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*The Lesser Poland version
of Silesian folk costume
Attitudes towards the Cieszyn
folk costume displayed
by regionalists east of the Biała
River in the 21st century*

*Małopolska wersja stroju śląskiego
Postawy wobec stroju cieszyńskiego wśród regionalistów
po prawej stronie rzeki Białej w XXI w.*

The Cieszyn folk costume as an indicator of ethnic distinction

Along with language, attire used to be an essential indicator of ethnic distinction, “proof of a person’s ethnic identity, an emblem of belonging to a fellow or an alien group” (Obrębski 2005: 93). According to Józef Obrębski, the study of ethnic diversity in a given territory ought not to focus on objectivist data, consisting not in “recording-some or other linguistic or ethnographic features and properties, but in establishing whether the inhabitants of the area divide themselves into groups that individuate

one another” (Obrębski 2005: 91).¹ Indeed, cultural boundaries need not overlap with ethnic ones (Eriksen 2013: 59; Obrębski 2005: 154). This is certainly the case with inhabitants of the region to the east of the Biała River – historically a part of Lesser Poland – where the Cieszyn folk costume, also known in these lands as Silesian attire,² has long been worn alongside other regional costumes. Elżbieta Teresa Filip put it as follows: “The concurrence of the ‘Lachy costume from around Biała’, the ‘peasant’ costume (...) and ‘Silesian’ costume in villages east of the Biała River is a fact that, at the current state of research, has no single unambiguous interpretation” (Filip 2011: 409).³

Attitudes towards folk attire displayed by inhabitants of the region in the past are now impossible to ascertain; only the contemporary approaches to the subject can be examined. It is an area where folk costume is no longer worn on a daily basis, yet discussions on how it should look like are important among regionalists. This fact is the focus of the present study.

Kinga Czerwińska rightly noted: “There is no (...) heritage without awareness of its existence and activities stemming from that fact” (2018: 39). The decision on what to recognise as heritage is made by its future bearers, since cultural heritage is “the product of a reconstruction of the past, which is determined by the needs of the present” (Albert 2007: 55). Existing heritage may be embraced or deemed a “bothersome superfluity” (Czerwińska 2018: 41). Assuming that “heritage is whatever contemporary people choose from imagined pasts for the present use and for bequeathing for the use of imagined futures” (Graham, Ashworth, Tunbridge 2000 after Ashworth 2007: 32), something that is forgotten ceases to be heritage at all. My research responds to the need for a new look at the heritage of border regions (cf. Kocój, Kosiek, Szulborska-Łukaszewicz 2019: 8).

Methodology and theoretical inspirations

The text is based on ethnographic fieldwork consisting mainly in participant observation and interviews. The observation part was conducted over a period of several years, during which I participated in various celebratory events (fairs, harvest festivals, popular science lectures on folk costume) and church ceremonies in the Wilamowice

- 1 All citations from non-English-language sources have been translated solely for the purpose of the present article.
- 2 The term ‘Silesian costume’ is still used today, particularly in the eastern parts of Cieszyn Silesia (e.g. in Jaworze), as evidenced by the name of meetings organised by Jerzy Krzyszczyński for private individuals wearing the costume, referred to as “*Po Śląsku przez cały rok*” [In Silesian style all year round] (cf. Krzyszczyński 2023).
- 3 The costume Filip refers to as „*laski* costume from around Biała” is known in literature under many names, e.g. “the *laski* costume”, “the *lachowski* costume”, “the costume from around Biała” or ‘Altbielitzer’. Some of these terms are burdened with a certain ideological load, which is why I chose to use a phrase that refers to geography: “the costume of western Lesser Poland” (cf. Król, Jurzak 2024).

commune and its vicinity (the Brzeszcze commune; the Evangelical parish of the Augsburg Confession in Biała). Moreover, I was present at rehearsals of several regional song and dance ensembles active in the Wilamowice commune.⁴

As regards interviews, my chosen interlocutors were people who might be regarded as activists or conscious users of folk costume. They mostly included folk group leaders, choreographers and other activists from local organisations or parishes. I also made use of statements made by local activists and available on the Internet. My justification for selecting these individuals follows the argument presented by the sociolinguist Nicole Dołowy-Rybińska, who, referring to the classical texts of Polish sociology (Znaniecki 1990: 368; Chałasiński 1935: 105), stated that “there is a direct connection between the image of a community as shaped and presented by its leaders, how they define it and what they believe to be best for it, and the functioning and self-awareness of the entire group” (Dołowy-Rybińska 2011: 64). I do not believe the recorded statements to reflect the views of entire communities, as these are collections of individuals whose opinions may differ. This being said, I nevertheless decided to focus on the attitude presented by those individuals who wear the folk costume themselves or, due to the functions they serve, have a say in when and by whom such attire will be worn.

