

*Michał Głuszkowski*

**Socio-cultural and Language Changes  
in a „Cultural Island”:  
Vershina – A Polish Village in Siberia**

**Abstract**

The present article attempts to describe the social evolution of the community of Vershina, a village founded in the beginning of the 20th century by voluntary settlers from Little Poland, from a cultural island to the stage of assimilation. The social, economic, cultural, political and language situation of the community changed several times. The most significant historical moments of Russia and the Soviet Union set the borders of three main periods in Vershina's history. During its first two-three decades Vershina consisted a homogenous Polish cultural and language island. The migrants preserved the Roman Catholic religion, Polish language and traditions as well as farming methods and machines. Collectivization and the communist system with its repressions made the Polish village assimilate to its surroundings. With the flow of time, the generation of first settlers died and some of the traditions of Little Poland vanished or got modified by the elements of the Soviet, Russian or Buryat culture. After the Perestroika the minorities gained some rights, which strengthened in the 1990s. Thanks, to the political changes and the collapse of the SU the inhabitants of Vershina can found cultural organisations, cultivate their religion, and learn Polish in local schools. However, in spite of the regained rights, over the decades of mass sovietization and ateization, the culture and customs of the Polish community became similar to other Siberian villages. Young people from the group of our interest abandon their mother language and are not eager to leave Russia and move to Poland. The process of assimilation is

intensifying while there are practically no factors protecting the local culture and language.

**Keywords:** language and cultural island, minority, assimilation, Polishness, identity, Polish migrants, Siberia, rural community

### **The establishment of the village of Vershina: An outline of the research problem**

The genesis of Vershina does not suit the picture of Siberia widespread in Polish culture, historiography and media. Although the region has been associated with exiled people, it was also voluntarily chosen by some as the place of settlement. People who faced the economic crisis in Dąbrowa Basin and other parts of Little Poland were looking for a solution to change their situation. In the beginning of the 20th century these territories as a part of Polish Kingdom (also: Vistula Country) constituted western borderlands of the Russian Empire<sup>1</sup>. Tsarist authorities encouraged their inhabitants to settle in Siberia and for farmers as well as miners and workers Siberia was the land of space, and new possibilities. Peter Stolypin, the Prime Minister of Russia in the years 1906–1911, introduced a subsidised programme for the colonizers (Bazyłow, 1975: 169–170). The founders of Vershina who came from various regions of Little Poland<sup>2</sup> (especially Dąbrowa Basin) were guaranteed a 16ha parcel, 75% of their travel costs were covered; they were given free building materials; subsidies in the amount of 100 roubles, and they paid lower taxes for several years (Petshik, 2008: 7–8). The village was founded in 1910, 130km north from Irkutsk. It is difficult to find the

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<sup>1</sup> In the years 1795–1918 Poland did not exist as an independent state. The territory of former Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania was divided by Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary. As a consequence of the Treaty of Tilsit (1807) on the basis of the borderlands of the three partitions was created a formally independent state – the Duchy of Warsaw. After the Congress of Vienna its territory was reduced and the duchy was transformed into the Polish Kingdom (also: Congress Kingdom), which was in personal union with Russia. Up till the resumption of independence of the Polish state in 1918 the level of autonomy of the Polish Kingdom was changing but it was still under Russian government.

<sup>2</sup> The first settlers came from the surroundings of the following towns: Olkusz, Błędów, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Piotrków Trybunalski, Końskie and others.

exact number of the first settlers, but according to the premises (census of 1926, local documents and statements of Vershina's inhabitants), the village has always been relatively big – about 400–500 inhabitants (Nowicka and Głowacka-Grajper, 2003a: 11; Petshik, 2008: 5–12).

For more than 100 years of its history, Vershina has experienced many changes in its social, cultural, economic, geopolitical and language situation, what makes the village an interesting research object for anthropologists and sociologists, linguists as well as historians. The present study aims at providing characteristics of the process of socio-cultural evolution of the community as well as the process of assimilation of the cultural and language island.

