

A Siberian Bietystok – the Polish small homeland in the Tomsk gubernya (turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries)

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The free Polish colonisation of Siberia at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century is a small page in the history of the region. The colonisation was caused by, among others, the land reforms that did not fully address all the problems, the edict of 1889 allowing a free settlement beyond the Ural, the start of the construction of the Siberian railway, and the great hunger in Russia. The village of Bietystok is a typical example of the resettlement action and the resulting establishment of Polish villages in Western Siberia. In 1916 its population numbered over 500. The settlers came from western Russian gubernyas, among others those of Wilno, Grodno, Warszawa, and Siedlce. The people farmed the land, and the Catholic church that they constructed helped them preserve their Polish identity, their religion, and morality. After the tragic events of the late 1930s the national character of the population began to change, and the Polish population started to undergo the process of forced integration with the Russians. Currently all that is left in the Siberian village of Bietystok is the awareness of the Polish roots of its founders and a Catholic church repossessed after 1990.

Key words: *Siberia in the 19th century; colonisation; Poles, Bietystok (in Siberia); national identity*

The history of the Polish inhabitants of Siberia was until now discussed almost exclusively in the context of their torment. They were seen as chained to wheelbarrows and sentenced to a life of hard labour in the mines of the Ural. What remained of them was only lonely crosses in the middle of the ice-covered “barbarous land”. This image was formed by 19th century romantic literature and art and some time had to pass before a discussion about these common myths could be started, and the romantic myth could be supplemented with crucial facts¹. Since the

¹ Dżakow, W. (1974). Udział Polaków w badaniach i zagospodarowaniu Syberii w XIX wieku. *Przegląd Historyczny*, vol. 65; Śliwowska W. (1991) Polscy zesłańcy polityczni na

1990s numerous studies of historians, ethnographers, geologists, specialists of different branches of natural studies, scholars of literature have been undertaken, and they present the Polish contribution to the building of civilisation in Siberia, their role and significance in science, culture, and the economy².

The less “impressive” page in the history of Siberia is the voluntary colonisation of this region by Poles that took place at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century. The Polish migration began after the land reforms at the end of the 1860s failed to solve all the problems. Nevertheless, for the following two decades this voluntary settlement was still less significant than the forced one that was implemented through exiles (lifelong or temporary settlements). While in the years 1861–1874 an average of 1,000 people migrated annually (mostly peasants), it was only with the construction of a railroad that the resettlement intensified and in the years 1893–1899 it surged to nearly 100,000. After the difficult time of stagnation in the times of the revolution statistics show that in the years 1906–1914 over 200,000 peasants would settle annually beyond the Ural³. The situation was influenced by numerous factors, first and foremost by the directive published in 1889 allowing for a free selection of the place of settlement and the aforementioned construction of the Siberian railway in 1891. At the same time, the following year the great hunger in Russia began and the population started to migrate East. For the Tsarist administration populating Siberia was one of the crucial aims. In its attempts to use the local resources in the second half of the 19th century Russia was already conducting free peasant settlement on a major scale. The peasants would mostly arrive from European gubernyas. The information also reached Polish villages where, as a result of the division of farms that had been going on for generations, the phenomenon of the “hunger of land” could be seen. This situation was the cause of the first significant peasant migrations in the 1890s⁴.

Syberii w pierwszej połowie XIX wieku. Mity i rzeczywistość, *Przegląd Wschodni*, z. 2.; Jędrychowska, B. (2000). *Polscy zesłańcy na Syberii 1830–1883. Działalność pedagogiczna, oświatowa i kulturalna*, Wrocław 2000.

- 2 Established in the 1990s, the Centre for Eastern Studies of the University of Wrocław organised a series of international scientific conferences dedicated to this subject. The papers published in connection with these conferences have served to greatly broaden the knowledge about the Polish presence in Siberia in numerous aspects, not only their torment. The following post-conference publications can serve as examples: *Kościół katolicki na Syberii. Historia. Współczesność. Przyszłość* (2002). Wrocław; *Polacy w nauce, gospodarce i administracji na Syberii w XIX i na początku XX wieku* (2007). Wrocław.
- 3 *Zestanie i katorga na Syberii w dziejach Polaków 1815–1914* (1992). Warszawa, p. 33.
- 4 Masiarz, W. (1998). Migracja chłopów polskich na Syberię w końcu XIX i na początku XX wieku. In *Syberia w historii i kulturze narodu polskiego*, Wrocław, pp. 230–231.