In my analysis of attitudes towards folk costume, I was inspired by the study of the ideology and approaches to language. To paraphrase Dołowy-Rybińska, who wrote about attitude towards language, whether or not a person is willing to don folk costume, and what type of it they choose, depends on their attitude towards it. Important factors for appearing in folk costume include whether the wearers are ashamed of it, and if they have good or bad memories associated with such attire. Whether or not people wear folk costume is determined by its prestige (cf. Dołowy-Rybińska 2011: 53). I therefore study folk costume as an element of immaterial heritage, since – similarly to Kinga Czerwińska – I am interested in “the social and cultural role it played in its native environment, and the position it occupies today” (Czerwińska 2018: 11). Czerwińska put it as follows:

Heritage constructed from arbitrarily selected resources of local and universal culture, configured into various permutations, becomes a platform for the process of self-identification, which is not something that is established once and stays fixed, but changes depending on the needs of the individual and the community (Czerwińska 2018: 14).

In the present study, the material aspect of folk costume will only be the background for analysing the needs and attitudes of the communities under scrutiny, as indicated by contemporary activists operating within them.

⁴ The folk ensembles in question were *Dankowianie*, *Pisarzowianki*, *Echo-Hecznarowice*, *Zasolanie* and *Wilamowice*.

The Cieszyn folk costume has been studied by numerous ethnographers, who produced many articles and monographs in Polish (Dobrowolska 1930; Bazielić 1958; Fierla 1977; Bazielić 2006; Kiereś, Studnicki, Sosna 2014) and Czech (Tomolová, Stolařík, Štika 2000). Some of these publications have been subjected to constructive criticism, as exemplified by Jerzy Krzyspiał's work *Jak nie pisać o stroju cieszyńskim* [How not to write about the Cieszyn costume] (2008), which refers to a monograph written by Bazielić (2006). Other noteworthy texts include Grażyna Kubica's auto-ethnographic studies (2019a; 2019b).

Vast as it is, the relevant literature rarely mentions the Cieszyn folk costume being worn in areas beyond the east bank of the river Biała. The few that remark on it are Agnieszka Dobrowolska's (1930: 9) work on the Cieszyn bodice (*żywotek*), and Stanisław Bronicz's work on the Pszczyna costume (1954: 4–5).⁵ The issue of the diffusion of the Cieszyn folk costume has been discussed in slightly more detail by German scholars (Kuhn 1923: 47; Karasek 1932: 189–192). Noteworthy authors include Anne Marie Beil, who published statistical data on the number of women wearing a given type of folk costume in localities she classified as a part of the Bielsko-Biała German language island (Beil 1942a).⁶

Beil noted that in the case of other regional costumes, women almost invariably adopted the folk attire worn in the husband's village. The important factor here is not female migration, but rather people's attitude towards various kinds of folk costume. It may therefore be surmised that the Cieszyn attire was accorded high prestige both among the Polish-speaking and the German-speaking female residents of the region around Bielsko and Biała. The only costume that was held in higher regard among its wearers was the Vilamovian one, as none of the residents of Wilamowice was ever seen wearing the Cieszyn costume.

As literature indicates, German scholars considered the Cieszyn costume to be a German cultural resource (cf. Karasek 1932: 191). Yet Polish nationalist activists of the interwar period introduced it in, for instance, Straconka and the Pszczyna region, believing that it could be used as a Polish national costume (Filip 2011: 407; cf. Gładysz 1938: 199; Polak 1994).

5 The map included in the publication shows Wilamowice and Hałcnów as "former German settlements", while the region between Biała and Oświęcim (including the communes of Wilamowice and Brzeszcze) are marked as "peripheral area in which elements of the Pszczyna costume appeared together with elements from the neighbouring groups" (Bronicz 1954: 17). Bronicz's statement on the Pszczyna costume infiltrating the areas around Biała (with no mention of the Cieszyn costume) was also repeated by scholars studying the Cracow costume, in sections discussing its territorial scope (cf. Pobieży 2017: 14–15; Marczak 2020: 9).

6 The works of A.M. Beil (as well as those by Kuhn and Karasek) contain certain ideological preconceptions of German nationalism; anyone drawing from them should therefore do so with awareness of the consequences of using nationalist discourse.



Fig. 1. A dress worn in Dankowice in the mid-20th century. Photo by S. Harężlak (2023).



Fig. 2. A woman wearing the Cieszyn folk costume in Hałcnów. The photo was taken by Anna Maria Beil (nevertheless, her publication contains the statement that such attire was never worn in Hałcnów). Photo by A.M. Beil (1941). Source: the collection of the Upper Silesian Museum in Bytom.