#### **Social and linguistic research in Vershina (until present)**

The Polish village in Siberia for several decades has aroused interest of scholars, publicists, journalists, documentary film makers, and recently also celebrities and politicians. One of the first widespread texts devoted to Vershina was a chapter in Hanna Krall's book, a reportage from the USSR *Na wschód od Arbatu* 'Heading east from Arbat'. The arousal of interest in the Polish community in taiga in the 21st century has been connected with the 100th anniversary of the settlement held in 2010. It has been also a subject of scientific research. Linguists have been seriously interested in the language situation of Vershina and the evolution of its dialect since the 1980s: Yuriy Goltseker's recorded some texts and described the main features of the language variety used by the descendants of the Polish migrants in the 1980–1990s; Wanda Decyk made a sketch of the language situation and the relics of the dialect of Little Poland; Natalia Ananiewa proposed a research project of Polish dialects in Russia in the 2000s, however her study was limited only to preliminary remarks (see e.g. Goltseker, 1989; Decyk, 1995; Ananiewa, 2007).

The Vershina's history was the subject of Jan Szostak's articles, who paid special attention to the years of repressions (see e.g. Szostak, 2002). Various historical aspects of the village's existence were also raised in popular-science and journalistic texts (see e.g. Minkowski, 1990; Soska, 1994; Koperski, 2003).

Thanks to the new political situation after the collapse of communism in the 1990s, the sociological and ethnological research on the Polish minority has been possible. Although the questions of identity of the isolated community constituted an interesting research problem, the first field research was performed only at the end of the 20th century. Agata Wiśniewska wrote an MA thesis and several articles dealing with the problem of Polishness and ethnic identity of the descendants of Polish migrants (Wiśniewska, 2000; 2002). The other work was specific one, because it was an MA thesis written by a native inhabitant of Vershina – Ludmiła Figura, who had graduated from the University of Gdańsk and after promotion came back to her village and has been working there as a Polish language teacher since that time (Figura, 1995). Ewa Nowicka and Małogrzata Głowacka-Grajper emphasize that these texts were the only socio-cultural studies of Vershina till 2000, when they conducted their research project on the Polish national and ethnic identity in Siberian village (Nowicka and Głowacka-Grajper, 2003a: 11–12; 2003b).

### **The present research and sources of information**

The expedition organised in 2008 by a group of 6 people: scientific workers, PhD students and students from the Nicolaus Copernicus University (Toruń) aimed at gathering sociolinguistic and dialectological material which should constitute the basis for the analysis of the preserved Polish dialectal features, Russian influence in the language variety spoken in Vershina as well as the language situation of the local community. While the present study was the first in-depth sociolinguistic research in Vershina, and 8 years since the previous scientific expedition<sup>3</sup> to this community has passed, the researchers from Toruń during the 10 days they spent in the village had to reconnoitre, bring the socio-cultural information from the available publications, update and record the linguistic and sociolinguistic material. Without access to the up-to-date demographical data it was impossible to predict the size of population in Vershina before coming to the place as well as to predict how many inhabitants are of Polish origin which was found necessary in order to specify a sampling frame and

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<sup>3</sup> E. Nowicka and M. Głowacka-Grajper's socio-cultural research in July 2000.

determine the sample size for a quantitative analysis. Due to some other circumstances<sup>4</sup>, the time in Vershina was spent on the semi-structured interviews with the locals. On the basis of the account of our informers we could quantify the population as 450–500<sup>5</sup> including approximately 75% of the descendants of Polish migrants<sup>6</sup>. The researchers tried to interview as many of them as possible. During the field research it turned out that the Polish dialect is spoken by approx. 50% of people of Polish origin and only about 100 of them (prevalently older generation) are able to produce longer utterances which could be recorded and analyzed. Finally the researchers recorded the speech of 34 inhabitants of Vershina. During the interviews the informers were asked several questions about their sociolinguistic situation (ethnic structure of the family, domains of language use, social position, occupation, education, civilian status, ethnic origin of the family members) and had the opportunity to talk on the topic chosen by themselves. The following 40 people who were not able to speak Polish, had no time for the interview or rejected to be recorded and answered only sociolinguistic questions. Only a few people rejected to talk with the researchers, who were warmly welcomed by the inhabitants of Vershina.

During the expedition in 2008, the researchers managed to record over 60 hours of interviews (monologues, dialogues and communicative situations with more than two participants). Because of the great number of recordings, the linguistic material has not been fully analyzed yet, although there are some reports on selected problems, e.g. maintenance of the dialectal features from Little Poland in Vershina<sup>7</sup> (Kozłowska, 2009; Umińska<sup>8</sup>, 2012), derivational loans from Russian (Paško, 2009), Russian

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<sup>4</sup> We had not enough information before going to Vershina to prepare a more detailed project. It was also impossible to plan a research after coming to Vershina. Due to the insufficient funds the expedition could not last longer.