In the second half of the 19th century Siberia is being rapidly populated, and the government treats it as one of the most important colonised areas⁵. The region had about 3 million inhabitants in 1858 and the number multiplied to over 9 million in 53 years. At the turn of the century (1897) out of 5 million 760 thousand inhabitants of Siberia only over 870 thousand were indigenous, and nearly 4 million 890 thousand were immigrants. In 1911 the number of indigenous people reached 973 thousand, and there were 8 million 394 thousands new settlers⁶.

Probably in the 1870s there were nearly 10,000 Poles living in Siberia, and it was only in 1881 that nearly 5,000 arrived from the Kingdom of Poland alone. Every year the migration increased to reach 10,000 new settlers on 1889⁷. Peasants from Lithuanian and Latvian lands also began to migrate to Siberia, and they would mainly settle in the Tomsk gubernya. The majority of these people came to Siberia with the help of agents that convinced them to move to this region. In the Kingdom of Poland the action was being organised until the end of the 19th century. Entire families were included in special lists, and these were not only peasants. There were also, among others, weavers from the vicinity of Łódź, Zgierz, Pabianice, or Sieradz who, as a result of the economic stagnation of the beginning of the 1880s were out of work, which led to their mass migrations. They were typically of peasant ancestry⁸. As a result of stagnation in coal mining and the consequent redundancies in Zagłębie Dąbrowskie in 1909 900 families (5,000 people) found themselves on the "migration lists". Procedures were developed to provide as much information as possible about the opportunities to live in the new places of settlement. "Scouts" (also called "hodoks" – from the Russian term for emissary) selected from among the future settlers received previously collected money and were sent ahead to Siberia to learn of the conditions in which people would live in the future. Some of them returned convinced that the poverty, pervasive crime, moral decadence, negative attitudes of the Buryat tribesmen, and, last but not least, severe climate would make survival impossible. Out of the group of 5 thousand only 200 people made the decision to resettle⁹. However, according to the population census

⁵ Previously the penal colonies delayed or made impossible the process of regular colonisation: *Zestanie i katorga na Syberii...*, op. cit., p. 36.

⁶ Zvieriev, V. A. – Zujev, A. S. – Kuzniecova, F. S. (1999) *Istorija Sibiri*. Nowosybirsk, p. 365.

⁷ According to Zygmunt Librowicz, citing a Russian newspaper "Sibir", 4,955 settlers arrived from the Kingdom of Poland in 1881, and 5,708 in 1882: Librowicz, Z. (1884). *Polacy w Syberii*, Kraków, p. 265; *Ateneum* (1889) Issue 1 (IV).

⁸ *Wychoźstwo włościan z Królestwa* (1886). *Przegląd Społeczny*, Issue 1.

⁹ *Zestanie i katorga na Syberii...*, op. cit., pp. 34–35.

carried out in Russia in 1897 peasants constituted over 60% of the Polish diaspora in Siberia, although before the start of the First World War 30–39% percent of them would regularly return, which was a significantly high rate¹⁰.

The highest number of peasants from the Kingdom of Poland would settle in Western Siberia, mainly in the Tomsk gubernya¹¹. They received land there and started their villages called “posiołki”. The settlements with the highest number of Polish families stood the greatest chances of survival. In a settlement of people of the same culture the bonds of language and religion were strong. Roman Catholic parishes played a significant role. These were established at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century in the bigger cities of the gubernya. The priests were typically Polish or Lithuanian. They tried to reach even the remotest of villages at least once a year, which helped to integrate the community.