Over two decades ago, the impact the Cieszyn costume exerted in the borderlands was mentioned by B. Bazielić (2001a: 327–329; 2001b: 14–16; 2006: 33; 2017: 201). However, I approach her texts with a dose of scepticism, as did the authors who criticised her work (Krzyszpień 2008; Filip 2011). Małgorzata Kiereś and Grzegorz Studnicki wrote of a new variant of the Cieszyn costume worn in Bestwina and Wisła Mała (Kiereś, Studnicki, Sosna 2014: 180).

Based on abovementioned literature, I conclude that the appearance of the Cieszyn folk costume east of the Biała River has been disregarded or marginalised by most authors, perhaps due to the assumption that the incidence of the folk costume would correspond to the borders of the regions, which proved inaccurate in that case. More attention was dedicated to the “expansion” of the Cieszyn folk costume, or the “battle” between the Cieszyn attire and other regional costumes, though these remarks pertained to the Pszczyna region and the villages near Bielsko-Biała. Nevertheless, scholars did note that the prestige of a costume and attitudes towards it are the primary factors affecting its continued use or disappearance.

Case studies

Biała

The boundaries of the Cieszyn diocese of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland correspond to the boundaries of the Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia. The only exception is the parish in Biała, located east of the river Biała.



Fig. 3. Female confirmands wearing the Cieszyn folk costume. Source: the collection of the Evangelical Parish of the Augsburg Confession in Biała (2015).



Fig. 4. A woman wearing the Cieszyn folk costume during festivities commemorating the consecration of the church in Biała. Photo by T. Król (2024). Source: the collection of the Evangelical Parish of the Augsburg Confession in Biała.

Before the Second World War, most female residents of the villages being recently a part of this diocese wore the Cieszyn folk costume, with those from villages near Biała also donning the attire from Altbielitz or “western Lesser Poland”. The residents of Biała itself stuck to urban fashions. Beil also mentioned several female villagers from Lipnik wearing the Cieszyn costume, yet it is impossible to ascertain what these women’s religious denomination may have been.

After the war, female folk costume in Cieszyn Silesia was slowly falling out of use, replaced by urban fashions. The same trend was observable among female confirmands; the practice of wearing Silesian attire during confirmation ceremonies only reappeared in the 1980s. Folk costume gradually assumed the role of confirmation dress, which many girls wear just once in their lives (cf. Kubica 2019b: 138–139; Czerwińska 2018: 104). Another factor of importance, at least for some young women, is using the costume to indicate regional affiliation (cf. Kantor 1982). In many parishes of Cieszyn Silesia, the clothing worn by female confirmands varies, with some girls appearing in Silesian folk costume, and others in white dresses. This indicates that the given form of clothing is consciously chosen by the girls themselves or by their families.

In the commune of Biała, in 1980s and 1990s girls attended their confirmation ceremonies wearing white dresses and boys wearing suits. This only changed in the 21st century. A parish chronicle entry dated 17 May 2007 reads: “For the first time in the post-war history of our parish, female confirmands wore regional costume. They looked very dignified. Most parishioners expressed their approval”.⁷ The Cieszyn folk costume also featured during confirmation ceremonies in 2010, 2012 and 2015–2016; in the remaining years, female confirmands wore long white dresses.

Significantly, unlike in many other parishes of the diocese, the attire of the confirmands of Biała never varied, with all youngsters attending the ceremony in a given year wearing the same type of clothing. Silesian folk costumes were rented especially for the occasion;⁸ the girls wore them only once in their lives. At first glance, it would appear that the persons overseeing the renting of costumes considered the regional affiliation function of attire to be of secondary importance, aesthetics being the primary concern. However, statements made by the former parson, Rev. Henryk Mach, and several of the confirmands, indicate that the people attending confirmation ceremonies regarded the Cieszyn folk costume as an indicator not of ethnic or regional identity, but of religious affiliation; it has become a symbol of the Evangelical denomination, not only as confirmation attire. Cultural practices and means of expression inspired by religion are classified as immaterial cultural heritage (Smyk 2017). Comments made by the priest and several members of the congregation suggest that the image of the regional costume as a symbol of the Evangelical faith has taken root due to the fact that women from Cieszyn Silesia wore it to various celebrations, e.g. during the 2019 festivities commemorating the consecration of the church. The wearers were private individuals who travel to different parishes for such events, dressed in such attire.

⁷ I am grateful to Rev. Robert Augustyn and his wife Irena for allowing me to use the chronicle in my research query.

⁸ The costumes were rented out from the parish in Drogomyśl.