<sup>5</sup> One has to notice the phenomena of oscillatory and seasonal migrations. Some of our informers and of other inhabitants of Vershina live and/or work in Irkutsk.

<sup>6</sup> While there are a lot of heterogeneous families in Vershina, the main criterion of Polishness in doubtful situations was the self-determination of the given informer.

<sup>7</sup> Many phonetic, morphological and syntax features still exist in the variety of Polish language spoken in Vershina. There is also Southern Polish dialect lexis preserved in the speech of the locals. Although the number of people speaking Polish in Vershina constantly decreases, their language still resembles the dialects used in contemporary Poland, what prove not only linguists but also other visitors of Vershina.

<sup>8</sup> The same author (A. Kozłowska changed name after marriage).

borrowings in the Polish dialect (Paśko, 2011), sociolinguistic situation of the community (e.g. Głuszkowski, 2011; 2012).

In 2011, a group of 4 people: NCU scientific workers, PhD students and a volunteer, with the cooperation of the “Polish Community” Association (Stowarzyszenie “Wspólnota Polska”)<sup>9</sup> conducted a project of a Summer School of Polish Language and Culture in Vershina. Thanks to the funds from the “Polish Community” the researchers could spend three weeks in Vershina, build ties with the youngest inhabitants of the village and gather both linguistic and sociolinguistic material after classes. This educational-scientific undertaking helped to enrich the corpus of recordings by 18 hours<sup>10</sup> of interviews and renew the sociolinguistic data.

The interviews were not the only source of the sociolinguistic data as well as the information about the history of the community being our interest, its social situation, traditions and culture. The other sources constitute various kinds of written accounts of the inhabitants of Vershina. With the exception of the already mentioned MA thesis and article written by L. Figura (Figura, 1995; 2003), the author has also analyzed Walenty Pietrzyk’s chronicle (Petshik, 2008) and school compositions about the history and culture of the Polish village in Siberia (see: Głuszkowski, 2009b).

### **Vershina as a cultural and language island: the relationships between Vershina and Poland**

The metaphor of island is often used in linguistic and socio-cultural research. Although more than one contemporary definition of this notion exists, they are not contradictory and can be treated as complementary. The term is especially vivid in linguistic studies. Claus J. Hutterer has defined language islands as: ‘internally structured settlements of a linguistic minority on a limited geographical area in the midst of a linguistically different majority’ (Rosenberg, 2005: 221). The other scholar studying the specificity of language islands, Alexandr Dulichenko emphasized the

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<sup>9</sup> A non-governmental organization aimed at various undertakings for the benefit of Poles and people of Polish origin living abroad. The organization gets funds for their activities from Polish Senate.

<sup>10</sup> Considerably smaller amount of recordings in 2011 was caused by the researchers’ engagement in the summer school.

need of borrowings in the island communities that experience the lack of lexis to name new elements of reality in their mother language because of being detached from their language continent. He also noticed that the inhabitants of language islands are bilingual: they acquire the language(s) of their surroundings and often try to maintain their mother language (Dulichenko, 1998: 26). According to A. Dulichenko, the specificity of island situations evokes and develops the phenomenon of lexical borrowings and parallel enabling preservation or prettification of language features and lexis which have already vanished in their fatherland (Dulichenko, 1998: 26–27).

Anatoliy Domashnev's study on language islands enriches the theoretical frame of these studies. The Russian scholar observed that island communities are seldom formed by people from one place. Most often their inhabitants come from different regions of their country and use more than one language variety. In foreign surroundings they merge and form a new code which can be called interdialect (Domashnev, 1983: 12).

Although the mentioned definitions and theoretical approaches were linguistic ones, they can be applied also in sociological and culturological research. Due to the specificity of island situations, characteristics of any aspect of their life is interdisciplinary. Moreover, the pioneer of the contemporary language contact studies, Uriel Weinreich, had always referred to sociological and anthropological works. According to him, the processes of lexical borrowings are strictly connected with cultural borrowings, and the language contact is an effect of the contact of cultures (Weinreich, 1963 [1953]: 11–12, 56–57). The islands depend on their surroundings and experience the lack of language means and also (or first of all) borrow from the dominant culture of their 'seas'. E. Nowicka used the term of island to describe the socio-cultural situation of Vershina and underscore the territorial aspect of such communities – an island has to be unequivocally smaller than its surroundings (Nowicka, 2011).

