

Being Góral



Identity Politics and Globalization
in Postsocialist Poland

Deborah Cahalen Schneider

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SUNY series in National Identities

Thomas M. Wilson, editor

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Chapter 1



The Day the Pope Came to Town

On May 21, 1995, Pope John Paul II came to town. I had been living and conducting research in Żywiec for almost nine months. Excitement had been building for weeks, ever since the pontiff announced that he would have a “private” visit to Żywiec, meaning that only town residents would be allowed on the main square while he was speaking. Everyone had an explanation for why the pope had picked Żywiec: it was close to his birthplace (the town of Wadowice), and he was very ill, so most of the explanations had to do with his coming home one last time before his death. But why Żywiec rather than Wadowice? The two towns are not that much different in size (about twenty-four thousand people), and more or less the same distance from the county seat (Bielsko-Biała), where he was celebrating mass that morning. For that matter, he could have gone to Oświęcim (otherwise known as Auschwitz), another nearby town of similar size, and made a different kind of symbolic statement.

The deciding factor in many townspeople’s minds was that the town of Żywiec lies at the heart of the Żywiec region, a place with its own claims to a particular regional identity, that of the Żywiec Góralś.¹ By some estimates, the Żywiec region makes up about half of the county of Bielsko, all lying in the Żywiec Hills foothills of the Tatras Mountains. There are several different groups of Góralś, all living in

the mountains bordering Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, and the Góral identity as a whole is accepted by other Poles as a distinct regional-ethnic identity. Because Pope John Paul II was born in Wadowice, which is within the Żywiec region, and also grew up within the Góral area, he is seen by these primarily Catholic Góral as a native son who attained the highest honor possible by becoming pope.² Also, because Żywiec is the center of the Żywiec Góral region, many townspeople felt that the pope was showing that he was a real Góral by coming to Żywiec, symbol of his homeland, possibly for the last time before he died.

In the weeks before John Paul II came to town, extensive renovations were done to prepare for his arrival. Buildings facing the route he would take were repainted. A huge stage was constructed on the main square, and several kiosks were moved to make room for it. Half-bombed-out buildings, left to decay after World War II, were bricked and boarded and painted. All the Catholic churches in town handed out tickets for the event, and every resident living on the main square was interviewed by special security forces and given a list of security requirements. (A more cynical resident told me that this was “just like when the First Secretary came through.”) These security measures, along with other aspects of the pope’s visit, were hot topics of gossip in the town for months before the visit. Town residents told me about the security requirements they had been hearing about: there would be a policeman at every window looking out onto the square, families would not be able to look out of their own windows, people would not be allowed to move in and out of their houses during the pope’s visit, and no guests would be allowed to stay with families who lived on the square during the visit.

A newly built traffic roundabout was interpreted by many residents as being created especially for the occasion. “The smallest rondo in the world,” as it was called, became the town joke. In a town in which until recently there was only one traffic light (there were now three), the idea of a traffic roundabout seemed a ridiculous pretension. (The mayor, as we will see later, had a very different justification for the building of the rondo.) Pictures of the pope and flags flying the colors of the pope (yellow and white), the Polish nation (red and white), and the Virgin Mary (blue and white) crowded every window, fence, and signpost in town.³

When the big day finally came, I went out with all of my neighbors to see the Holy Father drive through the neighborhood. We waited for an hour and were finally rewarded by the sight of the popemobile cruising by. We waved and snapped pictures, and the town’s moun-

tain horn players, dressed in full Góral costume, played a special Góral horn salute on our very corner as the pope passed. None of us had been so lucky as to obtain tickets for entrance to the cordoned-off main square (which were free to town residents, but limited in number and distributed through the Catholic churches in town to their members) or to the apartment block where he would supposedly be stopping for a papal visit. (I heard various stories that they were free, and also that some people were selling them at high prices to both town residents and out-of-towners). So, we retired to our houses to try to tune in the festivities on television. The TV showed us a packed, cheering throng on the main square, waving papal flags and pennants with the word "Żywiec" printed on them, with many Żywiec residents wearing "traditional" Góral costumes.