The Wilamowice commune

The Wilamowice commune is diverse in terms of the folk costume worn within its boundaries (cf. Król, Jurzak 2024). The residents of the town of Wilamowice are proud of their local costume; for some, it is also a marker of their distinct ethnic identity (Chromik, Król, Małanicz-Przybylska 2020). Some female inhabitants of Wilamowice



Fig. 5. Female residents of Dankowice and Stara Wieś wearing different (contemporary) variants of the Silesian (Cieszyn) folk costume. Photo by G. Król (2023).



Fig. 6. Female residents of the Wilamowice commune wearing (left to right): the Silesian (Cieszyn) folk costume, the costume of western Lesser Poland (the Laski costume) and the Vilamovian folk costume (the attire of Vilamovian townspeople). Photo by G. Król (2023).

and the surrounding villages wore the costume of western Lesser Poland. Vilamovians themselves called it the “Polish” costume, while residents of the surrounding villages referred to it as “rural” or associated it with specific localities, such as Stara Wieś or Hecznarowice.⁹ The most characteristic elements of that costume included a plain-colour skirt attached to the bodice (*oplecek*), and a long, mutton-sleeved jacket (*jakła*) in muted colours. The costume fell out of use in the 1970s. In the Wilamowice

⁹ Bazielić writes: “Even in the town of Wilamowice, women who wore costumes other than the Vilamovian one were called *śleski* (...), or *szleszki*” (2001a: 327). Meanwhile, my Vilamovian interlocutors used the phrase “dressed in the Silesian style” (*śtyzyś ogycün*) only to refer to the Cieszyn folk costume; women wearing the *laski* costume were described as “dressed in the Polish style” (*põnyś ogycün*) or in the style of Stara Wieś. In another publication, Bazielić herself noted that “the phrase ‘dressed in the style of Stara Wieś’ is used in Wilamowice to denote a different set of clothing” (2001b: 19).

commune (outside of the town itself) there are five regional dance and song ensembles, two of which, namely *Dankowianie* from Dankowice and *Tradycja* from Stara Wieś, perform in the Cieszyn folk costume. Members of these groups wear their folk costume to church ceremonies.

The village of Dankowice borders the Bestwina commune in the west, and the historical region of Prussian Silesia (the Miedzna commune), whose residents used to wear the Pszczyna folk costume, in the north. The Cieszyn costume only appeared there after the First World War and functioned as festive attire for more affluent women. Amalgamated forms of attire were also reported. The regional folk ensemble *Dankowianie*, established in 2000 on the initiative of Genowefa Lisewska, Jadwiga Piłot and Aniela Stańko, chose to perform in Silesian attire (cf. Wróblewski 2010). This was in line with the preferences expressed in the interwar period by many women from Dankowice, particularly the younger ones, who regarded this kind of costume as more prestigious than the one worn by their mothers and grandmothers.

Local activists from Dankowice differ in their opinion on the Cieszyn folk costume. Several of my interlocutors stated that “it would be better to return to the older Dankowice costumes, the ones worn earlier”.¹⁰ However, most activists with whom I spoke believed that “these [Cieszyn] costumes have been here for so many years. The mother of my acquaintance even wore one on her wedding day, before the war”. While the costumes of the ensemble members are mostly contemporary, they were modelled after family heirlooms kept in private homes – elements of the Cieszyn attire, including the characteristic bodice (*zywotek*) with a W-shaped neckline at the back (*szczytek*), also referred to as *oplecek* in Dankowice. Some of the new costumes were sewn by the seamstress Józefa Lubańska from Dankowice. The late Jadwiga Piłot, a regional activist, told me:

We used to have different costumes. The Silesian ones weren't introduced until later, there was a court here, the Habsburgs, and I think the women would see it and think it prestigious somehow. But the costume has been here for many years, and they have adjusted it to their... how to put it... their tastes. After all, the beaded necklaces and blouses are different. I believe that although this is the Cieszyn costume, from a different region, it still carries the history and the tastes of these people. And that every costume, even if it appeared here later, deserves to be cultivated. Although I myself try to preserve the memory of the original costume, the type my mother wore, with a jacket (*jakła*).

Thus, the regionalist considered the Cieszyn costume, in its altered form typical of Dankowice and its vicinity, to be a part of the local cultural heritage, together with the earlier costumes from western Lesser Poland.

¹⁰ Statement by an activist from Dankowice recorded in 2016.