The criticism besetting the metaphor of island cannot be ignored. A Norwegian social anthropologist, Thomas H. Eriksen, gave a comprehensive study of the usefulness of this term. Although he referred first of all to the 'literal islands' such as Mauritius or Kiriwina in the Trobriand Archipelago, his criticism regards the idea of isolated communities in general. T.H. Eriksen doubted if insular societies can exist in the contemporary world. He claimed that: 'no society is entirely isolated,



that cultural boundaries are not absolute, and that webs of communication and exchange tie societies together everywhere, no matter how isolated they may seem when viewed superficially [...] all human societies are, to varying degrees, in crucial intercourse with other societies. In this sense, the diffusionists were correct in a general way, emphasizing that societies influence each other' (Eriksen, 1993). However, the metaphor of island, defined in the present article, seems to be resistant to his criticism. Firstly, all the cited authors agreed that the language islands are under cultural, civilisational and language influence of their surroundings. Secondly, the communities of our interest constitute islands because they are isolated from their fatherland, not because of their isolation from the neighbouring culture(s). Thirdly, we are aware of the relativity of the terms 'language island' and 'cultural island' – in the 21st century, the isolation from the fatherland can not be as strict as in the 20th or 19th centuries. Vershina constitutes both a language and cultural island (see e.g. Głuszkowski, 2012; Paśko-Konecniak, 2012). This state is an effect of its 100-year-isolation from Poland which is strong even in the era of long-distance flights and the Internet, because of the specificity of relationships between the inhabitants of Vershina and Poland, as well as the character of their Polishness and group identity described in the following paragraphs.

In the analysis of Vershina as a language and cultural island, one cannot avoid comparing it to other Polish islands in the world. There are several main types of isolated communities grouped in accordance with their genesis. Cultural and language islands may come into being as a result of voluntary (mostly economic) migration, forced settlement, migration because of persecutions (religious, political, ethnic etc.), communities which found themselves in foreign surroundings because of political and territorial expansion of other ethnos and changes of the geopolitical situation, migrations of whole nations (migrations of people), mixing of various ethnic groups during many centuries, expatriation processes (Nowicka and Głuszkowski, 2013: 10). More or less isolated Polish minority communities in the West, i.e. Western Europe, North and South America, Australia, represent two of the already mentioned types: voluntary economic and political migration. Poles in the East, i.e. in the Soviet Union and after 1991 – in the Post-Soviet countries, constitute language and cultural islands because of the geopolitical changes or/and forced settlements.



At first glance one may classify Vershina as a voluntary island, but it differs much from other communities of economic migrants because of the location – it is situated in the East and not in the West. Although some diasporas, e.g. Polish peasants in Brazil or workers and miners in France in some aspects are similar to the founders of Vershina, the analogies refer practically only to the first years of the Siberian village, while its socio-economic and political situation changed diametrically after collectivisation in the Soviet Union and resembled the conditions of communities which appeared after forced settlements or geopolitical changes. This makes Vershina resemble other Polish communities in the East. E. Nowicka points out that even in the context of the characteristic of the Polish village in Siberia terminological problems arouse. They cannot be simply classified neither as “Poles in the East”<sup>11</sup>, while they moved to Siberia by their own will, nor as “Polonia”<sup>12</sup>, while they are not living in the West (Nowicka, 2013: 13–14). Thus, the social situation of Vershina stands out on the background of Polish communities in the world<sup>13</sup>.

The family ties between the migrants and their relatives who stayed in Poland were strongest in the first two decades after migration. The basic mean of contact was correspondence, however according to the accounts of the inhabitants of Vershina, some of their ancestors visited their families in Little Poland and they also travelled to Siberia (Nowicka and Głowacka-Grajper, 2003b: 65). In the time of Stalinist repressions, it was

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<sup>11</sup> In Polish, this term (*Polacy na Wschodzie*) presupposes people of Polish origin living in the East against their will.

<sup>12</sup> Polish notion used to characterize Poles abroad (in the West), predominantly economic but also political migrants.