After the pope had finished his speech, I left my neighbors and, with camera in hand, went out to see if I could get some pictures of the crowds leaving the main square. As three helicopters buzzed overhead, carrying the pope, his car, and other dignitaries back to the Czech Republic, I photographed some of the street vendors as the jubilant waves streamed past. One elderly woman, whom I knew slightly, was decked out in beautiful old-fashioned clothing and posing for some photographers. Her costume was what is touted as the "traditional" Góral dress for townswomen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: a white blouse with laced bodice, long petticoats and skirt with an intricate lace apron, and thick, knitted woolen socks with leather slippers tied on with leather thongs. It is likely that her mother wore such clothing for holidays when this woman was young, and she herself probably had worn a child's version of this outfit for special occasions. Although I do not normally take photos of people, I decided that I would ask her for permission because she was already posing. She nodded pleasantly and posed for me to take a snapshot, then sighed sadly and said to me, "Everyone wants to take a picture." Shocked that I had done something inappropriate, I tried to apologize, but she brushed it off and then commented, "People should know what Góral look like." The crowd from the main square and the vendors selling papal paraphernalia were dispersing, so after this encounter I headed home to rehash the day's events with my landlady, puzzling over the woman's remarks.

THEMES: CLASS, IDENTITY, AND GLOBALIZATION IN ŻYWIEC

The community of Żywiec had something that made it special in Poland—the Góral identity. This identity, which was the subject of

contention in the postsocialist era, was intimately linked to responses to political and economic change. For some people, the Góral regional-ethnic identity provides a sense of local autonomy from outside forces, and a sense of identity that gives weight to arguments to avoid global capital and focus instead on regional economic ties. Others disagree, believing that the community needs global capital for development, and they express this belief in part through arguments that the Góral identity is part of tradition but not relevant to contemporary political and economic issues. An important finding of this study is that class position was a major determinant of one's views on the relevance of Góral identity. Exploring this relationship between class and identity allows one to understand the point of view of the frustrated woman in Góral dress, and the story of the pope's visit provides a context within which to introduce important actors who attempt to construct differing Góral identities in this community.

Poland was facing escalating economic difficulties and social tension. The problems Poland's government had experienced in implementing policies for a shift to an entirely market economy were, in part, a result of the conflict between the assumptions underpinning government policy and patterns of lived experience familiar and available to the vast majority of the Polish people. This disjuncture led to a steep decline in popular support for politics in general and the national government in particular. In Żywiec, it also led people to feel more distant from the national government, and more in need of local solutions to their problems. One local resource on which they could draw was the regional-ethnic identity, Góral. This process of declining nationalism and increased importance of other identities is a much debated aspect of globalization, on which this project sheds some light.

An examination of Żywiec's responses to political and economic change in previous eras suggests that it is not unique to the postsocialist era that Góral identity had been used as a resource for mediating the community's relationship with states and economic systems. In both the pre-World War I period, when Żywiec was part of the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg Empire, and the socialist period, from the end of World War II up to 1989, Góral identity seems to have been linked to ways of negotiating the preferred relationship among the community, the state, and community economic strategies. By falling back on the meaning of their past during times of change, Żywiec's have been able to create new strategies for dealing with transition, while at the same time reinterpreting the meaning of their past to better serve their present needs. This is in no way an uncontested process, however. The class politics of recreating this identity, and the implications for

Żywiec's visions of postsocialist politics and economics, is the major focus of this book.

The primary process explained in this book is how class conflicts shape claims to group identity. This is not to say that class is the only determinant of identity process, but that it is an important one in this case. Class dynamics in the postsocialist era split the elites in Żywiec roughly into two groups—one favoring “globalization,” attempting to involve foreign investors in town businesses, and the other favoring “regionalism,” a more insular economic strategy involving increasing ties with neighboring towns across the nearby Czech and Slovak borders. The second group justified regionalism by invoking the Góral identity as a meaningful contemporary category, which tied the region together regardless of national borders. In contrast, the first group claimed that the Góral identity was a thing of the past, and that modern residents should look outward, especially outside the nation, for economic help. Ironically, both results of class politics involve a pulling away from nationalist politics, bolstering other claims on identity—regionalist or pan-European. What happened in Żywiec is a concrete example of a general trend: the contemporary spread of transnational capital and a growing, global cultural system of symbols and meanings pull in two directions, toward global (suprastate) systems of meaning, politics, and economics, and toward particularist (intrastate) backlashes. Whether called postnationalism (Matustík 1993), neonationalism (Wicker 1997), or simply a change in how nationalism functions (Llobera 1994), these processes “do not reinforce the ideological constructions called nation and state, but actually undermine them by pulling ahead of them on a trajectory of their own” (Wicker 1997, 32). Contrary to the strawman argument that postnationalism would mean that the nation-state is no longer meaningful in any sense, from an instrumentalist viewpoint it seems likely that the strength of nationalism will fade as the state plays a smaller role in the fate of the community, and other kinds of identities will gain salience. And in fact, the Żywiec case is one in which nationalism simply is not an ideological card that is played. No one there is trying to create a separate state (the idea of a separate Góral political homeland would be humorous to them), but no faction invokes the Polish state as useful or meaningful in their attempts to create a viable economic future for the community. National economic policy is designed to force communities, businesses, and individuals to be self-sufficient—with radical effect.