The Brzeszcze commune

The Brzeszcze commune, which borders Wilamowice to the south, lies at the historical boundary of Galicia, Cieszyn Silesia and Prussian Silesia. The ethnographers mentioned above considered it an area influenced by the Pszczyna costume rather than by the Cieszyn one (cf. Bronicz 1954; Bazielić 2001b). Still, members of folk ensembles from the region wear the latter. Two of these bands, namely *Iskierkowa Familia* and *Iskierki*, were established in the 21st century by the choreographer Alicja Zielińska-Złahoda. In a 2017 interview for the *Żywa Kronika Życia Codziennego Mieszkańców Gminy Brzeszcze* (The Living Chronicle of the Daily Life of Residents of the Brzeszcze Commune), she admitted that the introduction of Cieszyn dances and songs to the repertoire of the ensemble had been her idea (www.kronika.brzost.brzeszcze.pl/milosc-do-zaolzia). Apart from the two groups from Brzeszcze, Zielińska-Złahoda also founded the *Holan* ensemble in Oświęcim, whose website describes the ensemble's origins as follows:

After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the newly established states of Poland and Czechoslovakia came into conflict over the division of Cieszyn Silesia (...). The dispute was settled by the Entente in July 1920, by using the river Olza to split the region (...). This glaringly unfair division resulted in a mass expulsion of Poles from the Trans-Olza area. A large group of the expellees settled in the Oświęcim region (...). Many of them became permanent residents of Oświęcim, and their descendants live there to this day. It is to these expellees that the *Holan* ensemble dedicates its activity (www.holan.oswiecim-gmina.pl/index.php/geneza-zespolu).

In the same interview, Zielińska-Złahoda emphasised that the decision to include Cieszyn elements to the repertoire of the ensembles from Brzeszcze was motivated by the wish to cultivate the memory of the people from beyond the Olza:¹¹

In the year 1920 some 4000 people from the Trans-Olza area were resettled – expelled, as they put it – to Oświęcim. Later on they separated, going to Chrzanów, Wola, Bojszowy, Libiąż, Brzeszcze and Jawiszowice. Libiąż still has a very large and active group of Trans-Olzans. They probably found employment in the mines; they were qualified miners. The seeds of their culture were sown, which is why we remind people of this beautiful music and dances (www.kronika.brzost.brzeszcze.pl/milosc-do-zaolzia).

What the choreographer considered an important factor was compatibility between the repertoire and the costume of the folk ensembles. Their attire needed to be more than simply the Cieszyn costume, yet also had to be complete:

¹¹ Notes introducing the *Iskierkowa Familia* ensemble inform that it is a group "upholding tradition and honouring the nearly 4 thousand Poles expelled from the Trans-Olza, who settled near Oświęcim after the 1920 plebiscite"; see <http://mbludzm.pl/aktualnosc/iskierkowa-familia--drugi-dzien-rekolekcji-z-ks-j-tischnerem-663>.

I would not allow the group to look like it had come from who knew where. I discussed with each member of the ensemble at the beginning, how the outfits should look, what everyone ought to be wearing during presentation. I would not let them, for instance, go out without a headscarf; the ladies always had to have their heads covered (www.kronika.brzost.brzeszcze.pl/milosc-do-zaolzia).

It should be noted that the outfits of all these ensembles were designed to imitate forms from around Cieszyn, and to preserve the heritage of the Trans-Olza region, not the Lesser Poland version of the Cieszyn costume. During one of the events, the managers of the ensemble also mentioned the commune's borderland location as the motivating factor for choosing this particular type of costume.

The Bestwina commune

The Bestwina commune lies west of the Wilamowice commune, and east of Cieszyn Silesia (the town of Czechowice-Dziedzice). The Cieszyn folk costume in its female version became widespread in the area at the same time as in Dankowice, or perhaps even earlier. After the establishment of the *Bestwina Regional Dance and Song Ensemble* and the local Rural Housewives Association, members of these organisations wore the Cieszyn folk costume during stage appearances and for church ceremonies. In time, however, the situation began to change.

Sławomir Ślósarczyk, who is the current leader of the ensemble, as well as the initiator and the chief campaigner for the revival of the *lachowski* (i.e. Lachy) costume, is well acquainted with the history and forms of the Cieszyn costume observable in the commune, yet considers it a foreign element in its culture: "Our women have never referred to that costume as 'our Bestwina costume', calling it the 'Silesian costume' instead. There has been no identification with it through nomenclature, and this [attitude] still persists today, with their saying they are dressed in Silesian style". He does, however, emphasise that the forms from Bestwina differ from the classic Cieszyn attire; a fact that is also noticed by the Silesians: "People from Cieszyn immediately see, that this is not their costume. They immediately see that something's not right". When Ślósarczyk became involved with the ensemble, he noticed that the costumes of the female dancers differed from the ones he had seen in old family photographs. He began his efforts towards the revival of the earlier Bestwina folk costume due to contacts with the regionalist Jan Gąsiorek: "He was the one to open my eyes to the fact that this is essentially a different geographical region (...) afterwards I started to ask people myself, do my research, visit old homesteaders".¹² The aim of his activities is to make all elements (costume, dialect, music, dances) consistent with those found