<sup>13</sup> However, Vershina is not the only Polish island in Siberia which came into being as a result of voluntary migration. Białystok was founded by settlers from Eastern regions of Polish Kingdom in 1899 in Tomsk province (Haniewicz, 2008: 18). There are many analogies between Vershina and Białystok: subsidies for colonizers, efforts to cultivate Polish traditions, catholic religion and maintaining Polish language in the first decades after migration, repressions of 1937, sovietization and ateization, attempts to revitalize Polishness after the collapse of the communist system (Haniewicz, 2008: 24–56). According to the only (according to the author’s information) scientific study on Białystok, this community suffered more severe repressions (100 inhabitants were shot in 1937) than Vershina and the level of maintenance of the Polish dialect and culture is lower (Haniewicz, 2008: 56–57; 111–117; Umińska, 2013: 28). Because of the lack of sociological/anthropological research on Białystok, it is impossible to compare both communities in other aspects.

much more difficult or even impossible to keep in touch with the relatives. After the war, contacts with the fatherland were easier than in the 1930s, but the inhabitants of Vershina seldom travelled to Poland (Nowicka and Głowacka-Grajper, 2003b: 65; Głuszkowski, 2009a: 69). Up till the 1990s and the collapse of the USSR people from Poland practically did not visit Vershina – the island was absolutely isolated<sup>14</sup>.

Although after 1991 more guests from the fatherland appeared in Vershina, these visits did not mean the end of isolation. Priests and Polish language teachers were the first Poles who came to the Siberian village in the post-communist era. The descendants of Polish migrants warmly welcomed them as well as the tourists and representatives of various organizations for the benefit of people of Polish origin in the East (Głuszkowski, 2009a: 70). Some of the inhabitants of Vershina hoped that their fellow countrymen from Poland will help them to go to the fatherland and find a job. However, they soon realized that they are not needed in Poland and the tourists as well as other visitors are not interested in helping them (Głuszkowski, 2009a: 71). Nowadays, they are even bored with Polish guests because of the intensity of tourist groups visiting Vershina<sup>15</sup>. As an example of their attitude towards visitors, E. Nowicka quoted the local Polish teacher: 'So many people come to us. They do not remember us, we do not remember them' (Nowicka, 2013: 25).

E. Nowicka and M. Głowacka-Grajper noticed that the possibility to study in Poland was considered as a chance for a better life, but any of the young people who went to the fatherland did not want to stay there because of problems with assimilation (Nowicka and Głowacka-Grajper, 2003b: 64). Also L. Figura, who studied in Poland and had an opportunity to live and work in Gdańsk, decided to come back to Siberia, because it was 'her place'. Although our informers were aware of their Polish origin and considered themselves as Poles, all of them felt that Poland is not 'their country'. When they were talking about their visits to Poland, they were using such attribute as 'your', e.g. 'I was in your Poland'. They clearly see

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<sup>14</sup> The only information about guests from Poland in the post-war period refers to Hanna Krall and documentary film makers from Polish TV (without a specific date) (Petshik, 2008: 111–115).

<sup>15</sup> Every week in the summer several Polish excursions visit the village. Travel agencies offer trips to Vershina – the 'enclave of Polishness' as a tourist attraction (see e.g. Syberia, 2010).

the difference between the Siberian village in which they grew up and the fatherland of their ancestors.

### **The dynamics of rural community life**

According to the changing political, economic and socio-cultural conditions, there are three main periods in Vershina's history (Głuszkowski, 2011: 158–165). The pre-war period (1910–1940), the communist post-war period (1941–1990) and the contemporary period (after 1990). In the first years after the settlement, the inhabitants of Vershina not only tried to implant the traditions and way of life from their place of origin but in fact also managed to reproduce a Polish village in the heart of taiga. They got permission to build a Polish school and a Roman Catholic church and spent no effort to reach their aims even before all of them had built their houses (Szostak, 2002: 226–227). While in the pre-war period the inhabitants of Vershina communicated mostly with themselves, within the community, Polish<sup>16</sup> was the main language spoken in the village. Poles in Vershina knew Russian language, but it was used for contacts with administration and Buryats from the adjacent village Dundai (Głuszkowski, 2011: 165–166).