I began this research by doing semistructured interviews with individuals about how they were adjusting to these economic changes,

primarily in terms of their personal economic strategies, and how their political outlook might be changing. I asked them about the kinds of adjustments they were making at various levels—nuclear family, kin group, local organization, business, or community—because most individuals do not have the resources, inclination, or opportunity to make purely individual decisions about economic strategies. The interviews were designed to shed light on a set of related questions: How do people in Żywiec respond to the effects of political, economic, and cultural changes at the level of class? How have class categories been maintained or reworked through the changes that led to socialism and the changes away from socialism? And how are class, identity, and globalization currently being articulated in contexts of local, national, and global power? The results formed a picture of how important class reproduction, fractioning, and formation were in the current debates over the community's future and over conceptions of the current identity of the community. The answers to these questions also challenge our views of the political economy of postsocialism in the former Eastern Bloc.

I suspected that the reality of the “transition to capitalism” in provincial communities was out of sync with national reports and Western expectations of a rapid and easy change toward individualism, the main building block of liberal capitalist modernity. This was indeed what I found. As the current transition to decentralized economic and political structures in Poland proceeds, it is increasingly evident that the benefits of this transition are distributed unevenly. Provincial communities suffer at the expense of urban centers for a number of reasons. Foreign investors and in-country capital sources are more likely to invest in large cities that have well-developed infrastructures, so expansion of existing businesses and creation of large new enterprises and joint ventures happens more in cities. Existing enterprises in smaller cities and towns have a lower profit margin, due in part to a lack of infrastructure, and so are more likely to be liquidated during the privatization process. This last means that unemployment will rise most in the very places where new businesses are least likely to open. It also plays into a circular process in which the national government attempts to make the economy more cost-effective by cutting infrastructural support, such as railroad service, in places that “don't need it” because industry is shutting down there. As the socialist landscape is reworked into capitalist geography, areas outside the major cities increasingly and disproportionately suffer.

Many Poles in provincial communities thus feel abandoned or betrayed by the national government and new economy that had given

them such high hopes in 1989. They are left on their own to puzzle out ways to support themselves and their families, and to overcome these new obstacles of high unemployment, high inflation, decreasing infrastructural connections, and little or no support from outside sources. In the process, most people draw on their own past experiences and the traditions of their communities to come up with survival strategies. They do not have the resources that would allow them to open their own businesses or move to cities, the new way of doing things promoted by government and international development policies. Responses such as migrating to big cities to find jobs, which might be expected in the First or Third Worlds, are not viable strategies for most people in Eastern Europe, as I will explain.

An important factor in the responses of some people in this community to these problems is a defensive regionalism connected to the Góral regional-ethnic identity. As I discuss in chapter 2, the region around Żywiec historically has been passed back and forth among various nations in Central Europe, and thus has been the object of many different policies of nationalist politics and economics. Even after the region returned to Poland in the post-World War I era, it has been subject to the Nazi occupation, a socialist regime tied to the Soviet Union, and current attempts to integrate into the capitalist system. Each successive wave of changes has brought attempts by governing states to blur or eliminate this regional identity. Some Góral have resisted these attempts and entrenched their identity at each stage, because that very identity has helped them to process and mediate the community's relationship with each successive incursion. This identity affected strategies (economic, cultural, and political) at the family, local organization, and community level.