12 Interview with Sławomir Ślósarczyk conducted in December 2023.

in the region before the First World War. The odd one out is the Cieszyn folk costume, which Ślósarczyk believes to have arrived in the area after the disappearance of other elements of folk culture presented during stage performances (e.g. the linguistic phenomenon of mazuration¹³). Thus, the ensemble gradually switched to wearing new Lachy costumes and eventually stopped appearing in the Cieszyn folk attire. However, the latter type of costume is still popular among members of the Rural Housewives Association. What is more, some members of the song and dance ensemble who have the Lachy costume in their possession prefer to attend church processions wearing the Silesian one. Ślósarczyk believes this to be the result of prioritising the aesthetics of the folk costume over its function of indicating regional affiliation.

His own approach to folk costume has changed over time:

Initially, it was my belief that since I had not been the one to introduce it here, I would not be the one to eradicate it. It arrived in the region (...) naturally, so to speak. And this was a long time ago, and it has proliferated enough to simply function here, so I assumed that it was not imposed here artificially or by force. If we only look at the aesthetics and the fact that it functions in these villages, then okay. But if we travelled with the ensemble to some place in Poland, people there would perceive us as a group from Cieszyn Silesia, which made me realise that at least to some people, to those who know a thing or two about folk costume, this carries a certain message, a false one. That it simply shows us, as a region, as completely different. In this respect, I realised, it falsifies reality (...) and sends a false message to the world. And this does not bother me so much here in the region, because people are aware that this is not strictly our costume, so to speak, but if we perform [wearing] it outside, it appears rather inaccurate.¹⁴

This statement indicates that my interlocutor felt the Bestwina commune to belong to Lesser Poland, even though the latest administrative reform put it within the borders of the Silesian voivodship. It was the need to express this identity that resulted in his negative attitude towards the Cieszyn folk costume and his favourable view of the reconstruction and revival of the costume of western Lesser Poland, to which he referred as the “*lachowski* costume”.¹⁵

Although Sławomir Ślósarczyk considers the Cieszyn costume to be a foreign element in the region, he says: “If it is to stay here, it should be in an altered version, leaning towards something ours, with some sequins on the *oplecek* [bodice] and coral

13 Mazuration (Polish: *mazurzenie*) is a very common sound change in Polish dialects. It is a merger of retroflex and postalveolar consonants /ʂ, ʐ, tʂ, dʐ/ into /s, z, tʂ, dʐ/. For example, words *szyba* and *czas* are pronounced [s]yba and [c]as, respectively.

14 Interview with Sławomir Ślósarczyk conducted in December 2023.

15 Similar sentiments were also expressed in Ślósarczyk’s publications (cf. Boboń, Ślósarczyk 2020; Ślósarczyk 2021).

necklaces, so that it survives in this form”.¹⁶ Equally interesting is his opinion that the perpetuation of a “false message” regarding the identity of the people of Bestwina is less harmful in the commune itself, where the public is aware that the Cieszyn folk costume does, in fact, come from a different region, than in other parts of the country, where the natives of Bestwina, and thus of Lesser Poland, are arbitrarily ascribed a Silesian identity.

Attitudes towards the Silesian costume as displayed by respondents

Field observation has shown that the individuals under scrutiny belonged not to one, but to many communities. This results in varied attitudes towards folk costume, professed by activists affiliated with a number of different organisations. Further research would be needed to analyse the approach of non-affiliated individuals. Nevertheless, I believe that the generalisations made below might facilitate the understanding of the origins of activities associated with the Cieszyn folk costume, and the attempts to revive folk attire from western Lesser Poland in the region east of the river Biała.

The next section presents the attitudes towards the Cieszyn folk costume reconstructed on the basis of my collected data, followed by concluding remarks.

The Cieszyn folk costume is our heritage, which is why we wear it: This approach is the most common in Dankowice, whose community considers the Cieszyn costume to be an element of their cultural heritage. My interlocutors declared to feel an emotional attachment to the costume, evidenced also by the fact they have kept and carefully stored the outfits of their late mothers, mothers-in-law or grandmothers. They emphasised that the tailors creating the stage costumes for folk ensembles modelled them after these family heirlooms, and that some members of the groups even used to perform dressed in pre-war bodices. Doubts as to the validity of this attitude do not arise from within the community itself, but only due to the opinions of outsiders, e.g. panels of judges at folk ensemble contests held outside the commune. Activists from Dankowice believe that wearing the Cieszyn folk costume may be an expression not just of Silesian identity, but also of the identity of people from the borderlands of Silesia and Lesser Poland. The Cieszyn folk costume thus becomes transcultural heritage (cf. Macdonald 2013: 162–165). A similar approach may also be detected in the initiative of using the Cieszyn folk costume as confirmation attire in Biała. In this case, however, the heritage in question ought to be understood not as Silesian, but as Lutheran.