The number of Roman Catholics in the Tomsk gubernya increased 4 times in the years 1897–1911 (that of Lutherans increased 10 times, and members of the Orthodox Church – twice). In 1897 there were 8,973 of them, and after 14 years – 39,000¹². Roman Catholics preferred to settle in cities and constituted 3.11% of their entire population, and 0.87% of the rural population. However, the majority of Catholics in Siberia lived in villages, particularly in the Tomsk district and the city of Tomsk. Most of them were of Polish ancestry¹³.

Typically during the first year after settling the Roman Catholic communities would ask the authorities for permissions and help in building churches or at least small chapels. The communities organised around them would grow into bigger Polish villages that, thanks to their religious and national identity¹⁴, have survived until the Stalinist repressions of the second half of the 1930s. The immigrants, who were brought up in Roman Catholicism, who supported the stability of traditional families, and who did not recognise divorce, would live according to the same values in Siberia, which is why many children were born in marriages and hardly any out of wedlock.

¹⁰ Łukawski, Z. (1978). *Ludność polska w Rosji 1863–1914*, Wrocław, pp. 43–45.

¹¹ Chaniewicz, W. (2004). Polacy wpisani w dzieje Tomaska, *Zestaniec*, Issue 18, pp. 45–50.

¹² With 1,927,932 and 3,673,746 members of other religions – of the Orthodox Church, Old Believers, Lutherans, Jews and Muslims – in 1897 and 1911 respectively.

¹³ Niedzieluk, T. (2008). Polscy katolicy w guberni tomskiej. *Wrocławskie Studia Wschodnie*, Issue 12, pp. 69–75.

¹⁴ Jasiewicz, Z. (1996). *Wymiary kultury i tożsamości etnicznej i narodowej. Polskość i Polacy w Kazachstanie i na innych terenach dawnego ZSRR*. In *Polacy w Kazachstanie. Historia i współczesność*. Wrocław, p. 505.

A typical example of a resettlement action and the setting up of Polish villages in the Western Siberia before 1900 was the village of Bielystok (Белосток).

At the end of the 1890s (in 1896 or 1897) thanks to pro-immigration agitation and free transport, the first "scout" from the Grodno gubernya (vicinity of Szczuczyn) arrived in Tomsk. It was Aleksander Joncz. He received offers of a number of locations for nearly twenty families to settle. Having become familiar with the conditions and having made the final selection he received land for his family and all the others willing to come. In the spring of 1899 13 families who had decided to emigrate set out on a railway journey to Siberia, with 5,000 kilometres in front of them. Each of them travelled in one freight train carriage with all their belongings and farm equipment: farm animals with their feed, tools, seeds, basic furniture, food for the road. Discounts on tickets for people and equipment were an incentive¹⁵. At the same time, every family was guaranteed 30 morgens of land and 100 roubles of interest-free credit to set up their farms. However, it would later turn out that they only received 35 to 50 roubles, and some received no funds at all. In the case of the land it all depended on how large an area a family could clear for farming.

After arrival in Tomsk by railway the settlers had to board a ship that would take them to a village of Mołczanowo. From this point they went on foot and on rented carriages through the taiga to their place of settlement, which did not yet have a name.

The construction of the village was started in the Novo-Aleksandrovskoy district in the North of the Tomsk gubernya, which was at that time named Novo-Rybalovsk. After the immigrants settled they changed the name to Bielystok, which was to remind them of their native country and the nearby city of Bielystok¹⁶. The settlers were exempted from taxes for 3 years, and in the 3 following years they were to pay only 50%. Also for three years adult men did not have to do military service. Roads, bridges, and churches were built, wells were dug. The local authorities were obliged to organise warehouses and shops with food and farming tools near the new settlements. However, the corrupt and bureaucratic administration and resettlement offices could not keep up with the ever growing number of immigrants and their problems. It turned

¹⁵ Children under the age of 10 could travel free of charge, adults paid 25% of the ticket price. The fare for luggage, horses, and cattle depended on their size and the length of the journey, but it was nevertheless a fair offer.

¹⁶ Chaniewicz, V. (1993). *Bielostockaja tragiedija. Iz istorii ghenocida Poljakow w Sibiri*, Tomsk, pp. 129–136.

out that despite tax exemptions they had to pay high district taxes. They were also forced to work building roads and bridges.

