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Accounts of the descendants of the pre-war inhabitants of Masuria as a disappearing testimony of the former Polish-German borderland. A sociolinguistic perspective

A doctoral thesis written under the supervision of Dr. Ewa Golachowska, prof. of ISS PAS.

The subject of the dissertation is a sociolinguistic analysis of the accounts (collected in 2019-2023) of the descendants of the pre-war Masurian population residing in Poland for at least a part of the year, concerning the relation to historical processes and the once dominant Polish and German scientific, literary and media narratives about the population of Masuria.

The Masurian community in Poland is currently facing advanced disintegration, thus it is important to observe the processes taking place in it. Depending on the various adopted criteria, the number of the descendants of Masurians in Poland can be estimated at 5-15 thousand people, which is only a small fraction of people having some Masurian roots (the vast majority of them lives in Germany). Both in Germany and Poland, the processes of assimilation into the German or, respectively, the Polish nation, are in their final stages (in the case of the Masurian youth living in Poland the predominant Polish national identity of the descendants of Masurians was already observed at the beginning of the 21st century). Previous research on Masurians was mainly thought as sociological research (A. Sakson, B. Domagała, A. Czesła), historical research (G. Białuński, G. Jasiński, J. Jasiński, W. Wrzesiński, A. Kossert, W. Hubatsch, F. Gause, M. Toeppen and others) or finally dialectological research (K. Nitsch, W. Doroszewski, D. K. Rembiszewska, J. Siatkowski, K. Sobolewska and others). So far the sociolinguistic research on Masurians was only partially developed, and this lack was the inspiration for conducting my aforementioned study. The visits to 12 counties resulted in more than 50 semi-structured interviews with the descendants of Prussian Masurians. I recruited my interlocutors using the snowball method, which works well with hermetic communities that experienced intergenerational trauma.

The dissertation consists of three main chapters and an appendix. The first chapter consists of the theoretical considerations – including an attempt to justify the method of research, the presentation of my research hypotheses, the criteria for the selection of interlocutors and the sociolinguistic terminology used to analyze the obtained data. Among the hypotheses were the assumptions that the linguistic environment of the descendants of the Masurian population remains multicomponent – revealing, in addition to the overwhelming presence of the Polish literary language and smaller presence of High German, the influence of the non-standardized language forms – Plattdeutsch, East Prussian variants of Hochdeutsch, and Masurian subdialects. Their

presence was predicted to vary depending on the geographic origin of the interlocutors, generational factors, linguistic domains, socioeconomic conditions, denomination and identity.

The question of the criteria for the selection of my interviewees remains an important issue – I decided that a more complete picture of the internal diversity of attitudes could be obtained by abandoning the self-identification criterion (thus: the interviewees do not have to recognize themselves as Masurians) or the religious criterion; the only bounding criterion was the residence of at least some of the interlocutors' ancestors in Masuria before the Second World War (in the case of Działdowszczyzna – before the First World War).

The matrix for analyzing the interviews with my interlocutors was to refer to the sociolinguistic tools: using the concepts of language biographies, language practices, code-switching and code-mixing, language ideologies and attitudes, also the term of linguistic and identity borderlands.

I devoted a separate subsection to the issue of positioning myself as a researcher, but at the same time as a Masurian activist, partly connected with the Działdowszczyzna microregion (some of my ancestors settled in Masuria before the First World War). Such specific position can be possibly perceived as both an opportunity (trust of a part of the Masurian community, partial common experiences of our ancestors, knowledge of the region and the community gatekeepers) and a threat (necessity to go beyond the circle of Masurian descendants that are fond of my initiatives; personal attachment to the Masurian culture and values, deep commitment to the revitalization of the *Masurianness*).

The second chapter consists of an introduction of the most important historical events that formed, and later disintegrated the community (the colonization of Masuria by the Mazovian people after the Teutonic conquest of Prussia, the secularization of Prussia, the Reformation, epidemics, wars and population migrations in the modern era). These events shaped the specific culture, language and identity of Masurians, with a special role played by Prussian loyalism and lack of a sense of Polishness.

I was particularly focused on the 19th and 20th century Polish and German narratives about the nature of the Masurian community. As a part of this analysis, I described recurring motifs that shaped both internal and external perception of Masurians: the stereotypes connected with alcohol abuse, the stereotypes of the good-hearted, hard-working Masurians, yet vulnerable to manipulation, the motif of a nationally unaware Masurian, the motif of an *eternally Polish Masurian*, and the motif of neglected and left-alone Masurians. I also analyzed the leading narratives of a sociolinguistic or ethnographic nature: the question of *the Masurian language*, the *Masurian Mischvolk* (the motif of a people of mixed ancestry), or, finally, some linguistic ideologies – the ideology of spoiled or pure (beautiful) language of Masurians. I also elaborated on

the existence of the early beginnings of polycentricity of the literary Polish language – the literary Polish used in Masuria mostly by the press revealed some characteristics of a distinct trajectory of development.

The purpose of the extensive reference to the once dominant narratives about Masurians was to show that the beliefs concerning their identity and linguistic traits, still existent among the descendants of Masurians, the transformations regarding the occurrence and the role of the specific linguistic forms and phenomena, are closely linked to past narratives and the historical or social processes.

In the third and most important chapter, I described the functions, the characteristics of occurrence and beliefs linked to each of the analyzed language codes.

