskolnics* (splitters) as they split from the Russian Church, or Old Believers (Old Ritualists) as they did not renounce ancient beliefs and traditional rituals. Opposition against Nikon's reforms was brutally crushed. The only chance for *raskolnics* to survive was to emigrate to remote areas, far from big towns or villages. After some time, when the terror intensified, they were made leave abroad.

From the beginning Old Believers' movement was not a homogeneous one. There were differences within the group referring to the matter of clergy. At a certain stage of their history, Old Believers had to face the problem of a lack of priests. Some of them died in persecutions, some other died of old age. At the same time no Orthodox bishop joined the group, so they could not ordain new priests. Already in the 17th century Old Believers split into two groups: the Popovtsy and the Bezpopovtsy. The first one, which was a priestly sect, recognized the need for clergy and decided to gain them from the Orthodox Church. The

priestless sect – Bezpopovtsy - rejected clergy hierarchy and appointed Christ as their spiritual leader. Besides, those two factions differed on many issues relating to every-day life and manners of church service. Later, new divisions within the Popovtsy and the Bezpopovtsy took place. Nowadays in Poland, there are only two groups of the priestly sect and no less than 47 groups of the priestless sect. The most known faction of the Bezpopovtsy are: Pomorska, Fiedosiejewska and Filipowska group (Iwaniec 1977, Grek-Pabisowa 1999).

Origin of centres of Old Believers in Poland

Poland was one of numerous aims of emigration for Old Believers who wanted to avoid persecutions. Apart from anxiety about safety, the most frequent reason for their migration was hope for a change of economic and social situation and for better life conditions. Reaching new territories, they could choose place for settlement and they were not obliged to perform villein service. The most popular jobs among Old Believers were: forestry, fishing, bee-keeping and crafts. They were perfect carpenters, masons and stone-masons (Grek-Pabisowa 1999).

The first representatives of Old Believers, who belonged to the priestly group, appeared in Poland in the end of the 17th century. They colonized Ukrainian region called Starodubie in Czernihov Guberniya and created a famous centre on the Wietka Island on the Soż River (a tributary of the Dniepr River) (Iwaniec 1977, Grek-Pabisowa 1999).

The main settlements of Old Believers in Poland were formed in the 18th and 19th centuries. These were: Suwałki-Sejny Centre (villages: Głębokki Rów, Wodziłki, Łopuchowo, Zaleszczewo, Białorzeczka), Augustów Centre (Pijawne Ruskie, Szczebra, Blizna, Bór, Gabowe Grądy) and Masurian Centre (Wojnowo, Zameczek, Mościszki, Gałkowo). On the turn of the 17th century another centre occurred in Vilnius and its surroundings (Zielińska 1996, Grek-Pabisowa 1999).

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The number of Old Believers in Poland was not stable over ages and at the same time the number of their colonies decreased or increased. It resulted mainly from historic reasons, like endless changes of Polish borders and modification of status of occupied Polish territories over more than 100 years. Before 1772, about 90 thousand of Old Believers lived in Poland. In 1836 there were 3445 persons of this religion in the Kingdom of Poland and 829 persons in 1838 in Prussia. According to the census of 1921, 4637 believers lived in Suwałki-Sejny and Augustów Centre (Jaroszewicz-Pieresławcew 1996, Zielińska 1996).

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During the World War II Old Believers lived on the territories under influences of Germany or the Soviet Union. They experienced all dramatic war events: deportations, forced displacements and executions in the areas controlled by Russians as well as transportations to work to Germany and pacifications of villages on the territory occupied by Germans. A certain number of Old Believers joined German army. All the mentioned factors caused a diminution in the population of Old Believers and scattered them on extent areas of northern Poland. In 1973 in Poland there were about 2 thousand people of this confession. To the beginning of the 90-ties, this number has slightly increased to about 2,6 thousand persons (Wyznania religijne...1997).

Dramatic changes, that may be observed in the number of Old Believers in Poland in the second half of the 20th century (see Chart 1), seem to be irrational. What is important, all they come from the same source of information: Main Old Believers' Council in Poland. Reasons for such changes may be found in political changes in Poland influencing people's willingness to declare as Old Believers or not, as well as in inaccuracy of counting methods used by the Council.