These social conditions began to change in the early 1930s. Although first serious changes of the political situation in Russia started soon after the foundation of Vershina and were connected with the beginning of the World War I in 1914 and the Revolutions (February and October Revolutions) in 1917 with the collapse of the Russian government and the former political system, their effects were noticeable in Siberian villages only after some years. The inhabitants of Vershina faced the consequences of the new Bolshevik government era when the mass collectivization began and they were forced to join the kolkhoz. Their crops, animals and agricultural machines were confiscated, and the insubordinate people were arrested and intimidated (Petshik, 2008: 14–15). The culminating point of the repressions took place in 1937. The local church has been closed and 30 Vershina's inhabitants were arrested, accused of hatching a plot against the Soviet Union and shot after fixed trial (Szostak, 2002: 228–234). Another important moment in the history of the village being of our interest was 1940, when people living in a small settlement Odigon joined the kolkhoz

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, it was not literary variety of Polish language but a dialect of Little Poland.

in Vershina and; as a consequence, Poles were forced to live and work together with Russian and Buryat workers (Petshik, 2008: 19).

These events were extremely important for the social situation of the village. Firstly, they changed the economics of the community – free farmers became the kolkhoz workers with no hope for regaining their property. Secondly, Polish migrants became Soviet citizens taking all the consequences of this fact. Thirdly, Vershina lost its former ethnocultural homogeneity and the Russian language became the second mean of communication within the community. Another social changes were caused by the Soviet period of the Second World War – the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945). Some men were conscripted and never returned to the village while others were killed in the course of the war or stayed in other regions of the Soviet Union. After the war, Polish settlers and their descendants still constituted majority in Vershina, but they did not avoid marriages with Russians and Ukrainians. However, in the middle of the 20th century, Poles still did not marry Buryats.

The last period in Vershina's history started in the 1990s, after perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The local kolkhoz was privatized and its workers get parcels of several hectares. Nowadays, most of them is owned by one private owner who bought the land from the former kolkhoz workers. However, in comparison to the communist period, the economic situation of the inhabitants of Vershina became much more differentiated: these who have sold their farms, work in the private kolkhoz, lumber mill and make a living thanks to child allowance or welfares. The problem of unemployment is connected with alcoholism which became a very important social problem in Vershina, and it was emphasized not only by our informers in the village but also by the representatives of church and workers of Polish consulate in Irkutsk.

The heterogeneous marriages between the descendants of Polish migrants and Russians are quite often and the children from mixed families become monolingual. Thanks to the political changes, the legal situation of many ethnic groups (including Poles from Vershina) has improved. The minorities achieved such rights as freedom of confession, minority education and government funds for various organisations and undertakings, which was not possible in the Soviet Union. The interesting question is, if after several dozens of years of sovietization and atheization

people in Vershina are able to take advantage of the regained rights and preserve their Polishness.

### **The question of Polishness and identity**

While analyzing the question of Vershina's Polishness and the identity of the locals, one cannot ignore its picture in Polish media and public opinion. Practically all non-scientific texts which can be found easily on the Internet and sometimes in local press are based on a myth of unharmed pure Polishness. The picture of an isolated community in taiga which inhabitants maintained the language, culture and identity of their ancestors and 'where everyone is speaking Polish' is consciously supported by some authors, especially a popular Polish travel writer Romuald Koperski, who organizes tourist and charitable expeditions to Vershina (see e.g. Koperski, 2003; Łabieniec, 2003; Bednarska, 2009). The other authors, who know the village only from a short few-hours-visit or from popular publications reproduce this myth; in fact, they describe their real impressions, because they see what they want to see, i.e. catholic church, cemetery and the Polish House, where they have dinner and listen to some Polish and Russian folk and popular songs performed by the local folk group 'Yazhumbek' (Głuszkowski, 2009a: 75–76). Their contact with the locals is limited to the members of 'Yazhumbek' and several people from the Polish national organisation who are engaged in the tourist's reception, so they hear Polish language and see Polish culture<sup>17</sup>.

Let us compare the popular picture of Vershina with the results of sociolinguistic and anthropological research. Although there is more than one definition of cultural (or group) identity, most authors unanimously enumerate its several major components: history of the group, confession, language, culture and tradition, nationality (ethnicity), feeling of distinctiveness from the other groups (cf. Szpociński, 1991:

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<sup>17</sup> Only two authors of non-scientific texts tried to escape the myth of ideal Polish community. P. Herman observed that active knowledge of Polish dialect is not common (Herman, 2009) and K. Sowa put in doubt the pureness Vershina's Polishness and notices that some minority activists are interested first of all in profits from 'being a Pole in Siberia' (Sowa, 2013: 83–84). For most authors these facts, especially earning money on Polishness, are taboo.

