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THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE WIELKOPOLSKA REGION

Wielkopolska, also known as Greater Poland, is a region that can boast its own cultural heritage, marked by a number of distinctive features. In setting out to describe this phenomenon, it is first necessary to explain what the term “cultural heritage” in fact means. It has become a colloquial expression that is often used in reference to multiple objects and phenomena related to the past and to culture. It appears in national and international documents and declarations, it is used in the names of institutions and government bodies,¹ and it has been the subject of numerous books, papers and collective works. Nonetheless, few researchers or journalists address the question of what cultural heritage actually is. Only a few Polish dictionaries provide comprehensive definitions.² Many historians consider the concept of “heritage” to be one that is transparent to all readers, and consequently they make no effort, in their individual and collective works, to define it.³ Moreover, the subject of cultural heritage is not given the space due to it in theories of sociology and ethnology. In encyclopaedic articles it is usually considered alongside tradition.⁴ In such analyses it is generally accepted that there is a difference between tradition and heritage, a view shared by many authors of works devoted to tradition. According to Roman Zimand, tradition is only “a part of that which, in our lives, is the heritage of the past.”⁵

Most often, “heritage” is viewed in terms of the historical monuments embedded in urban and rural landscapes, of churches, castles, palaces and the like, and of the works of art and craftsmanship displayed in public museums.⁶ However, as Jan

¹ Examples include the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, and the Office of the Government Representative for Polish Cultural Heritage.

² See *Słownik współczesnego języka polskiego*, B. Dunaj (ed.), vol. I, Kraków 2000, p. 357; *Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego*, S. Dubisz (ed.), vol. I, Warsaw 2003, p. 761.

³ Cf. for example: *Dziedzictwo zaborów. Wybór tekstów*, J. Osica (ed.), Warsaw 1983; *Dziedzictwo. Ziemiańscy i udział ich w życiu narodu*, T. Chrzanowski (ed.), Kraków 1995. No definition of “heritage” is given in the introductions to either of these works.

⁴ See Z. Jasiewicz, *Tradycja*, in: *Słownik etnologiczny. Terminy ogólne*, Z. Staszczak (ed.), Warsaw–Poznań 1987, pp. 353–358; M. Krygier, *Tradycja*, in: *Encyklopedia socjologii*, vol. IV, Warsaw 2002, pp. 255–259.

⁵ R. Zimand, *Problem tradycji*, in: *Proces historyczny w literaturze i sztuce*, M. Janion and A. Piornowa (eds.), Warsaw 1967, p. 377. See also: J. Szacki, *Tradycja. Przegląd problematyki*, Warsaw 1971.

⁶ See e.g. A. Jędrzejczyk, *Czym jest narodowe dziedzictwo?*, *Spotkania z Zabytkami*, 2000, no. 4, p. 1.

Pruszyński notes, it is inappropriate to restrict “heritage” merely to material goods, since great importance also lies in the emotional and intellectual values associated with them. He asserts that:

Cultural heritage is a collection of immovable and movable objects together with their associated spiritual values and historical and customary phenomena, considered to be deserving of legal protection for the good of society and its development, and of being passed on to future generations, in view of understood and accepted historical, patriotic, religious, scientific and artistic values, having significance for the identity and continuity of political, social and cultural development, for proving truths and commemorating historical events, for the cultivation of beauty and the cultural community.⁷

Pruszyński goes on to state, justly, that cultural heritage also includes language, customs, moral standards, beliefs and forms of their expression, while the “political heritage” of nations is the story of

their existence as states within territory delimited by borders, the ideas being the prime movers of that existence, the programmes and slogans stimulating public actions, and the memory of worthy events, of persons who have made valuable contributions to politics, culture and science, and of significant episodes in history.⁸

However, it is often forgotten when considering “heritage” that it also includes defects, negative patterns of behaviour and ways of thinking inherited from past generations, social pathologies, destruction of the natural environment, and the like.

Without embarking on a further detailed terminological analysis, we may make the general statement that “cultural heritage” is a term that may be defined both narrowly and broadly. In its narrow meaning, it includes goods of material and spiritual culture (works of art, architecture, literature, etc.) left by past generations to succeeding ones. In a broader sense, however, it includes not only historical buildings and objects, but also everything handed down by the past, the various components of social life, aspects of cultural and economic policy, and so on.⁹

The concept of heritage appears in a variety of contexts and situations. Particular mention should be made of attitudes towards the past and its legacy, and reflections on the significance of cultural heritage in social life. Ever since the Enlightenment, scholars and thinkers have debated whether it is right to cultivate tradition, to protect our heritage and draw inspiration from it – or to oppose it. Although a great diversity of views have been expressed, the debate has generally been carried on according to a black-and-white template. Some regard heritage

⁷ J. Pruszyński, *Dziedzictwo kultury Polski. Jego straty i ochrona prawna*, vol. I, Kraków 2001, pp. 49-50.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

⁹ G.J. Ashwort, *Planowanie dziedzictwa*, in: *Miasto historyczne. Potencjał dziedzictwa*, K. Broński, J. Purchla and Z.K. Zuziak (eds.), Kraków 1997, p. 26.

