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## **The Activation of Local Communities in Poland as Illustrated by the 'Small Homelands' Programme\***

The purpose of this paper is to provide a grass-roots view of the formation of democracy on the basis of initiatives submitted to the Cultural Foundation competition 'Small Homelands — A Tradition for the Future.' Four editions of the competition have so far taken place (in 1993, 1994, 1996 and 1998). It is an open competition for the most interesting local cultural endeavours. Its purpose is to stimulate socio-cultural activities in local communities. The scope of ideas presented in the projects which have been submitted to the competition is very varied: a wide spectrum of educational activities, promotion of the environment, development of 'soft' tourism, protection of the local natural and cultural heritage, research of monographies of specific localities and villages, attempts to renovate neglected historical monuments, develop cooperation with neighbouring centres, bring together communities which differ culturally yet live close to one another in the same areas, organizing events on a one-time, cyclical or other basis. Some of these ideas are original, resourceful, unusual — others are more conventional and are a sign of good will in acting for the community. When attempting to present the process of the revival of collectivities and local communities in Poland after 1989, I assume that the transformations connected with the change of political system were a favourable factor. This process should favour the development of grass-roots democracy, expressing itself in the significant participation of the community in wielding power and cooperating for the benefit of the home environment and so also of the village, town, commune and district.

In March 1998 The Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) made an analysis of the collective social activity of the Polish people. It appeared that we most willingly get involved in work concerning education, the local

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parish and religious movements. The hardly perceptible involvement among those surveyed in local (district, housing estate) government is alarming, although it seems that these organs should be closest to the respondents because they represent the interests of the inhabitants of a given area. The authors of this survey are searching for the sources of this social passivity rooted in cultural factors, inherited from social realism which rejected the principles of public spirit and democracy. The principle of social activity was discredited by the organization of so-called 'voluntary work,' often imposed from above and other useless actions. This kind of organization accustomed people to having decisions made by others. The survey also showed a low level of social awareness, a sense of not having any influence on matters concerning one's own country or environment.

### **Financing culture after the transformation of the political system**

The changes in the way the state functions, brought about by the political transformation since 1989 entail modifications in various areas. These include culture, which is no longer state-controlled and is now widely the result of spontaneous social activities. Due to the legal modifications brought about by the political transformation and with the creation of local government, there have also been changes in the financing of culture. The Cultural Development Fund has been done away with, thereby creating a new and rather difficult situation from the organizational and legal point of view. The organization of cultural events is now largely the responsibility of local government. Its duty is to provide facilities for developing cultural activity. However, local government cannot finance all cultural activities. In comparison with other areas, culture is frequently regarded as a marginal issue by the local authorities. Social needs which need to be seen to daily and urgently (plumbing, sewerage, road works, telephone services, etc.) are considerable rivals.

Therefore, so-called extra-budgetary funds play a significant role in financing culture, among others initiated by NGO's. Since 1989 various kinds of organizations, foundations, funds have appeared, providing allocations, grants, bursaries for different types of socio-cultural activity.

### **In the realm of the small homeland**

In his 'Sociological analysis of the idea of homeland' which first appeared in 1946, the outstanding Polish sociologist, Stanisław Ossowski (1897–1963) forged the concept of 'the private homeland' which is tangible, very personally perceived in daily life. The private or 'small homeland' is man's closest environment, the world experienced daily, nature, people and the socio-cultural reality they create. It is a world where people are united

by an emotional bond. The German language distinguishes between *Vaterland* and *Heimat*. The idea of the homeland is associated with patriotism. The source of European patriotism lies in the roots of the Latin *patria*. This word exists in French, Italian and Spanish. It binds the homeland with the state, reflecting the power and the glory of the state. In Slavonic tradition, particularly eastern and southern, the family is the prototype and model of the homeland. The homeland is associated with the home, family and village. It is founded on the distinction between the insider and the outsider, it is clearly linked with the father and with inheriting the household from him, with the mother by reference to the earth 'Mother — Earth' revered, the homeland — woman bringing children into the world. Mother and father are united by the home, family hearth, the heart of the small homeland, aptly portrayed by the Kashubian expression *domowina* (Bartmiński, 1993: 7).