47; Olechnicki and Załęcki, 1998: 228; Hillmann, 2007: 431–433). How important is each of these elements? The interviews in 2008 and 2011, as well as various texts written by the inhabitants of Vershina prove that they know the history of their community and consider it as a part of their identity. The information about the first migrants, repressions of 1937 and regaining of minority rights can be found even in youth and children's school compositions. However, one has to emphasize that it is the history of their community, not the history of Poland. The Roman Catholic religion in the first decades was an important factor protecting Vershina's culture from foreign influence. In the communist period, the role of religion weakened. Although in 1991, after over a half of century, the local church was repaired and reopened (Figura, 2003: 93), there are not many churchgoers: only a dozen or so attend the masses regularly; most of the locals do not know even the most popular prayers as 'Lord's Prayer' and 'Hail Mary' and the meaning of the major holidays.

We will try to describe the role of language and culture in the identity of the community of our interest with a help of Einar Haugen's model of relationships between bilingualism and biculturalism. He distinguished four types of configurations: a) biculturalism with bilingualism; b) biculturalism with monolingualism; c) monoculturalism with bilingualism; d) monolingualism with monoculturalism (Haugen, 1972: 64). From the very beginning, Vershina was a bilingual community. Its founders, as the citizens of the Russian Empire, attended Russian schools. After the migration, children were learning Russian at the local primary school, and after 1916 all subjects were taught in Russian. However, in everyday life everyone in Vershina was speaking Polish (cf. Wiśniewska, 2000: 102). In the first (pre-war) period of its history, the community was monocultural – the migrants did not participate in the Buryat, Russian nor Soviet culture. During the years of communism the cultural system of Vershina was evolving, but the community still represented the same type of relationships from E. Haugen's typology: monoculturalism with bilingualism.

Multiethnicity of Vershina had to bring severe changes to the system of traditions and culture. The descendants of Polish settlers were still in the majority, but gradually more children from Polish-Russian families and the mixed families tended to choose Russian identity (Nowicka and Głowacka-Grajper, 2003b: 45). The importance of Russian language as the mean of communication increased, although Polish was still the main language of

the community (Głuszkowski, 2011: 165–166). Nowadays, the inhabitants of Vershina speak Polish at home and neighbourhood domains as well as in church, but it is used interchangeably with Russian. The choice of one of the codes in particular communicative situation depends on the type of the family (homogeneous or heterogeneous), generation of the sender and the receiver. The Polish dialect is still important in homogenous families, especially among the middle-aged and older people, while the Russian language dominates in other situations. All inhabitants of the village have at least passive knowledge of Polish. The Polish dialect has been under influence of the Russian language for a century, and contains numerous borrowings, loan translations as well as grammar and syntax calques, the total amount of interference is not relatively high and the two codes are easily differentiated by the locals (Głuszkowski, 2012: 434–439). Thus, the community can be still considered as bilingual although its bilingualism is unavoidably heading towards a language change while the number of the Polish dialect users continuously decreases. Especially young generation tends to replace Polish with Russian<sup>18</sup>. According to William Mackey, a community has no reason to remain bilingual when all its members are able to communicate just as effectively with one language (Mackey, 1968 [1962]: 555). Nowadays, everyone can speak Russian in Vershina. E. Nowicka's observations from the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the village are a good illustration of the language shift. A week after the celebrations, in which many official guests participated (also from Poland), the inhabitants of Vershina organized another ceremony – for themselves and only a few guests<sup>19</sup>. During the celebrations for the locals everyone was speaking Russian (Nowicka, 2013: 19). The fate of Polish dialect in Vershina seems to be predicted. However, it shall still fulfil some function in their group identity as a part of collective memory.

Although Vershina's culture has changed much since the beginning of the 20th century, we still cannot speak about the biculturalism of the

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<sup>18</sup> In 2008 ca. 50% of Vershina's population of Polish origin was able to speak the Polish language (on various communicative level). Among youth and children the percentage of Polish dialect users was lower – ca. 20–25%. These observations were proved by the participants of the expedition in 2011.