Present situation of Old Believers' population

Both present number of Old Believers and distribution of their colonies are rather unfavourable for integration and development of the minority. In 2001 it had more than 1000 members. Most of them live in the areas of two voivodships: 902 persons in Podlaskie Voivodship and 110 persons in Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship. Individual believers can be found in former Warszawskie, Gdańskie, Wrocławskie, Włocławskie i Szczecińskie Voivodship. In the north-eastern parts of Poland they live in some towns and villages: Suwałki, Sejny and Wodziałki (Suwałki-Sejny Centre), Augustów, Gabowe Grądy and Bór (Augustów Centre) and also in Wojnowo in Masurian region. However, old traditional settlements of Old Believers lose their original character. In the last period still more and more young people have abandoned countryside and left for big cities or abroad. In new surroundings, their bonds with the religion and customs decline and then they completely renounce their faith. It makes dispersion of the group more intense and grave for its future existence.

Nowadays, the Old Believers' parishes function in three towns: Suwałki, Gabowe Grądy and Wojnowo. But lately, the minority has been making efforts to organize a new parish and open a temple, which is called *molenna*, in Augustów.

Long distances between the Old Believers' colonies result in only occasional meeting of the people from different centres. They also very rarely participate in common church services. Due to strong family and friendship connections among the believers, more favourable situation in that respect is observed in Podlaskie Voivodship. Unfortunately, relations between Masurian Centre and Podlasie Centre actually do not exist.

Generally, the society of Old Believers is said to be ageing. Contrary to the centres in Podlaskie Voivodship where families composed of two or three generations live, in the Masurian Centre, in Wojnowo, rather the elderly are met. Such a state is a serious threat for the Old Believers' minority because it may lead to decay of next colony.

Traditional elements that distinguish Old Believers

Constantly, the main factor that lets distinguish Old Believers on the background of surrounding Polish society is their religion. Even though more than three hundred years passed since the break-up in the Orthodox Church, Old Believers still claim, that only their religion and liturgy are true and proper. They reject ecumenism, which is considered mortal sin, and they do not want to establish any contacts with Orthodox community representatives. This is the point of view of clergy, while the faithful usually do not know any aspects that differ Old Believers religion from the Orthodox one. They keep both these groups "probably pray the same way". It is worth mentioning here that almost 95% of liturgical changes introduced by Nikon, that were the direct reason of 17th century disintegration of the Russian Church, have already been rejected by the Orthodox Church itself.

As it was presented above, precise religious rules are not well known to all believers, even to the older ones, so organizing religion lessons for youngsters became one of the main aims of the Old Believers community. Till the middle 90-ties such lessons were organized only by parishes, while now they also take place in state primary schools.

Another crucial problem connected to religion is the matter of marriages, as Old Believers are not allowed to marry any person of other faith. Despite that fact, the number of mixed marriages still increases. As a matter of fact, most children in such marriages are brought up as Old Believers, but such marriage itself is perceived as a crack on the image of the whole group.

To emphasize exceptionality and purity of their religion, Old Believers do not allow any persons out of the group to take part in their services or even visit *molenna* with an intent to pray. Old Believers themselves are also obliged to keep some traditional rules that relate,

among other things, to clothing. Especially women are subject to these rules, for example: to enter the temple they have to hide their hair under any scarf and wear long skirts. Nowadays, after some decades of relatively loose interpretation of the rules, they become again strictly obeyed. Men used to wear long beards, to follow Christ, and to look bravely. Presently, only older men wear really long beards, while the young, guided by fashion and convenience, quit this custom.

Some more rules, that have always distinguished Old Believers, result from religion. One of the most important was fasting. Bans perceived extremely crucial were abstaining from drinking alcohol (especially vodka), from smoking cigarettes and from eating some kinds of food. Thanks to their abstinence Old Believers gained recognition of both civil authorities and neighbouring society. Presently, they do not treat these bans that seriously, thus they are not treated with any special respect, as it took place before.

A specific and a little bit exotic element of Old Believers' culture is spending time in so called *bania*, a kind of steam bath located in a small shed built apart from a house. Taking a bath, aside from typically hygienic function, had also symbolic meaning – who did not take a bath on Saturday should not take part in Sunday service (Iwaniec 1977). This tradition is still vivid within Old Believers' community and is inseparably associated to them.

The next feature, which emphasizes Old Believers' distinctness, is their language. Services are given in Old-Church-Slavic, but in every-day contacts, for instance at home, on the street or in the temple, a mix of Russian, Old-Church-Slavic and Polish is commonly used. Old Believers consider this dialect as one of the elements that let them integrate, so they try to make youngsters use it. Russian is a linguistic base for this dialect, so children are taught Russian at their homes and in the village of Bór in common room.