A project from the border town of Sejny in Suwałki province, where Lithuanians and Poles currently live side by side and where Russians, Byelorussians, Jews and Germans once lived was sent to the first edition of the 'Small homelands — a tradition for the future' competition. The authors of this project, members of the Association for the Development of Sejny and its surroundings ask: 'Why do we need a small homeland? We associate this idea with patrimony, heritage, the past, memory... Asking about today and tomorrow we find ourselves in a position, fissured as a result of various past events, we are on the borderline. Those living here are of various nationalities and beliefs and are alienated. The young generation have little in common with the generation of their parents or grandparents. Communication between villagers and town people is difficult. People exist in separate environments and professional groups. Even homes with tables where we can sit down together are growing increasingly rare.' — and then — 'Here, on the borderland the small homeland should become an insulation for the cracked earth, which will remain cracked for long to come, but it must after all start to cicatrize, become filled with bridges and open doors.'<sup>1</sup>

The concept of 'the small homeland' is not clearly defined. It is difficult to fully express its meaning in a few simple words. But perhaps due to such concepts the world still remains magic in a certain sense. This indefinability allows people to create their own definitions, at the centre of which lies emotion, a feeling binding man to a place, an area distinct from others in various ways. It seems that whoever considers the significance of possession — sensing the small homeland, can interpret what it means to him or her.

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<sup>1</sup> A project from the first edition of the competition of the Cultural Foundation 'Małe Ojczyzny — tradycja dla przyszłości' ('Small Homelands — A Tradition for the Future') entitled *Dom Sąsiedztwa — Nasza Mała Ojczyzna Ziemia Sejneńska* (*The Home in the Vicinity — The Land of Sejny, Our Small Homeland*), compiled by the Association for the Development of Sejny and its vicinity.

'What is the small homeland? — It is the closest world we daily live in: nature, the people and the culture which is constantly created by them. [...] This may be our most immediate neighbourhood: the country, village, commune, housing estate or urban district. Being part of a greater whole and bordering with neighbouring small homelands it mutually creates lands, states and regions — large homelands.'<sup>2</sup> This is an example of how the authors of the competition define the small homeland.

In the projects submitted to the competition other definitions were devised by the authors for their own use. A deeper reflection arose concerning the bond between the individual and the place s/he lives in.

'The homeland, the small homeland has a non-institutional yet totally personal dimension. Only laws and mechanisms contributing to its duration can be institutional. [...] The small homeland — is a land whose frontiers can change within us without causing harm to other, neighbouring small homelands. Its sense of space has, above all, a spiritual nature and that is why concepts such as rapacity, conquest and violence are alien to it. [...] The small homeland is present within us through the resources of values, stored both by previous generations and by ourselves.'<sup>3</sup>

To Anna and Antoni Pilch, the authors of the 'Manorial Psalm Book' project, the XVI century fortification manor and surrounding area which once belonged to the manorial estate is that kind of place. They consider the manor as a 'visible sign' of their small homeland. There they run a centre of ancient music, the so-called Lute Academy and try to have an influence on their neighbours, helping them diversify their monotonous country lifestyles. The manor is becoming a centre which emanates culture towards its surroundings.

The authors of the project 'Place — Memory — Presence,' members of the 'NN Theatre' in Lublin, present the following definition of the small homeland: 'In the spacial sense our Small Homeland is Lublin and the region connected with this town. A particular place in this space is the Old Town in Lublin and the seat of the NN Theatre — *Brama Grodzka*, the Castle Gate. What constitutes our Small Homeland in the spiritual sense is that which arises from the tradition and history of this place: a meeting of different cultures, between East and West. This history also includes the experience of Majdanek — the camp where hundreds of thousands of people were exterminated. This is precisely what we want to take along with us when meeting the future and all the questions and problems it holds.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> From the materials of the Cultural Foundation, promoting the programme 'Small homelands — a tradition for the future,' 1995, p. 2

<sup>3</sup> The project 'Bory Tucholskie — My Small Homeland' by Jan Sabiniarz, submitted to the second edition of the competition, pp. 3–5.

<sup>4</sup> 'Place — Memory — Presence,' a project by Tomasz Pietrasiewicz and his team, first edition of the competition, p. 6.

Instead of definitions which are more or less precise, descriptions often appear of specific small homelands, which are the result of a combination of the geographic trait and the trait of the population inhabiting a specific area as well as the local culture created by it.

There are many expressions and interpretations of the small homeland for the authors of the competing projects. I have presented those I considered most meaningful. It is very significant that by attempting to define this concept the authors of the projects had to take a very close look at the place in question, delve into its history, heritage and future.

### **The small homeland as a return to local communities**

Issues concerning local communities have frequently been dealt with, both theoretically and empirically. In his work 'The Local Community,' Jan Turowski points out that local communities are one of the most frequently assumed topics in sociological literature (Turowski, 1977: 105). Janusz Mucha also emphasizes this fact while on the subject of the local ethnic community (Mucha, 1996: 15-18).