and tradition as superfluous ballast in the development of modern societies, a curse on the minds of modern people. For others, heritage has been and remains a testament to all collective wisdom, an important factor in social development and in the survival of the state and national ties. In recent years, defenders of national heritage in our country have been unsettled by the progress of globalisation and by “attempts to create a new model of Polish culture” based on negation of the legacy of prior generations and on complete openness to the customs and intellectual currents flowing from Western Europe and the United States. According to Barbara Jedynak, without knowledge of and due respect for national heritage, “Poles may weaken their position as a proud nation, distinguished in history, which has resisted various and extremely cruel efforts to destroy its right to its own home and its own culture.”¹⁰ However, the term “national heritage” often used in discourse of this type is something of a simplification. No nation is “racially pure” or culturally monolithic, nor do national cultures exist in pure form. This is the result of many factors, from the movements of peoples in ancient and mediaeval times, to the political and economic migrations of the modern era and our own times.¹¹ The situation is similar as regards the cultural heritage of local communities, which is also usually shaped by a multiplicity of factors.

The province of Wielkopolska (*województwo wielkopolskie*) is unquestionably a region rich in works of architecture and art in such styles as Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque, many of which are distinguished by their artistic quality and reveal the connections between Wielkopolska and the best European accomplishments.¹² These are becoming increasingly well known – for instance, thanks to the European Heritage Days, organised every September under the auspices of the Council of Europe. Wielkopolska has participated in this undertaking since 1993. The idea behind it is to present historical buildings and objects as part of a common cultural heritage of the European continent. At the local events, organised by the Regional Centre for Study and Documentation of Monuments in Poznań, the objects displayed also include those left by Germans, Jews, Czechs, Greeks and others who, in past centuries, chose to make Wielkopolska their home.¹³ An extensive survey of the region’s historical objects is contained in the collective work titled *Wielkopolska. Nasza kraina* (“Wielkopolska. Our Land”)¹⁴ and there is therefore no need to present them again here. It would seem desirable, however, to discuss certain elements of cultural heritage which may and ought to assist Wielkopolska in facing up to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

¹⁰ B. Jedynak, *Dziedzictwo obyczajów narodowych Polaków. Pamięć i zapomnienie*, Lublin 2004 (quote taken from the back cover).

¹¹ J. Pruszyński, *Dziedzictwo kultury Polski...*, p. 57.

¹² A. Karłowska-Kamzowa, *Charakterystyka architektury i budownictwa utrwalonych w przestrzeni historycznej Wielkopolski*, in: *Przestrzeń historyczno-kulturowa Wielkopolski i Środkowego Nadodrza*, D. Matyaszczyk (ed.), Poznań 1994, pp. 59-65.

¹³ A. Plenzer, *Gdy żyli z nami inni*, *Głos Wielkopolski* 11/12 September 2004, no. 214.

¹⁴ *Zabytki różnych epok*, in: *Wielkopolska. Nasza kraina*, W. Łęcki (ed.), vol. II, Poznań 2004.

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Particularly deserving of wider attention is the role played by Wielkopolska in the transfer of culture from the countries of Western Europe to the Polish lands. It performed such a role from the time of the adoption of Christianity in 966 right up to the twentieth century. It was a role that in certain historical periods took on great significance, although in others it was weak and barely visible. It involved the adoption of various achievements of Western European civilisation, which were then passed on to other Polish regions. In the early 1840s, an article in the Leszno weekly *Przyjaciel Ludu* ("Friend of the People") stated – with a certain amount of exaggeration – that Wielkopolska had played and continued to play "the role of a stomach, which digested only accepted food so as to provide the whole body with life force and robustness." The achievements of civilisation in the Western European countries were said to "first spend time in Wielkopolska's border quarantine" and only then be "shared out among the rest of the nation."¹⁵

In the tenth century the Piast rulers conquered successive tribal territories and subordinated them all to Gniezno, thus forming Wielkopolska into a cohesive region that took a leading role in the shaping of the Polish state. After adopting Christianity, the Piast royal court was soon able to gain access to the world of Latin civilisation. The adoption of Western models served primarily to aggrandise the ruler and court in the eyes of his subjects. The real entry of the Polish lands into the circle of Western civilisation took place in the thirteenth century. In that century and the next, however, it was chiefly the rapidly urbanising Silesia that acted as a cultural bridge. The towns and townspeople played the most important role in transferring new values and aesthetic trends. New currents and models reached Silesia from many directions, helping to create new forms native to that region, which were then passed on to the southern Polish lands, and to some extent also to Wielkopolska.¹⁶ The influence of the Silesian towns was particularly visible in the architecture and fine arts of the other Polish lands. However, Silesia did not form part of the reunited Polish kingdom, while the Danzig (Gdańsk) region was recovered only in the mid-15th century and long retained its separate character. Consequently, in the late Middle Ages, it was Wielkopolska that became the most westerly part of the Polish state, and thus the region most strongly exposed to Western influences. This was of great importance at a time when the country as a whole was leaning increasingly towards the East. Wielkopolska outpaced the other parts of the state in many areas, such as the codification of common law and the introduction of regional governance by the noble class, a system that played an important role there from the end of the fourteenth century – as compared with the region of Małopolska (Lesser or Little Poland), where it did so only from the mid-fifteenth. Given its unquestioned position, Wielkopolska also played a significant cultural role. It was in this part of Po-

¹⁵ Quoted after W. Molik, *Edward Raczyński 1786-1845*, Poznań 1999, p. 164.