Before I ever came to Żywiec, I had heard from Poles living in other regions that Żywiec residents were Góral—that they spoke the Góral dialect and embodied a number of stereotypes, such as being less educated, rowdier and more ready to fight, fiercely independent, and generally ornery. I was told that I wouldn't be able to understand these people because the Góral dialect was so different from standard Polish.⁴ On my initial visits to Żywiec, however, I discovered that I had no trouble understanding the few people with whom I spoke. I saw some few pieces of artwork and furniture in the Góral style, but I chalked it up to romanticization of the traditional. Only after several months of living there, I realized that I had difficulty understanding some people because they used certain idioms and grammatical aspects that were different from standard Polish, code switching between the Góral dialect and Polish. (This was certainly a relief to figure

out!) At the same time, I was attempting to make sense of various statements that people made to me about who “real” Żywieceners were, and who I should be interviewing for my project. When people asked me who I was interviewing in Żywiec, I usually asked them who they thought I ought to be interviewing—a serendipitous question, as it turned out. Some people inquired whether I was interviewing only “town residents,” because in their opinion the “real traditional Żywiec folk” lived on the outskirts of town. Others informed me that the real Żywieceners were those who lived in the main town, who had a family history there and relatives who been merchants or artisans prior to World War II (Żywiec residents call it simply “the War”). Still others thought that I should go beyond the bounds of the town to interview people from various parts of the Żywiec region, but I was not sure exactly where that region ended (neither were they) or what it meant to them. It was only several months into my project that someone actually used the term “Żywiec Góral” to me, and I began to pay more attention to whether people were implying the Góral identity when they said Żywieceners.⁵ I started to put the pieces together and developed an idea of how and why this identity is important to various groups of people in the community.

The Góral identity is not important to every Żywiec resident: its strength of appeal is based in large part on how useful people find it, and class position is important in understanding its potential usefulness (or uselessness, or even disadvantages). I found that some people in Żywiec were repositioning and entrenching the Góral identity in attempts to improve their own situations by exerting influence over the economic choices of local businesses, the community, and one another. I call this group of people the “prewar elite”; they are currently in conflict with an emerging class I call the “neocapitalists.” Identification with this regional identity is also a response to their own political feelings about national leadership. Some self-folklorized⁶ markers of this identity, such as ostensibly traditional dress and crafts, or the dialect being used by people who normally speak standard Polish, are intentionally adopted by members of the prewar elite to reinforce their meaning of Góralism and their social claims to authority in the community. Other markers, such as speaking the Góral dialect mixed with standard Polish, or cultural rootedness in the geographical place where Góralism is a way of life, are implicit markers that are reworked as other aspects of people’s lives change. For example, some Góralis who moved to Kraków and Warsaw founded chapters there of the Friends of the Żywiec Region (FZR [*Towarzystwo Miłośników Ziemi Żywieckiej*], an organization whose importance will

become clear later), and Góral's who moved to some foreign countries can purchase the *Żywiec Gazette*, the local monthly newspaper, through Polish-owned businesses abroad.

To understand the social crosscurrents of this complex factor in townspeople's responses to the post-1989 political and economic changes, I had to explore what "being Góral" meant to different parts of the community, in both the past and the present. The "town" version of being Góral in Żywiec is certainly a more objectified identity than it is among those who live in outlying rural districts, which were formerly separate villages and have recently been incorporated into the town. Both Góral speech characteristics, varying from differences in pronunciation to distinctly different vocabulary and grammatical structures, and artistic traditions, such as knowledge about the production of traditional Góral instruments and possession of Góral-style furniture, are more likely to be found in the rural areas. Yet the emphasis on community identification with "Góralness" is being promoted by a group of local cultural and political elites (the prewar elite) centered in the town proper. Likewise, the push to consider the identity part of the traditional past is championed by individuals with links to global capital (the neocapitalists). Thus, the identity as conceptualized by any member of the population is in dialogue with different external forces, depending on who that person is and how they are connected to groups outside Żywiec.

The anecdote about the pope's visit to Żywiec provides a framework within which I can illustrate the interaction of the major actors of this community and show how class drives claims to identity. Central to understanding several aspects of this anecdote, and the major theme of this book, is the conflict between the prewar elite and the neocapitalists over which group should have the authority to shape a Żywiec community strategy in the postsocialist era. This conflict links the fate of the Góral identity to the role of local and global business in the community. Ultimately, these conflicts involve questions about the relationships among the local community, the Polish state, and the global economy, which result in the growth of postnational identity processes. Understanding the ways in which the Góral identity is used by the two opposing elite groups in town helps in understanding the subtexts of globalization, ethnic revitalization, and class formation that are present in everyday life and are given concrete public shape in major community events. In the next section, I reexamine Pope John Paul II's visit from the point of view of three group actors who play key roles in town: the prewar elite, the Żywiec Brewery, and the neocapitalists. This closer reading illuminates the "behind the scenes"

significance of class formation, ethnic resurgence, and postnationalism during the event.