Papers devoted to this theme were full of rich descriptions of the life of such communities, they described their standards, behaviour and customs. In this light, local communities appeared to have a social way of life which was highly organized and autonomous as far as the economy, social and cultural life were concerned. Nowadays, it would be hard to find an old, traditional local community with strong social ties. In the case of Poland, the policy of the authorities after the Second World War was neither conducive to maintaining local communities nor to their further development. Highly centralized political power contributed to destroying autonomy at local level. Describing the situation of local communities during the period of the Polish People's Republic, Elżbieta Łojko states that standards dictated from above and norms created by the socialist system, were widely adopted, becoming a permanent part of human consciousness and are difficult to alter. Those 45 years were instrumental in assuming an attitude of helplessness, a situation of expectation that someone from somewhere is there to solve problems or difficulties, since the community in question is incapable of generating constructive solutions for itself. I would even submit a view, that that particular centralist system of wielding power contributed to intensifying the provincial complex by standardizing cultural patterns and deriding small-town or village communities. At the same time, due to the accelerated industrialization of Poland, there was an increased population outflow from country to towns.

The creation or activation of the small homeland is associated with a nostalgia for neighbours who help one another, a feeling of having an influence on one's own environment and being responsible for one's own

'private homeland.' The words of the authors in the competition brochure say the following: 'It is our intention to lend support and stimulate new energy among existing cultural and creative elites in local communities in present-day Poland to work efficiently towards maintaining values which originated in the past and using tradition constructively for the benefit of the future. We wish to encourage an attitude of respect for local cultural heritage as one of the many fruits and legitimate components of the large cultural universe. We want heritage and tradition to become the source of recommendations for shaping and reinforcing self-identity and cultural independence.'<sup>5</sup>

The regional community is one type of local community. There are several characteristics which distinguish such a community. These include: linguistic particularity (e.g. local dialect), cultural distinction developed through history as well as economic particularity. The sense of attachment to regional collectivities is also associated with specific political and administrative conditions, the former attachment of these regions to the invaders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their lives at that time and nowadays. These factors point out the state of social awareness, creating a sense of belonging to a distinct region, as in the case of Silesia, Podhale, Wielkopolska, Mazovia, Mazuria and Kashuby. It is worth noticing that when talking about a region, one may be thinking of the administrative divisions into voivodships (provinces), yet the administrative boundaries rarely tally with the geographic or cultural boundaries of particular regions.

In his work 'Sociology in regional and local planning. Usefulness or necessity?', Jacek Wódz considers the problems of belonging to the regional community. He ascertains that apart from external factors, connected with living conditions and factors such as the spiritual experience of tradition and culture, there is the question of 'belonging to one's own folk,' which does not necessarily mean keeping direct or regular contact with these 'folk,' but rather assumes a partiality, a longing for the land of one's ancestors (Wódz, 1989).

What does the sense of community mean in today's world? Can this be considered as a longing for the attachment to a particular group, where people know one another, are not anonymous and therefore lonely? I think it can. Despite the tremendous development of information reaching the furthest corners of the world and the ease in acquiring knowledge about the entire world, mankind continues to need a place to belong to, specific people with whom to experience reality. In the face of a multitude of cultures composed of people, it is difficult to imagine one unified culture, which

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<sup>5</sup> From the information brochure concerning the third edition of the competition *Small homelands — a tradition for the future*, published by the Cultural Foundation, 1995, p. 4.

everyone would participate in. The highly technological world, which has contributed to creating an ever greater distance between people, has brought along with it a feeling of loneliness. Zygmunt Bauman describes the present age as an endless search for the community. Small, local communities are beginning to revive. More and more people are searching for somewhere to belong, joining various associations, clubs and organizations.

In present-day Poland, under the influence of the democratic transformation and the gradual decentralization of power, local communities are having to participate in the activities of the city, commune and region. More and more specific towns or regions are cooperating with their foreign counterparts. Possibilities of improving business opportunities by joining forces exist in borderland areas.

Environmental education is also a significant factor here — its scope or area stems from the problems of the local environment. Apart from the necessity of rebuilding and developing local communities there are threats connected with the indiscriminate adoption of patterns drawn from the world of mass western culture. There is also the risk of socio-economic degradation of these groups. Awareness of the laws, possibilities and potential opportunities of small local centres should combat this. In many of the projects submitted to the competition educational aspects are either dominant or have a secondary role. Local education is conducive to living up social life and developing the public spirit. The social educationist, Wiesław Theiss writes: 'Environmental education concentrates on the area between the family and the state. By bridging this enormous gap it draws people together in the local community, creates a social identity, develops civil autonomy and activity. During this process a typical position develops — as is sometimes described — for *the new social person*. First of all, this person actively participates in national socio-political changes. Secondly, s/he is immune to the crises of the post-modern epoch, which propagate destruction, disbelief, chaos, the decline of identity, *the end of history*. This person sees opportunities for him/herself and the world in a stability offered by a united and responsible community, built on principles of democracy, morality, dialogue and cooperation' (Theiss, 1997: 28).

