

Piotr Szatkowski: *Masurians – the disappearing testimony of the linguistic past of the Polish-German borderland. The contemporary language practices of descendants of the native population of Masuria*

The Masurians are a disappearing community of indigenous people of the Masurian region. Their culture and speech reflect the complicated history of the former Polish-German borderland. The Masurians are mostly descendants of colonists from Mazovia, but also many of them have their roots in Germany, Lithuania, France, Austria, Scotland, the Netherlands and Russia. Some research also indicate the admixture of the remains of the Old Prussians, who were conquered by the Teutonic Order in the 13th century. After the Teutonic conquest of these areas, various colonization waves lasted practically until the 19th century. The Masurians, who converted to the Lutheran denomination in the 16th century, have lived all the time at the crossroads of German and Polish cultural influences. The Masurians traditionally used the Masurian dialect in its several variants, as well as the Ostróda dialect, High Prussian dialects, the Low German and the standard German language, called High German.

The processes of assimilation to the German society, language and culture intensified particularly in the second half of the 19th century, when the Masurian dialect began to disappear slowly. Despite this, the Mazurians still used the old Polish cantionals and translations of the Holy Bible. Polish services in various parts of Masuria were held in the 1930s until they were completely banned by the Nazi regime. The largest linguistic switch took place after World War I, when the assimilation processes accelerated. The German state was rebuilding Masurian towns destroyed by the war, and the plebiscite of 1920 showed that the majority of Masurians had already felt a part of the political German nation. They did not know the Polish state - their territories never belonged directly to Poland. They were also afraid of being forced to convert to Catholicism, which would not be acceptable to many Masurians. After World War II, Masurians became a disappearing community. The old dialect was mainly used by the elders and less educated people, still most of Masurians spoke German well. The national verification carried out by the communists was marked by terror; it only caused that many Masurians wanted to move to Germany even more. Numerous ethnic and religious harassments had a similar impact on them. The Masurians were leaving their homeland gradually, until the 1970s. The community of several hundred thousand members disintegrated and spread throughout Germany and Poland.

According to various estimates, between 1.3 and 10 thousand Masurians live in Poland today. The purpose of this project is to investigate what languages (or dialects) are used by the modern descendants of the indigenous Mazurian population and how often; it is needed to study the contexts, the area of the usage of these languages, the demographical and identity characteristics of the users of the diverse language codes. The study also aims to reveal the relationship between the contemporary language practices and the so-called language biographies, i.e. the biographies of the respondents and their families, analyzed in terms of the languages they used in the past and related memories, feelings and facts.

I have been working among Masurians for many years. Based on past experience, I have developed several hypotheses that need to be verified. The most important of them is the assumption that there are intergenerational differences in the way of using specific languages. The German language dominates among the older generation, it is also used by younger people as a professional asset - it helps in contacts with tourists or in getting a job. Polish dominates the middle and young generation. The Masurian dialect and old German dialects have mainly a sentimental and identity meaning. They are rarely used, mainly by some older members of the community.

These and other side hypotheses will be verified with a series of about 60 interviews conducted evenly throughout Masuria. The meetings with the descendants of the indigenous inhabitants from the entire region will reveal subtle differences between specific parts of it. In this manner, the acquired knowledge can fill an important gap in the research on the linguistic past and the resulting present of this community. It is crucial to conduct the research before the Masurian community completely disappears. The expected effect of the research is to supplement the sociolinguistic knowledge about Masurians. The research results will be published in the form of at least 3 articles published in peer-reviewed journals or monographs. The research will also be presented thanks to 3 lectures given by me in Masuria.