¹⁶ H. Manikowska, *Dzielnice i regiony: horyzont odrębności*, in: *Kultura Polski średniowiecznej XIV-XV wiek*, B. Geremek (ed.), Warsaw 1997, pp. 873-874.

land that Western European chivalric customs were most rapidly adopted (although this occurred only to a limited extent).

The sixteenth century saw huge changes in the European economy. These were accompanied by changes in the social structure, in intellectual life and in art and architecture, which began to clothe the continent in Renaissance robes. The exchange of ideas and adoption of new models between European countries took place more rapidly and profoundly than before. Jerzy Topolski wrote that Wielkopolska became “fully drawn into those transformations” and that: “In that regard it can even be said to have been one of the more active regions in northern Europe.”¹⁷ With the decline in the importance of the Mediterranean and the centres based around it, and the shift in major world trading activity to the Atlantic, Wielkopolska found itself on some of the main European trade routes. Two of these were particularly important at the time: the “high road” leading from the western German cities via Leipzig and Wrocław (Breslau) to Wielkopolska, and the “Great Warsaw Road” which ran to the towns of Wielkopolska from eastern Europe. Lesser trade routes ran to Poznań and Gniezno from Pomerania. Thus, as the aristocratic Commonwealth flourished, it was in Wielkopolska that the eastern European trading system was joined to that of the west. Merchants from all over Europe came to the fairs in Gniezno and Poznań, and it was not only goods in transit that were traded there. Many local products were also on sale, and imports from western Europe included iron products, fine cloth from England and Flanders, and colonial goods. At the time, Wielkopolska was also the country’s leading region in other areas, including in the realisation of the nobility’s most important programme of internal policy, the “executionist programme”, which aimed to expand the rights of nobles and to restrict the political and material expansion of the Church. “This executionist movement was a variant of the efforts characteristic of the new, enriched nobility of many European countries.”¹⁸

While in the countries of Western Europe in the seventeenth century an increasing role was coming to be played by the economy and money exchange, in Poland the state was weakened by economic laws designed to favour aristocratic interests. Credit and money exchange were only marginal elements of economic life. An ever greater disproportion grew up between the increasing power of the country’s neighbours and its own tendency towards the privatisation of power. The unfavourable trends were nonetheless manifested to varying degrees in different parts of the still extensive country. The situation presented itself best in Wielkopolska. Even in the time of the Thirty Years War and shortly after the Swedish “Deluge”, the great landowners there successfully brought in craftsmen from Neumark, Silesia and other regions, settling them in Wielkopolska’s towns and villages in amenable conditions. This led to a resurgence in the production of cloth, including that of high-quality fabrics.¹⁹

¹⁷ J. Topolski, *Wielkopolska poprzez wieki*, Poznań 1999, pp. 92-93.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

¹⁹ A Mączak, *W czasach „potopu”*, Wrocław 1999, pp. 16-18, 41.

Wielkopolska again distinguished itself by its economic and social development, proportional to and similar to that of Western Europe, in the second half of the eighteenth century. Agriculture and industry developed at a reasonably even pace, and the serf-manor system gradually broke down. Other factors in the region's high level of economic development prior to the Partitions included the development of rural colonisation (especially by the immigrant settlers known as *Olędrzy*²⁰), agricultural output, the system of roads, communication and transport, demographic growth, a trade surplus (of exports over imports) and a more modern social organisation of production. The leading sector in the development of crafts and manufacturing in Wielkopolska – as in many European countries at that time – was cloth production (the region produced approximately two million metres of fabrics, around 70% of the national total). At the time of the Partitions, Wielkopolska was also – alongside Royal Prussia – the most urbanised of the Polish regions, and had a relatively modern social structure (a low percentage of nobility, a fairly large number of free peasants, and a proportionally large urban population), which was the closest – though still with large differences – to the structure of Western European societies.²¹

After the partitioning of Poland, the position of Wielkopolska underwent a fundamental change. From being the most westerly and best-developed (alongside Royal Prussia) part of Poland, it became one of the most neglected provinces of the Prussian state. Conditions imposed by the new authorities turned it into a typically agricultural region. Prussian rule is seen by Poles primarily in terms of the Germanisation policy carried out against the Polish population, battles for land, legal restrictions on the Polish language, exclusion of Poles from positions in the courts and administration, and so on. It must also be remembered, however, that Prussia was one of the most modern states in Europe, boasting many achievements, and having much greater organisational resources and human potential for the implementation of its policies in the annexed Polish lands than the other partitioning powers did.