The severe climate, with its short and hot summers and long winters with extreme freezing temperatures, the taiga, with its wild animals, and the very hard work with clearing new land for farming did not discourage the settlers. They quickly turned their small and primitive dug-outs into real houses with pantries, granaries, and barns for the animals¹⁷. In the first years after their arrival they would attend religious services in Tomsk, 200 km away from Biełystok, or they invited the vicar Paweł Kaziunas to visit them. That was, however, hardly convenient, so it was decided that a local church needed to be built. A collection of funds commenced, with a high tax of 5 roubles "for every soul" established. The place that was selected for the church was on a hill and visible from all around. The construction was started in 1902. The works were conducted by a group of local carpenters, who were supervised by the settlers themselves. A house and a farm for a priest were built nearby. On June 13, 1908 the construction was concluded by the consecration of the Church of Saint Anthony of Padua. On request of the settlers the Roman Catholic Province in Sankt Petersburg sent priest Hieronim Cerpento to the church in Biełystok. He would remain there until 1913. After him Mikołaj Mikasionek became the rector of the parish. He, in turn, was driven out of Biełystok in 1923 by Bolsheviks and Polish communists¹⁸.

The wooden church was designed in the shape of a Roman Catholic cross and the local pines, cedars, and larches were used to build it. Above the entrance there was a large bell tower with two bells, with a cross on its roof. The interior, with high walls, narrow windows, and stairs leading to a choir, was richly decorated with 15 large paintings of St. Anthony (today nobody can remember how many smaller paintings were there). Under the ceiling there was a large chandelier of imitation crystal, and below there were simple benches.

The church attracted more and more Catholic settlers to Biełystok. In 1916 there were 95 individual farms in the village, with 561 inhabitants, which made its population one of the largest in the area. The last of the settlers to arrive there came from Biała Podlaska. They came in 1914. At

¹⁷ Masiarz, W., op. cit. pp. 233–234.

¹⁸ Mikołaj Michasionek was arrested in Novosibirsk and sentenced to 3 years in a labour camp on the Solovetsky Islands. He died in exile: Chaniewicz, W. (1997). *Z historii kościoła katolickiego na Syberii Zachodniej Zestaniec*, Issue 2, pp. 96–103; Chaniewicz, W. (2002). *Wiejska świątynia. Z historii budowy, zniszczenia i odbudowy kościoła we wsi Białystok na Syberii*. In *Kościół katolicki na Syberii. Historia. Współczesność. Przyszłość* Wrocław, pp. 357–358.

that time the village was inhabited by Poles from many western Russian gubernyas, such as those of Wilno, Grodno, Warszawa, Siedlce¹⁹. A Catholic church allowed them to preserve their national and religious identity in the distant land of Siberia.

The church and its priests helped to preserve the national identity, religiousness, and morality of the local Polish population. The priests not only used to teach religion, but also Polish language, correct pronunciation and general culture, because a school was only built in 1917²⁰.

A new, difficult period began with the victory of Bolsheviks in 1920. With the help of the newly arrived Polish communists they started a strong anti-religion agitation and an atheist campaign²¹. The priest was driven out of Biełystok, and in 1931 the church was closed and the presbytery was confiscated and made into a school. The Poles who protested were taken to a prison in Tomsk. For some time masses were occasionally held by pr. Julian Groński, the administrator of the Roman Catholic Church for Siberia. However, he was arrested, as well, along with a group of the faithful. Among them was a representative of the parish council of Biełystok, who was accused of helping "the Polish spy and anti-soviet" Julian Groński²².

With the forced collectivisation and establishment of a kolkhoz that all the peasants were required to join a number of people were arrested and sentenced to 3 to 7 years in prison. The local communists used the atmosphere of terror to remove the cross from the bell tower and break it, and they used horses to transport the church bells away to have them melted. Even then the local population did not allow them to completely vandalize their church²³.

The inhabitants of Biełystok faced a true tragedy in the years 1937–38, when the NKVD in Tomsk arrested all Polish men aged 16 to 75 (about

¹⁹ Chaniewicz, W. *Wiejska świątynia* ..., op. cit. pp. 355–357.