The older as well as living in the countryside attach a special importance to Russian language. Youngsters, children and the faithful living in the cities speak Russian, but they more and more often speak Polish within the group. Polish is an official language of Poland, it is necessary in offices, schools and in any contacts with Polish majority, so the threat of Russian language extinction becomes clearly visible. Old Believers living in Masurian region speak also German, as this was the language of Eastern Prussia in the times of German domination there. They use it willingly to accent their connections to Germany (Zielińska 1996).

When trying to determine group identity, minor importance for Old Believers has their ethnic origin. They are obviously conscious of the fact, that their religion has Russian roots and their ancestors were Russians, what is confirmed for instance by the dialect they

speak. But asked about their national identification, Old Believers cannot give any direct answer. Some explain they are Polish, because they live in Poland, where their grandparents and parents also lived and grew up. Indifference to Russian origin may also result from conviction, that confession to being Russian would be reluctantly perceived by Polish friends and thus constitute a difficulty in social and professional life.

Old Believers from Wojnowo region treat the matter of national identification in a different way. Emotional ties with German nation have always been firm, especially since inter-war period, when this part of Masuria belonged to Prussia. Consequently, when consciousness of Russian roots is low, Masurian Old Believers identify themselves with Germans to significant extent.

Conditions of life as the main assimilation factor

Present-day situation of Old Believers, that results from general economic situation of the country, may determine the most significant threat to their group durability. Even priests, called *nastawnik* (navigator), do not see any perspectives for the future. Unquestionable majority of Old Believers population inhabits villages, makes a living by odd jobs, picking forest fruits and farming. However, farms are very small and bring low yield, so poverty of Old Believers' families escalates. Unfortunately, it also results in religious and social life. Youngsters in large numbers leave for cities or even abroad. The most popular destination for international migration is Germany, especially for Masurian region inhabitants, who look for help at their relatives' there. Villages depopulate, temples and parishes are closed down, as keeping them for small number of the faithful is impossible. Such a situation took place in Wodziłki, where the number of Old Believers' families decreased from 15 to 5. The temple was closed and the faithful were moved to Suwałki parish register. Most Old Believers do not own cars, so every-Sunday visits to about 30-kilometres-away Suwałki temple constitute too big expense for almost all of them. As a result they neglect regular prayer, but try to take part in all Christmas and Easter services.

Economic problems are reflected also in financial situation of parishes. They are not delivered any state financial aid, so the only source of money are fees paid by parishioners. They are not high enough to let either editorial, educational or informational activity occur, so they are all led for free by some activists. Possibilities of the temples' renovations are also limited. On this background there is especially worthy noticing, that each year Old Believers' community helps people injured in natural disasters, and in 1999 some money was given to Byelorussian Old Believers to support building a new temple in Minsk.

Conclusions

All analyses show that Old Believers' community in Poland undergoes some relatively radical changes. Their life becomes still more and more similar to Polish neighbours' way of life, even in these aspects, where differences were vast not a long time ago. Changes do not concern faith or liturgy, but many traditional ceremonies and behaviours, what is a result of adjusting to general trends. This tendency is especially visible on the example of the young, who want to be "normal", as they say, to be similar to Polish peers. This way some typical features of the community lose importance and its identity fades away. These processes are not new at all, but last years they notably accelerated. This is a result of transformation taking place in the country, as economic considerations have crucial influence on every-day life.

In the face of such significant effect of outside factors, the chance for preserving distinctness might be looked for in keeping and strengthening at least these practices, that did not vanish thanks to their importance. Care for it and for further development of the community should be taken not only by secular authorities and clergy, but also by all the faithful. The point is not only in financial aid, but mainly in willingness to continue the tradition, what is absolutely crucial in case of children and youngsters, as ties with old customs are much weaker in younger generations.

What is surprising, but true, Old Believers' community may get another chance, when a new fashion of "being different" appears. Each year there are more people who want to learn more about different ethnic, social or other minorities, what is considered exotic and fashionable. Such interest may bring significant, and not only financial advantage to the group. Members of this community may be confirmed themselves in conviction, that individual character and originality is worth maintaining, as it arouses respect and interest of others. This argument might be especially useful when talking the young, who usually imagine that "it is worth being different, when it is fashionable".

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