The Polish lands of the Prussian Partition thus remained within the sphere of Western European civilisation. Poles there could take advantage of the opportunities created by a modern state, while at the same time facing up to its integrative intentions, which posed a great danger to them. The Prussian state's modernising measures, particularly in the legal, economic and educational systems, were equivalent to the Germanisation of the native population. In the 1830s, when the authorities intensified efforts to integrate the Poznań region with the mother provinces of the Prussian monarchy, the local Polish community found itself in one of the most difficult moments of its history. It was a poor society, still with strong class distinctions. The great majority of the population were landless peasants and cottagers. Most of the wealthier townspeople were Germans and Jews, with only a few rich Polish merchants, craftsmen and

²⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ol%C4%99drzy>

²¹ J. Topolski, *Wielkopolski model gospodarczy drugiej połowy XVIII w.*, in: *Dzieje Wielkopolski*, vol. I, Poznań 1969, pp. 815ff.

small traders. The nobility, who accounted for only about one percent of the Polish population, struggled with many adversities. Many of them were deep in debt, were not able to put their farming estates on a new footing, and saw their property taken over by Germans at a rapid rate.

In this difficult situation, the most enlightened representatives of the landed gentry and of the new intellectual class, associated particularly with Dr Karol Marcinkowski, proved themselves equal to the task. They distinguished themselves not only in Wielkopolska, but throughout the country, with their extensive education and broad intellectual horizons. They created a programme to modernise the structure and consciousness of Polish society, referred to as “organic work” (or more recently, as a programme of self-modernisation).²² This was a programme strongly rooted in the realities of the day, adapted to the nation’s own powers and capabilities, looking far into the future, and consistently put into practice.

The creators of the Wielkopolska programme of self-modernisation had good knowledge of Germany and of the most highly developed Western European states: France and Great Britain. They took inspiration from observations made in those countries to a greater degree than is implied by the vast subject literature. The models adopted were usually creatively reworked to suit local conditions. The best-known undertaking is the expedition of Dezydery Chłapowski to England and Scotland in 1818–1819 to gain first-hand knowledge of modern methods of crop and livestock farming and land management. On his return he thoroughly modernised agricultural production on his estate in Turew, becoming a model (though at first only weakly imitated) for other landowners. From 1836 onwards in Turew he trained numerous apprentices, who went on not only to manage estates in Wielkopolska, but also to promote progress in agriculture elsewhere.²³ August Cieszkowski, in drawing up the concept of the Polish League in 1848, modelled it on the British Anti-Corn Law League, established by Richard Cobden.²⁴ It is generally forgotten that Maksymilian Jackowski, patron of the peasant agricultural associations which developed rapidly in the Poznań region, sought advice and guidance from the president of similar associations in Westphalia. The Wielkopolska system of credit unions, one of the pillars of the defence of Polish nationhood, was modelled on the organisations founded by Hermann Schultz of Delitzsch, which were considered the most suitable kind for local conditions. The system was creatively adapted to those conditions, having its own management principles and ideological programme. Compared with the German system it was more cohesive, adhered more exactly to cooperative principles,

²² N. Davies, *Modernizacja: sojusznik czy wróg tworzących się nowoczesnych narodów?*; L. Trzeciakowski, *Wielkopolski program samomodernizacji – kształtowanie się nowoczesnego społeczeństwa*, in: *Samomodernizacja społeczeństw w XIX wieku. Irlandczycy, Czesi, Polacy*, L. Trzeciakowski and K. Makowski (eds.), Poznań 1999, pp. 18, 66.

²³ Z. Grot, *Dezydery Chłapowski 1788-1879*, Warsaw–Poznań 1983, pp. 56ff; D. Chłapowski, *Chłapowscy. Kronika rodzinna*, Warsaw 1998, p. 72.

²⁴ W. Jakóbczyk, *Studia nad dziejami Wielkopolski w XIX w. (Dzieje pracy organicznej)*, vol. I, Poznań 1951, pp. 108-110.

and was more resistant to economic changes.²⁵ Great interest in German experiences was also shown by the priests and laypersons active in the Union of Catholic Associations of Polish Workers. They considered as a worthy model Father August Pieper, founder of *Volksverein für das katholische Deutschland*, and sought to gain as much knowledge as possible about the directions and forms of activity of the central office of that organisation in Mönchengladbach.²⁶

Particular interest was aroused among Poles in the Poznań region by the development of the Czech national movement. Over time, this interest turned into admiration for the achievements of the Czechs in their economic and political struggles against their stronger German rival. The Czechs became a model worthy to be followed by the people of Wielkopolska. At the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth, their activity in the economic, social and political spheres was keenly and constantly observed. The slogan "Let's learn from the Czechs" was often repeated in the Poznań journals of the time.²⁷

In the interwar Second Polish Republic, Wielkopolska again distinguished itself among the country's regions. It joined the newly independent state with significant social and economic potential and with the highest standards of civilisation. In many areas of community life its institutions were more modern than in other parts of the country.²⁸ As the most westerly of the border provinces, it developed under the influence of the socioeconomic processes taking place in the re-emerging Polish state, and also somewhat in the shadow of the Weimar Republic. It differed from the rest of the country in its social structure (which was closer to that of Western countries) and in the style and higher quality of life of its inhabitants. It was thus no coincidence that regionalist ideas were promulgated with much greater force in the Poznań region than in Małopolska or the former Congress Kingdom.²⁹ After the establishment of a university in Poznań in 1919, Wielkopolska's capital quickly transformed itself from a second-rate city on the cultural map of Poland into an important centre of learning. The region also had many more distinguishing features that could be listed.

