

## **Preface<sup>1</sup>**

The Opole Silesia (Śląsk Opolski) also known as Opole Province (Województwo Opolskie) is the smallest of all 16 Polish regions. Squeezed in between Lower Silesia and Silesia regions, Opole Silesia has faced a constant threat of being object of partition and absorption into its mightier neighbours in the east and west. The importance of the Opole Silesia consists in its position on the middle part of navigable Odra River and on an important railway line connecting Cracow with Wrocław. Of nationwide importance is the Opole Power Station (Elektrownia Opole – EO) that at present is being expanded into one of the most powerful stations in Poland. It uses coal that comes from the mines located in the Silesia region and is transported by rail. Until 2016, EO was situated on the territory of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune (gmina) but from January 2017 it was incorporated into the Opole commune. The main socio-economic problem of the Opole region is outmigration partly resulting from relative lack of work opportunities and partly because the indigenous Silesian population received German citizenship after 1990 and settled in Germany.

This book is based on first-hand anthropological field research on the sociocultural aspects of the relationship between the inhabitants of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune and the expanding Elektrownia

---

<sup>1</sup> This preface was written as part of research grant “Conflict, tension and cooperation. A case study of mutual impact between Opole Power Station and the community of Dobrzeń Wielki.” The project was financed by National Science Foundation (NCN), decision no. DEC-2013/11/B/HS3/03895.

Opole. The original research proposal<sup>2</sup> did not anticipate the partition of Dobrzeń Wielki commune and the incorporation of five villages plus the EO into the Opole commune. Practically all of the year 2016 the research team had to take into account the heavily politicised resistance movement of people of Dobrzeń Wielki, who were opposed to the partition.

The research consisted of interviews with inhabitants of Dobrzeń Wielki, employees of EO and officials of Opole-located government offices. But we also studied relevant literature and archival material. The researchers stayed intermittently on the territory of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune and thus were able to act as participant observers, attending various local events such as the commune council meetings, various celebrations, church gatherings, protest demonstrations, cultural festivals, sport and recreational activities. The village of Dobrzeń Wielki was studied repeatedly since the end of the Second World War when the Opole Silesia was incorporated into Poland after being part of Prussia/Germany for more than 200 years. As such it was an ideal place for an anthropological re-study. The present research is thus completing the dynamic picture of social and cultural change exceeding the period of more than seventy years.

The construction of EO during the last two decades of the communist rule, subsequent exploitation of the power station's four blocks, and finally the present expansion in the form of blocks 5 and 6 have inevitably created an unexpected novelty for the inhabitants of the nine villages that between 1974 and 2016 made up the Dobrzeń Wielki commune. The owners of land on which EO was to be built were confronted with the necessity of ceding their property to the state. The indemnities were small and people did not know

---

<sup>2</sup> The title of the project was "Conflict, Tension and Cooperation. A case study of mutual impact between Opole Power Station and community of Dobrzeń Wielki." The three-year project (2014-2017) was financed by the National Science Centre of Poland, project No. 2013/11/B/HS3/03895. The holder of the grant was University of Wrocław. The leader of the research team was Petr Skalník, other members of the team being Monika Baer, Marcin Brocki, Konrad Górny, Mirosław Marczyk, Marek Pawlak, and Ewa Kruk.

what kind of health or ecological hazards they were facing once the construction would be completed and EO would start operation. There was apprehension and even fear among those who would continue to live in the shadow of the huge industrial enterprise.

Those involved in the construction were numerous and for at least some of them a special housing estate „Energetyk“ was built to the northeast of Dobrzeń Wielki. The construction lasted for two decades which gave people an opportunity to get accustomed to the existence of EO and the new housing estate in their vicinity. Also the technologies of exhalation control have improved considerably so that special filters could be installed and the level of pollution which locals feared was drastically reduced. Eventually the inhabitants of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune accepted EO as part of their lives. When the question of the completion of EO with the construction of blocks 5 and 6 emerged in the late 2000, a questionnaire designed by the students of the University of Wrocław under the leadership of the present writer showed that the inhabitants of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune did not object to its realisation. However, this does not mean that the authorities of the commune and its inhabitants would engage themselves in the struggle for the decision to start the construction of blocks 5 and 6.

Once the EO became part of the PGE (Polish Energy Group), a state-owned public company, it lost its status of an autonomous firm. The office of the director of PGE is now situated in Bełchatów near Łódź, several hundred kilometers from EO. PGE is listed among major stock exchange actors in the Warsaw Stock Exchange. As such, PGE is primarily interested in profit generation. The decision to begin the construction of blocks 5 and 6 was influenced by the fear within PGE that the interests of stock holders could be jeopardized. The ensuing debate and activist lobbying, mainly carried out by the Opole-based politicians, unionists and other interested parties, but not by Dobrzeń Wielki commune, eventually led in June 2013 to the decision of the Polish government of Donald Tusk to approve the launch of the construction of blocks 5 and 6. The construction started in February 2014.