²⁰ Masiarz, W. op. cit., p. 234.

²¹ What was significant in the anti-religion campaign in the Tomsk gubernya was the participation of the head of the local Education Department, and subsequently National Minorities Department and a Secretary of the Polish Office and the Tomsk Committee of the RCP (b) Kazimierz Bulanda, a future doctor of philosophy of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków in 1929. Bulanda, K. (1967). *Księga uczestników Rewolucji Październikowej*. Warszawa, p. 126.

²² Julian Groński was sentenced to 10 years in labour camps, however, he left the USSR by way of an exchange. Zygmunt Proński, head of the Parish Council of the Siberian Biełystok returned to Tomsk after a year in prison. In 1937 he was shot along with other members of the church council. Haniewicz, W. *Wiejska świątynia*..., op. cit., p. 357.

²³ Chaniewicz, W. *Wiejska świątynia*..., op. cit., p. 358.

100 persons). They were named “enemy of the people”. It was two decades after this event that the families started receiving news about the arrested in the form of documents proving their supposed membership in the Polish Military Organisation (Polska Organizacja Wojskowa) or participation in common crimes. A flood that came in the 1970s and damaged a river bank uncovered human remains, along with the truth. All the men were shot in the spring of 1938 in Kolpashev, the capital city of Narimskiy Kray²⁴. After these events there was no one left to defend the church in Bietystok and in the summer of 1938 it was completely vandalized. Some of the equipment was thrown out into the street, including the paintings, and the furniture was confiscated by the city council and the kolkhoz. In 1940 the church was officially closed as a “place of prayer”. It was to be reborn 50 years later. During the Second World War the building was made into a granary, and later into a club. This led to changes in its construction – it was lowered and the bell tower was removed from the roof. The lack of any renovations led to enormous damage.

Through all these years the Poles did not forget their religion, despite the atmosphere of terror. Older women would gather in homes or at the cemetery to read prayers and sing hymns in Polish, and to baptise “in water” new-born children in the Catholic rite. Occasionally a priest turned up, usually to baptize children. By the end of the 1980s only a few of the villagers could remember the original purpose of the decrepit building. The local administration wanted to have it pulled to the side and burnt. It was only with an article published in a district newspaper about the history of the church, written by Wasyl Haniewicz, a historian, and a descendant of the Polish settlers, that the decision was changed. When the local community learnt that the building which was to be demolished was not an old barn, but a Catholic church, they agreed that it would have been “a deadly sin to do something like that”²⁵.

In 1990 the 36 oldest inhabitants of the village petitioned for the registration of a Catholic community in Bietystok, transferring the possession of the remains of the church to them, and for help with its renovation. During the times of the “restructuring and transparency” (perestroika and glasnost’) it was possible to repossess the building. The old wooden structure was disassembled and moved to a different location, where it was placed on new foundation. It was crowned with a large Catholic cross, and a bell named Maria, cast in Poland, was

²⁴ Jędrychowska, B. (2002). Tomsk, *Gazeta Polska* (Moskwa), September, p. 3.

²⁵ Chaniewicz, W. *Wiejska świątynia...* op. cit., p. 359.

placed under the roof of the bell tower. The consecration of the new church was celebrated together with the 100th anniversary of the establishment of Biełystok. The celebrations took place on June 13, 1998, the day of St Anthony of Padua²⁶.

This Catholic church has always been the centre of the life of the Catholic community, and it is still associated with the Polish nation, even though the nationality of the local population has changed rapidly, especially after the events of 1938. Because of the lack of Polish men the Polish women would marry the Russians or the Cossacks who settled in the area. The descendants of the Polish settlers have slowly undergone the process of forced integration with Russians. In 2002 only one of the villagers could speak Polish, even though the older women could recite certain prayers and sing hymns from a book in Polish. Nevertheless, people are nowadays still aware of the Polish roots of the founders of the Siberian Biełystok.

²⁶ Masiarz, W., op. cit., p. 234; Chaniewicz, W. *Wiejska świątynia...*, op. cit., pp. 360–362.