The central topic of our deliberations, Wielkopolska's function as a bridge between Poland and the Western world, was significant not only in the two interwar decades, but in the whole of the twentieth century, primarily through the Poznań trade fairs, which were held from 1921 onwards and became an international event in 1925. They quickly became the most important trade event in the country, and also gradually gained fame abroad, with the number of countries represented ranging between

²⁵ *Wielkopolski system spółdzielczości kredytowej*, S. Ochociński (ed.), Warsaw–Poznań 1985, p. 42.

²⁶ W. Molik, *Z badań nad modelem działacza społeczno-politycznego w polskiej myśli politycznej dzielnicy pruskiej na przełomie XIX i XX wieku na ziemiach pod pruskim panowaniem*, S. Kalembka (ed.), Warsaw–Poznań–Toruń, pp. 205–206.

²⁷ R. Jaworski, „*Swój do swego*”. *Studium o kształtowaniu się zmysłu gospodarczego Wielkopolan 1871–1914*, Poznań 1998, pp. 206–214; W. Molik, *Wielkopolanie wobec czeskiego ruchu narodowego w XIX i na początku XX wieku*, in: *Problemy narodowościowe Europy środkowowschodniej w XIX i XX wieku*, Poznań 2002, pp. 119–133.

²⁸ See K. Dembski, *Wielkopolska w początkach II Rzeczypospolitej*, Poznań 1972.

²⁹ B. Wysocka, *Regionalizm wielkopolski w II Rzeczypospolitej 1919–1939*, Poznań 1981, p. 21.

10 and 20. In the years before the outbreak of World War II, they were among the four leading trade fairs in Europe, alongside those of Leipzig, Lyon and Milan. The fairs made Poznań “famous throughout the world as a trading emporium.”³⁰ They were not a purely commercial undertaking for merchants, manufacturers and managers, but also drew crowds of ordinary people, including many from other parts of the country and abroad. For residents of Poznań, the fairs gradually turned into an unmissable event. They were made more attractive by the conventions and congresses, both national and international, that were held in the city at the same time.

An event of huge importance was the National Exhibition (PWK) held on the Poznań fairs site in 1929, under the patronage of Poland’s president, Ignacy Mościcki. This served as a “great review of national creativity” in the decade since the “resurrection” of Poland. It became a great festival for Poles at home and those visiting from abroad, and led to a raising of the status of Poznań and Wielkopolska. The exhibition was visited by a total of 4.5 million people, including as many as 200,000 foreign guests. At the same time the city also played host to 140 various conventions and congresses.³¹

After a seven-year break caused by World War II, the Poznań International Fairs were reactivated in 1947, becoming a symbol of the rebuilding of the nation. In the circumstances of the time they were required to be less of a commercial event and more of a propaganda exercise, serving to demonstrate the superiority of the socialist economic model over capitalism. However, the exhibits on display from Western countries contradicted that message, and the fairs were discontinued in 1951. Restarted in 1955, they went through periods of expansion and stagnation, but remained the most important trade event in Poland. Their continuing overall growth, in spite of some weaker years, is confirmed by figures: the numbers of countries represented and of trade contracts concluded, the increased area of the exhibition site, and so on. Because of the propaganda function of the fairs, the communist authorities strove to maximise the number of visitors. Hence every June hundreds of excursions to Poznań were organised from all parts of the country, and in the 1950s and 1960s many Poznań homes were visited by distant relatives and acquaintances during the time of the fairs. For thousands of people, the fairs were a chance to “escape from the grey reality, to touch the far-off world, so different and inaccessible.”³² As is still the case today, the fairs were accompanied by various commercial and cultural events (conventions, congresses, etc.) and provided a “window on the world” for residents of Wielkopolska and the whole country.

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A characteristic feature of the historical process in Wielkopolska in the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth was the development of civic society. A more modern community was formed there than in other parts of the country,

³⁰ *Z biegiem lat. 75 lat Międzynarodowych Targów Poznańskich*, Poznań 1996, pp. 12-14.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 21-22.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 32.

aware of its goals and of the advantages that follow from collective action. Opportunities to propagate among that community the habit and capability of engaging in continuous activity based on thorough analysis of social needs, and to apply rational means to meet those needs, were created by a system of Polish organisations – economic, social, educational and others – which from the mid-1830s onwards gradually developed as part of the aforementioned self-modernisation programme. The creation of that system was initiated by a group of enlightened landowners, who in 1835 formed an association called *Kasyno Gostyńskie*, which justly came to be known as the “mother of organic works in the Poznań region”.³³ Two institutions, both formed in 1841, served as its pillars: the Bazar Hotel and the Educational Assistance Society. Around these, over time, various leagues and associations grew up, coming to serve all layers of Polish society: agricultural associations both for landowners and for peasants, commercial associations for craftsmen, journeymen and merchants, credit unions, the libraries established by the People’s Libraries Society, sports clubs under the name *Sokół* (Falcon), church and folk choirs, Catholic workers’ associations, women’s organisations, and so on.³⁴ Apart from their defined specialist goals, all of these organisations had an unwritten common aim – to defend Polish nationhood, in a broad sense. They combined professional training and action to protect group interests with general education about national history and culture. At meetings it was also discussed how properly to bring up children in a Catholic and patriotic spirit, the work ethic was promulgated, and members were encouraged to engage in social activity. They were taught that a good Polish craftsman or farmer should be religious, lead an exemplary life, cultivate Polish folk customs, subscribe to a Polish newspaper, read popular books about the country’s history and geography, contribute to collections for national causes, and vote for Polish candidates to the Prussian and German parliaments.³⁵