In November 2015, in the wake of electoral victory of PiS party (Law and Justice), the Mayor of Opole Arkady Wiśniewski announced his intention to incorporate together with some other settlements five villages from Dobrzeń Wielki commune, including the EO, into the City of Opole. This was met with disagreement by the self-government of DW and population of the commune. Protest actions continued throughout 2016. After a letter by the new head of the Opole Region, member of PiS, expressed support for the plan, the Polish Government approved Wiśniewski's plan on 19 June 2016. By January 1, 2017 EO and five villages were taken out of the corpus of Dobrzeń Wielki commune and incorporated into the Opole commune. This unexpected development impacted our research as the conflict concerning EO and its expansion, now situated in Opole City, was central to our research project.

This book contains seven chapters, each by one member of the research team. The research topics comprised of various aspects of the mutual impact between the Gmina DW and EO, now "enriched" by the issue of the incorporation of EO into the City of Opole. Political ramification of the conflict, tension and cooperation have the obvious priority followed by the economic aspects of the expansion of EO. There are two chapters on economics, one concentrating on entrepreneurial activities, while the second deals more with the economic relationship between EO and the population of DW. There are also two chapters on migration. One concentrates on worker labour migration, while the second discusses women as migrants. Ethnic relations dominate in another chapter that deals with the dynamics of ethnic relations in DW in connection with the expansion of EO. Finally, there is a chapter on selected characteristics of social activities of women in DW in the light of dominant anthropological theory.

The introductory chapter by the writer of this Preface deals with political and broader social aspects of the expansion of EO. It mentions the question of Poland's reliance on coal as source of electric energy and warmth. The European Union decarbonization programme has been not heeded by Poland and the expansion of EO, although heralded as no ecological hazard, remains a problem. The

chapter further develops the overall critique of late industrialism that in some parts of the world has led to ecological catastrophes. Poland still discusses the introduction of nuclear energy generation. The chapter then broaches the social consequences of the construction of the first phase of EO (blocks 1–4). Next in the chapter is the discussion of the gradual acceptance of EO among the inhabitants of DW and the role in it of Józef Pękala, many years' director of EO, as a humane manager and promotor of mutually advantageous relations between EO and DW commune. It is followed by a brief survey of sociological research on DW and EO as successor to Giełczyn (research pseudonym of DW) studies. The chapter also tackles the debates and conflicts leading to the decision to proceed with the construction of blocks 5 and 6 of EO. There is a covert competition between the City of Opole and DW, which reflects the tension between ethnicities in the Opole Silesia. Is this region of Poland an example of a failed melting pot? The chapter discusses also the central position of the EO enlargement in the Opole Region and in the relation between DW and the Opole City. This relates to the question of the limits of self-government vis-a-vis political interest from above.

Konrad Górny and Mirosław Marczyk have analyzed the influence of the major investment – enlargement of EO – on economic processes in the Gmina DW, namely entrepreneurial strategies as well as attitudes of public and private agents, elements of continuity and change compared to the attitudes during the earlier stages of EO. They studied local markets and their links to broader dimensions of late industrialism but also discourses outside of the local scene. These two authors also included in their research verbalized expectations and needs of local inhabitants vis-à-vis EO. Concretely, Konrad Górny dealt with social reception of various developments during the operation of EO. He identified socio-economic processes and attitudes of the people living the area of construction and expansion of EO.

Mirosław Marczyk in his chapter identified the strategies within the bottom-up dynamics observed during the expansion of the EO. This author is interested in the relations between the expansion

of the EO and particular actions taken by the residents of the DW commune. The text discusses local bottom-up strategies designed with the use of the potential economic situation. They take the form of various cultural activities, among which bottom-up economic strategies are crucial. The impulses for these activities are supplied by specifically targeted social changes taking place under the influence of supra-local political and economic transformations.

Marek Pawlak's chapter takes up the question of Mobile Livelihood of workers engaged in the expansion of EO. The author contends that EO is strongly embedded in the local landscape of DW commune. Its recent expansion has fuelled new migration to the region and generated new economic initiatives. The chapter explores mobile livelihood of labourers working on the power plant's expansion and problematizes their strategies of dealing with specific kind of temporariness. First, he introduces the context and predicaments of conducting an ethnographic fieldwork in the industrial site and surroundings, which also cast light on labourers' everyday life routines. Next, he examines the temporal and spatial aspects of labourers' mobility as well as their daily strategies of living 'between shifts' while residing temporarily in the hostel located in DW territory. Labourers, who construct a mobile livelihood and move between different industrial sites across Poland (and beyond), find themselves in a rather ambiguous position of being "here" and "there." For many, it is an economic strategy, which they follow for several of years (or more), and which enables them to support their families. They are local, but only in places where they live with families; while working and residing at different industrial sites, they experience rather indifference, flexibility and temporariness towards visiting places. Their mobile livelihood has been habituated and seems to have become a strategy of "muddling through" the conditions of neoliberalism and late industrialism. Construction workers' mobile livelihood, altogether with indifference, temporariness and flexibility, is an example of their agency, which shows different ways of dealing with the existing global forces and dependencies. Neoliberal reconfigurations of political economy loosen the livelihood certainties and introduce

profit-oriented "accumulation by dispossession," the context of late industrialism evokes the anxieties of working conditions and the questions of safety measures.