As for the role of Polish, the recollections of the interlocutors were connected with the motif of the Polish language as a foreign language that had to be learned (some Masurians even rebelled against the introduction of Polish in the region). The other motif was treating Polish as a prestigious variety, *a roof* for the Masurian variety.

The High German language was presented as the language of the ancestors, a heritage worth fighting for, but above all as a useful tool to help improve the socio-economic situation – German has been used at work, education, cross-border contacts during the political transformation in the 90's and afterwards. German has also helped to maintain family ties and the cohesion of the Masurian community (a special role was played by associations of the German minority or social circles centered around Protestant parishes).

The non-standard Germanic varieties – *Plattdeutsch* and elements of the characteristic pronunciation of the East Prussian *Hochdeutsch* were, above all, a determinant of linguistic distinctness and the key to memories of deceased ancestors. Among the inhabitants of the northern Masurian counties, there are some recollections of varieties of Low German or High German mixed with elements of Low German; however, I met almost exclusively rememberers of this language variety and they were only able to quote single words and phrases.

A similar role in the Masurian community was played by the Masurian variety (Masurian subdialects). For some descendants of Masurians, it is perceived as a lost language – a symbol of the past, yet of little practical use. Despite the generally positive attitude towards the very idea of reminding the *Masurianness*, there is no consensus regarding the revitalization methods that were extensively described in this dissertation.

In the course of the research, it was possible to verify (positively, partially positively or negatively) the hypotheses formulated in the first chapter. The linguistic environment of the descendants of the pre-war population of Masuria in fact consists of several components – apart from the standard Polish language, some of the interlocutors and their families still have knowledge

of German at various levels. The inhabitants of the poviats of Giżycko, Kętrzyn, Olecko, Ostróda and partly Ełk had the best command of German (according to the self-evaluation of the interviewees). The strip of southern poviats is slightly different in this context – due to greater dispersion, resulting in more intense contacts with the Polish population, German began to disappear there as the primary language of home contacts in the first decades after the end of World War II.

In the southern belt of Masuria, the German language was better preserved among the descendants of the inhabitants of urban areas that lost their Masurian linguistic character even before World War II.

Some families maintain bilingual contacts at home – either for identity or practical reasons (belief in the usefulness of the German language, maintaining connection with the families, also with relatives that live in Germany).

In the sphere of the passive use of the German language, the following trends can be observed – the professional aspect (reading German books, professional literature), the entertainment aspect (watching German satellite television, browsing German websites) and the entertainment-sentimental aspect (reading German minority magazines, listening to minority broadcasts on the radio).

In the memories of the interlocutors, there were threads of code-mixing or code-switching (between German and Polish), but today the phenomenon is less frequent and is most intensely noticeable among the oldest interlocutors and their family members. Similarly, the mixed Masurian-Polish code could be observed in speech of the oldest interlocutors.

The standard Polish language dominates as the language of everyday contacts with neighbors and their families; especially in mixed families the Polish part was a catalyst for language shift. The state education also had a big impact – a significant part of the older interviewees, but also some forty-year-olds, did not know Polish or knew it poorly before going to public schools. In the past the German language was abandoned for several reasons: practical (Polish language of instruction, communication with the Poles), or to avoid shame and violence based on language and Masurian/German roots.

Polish dialects (Masurian dialect, Ostróda dialect) no longer play a role other than reminiscent, symbolic. They give the ability to shape the descendants' identity or the identity of the region as a whole. Masurian was compared to Silesian or Kashubian several times, with regret of the absence of Masurian in the symbolic, visual, and tourist spheres. However, they are not an everyday means of communication, and outside the activist group, there is no real consideration for its reintroduction in everyday lives.

The hypothesis of a deeper linguistic assimilation of the Catholic interlocutors turned out to

be insufficiently precise. In general, one could observe similar levels of maintaining the Masurian variety both among the interlocutors with either Protestant or Catholic roots. In a few cases, it was even possible to observe a larger Masurian lexical repertoire among the descendants of Catholics, but here I propose refraining from correlating this phenomenon with religion, and connecting it rather with living in the southern part of the Szczytno powiat (near the former border with Poland) or in the Nidzica and Działdowo powiats.

Catholics declared the command of the German language slightly less often, but here again a general geographical correlation should be sought, not a denominational one. The geographical interpretation is supported by the fact that in counties that were more Germanized before the war, the use of German had a similar frequency and characteristics among interlocutors of both denominations. Similarly, membership in associations of the German minority, in which active participation is sometimes associated with German-language practices, is not denominational in nature – the criterion of the national origin is applied for the membership in these NGOs.

The national or ethnic identity of the interlocutors affects their attitudes to the discussed language codes, as well as the knowledge of their elements. In this sense, it was confirmed that people who felt the Masurian identity showed some interest in revitalization movements and kept numerous instances of the Masurian vocabulary and the traits of pronunciation in their memories. The interest in Masurian among people with a German identity was much less frequent – here the concern for maintaining the German language prevailed, and East Prussian and Low German varieties became the object of warm memories. A significant part of the interviewees, however, showed multi-identity attitudes – they combined some elements of German, Masurian and Polish identity – such people appreciated the value of each of the language codes.

The dissertation's last part consists of a list of words, phrases and characteristic forms noted both thanks to physical and online contacts with the descendants of Masurians in 2012-2019, as well as during field research conducted in 2019-23.