The whole of this system was developed with great organisational and financial efforts, coming chiefly from the landed gentry, clergy and intellectual class, to some extent also from wealthier townspeople, and to a relatively small degree from peasant farmers. Almost all of the Polish social organisations and scientific and cultural institutions (including the Poznań Society of Friends of Science, and the Polish Theatre in Poznań) were maintained and supported by membership fees and donations, receiving no state aid. Thanks to public generosity, the Karol Marcinkowski Educational Assistance Society was able to carry on a wide range of activities, being admired even by Germans. In its first 50 years it helped several thousand young people from less wealthy backgrounds to attend college or high school or to receive vocational

³³ S. Jankowiak, *Kasyno Gostyńskie 1835-1846. U początków pracy organicznej w Wielkopolsce*, Gostyń 1996, p. 6.

³⁴ W. Molik, *Jak pod pruskim mundurem biło polskie serce. Środkowoeuropejski fenomen Bazaru*, Kronika Miasta Poznania, 2015, no. 4, pp. 124-139.

³⁵ W. Molik, *Prace organiczne a rozwój polskiej świadomości narodowej na ziemiach pod panowaniem pruskim w XIX i na początku XX wieku (Zarys problematyki badawczej)*, in: *Od Wiosny Ludów do powstań śląskich*, W. Wrzesiński (ed.), Bytom 1998, p. 113.

training.³⁶ Had it not been for this organisation, it is hard to imagine how a Polish intellectual class could have developed in the Poznań region.

Especially notable is the broad social reach of this organisational system. In the years prior to World War I, in almost every town in Wielkopolska, and in many villages in areas with a majority Polish population, there was a functioning commercial or agricultural association, Catholic workers' association, Sokół sports club, public library, credit union, etc., and a church or secular choir giving concerts. Many Polish townspeople belonged to several different associations, and attended their meetings, rallies, lectures, courses, national anniversary celebrations and other such events. A total of 17,000 peasants belonged to the agricultural associations, the Sokół Athletic Associations Union had almost 11,000 members (in Germany as a whole), the archdiocesan Union of Catholic Associations of Polish Workers counted 30,000 members, and around 60,000 peasants and cottagers belonged to the credit unions.³⁷ It can therefore be said that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Poles of Wielkopolska created a highly effective organisational system that well served the protection of nationhood and civic education. Before World War I it came to encompass vast numbers of people, representing one of the largest such systems among the national minorities on the European continent at that time.

The experiences and the organisational network inherited from the time of the Partitions proved an important factor in Wielkopolska's development in the interwar decades. This is nonetheless poorly recognised, if at all, in the historical literature, particularly in synthetic studies.³⁸ In those years many of the Polish organisations formed in the nineteenth century continued their activities with great success; they included, among others, the Educational Assistance Society, the People's Libraries Society, the Wielkopolska League of Agricultural Associations, and the Union of Catholic Associations of Polish Workers. Many new societies sprang up, including a number of regional organisations such as the City of Poznań Appreciation Society, the Society for Culture and Art in Gostyń, the Regional Association of the Buk Land, and the Leszno Society for Propagation of Science and Art. Just like before the war, in almost every town in Wielkopolska there existed a number of associations – several dozen in some cases – with well-established traditions and large numbers of members and supporters.³⁹ No other province of the Second Republic had such extensive structures of this type. These numerous societies, well rooted in various social circles and to a greater or lesser extent encompassing all social classes, were a significant cause of Wielkopolska's retention of a separate identity and its achievements in social and economic life. Their powerful development was stopped for several years by the outbreak of the Second World War.

³⁶ W. Jakóbczyk, *Towarzystwo Naukowej Pomocy w Wielkopolsce 1841-1939*, Poznań 1985 p. 122.

³⁷ W. Jakóbczyk, *Studia...*, vol. III, pp. 43, 49, 136.

³⁸ The topic is not covered in, for example: J. Topolski, *Wielkopolska poprzez wieki*, Poznań 1999; A. Czubiński, *Wielkopolska w latach 1918-1939*, Poznań 2000.

³⁹ B. Wysocka, *Regionalizm wielkopolski...*, p. 22.