Ewa Kruk in her chapter concentrates on migrating women in the area of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune. She analyzes family and maternal strategies by women for whom the Dobrzeń Wielki commune is a space cutting across the borders, where multi-level processes of exchange of people, things, ideas take place. These women, for whom DW area became a place of (temporary) settlement, are of different nationalities and occupy various social locations determined by hierarchizing factors of politics, economy, history, kinship, and geography; the hierarchies based on gender, "race," ethnicity, nationality, etc., "shape and discipline the ways they think and act". Due to the intensity of migration processes occurring in the studied area, their dynamic character and the transnational actors participating in them, Kruk's analysis is embedded in the transnational/translocal mobility paradigm. "Settled in mobility," the migrating women become members of the host community and at the same time they negotiate a number of identities and connections with their community of origin. Owing to the use of transnational/translocal perspective, the author shows that family and household are deeply rooted in gender practices, and that "the researched women manifest the multidimensional agency which reveals itself in conditions of migration as a response to situations resulting from their current position".

Marcin Brocki's chapter concerns the dynamics of ethnic relations in the commune of Dobrzeń Wielki in the light of social processes triggered off by the recent expansion of the Opole Power Plant. The author tests the hypothesis that the expansion affects intergroup relations. The hypothesis is backed by two premises: first, that large industrial investments and developments have an impact on the communities living in their vicinity, and second, that in the municipality with a strong German minority where mutual inter-group relations were already tense, the influx of large number of workers from outside the region may have a negative effect on those relations. Although the current research has not confirmed the research

hypotheses about the impact of EO expansion on interethnic relations (tensions), it has shown that there exist intergroup tensions independently of the development of the EO (the dichotomous division into “ours” and “not-ours” is present in all groups of residents of the commune). Moreover, the chapter shows that although for more than a decade there had been a significant progress in building a sense of local community - the sense of “we”/homeliness that would include also the immigrant population - this process has not resulted in the formation of a homogenous community but a community integrated enough so that in face of the external political pressures involving the partition of municipality, the community acted as a whole even though the ethnicity was still at play as a potentially differentiating element.

Last but not least comes the chapter by Monika Baer who studied social activities of women in the DW commune in light of anthropological critique. The author, relying on the writings of Kim Fortun, argues that the contemporary world can be seen as a product of technical, biophysical, cultural, or economic nested systems of various scales involved in multiple and complex interactions. Such context makes keeping the analyzed problems “in place” impossible. The emerging phenomena rather need to be followed through variously defined, but continuous spaces. This, in turn, requires broadening the classical forms of anthropological critique. The proposed perspective uses some elements of “anthropology of the contemporary” developed by Paul Rabinow, “para-ethnography” by George Marcus, and “ethnography in late industrialism” by Kim Fortun. Baer applied her critical theoretical approach in her investigation of social activities of women in the DW commune. The author worked with four groups of women of different ages, involved in different activities. They are comprised of an educational group focused on family issues; an association working for local community; a vocal ensemble; and majorettes. The existing literature on the Opole Silesia examines macro- and microstructures separately, treats “local communities” as coherent wholes and assumes that gender differences are basically rooted in reproductive roles. This study shows how such concepts



as “(Silesian) women,” “family,” “tradition,” “identity,” or “local community” are produced, sustained or destabilized at the intersections of “the individual” (in discursive practices of specific persons) and “the supraindividual” (conditionings of local, national, European, or global types). Instead of lamenting or even mourning the presumed “collapse” or “disintegration” of the culturally autonomous Opole Silesia, the present form of anthropological critique recognizes new forms of “family life,” the transgressive potential of “women’s agency,” discursive (re)constructions of the “region,” new emblems of the “local community,” or potentials emerging from the recently “partitioned” Dobrzeń Wielki commune.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors of this book would like to thank the inhabitants of the DW commune, especially those who answered our questions. We thank also the employees of EO for the same. We are grateful to the Opole-based officials and scholars who helped us to understand the complexities of the research field. Special thanks are due to Józef Pękala, Alojzy Kokot and Henryk Czech for their long-term willingness to share with us their knowledge and memories. The book is dedicated to the memory of the late Józef Pękala, a pioneer of constructive relations between a giant industrial enterprise and the people living in its vicinity.

Komárov, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2018  
Petr Skalník