The Cieszyn folk costume is the heritage of our neighbours, which is why we wear it: This is the approach displayed by activists managing folk ensembles in the Brzeszcze commune. In this case, the “neighbours” are the descendants of the Trans-Olza expellees resident in these communes. It is an example that testifies to the

¹⁶ The topic of coral necklaces in the Cieszyn folk costume was discussed by Czerwińska (2018: 112).

migrants' heritage being accepted and preserved (cf. Macdonald 2013: 168). It is also possible that for some members of these ensembles, the category of "neighbours" also includes the residents of Cieszyn Silesia.

The Cieszyn folk costume is a foreign element, which is why we should not wear it: This approach is represented by activists from Bestwina, who emphasise the correspondence between folk costume and the historical regional borders. For them, wearing folk costume is a way to manifest their non-Silesian identity. Opposition to Silesian-ness is what prompted these activists to abandon the Cieszyn folk costume in favour of the one they call *lachowski* (Lachy) costume. As they believe, it is this latter costume that allows them to express their identity. The shift did not happen overnight, but as a result of a gradual process of both reconstruction of the *lachowski* costume, and of changes in its perception. It was greatly influenced by the opinions of contest juries and other outsiders who were not aware that the Cieszyn costume might also be worn by non-Silesians. Local activists model their outfits after the costume worn before the First World War. They are more concerned with the form than the fabric (cf. Macdonald 2021: 122–123), believing that an archaic cut or ornamentation makes the reconstructed Lachy costumes more authentic than original Silesian dresses preserved since the interwar period. My interlocutors from Dankowice were aware of this approach, yet only some of them were willing to agree with it.

The Cieszyn folk costume is beautiful, which is why we want to wear it: This approach was present in each of the communities under scrutiny, albeit to a varying degree. The aesthetic function of folk costume carries enough importance to assume that if no-one found delight in it, it would never be worn (Kantor 1982; Trebunia-Staszel 2013). Aesthetics was certainly one of the (numerous) factors motivating activist associated with the *Dankowianie* ensemble and other folk bands from the Brzeszcze commune who decided to use the Cieszyn attire during stage performances. The aesthetic value of such outfits is recognised even in Bestwina, whose local activists perceive the Cieszyn folk costume as a foreign element. Some women (especially members of the Rural Housewives Association) still wear it for precisely that reason. This approach is the most evident in Biała, where the Cieszyn folk costume is used as girls' confirmation attire not in order to express affiliation with Cieszyn Silesia, but to make the ceremony more attractive.

Conclusions

When analysing the attitudes presented above, it is important to remember that in the interwar period, group-specific dress was an element of everyday life and that dressing differently was a manifestation of otherness. Nowadays, the act of donning a folk costume (whichever one) is, in itself, a declaration of specific values or beliefs (cf. Czerwińska 2018: 111):

What used to have a life of its own and was a spontaneous process now has its “guardians”, who define the core of the message and decide what is worth preserving, and how it should be interpreted and defined. Tradition becomes the subject of planned and coordinated action encompassing some areas of the past world (attire, songs, customs and rituals, language) that constitute a representation of pastness, folkness, etc. This implies a certain kind of selectivity stemming from the fact that the entirety of the past cannot be brought back to existence. What is done involves planned teaching and “conservation” of folk culture and tradition as it is remembered and imagined. It appears that the poorer the condition of that which is protected and preserved, and the faster the heritage is disappearing, the more institutionalised the processes become and the more emphasis is put on the need to undertake such action. These activities are undoubtedly a manifestation of remembering the past experienced as “our own” and different than that of “others”; one that makes one feel “at home” and sustains the emotional bond between “us” and those who lived here before (Studnicki 2015: 190).