The rebuilding of the societies (educational, cultural, economic, charitable, religious, sporting and so on) that had existed before the war, and the formation of new ones from scratch, began immediately following the liberation of Wielkopolska from Nazi occupation. The years 1945–1947 saw an explosion in grass-roots initiatives leading to the rapid rebirth of the societies movement. It led to the formation of dozens of associations, organisations and unions in all counties of the province. In 1946 there were 307 various associations in Wielkopolska, involving large numbers of active citizens.⁴⁰ Just like before the war, the whole of Wielkopolska, in spite of shortages of premises, money and personnel, became covered by a dense network of all kinds of societies. At its lowest level, in villages and districts, were parents' associations, secular and church choirs, singing and dance groups, shooting clubs, town appreciation societies, local unions of craftspeople and traders, and the like. Above these were chartered associations at county or provincial level (with branches in the counties), public service institutions (the Polish Red Cross, the Nature Protection League, the Polish Committee for Social Care, the Polish Scouting Association), as well as Wielkopolska-based associations registered as nationwide organisations (the People's Libraries Society, the Polish Western Union, the National Institute of Progress, and others).

In Wielkopolska – self-reliant and rich in the tradition of effective work – the numerous associations answered to local needs and aspirations, provided civic education, and constituted a kind of “fortress” where interference by government and party officials “was still weak, where expertise and authentic commitment were what mattered.”⁴¹ Thus, as totalitarian models for the control of society came to be implemented in Poland, the activity of these organisations caused increasing concern to the communist authorities. The security services that oversaw them introduced more and more legal, financial and personnel-related restrictions. Attacks from the authorities on social organisations intensified in 1948. After the formation of the Polish United Workers' Party, the new central government authorities in Poznań province ordered the closure of dozens of associations, and very rarely gave permission for the foundation of new ones. In principle all social organisations which lacked central offices in Warsaw were subject to closure, including around 250 associations and unions that had been registered before 1 January 1939. The whole of the highly developed and efficiently functioning system of social organisations in Wielkopolska thus soon lay in ruins. In the mid-1950s, in most of the province's 33 counties, there were no registered local societies or branches of provincial-level associations.

Over a period of more than one hundred years, between 1835 and 1948, a civic society had grown up in Wielkopolska, realising its aspirations and goals with no assistance (during the Partitions) or minimal assistance (after 1918) from the state, and capable of facing up to the challenges of the times. The post-1948 liquidation by the

⁴⁰ I. Kowalski, *Wielkopolskie stowarzyszenia i związki w latach 1945-1955 (odbudowa – rozbięcie – likwidacja)*, Kronika Wielkopolski, 1992, no. 1, p. 17.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

communist authorities of the system of free associations and unions, which had successfully performed the function of a civic “school”, was one of the factors – alongside the significant exchange of population in the post-war years, the propagation of a socialist value system, and so on – that led to the vanishing of the Wielkopolska ethos. The gap that arose following the crushing of the free organisations was to be filled by a small number of officially controlled central associations, with branches or executives established in every county and province. These organisations, directed from above by the regional Party apparatus, could not and did not satisfy local aspirations or real social needs. Over time some of them gained more independence, and many town and district appreciation societies, which were numerous in Wielkopolska, achieved notable successes. After 1989 an eruption of local and civic initiatives occurred. Many of these bore fruit, and a large number of new associations were established. Nonetheless, the system of unions and organisations that existed before 1948 has not yet been recreated on the same scale.

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The economic, social and cultural development of Wielkopolska in the Middle Ages and modern times has been significantly influenced by foreign elements. In the second half of the thirteenth century and at the start of the fourteenth many German settlers arrived in the region, and they unquestionably played important decision-making roles in the towns being founded at that time. Most of them subsequently became Polonised; German majorities remained only in border towns such as Wałcz, Międzyrzec and Wschowa. Later, there was an inflow of German elements into Bojanowo, Rawicz and Leszno. Jews settled in Kalisz as early as the end of the thirteenth century; they also ran the mint of Duke Mieszko the Old. In the following century, Kazimierz the Great first codified the Jews’ rights and gave them protection. In Poznań and Gniezno the first Jewish settlements were also probably established in the thirteenth century. Jews living in Wielkopolska enjoyed privileges which assured them of – among other things – religious freedom, personal protection, and the right to administer their own communities.⁴² In the spring of 1548 the Czech Brethren, exiled from Bohemia by Ferdinand I, were warmly received in Wielkopolska. A further large wave of refugees and emigrants from Bohemia, Silesia, Pomerania and Brandenburg arrived in Wielkopolska at the time of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648).⁴³ In the second half of the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth century, all of the factions of the reformation – Lutheranism, Calvinism, Arianism – spread throughout the region. Under the influence of the Czechs “there was founded in Wielkopolska – and only in that region – a Polish Protestant Church, with its own confession, different from those of the Lutherans and Calvinists.”⁴⁴ In certain periods, alongside the Germans and

⁴² See: S. Kemlein, *Żydzi w Wielkim Księstwie Poznańskim 1815-1848. Przeobrażenia w łonie żydostwa polskiego pod panowaniem pruskim* (subsection: *Żydzi poznańscy w Polsce przedrozbiorowej*), Poznań 2001, pp. 20ff.

⁴³ J. Dworzaczkowa, *Reformacja i kontrreformacja w Wielkopolsce*, Poznań 1995, p. 42.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 5-6.