The Prewar Elite

My conversation with the woman I photographed on the day of the pope's visit still stands out in my mind. Some important pieces of information that helped me make sense of it include the facts that she was not speaking in Góral dialect, that she lives in town rather than in a rural area, and that she is involved with the FZR in town, an arts and folklore group whose membership is predominantly made of up of prewar elite. People who have lived in the main town speak standard Polish and have largely lost the Góral dialect over the last one hundred years. This is particularly true of the prewar elite, because they were small business owners or managers of Habsburg businesses in the prewar period—the town elite who had business relations with outsiders who spoke standard Polish or German. A few older people who live in the large apartment complexes known as “settlements” retain the dialect, but their children quickly learned a more standard version of Polish. People in the outlying areas of town, however, tend to have been farmers much more recently in their families' histories, and they have retained Góral speech characteristics, even if they do not speak completely in dialect. The members of the FZR, the Żywiec Culture Club, and other artistic, cultural, and folkloric groups in town come primarily from the prewar elite, the more cosmopolitan main town residents. These groups are very active in trying to promote Góral arts and crafts among the residents and in organizing folk festivals and exhibitions. Together, the groups constitute a solid power block of upper-class town residents who retained much of their social status through the socialist era, a process I explain in detail in chapter 3.

Prewar elites' construction and use of who and what is Góral conforms to Polish ethnographers' vision of traditional Góral culture—a self-folklorizing, romantic view frozen in the early twentieth-century costume, rural lifestyle, and defining dialect. At summer folklore festivals, for example, ethnologists from universities are brought in to advise Góral dance and acting troupes and to judge the festivals. This folkloric view permeates the community to such an extent that individuals who in fact do incorporate characteristics of the Góral dialect into their speech and maintain small farms on the outskirts of the town sometimes don't consider themselves to be “real” Góral if they do not know Góral dancing or crafts.

These members of the prewar elite embody and privilege certain markers of Góral history that could be easily discarded—dialect for writing purposes, dress on occasion, and folklore—over other Góral characteristics such as farm life and actual incorporation of the dialect into everyday speech. This vocal and influential group of townspeople maintains that Góralism is rooted in community solidarity against the outside, for example, in regional autonomy from the national government or resistance to Western popular culture and Americanization. In promoting this ethic of solidarity, they also attempt to use it to discipline and control individuals (local and national politicians) and businesses that they believe are not doing enough to help the community.

My interpretation of the actions of the woman who was dressed in Góral finery hinges on her involvement in the various cultural groups in town that were interested in entrenching this identity and my understanding of her as one of the prewar elite. In my interviews with members of these groups, they suggested that by focusing on being Góral, and remembering the community's history, the community will be better able to weather the homogenizing cultural and economic effects of capitalist transformation. It soon became clear to me that a similar strategy had been used during times of political and economic transformation in the community: during the socialist period to distance the community from communism, during the World War II Nazi occupation to maintain community morale in the face of devastating attacks, and, before that (up to 1919), during the feudal period and Austrian partition. Thus, I argue that this recent response to policies of capitalist transformation is part of a historical pattern of relying on the local identity in instrumental ways to mediate colonizing forces, and in the same process, redefine the identity.

I would suggest that this particular woman was exasperated with the other residents' emphasis on the anomaly of her wearing of Góral costume, because her intent was to make a statement that the Góral identity is a given for everyone in the community. Wearing a beautiful traditional costume reflected her class status as well, because she was certainly part of the prewar upper class in Żywiec. More important, it was clear from the particular style of costume she wore that she was an upper-class resident, because there is not a standard traditional dress; dress differs by class and occupation as well as by gender, age, and, for women, marital status. The prewar elite are in key positions to construct, manipulate, and monopolize the cultural capital invested in Góral identity in an attempt to control the changes wrought by national programs on their community and in their families.