My interlocutors maintained that the Cieszyn folk costume (and, in the case of Bestwina, the *lachowski* folk costume) was not adopted from other regions, but constitutes an element of their own heritage – the legacy of the people who, as Studnicki put it “lived here before”. Thus, the only remaining question is to whom a given community wishes to stay connected. As my research has shown, the people of Dankowice cherish their links with their mothers and grandmothers who wore the Cieszyn folk costume, the people of Bestwina – with the even earlier generations wearing what they call the *lachowski* costume, the people of Brzeszcze – with their neighbours expelled from the Trans-Olza, and the Lutherans of Biała – with other people of the same denomination. Wearing the Silesian costume does not necessarily imply Silesian identity; in fact, it is only the narrow perception of the attire as an element of purely Silesian (and thus foreign) heritage that leads to its abandonment, as observable in Bestwina. According to Ewa Kocój,

[contemporary regionalism] becomes a movement that aims to understand and creatively use the inherent values of small socio-spatial units, wherever they might exist. One’s place of residence is of no importance at all; anyone willing to be a regionalist may become one, even if they live outside of a given region. Likewise, everyone has the right to practice such regionalism as they see fit, and imbue it with their own meaning” (Kocój 2019: 28–29).

My analysis indicates that the leaders of each community are fully aware of their choices, made not on impulse, but based on many years of practice in adjusting folk costumes to the needs of the given group. It is not the ethnographers’ place to judge them, only to analyse them by “listening intently to an array of messages” (Kocój 2019: 34). Sharon Macdonald rightly noted:

Rather than being a definition ready-made for application, ‘authenticity’ is itself shaped, nuanced and often repeatedly contested in relation to the specific contingencies of

practice that people face. This is an ongoing process in which these various understandings themselves have consequences – for social differentiations, practice and the heritage produced (Macdonald 2013: 121).

The diversity of folk costume currently observable in the borderlands between Silesia and Lesser Poland, as well as the discussions around it, may serve as excellent material for anthropological analyses, provided that researchers do not repeat the errors of the previous generations and do not begin to evaluate the “accuracy” of specific practices (cf. Macdonald 2013: 122–123). The search for “accuracy” or “authenticity” might overshadow the messages communicated by the analysed communities, even though listening to their voices is the principal objective of anthropological study.

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Summary

The Cieszyn folk costume, also referred to as the Silesian or the Valachian costume, is an important element of the cultural heritage of Cieszyn Silesia. It has been analysed in many academic and popular publications, both in terms of its material aspect and its role within the society. Thus far, however, authors focused on the region of Cieszyn Silesia in its historical borders, while in the early 20th century the Cieszyn folk costume could also be seen in what is now the Bestwina, Wilamowice and Brzeszcze communes, historically belonging to the region of Lesser Poland. Nowadays, it is worn for church ceremonies, as well as by members of folk dance and song ensembles and Rural Housewives Associations from the area. In some localities, there have been initiatives to replace the Cieszyn folk costume with others, e.g. the so-called *lachowski* (Lachy) attire, which used to be worn in the region and is associated with the cultural heritage of western Lesser Poland. The aim of this article is to analyse the various attitudes towards the Cieszyn

folk costume as part of the heritage of western Lesser Poland. Some see it as a source of pride, others, as unwanted heritage. The analysis is based on interviews with local activists coupled with field observation and examination of photographic documentation available on the Internet.

Keywords: folk costume, heritage, Lesser Poland, Cieszyn Silesia, borderlands, Lutherans

Streszczenie

Strój cieszyński, zwany też śląskim lub wałaskim, jest ważnym elementem dziedzictwa kulturowego Śląska Cieszyńskiego. Poświęcono mu sporo miejsca w publikacjach naukowych i popularnonaukowych, zarówno jego sferze materialnej, jak i jego funkcjonowaniu w społeczności. Dotychczasowi autorzy opracowań skupiali się jednak na regionie Śląska Cieszyńskiego w jego historycznych granicach. Tymczasem strój cieszyński na początku XX w. przenikał na tereny obecnych gmin Bestwina, Wilamowice i Brzeszcze, które leżą na terenach historycznej Małopolski. Współcześnie jest noszony podczas uroczystości kościelnych oraz przez zespoły regionalne i koła gospodyń wiejskich na tym terenie. W niektórych miejscowościach pojawiają się inicjatywy jego wyrugowania na rzecz innych strojów, np. „lachowskiego”, który dawniej występował na tym obszarze i jest kojarzony z dziedzictwem kulturowym zachodniej Małopolski. Celem tego artykułu jest analiza różnych postaw wobec stroju cieszyńskiego jako dziedzictwa mieszkańców zachodniej Małopolski. Dla jednych jest on powodem do dumy, dla innych dziedzictwem niechcianym. Analiza opiera się na wywiadach z miejscowymi działaczami oraz na obserwacji terenowej i analizie dokumentacji fotograficznej dostępnej w Internecie.

Słowa kluczowe: strój ludowy, dziedzictwo kulturowe, Małopolska, Śląsk Cieszyński, pogranicze, luteranie, etnologia i antropologia kulturowa

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