Jews, small colonies of Scots, Italians, French and Greeks made their presence felt in Poznań. In the eighteenth century Catholic settlers from the Bamberg region were brought in to settle in villages around Poznań; they gradually became Polonised.⁴⁵ We know little about the coexistence of Catholics and Protestants in the small towns of Wielkopolska during those times. This is an issue that deserves to be carefully researched. The sources used hitherto by historians contain no record of major conflicts between people of different denominations – Catholic, Protestant or Jewish – although there was no shortage of religiously rooted antagonism and disputes. It might thus be said that in Wielkopolska's towns before the Partitions, people of different faiths lived peacefully side by side, in a coexistence that was not marked by serious conflicts. There was also cooperation between nobles of the region who represented different denominations. At the time of the Counter-Reformation, the strongly Catholic majority among that class elected Protestants – “people well-rooted in the neighbourhood and enjoying trust” – to the national and regional parliaments. The religious intolerance characteristic of that age did not have much influence on those elections.⁴⁶

In the Prussian Partition, the national makeup of the population of Wielkopolska underwent major changes. As a result of the influx of significant numbers of Prussian officials and their families, and the arrival of colonists and others brought in by the authorities, the proportion of Germans increased markedly. A significant percentage of the population was also Jewish. The Poles and Germans formed separate communities, living side by side, and before 1848 they showed each other a great deal of tolerance. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as a result of the intensified Germanisation policies and economic struggles, that coexistence became increasingly difficult, and following the creation of the *Ostmarkenverein* in 1894 relations between the communities became significantly more tense. There were many local conflicts related to nationality, although they did not take on extreme forms. Unlike in the Congress Kingdom and Galicia, there were no pogroms of Jews in the Poznań region. Starting from the mid-nineteenth century many Jews emigrated to towns in the centre and west of Germany, and to the United States, as a result not of pogroms but of lack of success in the tough economic battle with Polish merchants and craftsmen. Both Polish and German historiography developed for a long time on a confrontational model, and thus give much exposure to nationality-based conflicts, while examples of coexistence and cooperation often go unnoticed or neglected. Moreover, relations between national groups in Wielkopolska are largely perceived through the lens of the conflicts between the elites of those groups. We have much less knowledge about such relations in the everyday life of the lower social classes – the peasants and workers.

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The cultural heritage of Wielkopolska represents a rich legacy, which today's inhabitants of the region should not only nurture and protect, but also use as a source of models and inspiration in facing the challenges of the twenty-first century. The func-

⁴⁵ J. Paradowska, *Bambrzy, mieszkańcy dawnych wsi miasta Poznania*, Warsaw–Poznań 1975.

⁴⁶ A. Mączak, *W czasach „potopu” ...*, p. 260.

tion of a cultural bridge, which Wielkopolska performed to a greater or lesser extent during more than a millennium of Polish history, its significant contribution to the transfer of culture from the countries of Western Europe to the Polish lands, as well as the traditions of civic society and the coexistence of people of different faiths and nationalities, can and should serve today as a signpost and an obligation in the difficult process of Poland's integration with European structures.

In the Development Strategy for Wielkopolska Province, drawn up at the start of the twenty-first century, it was proposed to "engage the province in active interregional cooperation" and to "style Poznań as a metropolitan centre of European rank."⁴⁷ Efforts to achieve these goals have so far been carried out with insufficient dynamism and invention. In many initiatives and projects at international level, Poznań is outpaced by other cities, particularly Wrocław. From the past, both distant and recent, we also inherit the Wielkopolska ethos, which gradually faded during the communist era.⁴⁸ It thus becomes desirable to create conditions for the rebuilding of that ethos, and to undertake a wide range of educational activity to make the wider population of Wielkopolska aware of the entire rich cultural heritage of the region.

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Key words: Wielkopolska, Greater Poland, cultural heritage, civic society, system of Polish organisations

ABSTRACT

The author discusses three selected elements of the cultural heritage of Wielkopolska (Greater Poland) which can and should help the region's community to cope with the challenges of the 21st century. He describes the role played by Wielkopolska in cultural transfer from West European countries over a millennium of Polish history, from the adoption of Christianity in 966 up to the 20th century. The second element of the region's cultural heritage to be discussed concerns the traditions of civic society. In the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century, a more modern society was shaped in this area compared with other parts of Poland, a society aware of its goals and the advantages that follow from collective action. The opportunity to propagate among that community the habit and capability of engaging in continuous activity based on thorough analysis of social needs, and to apply rational means to meet those needs, was created by a system of Polish organisations – economic, social, educational and others – which gradually developed from the mid-1830s onwards, and was only dismantled by the communist authorities in the years following the Second World War. The third of the selected elements of Wielkopolska's cultural heritage is the contribution made to the region's economic, social and cultural development by German settlers arriving in waves since the 13th century, as well as Jews, the Czech Brethren and other refugees from Bohemia and Moravia who arrived in large numbers in the second half of the 16th century.

⁴⁷ *Strategia rozwoju województwa wielkopolskiego. Sejmik Województwa Wielkopolskiego*, Poznań 2000.

⁴⁸ Further see: *Etos Wielkopolan. Antologia tekstów o społeczeństwie Wielkopolski z drugiej połowy XIX i XX wieku*. Texts selected and edited by W. Molik, assisted by A. Baszko, Poznań 2005, pp. 18ff.