The second edition of the competition received a project from Lewin Kłodzki, telling the story of a young community, barely a few years old, about the initiatives undertaken by its inhabitants with the purpose of doing something for themselves.<sup>6</sup> The project was initiated by someone who came to Lewin as an outsider. Coming into contact with the existing local stagnation and with the experience of her former social activity, she decided to start acting. Until 1991 Lewin lay within the boundaries of the commune

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<sup>6</sup> The project 'How to Believe in Success' by Barbara Drożyńska, submitted to the second edition of the competition.

of Kudowa Zdrój and none of the local authorities bothered to improve its situation, their entire attention and possible activity concentrated on Kudowa. Mrs Drożyńska started her efforts for the benefit of Lewin by running for council elections, then endeavouring to separate Lewin as an independent commune. Further steps included searching for ideas to enliven the place. Initially this involved a cycle of children's events: The Festival of Theatrical Creativity for Pre-School Children, a party given 'For the Children by the Adults.' Later, drawing inspiration from neighbours in a nearby Czech village, the local activists established a local holiday. They decided to hold an annual fair *Lewińskie Michałki* (*St. Michael's Day in Lewin*) after St. Michael, the patron saint of the local parish church. Michał Lewiński, the patron of the commune was then sought out. In this way, mainly by having fun, the village was livened up and people were encouraged to become more active and integrated. So that the 'town hall news' could reach all the local residents, the publication of a local newspaper 'Wzgórza Lewińskie' (The Lewin Hills) was started. Due to the high unemployment rate a decision was taken to create new job opportunities. The land of Kłodzko with its landscape and mountains is an exceptional tourist attraction. The idea arose of starting a local tourist office together with neighbouring communes, which would promote those areas and organize a tourist infrastructure. Thus an information centre, *Turystyczna Szóstka* (The Tourist Six) came into being and turned out to be a very good idea.

The programme 'Świdnica in the light of its existence' is an illustration of educational activities realized by the Association for the Benefit of Man 'ITON,' involving mainly educational cycles, connected with the promotion of autonomy, the development of cooperation on the 'democratic network,'<sup>7</sup> the presentation of civic society, the dissemination of awareness of human rights. It is not easy to start doing anything without finding a place for oneself in the new reality and the new legal situation. Hence the importance of educational activities connected with promoting the idea of grassroots democracy, the development and possibilities of NGOs.

Programmes prepared by ethnic minorities have also been submitted to the competition. The main purpose of these programmes is the safeguard of cultural heritage and the identification of the members of a given minority with that culture.

The local community, the inhabitants of small homelands who identify and are integrated with them seem to be an opportunity for places such as Lewin Kłodzki and many others in Poland.

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<sup>7</sup> The term promoted by the Foundation for the Development of Local Democracy for the cooperation and contacts between various NGOs.



## Conclusion

The considerations presented above are an insight into the projects submitted to the programme 'Small homelands — a tradition for the future.' Starting with the current perception of the small homeland, the relationship with the closest environment, through the sense of local bonds, the conversion after the transformation of the socio-political system after 1989 — all of this characterizes the initiatives submitted to the programme. In no way is one model of such an initiative dominant. There is considerable variety. Stefan Starczewski and Barbara Weber (Starczewski, Weber, 1997: 111) reached the following conclusions concerning the results of the competition:

— firstly, the realization of these projects enriches the former modest choice of active participation in socio-cultural life, as broadly understood;

— secondly, such activity is instrumental in expanding the knowledge of the inhabitants about their environment, reinforcing social awareness and social bonds for the integration of these circles,

— thirdly, groups and individuals appear who are enterprising and willing to act for the benefit of the particular community.

The purpose of many of these projects is to serve educational activities and ecological education, connected with developing respect for the environment, nature; regional education, disseminating knowledge about the place one lives in, its heritage; as well as awareness of democracy, in other words, the development of knowledge about the forms of autonomous and non-governmental activity. In certain cases, education is considered as a way of solving problems, particularly in borderland areas or those inhabited by representatives of different cultures.

Educational activities may also have the purpose of familiarization with a different culture and its heritage so as to overcome orthodox stereotypes and fears. The author of one of the submitted projects 'Place — Memory — Presence' says the following: 'The object of our considerations will be culture as one of the fundamental factors bringing nations closer together. This is significant since demons of nationalism always seem to come to life. It is precisely the domain of culture, which is both universal and respectful of people where people speaking different languages can meet without problem' (Pietrasiewicz, 1994: 52). The venture undertaken by the Culture Foundation within the framework of the competition programme 'Small homelands — a tradition for the future' is not alone in supporting the development of local communities in Poland. There is also a special programme of the Foundation for the Development of Local Democracy — A competition for Social Enterprise, as well as several other ventures involved in the development of grass-roots democracy. The 'Small homelands' competition specifically supports the development of activities where culture plays a dominant role.

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