<sup>19</sup> The local priest and members of E. Nowicka's research team who were then in Vershina.



locals. The system of traditions and cultural canon of the community being of our interest borrowed many elements from Buryat, Soviet and Russian cultures and currently constitutes a Polish-Russian-Soviet-Buryat cultural hybrid. For instance, they replaced Polish folk methods of forecasting weather with the Buryat ones – the descendants of Polish migrants used to consult a shaman before planning fieldworks. The funeral was enriched with the elements of Russian and orthodox culture: people eat a meal at the cemetery, drink vodka as well as leave some food and alcohol on the grave (Głuszkowski, 2010: 91). Polish custom of namedays was replaced with the celebration of birthdays (Figura, 2003: 100–101). Before weddings, young couples from Vershina, on their way from the civil registry office, stop in holy Buryat places and sprinkle the soil with alcohol, which was adopted from the Buryat culture (Głuszkowski, 2010: 90–91). The inhabitants of Vershina do not differentiate the components of their culture and traditions – e.g. they use the Buryat term ‘tarasun’ for the self-made alcohol, and consider this notion as Polish, while ‘samogon’ (Polish-Russian homonym) is perceived as a Russian word. Vershina is evolving from the state of monoculturalism and bilingualism into monoculturalism and monolingualism. It is an indicator of progress of the assimilation process.

Another important constituent of the group identity is the nationality. In the 21st century, the cultural hybrid was enriched with Polish national symbols as the national coat of arms and flag of Poland brought to Siberia by Polish official delegations and tourists. One has to stress that when the migrants decided to move to Siberia, there was no independent Polish state. They left region which was a part of the Russian Empire and their migration was inland. Living in Russia and in the Soviet Union, they did not know the symbols of Poland. However, they had a strong feeling of patriotism. Their Polishness was basing on their rusticity – first of all they were peasants from Little Poland. Their devotion to their farms after collectivisation was replaced with the attachment to the local kolkhoz which was treated as the real common good (Nowicka and Głowacka-Grajper, 2003b: 49; Głuszkowski, 2009b: 15–16). It is significant that they consider themselves ‘Siberians of Polish origin’ and never thought about being ‘the citizens of Poland’. In spite of the opinion of some right-oriented publicists<sup>20</sup> in Poland, the inhabitants of Vershina are not emotionally attached neither

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<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Wyrostkiewicz, 2010.

to the idea of Polish state nor to the contemporary Poland. However, they have always had strong relationships with their homeland, both in their villages in Little Poland and in Siberia.

### **Is the process of assimilation already accomplished?**

#### **Conclusion**

All the elements of group identity of the community being of our interest help them feel distinct from the other groups. However, the consciousness of distinctiveness does not mean that the process of assimilation is not in progress. On the one hand, the cultural system of Vershina still differs from these of the Buryat and Russian villages in Siberia. On the other hand, due to its multiethnicity and hybridization, the community resembles another Siberian villages. Being inhabitants of the same region, they have common regional identity with other nations living in the multiethnic conditions (Nowicka and Głowacka-Grajper, 2003b: 53). It does not mean that people of Polish origin from Vershina constitute one community with Buryats. Both groups are aware of their different roots and confession but this consciousness has only symbolic meaning. In fact, neither Poles nor Buryats practice their religion, and their children and youth tend to replace their grandparents' language with Russian. In the multiethnic Siberian society, the awareness of own roots cannot protect the minority languages and cultures. The inhabitants of Vershina have not fully assimilated into their surroundings yet, because there are still the representatives of the older and middle-aged generations who were growing up in other socio-cultural conditions, when Polish language was the only code used in the communication inside the community and the system of traditions had not been changed so much under foreign influence. Without the support from the field of religion<sup>21</sup> the process of dissipation of the Polish community will intensify. It is also doubtful whether the regained minority rights, subsidies from Polish government as well as activities of the local Polish minority organisation can reverse the process of cultural and language

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<sup>21</sup> There are examples of minorities and cultural as well as language islands lasting for ages in foreign surroundings, but most of this communities are basing on their confessional distinctiveness and the ties between religion and culture (see e.g. Karaliunas, 1988; Haim, 2004).

assimilation, while only several families are engaged in the cultural life of the community and take benefits from the undertakings of Polish consulate in Irkutsk. Thus, the former cultural and language island is losing its insular character. On the one hand, Vershina is still relatively isolated from its continent, while the contact with Poles and Poland are superficial and limited, but, on the other hand, it seems to be absorbed by its surroundings – the multicultural Siberia and; in fact, is not isolated from the outer world (cf. Eriksen, 1993).

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