

## ***Breslau or Wrocław?***

### ***The identity of the city in regards to the World War II in an autobiographical reflection***

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#### **Abstract**

On the 1st September 1939 a German city Breslau was found 40 kilometers from the border with Poland and the first front lines. Nearly six years later, controlled by the Soviets, the city came under the "Polish administration" in the "Recovered Territories". The new authorities from the beginning virtually denied all the past of the city, began the exchange of population and the gradual erasure of multicultural memory; the heritage of the past recovery continues today. The main objective of this paper is to present the complexity of history through episodes of a city history. The analysis of texts and images, biographies of the inhabitants / immigrants / exiles of Breslau / Wrocław and the results of modern research facilitate the creation of a complex political, economic, social and cultural landscape, rewritten by historical events and resettlement actions.

**Keywords:** Wrocław; Breslau; identity; biography; history

Scientific meetings and conferences open academics to new perspectives and face them against different opinions, arguments, works and experiences. The last category, due to its personal and individual aspect, is very special. Experience can be shared and gained at the same time, which is inherent to the continuous development of human beings. Because of its subjectivity, experiences often pose a great methodological problem for the humanistic studies.

How can one place emotions, opinions or biographies in an academic setting if neutral, precise rules and classification methods do not apply to them?

A simple methodological division on quantitative and qualitative methods can partially disperse these doubts. This is apparent in many works based on autobiographies, life stories or word of mouth, most often from the fields of history (W. Churchill, „My Early Life”, 1930), sociology (W.I. Thomas, F. Znaniecki, „The Polish Peasant in Europe and America”, 1918), pedagogy („The Correspondence of John Dewey”, 1871-1952) or anthropology (O. Lewis, „The Children of Sanchez. Autobiography of a Mexican Family”, 1961). Just a few of the chosen examples prove that, by applying such a broad approach to the studied topic, it is possible to introduce a new kind of scientific quality in these works. It is also possible to discover this specific "baggage" of the researcher, i.e. experiences that may be crucial to fully understand the study. Thus, the researcher exposes a part of his or her identity, both the academic as well as personal one<sup>1</sup>.

What is the reason for such an introduction in a paper that aims to be a historical study? When asking about the identity of a city, one is also asking about the identity of its residents: generations, groups and individuals for which the city was a stop during their journeys. Finally, one is also asking about the identity of immigrants and exiles to whom the German name "Breslau" and Polish name "Wrocław" could mean both the biblical promised land as well as hell on earth. Even though the origins of the city are connected with slavic settlements, first Polish settlers and the funding of the Wrotizla bishopric in the year 1000, the city goes under the Bohemian crown in 1335. Under the name of Vretslaw, this regional metropolis becomes a central-european center of international trade. In 1526, when the Kingdom of Bohemia becomes a part of the Habsburg dominion, Vretslaw is renamed to Presslaw. Despite its peripheral nature, die Blume Europas – "The Flower of Europe", the urban microcosm, as the city is called by Norman Davies, a British historian, Wrocław is affected by all major decisions made in the European capitals: in the 17th century, the capital of Silesia is placed at the centre of military operations of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), it becomes a part of the Kingdom of Prussia as Breslau in the first half of the 17th century and it is captured by the French army during the Napoleonic campaigns. The city enters the 20th century with a rich historical, social and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> SILVA, A. Pacheco; BARROS, C. Reis; NOGUEIRA, M. L. Magalhães; DE BARROS, V. Andrade - *Conte-me sua história: reflexões sobre o método de História de Vida*. Mosaico. Estudos em Psicologia. Minas Gerais: UFMG. ISSN 1982-1913. No 1 (2007) p. 26-31.

baggage, which is not devoid of conflict and constantly changing borders. Its rich heritage is in contrast with its hugely underdeveloped infrastructure, which was set back even further by the post-war crisis of the Weimar Republic<sup>2</sup>. The changes that take place in the city over only twelve years (1933-1945) were dubbed as "the quintessence of Europe's tragedy in 20th century" by Gregor Thum, a German historian. In the provincial Breslau, which belongs to the Weimar Republic, ideas such as radical nationalism, supported by xenophobia and anti-Semitism quickly gained in popularity. The city took an active part in the development of Nazi fantasies bent on the germanization of surrounding territories and extermination of Jews. The city was damaged during the war both by the advancing Red Army as well as the defenders of Festung Breslau, the Citadel of Breslau, which surrendered four days after the fall of Berlin as the last remaining German strong-point. The post-war border change in the Central and Eastern Europe led to mass resettlements on an unprecedented scale and Breslau became Wrocław, a "reclaimed", "promised" Polish city created by the communist propaganda and stripped of its own past. After fifty years, along with the collapse of the regime, the tedious task of recovering the historical identity of the city could be started<sup>3</sup>.

The thirties mark the city with the nazi swastika. Breslau accepts the political solutions of the Nazi Party with great enthusiasm: in the 1932 election, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP, *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*) gets over forty per cent of the votes in the city, which is the third best result in the nation<sup>4</sup>. The *Osthilfe* (Eastern Aid) program, which was aimed to "help the East", seemed like the only chance for a better future and reclamation of honour on the international arena for citizens tired by the crisis and unfulfilled promises. Breslau becomes a model implementation of the Party's program. The problems of unemployment and poverty are tackled and investments are made to develop the neglected infrastructure. Plans are made for the reconstruction of the urban space to adjust it to the monumental style of National Socialism<sup>5</sup>.

To develop the ideological spirit of the National Socialism, The School of Anthropology is opened in Breslau, which serves as a centre for research on racial theories and German

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<sup>2</sup> KULAK, T. – Wrocław in the history and memory of Poles. European Network Remembrance and Solidarity Reading Room [consult. April 30, 2015] Available at WWW: <URL: <http://www.enrs.eu/pl/articles/223-wroclaw-in-the-history-and-memory-of-poles>>

<sup>3</sup> THUM, G. - Obce miasto. Wrocław 1945 i potem, 1st edition. Wrocław: Via Nova, 2008 p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> DAVIES, N.; MOORHOUSE, R. - *Mikrokosmos. Portret miasta środkowoeuropejskiego*. Kraków: Znak – Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2002. p. 369.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 378-379.

heritage of Silesia. During the popular displays of sport and athleticism, which meant to demonstrate the ideal Aryan body, high ranking representatives of the Party arrive at the city. In July 1938, during the 12th Turn-und-Sportfest, The Celebration of Gymnastics and Sport, Adolf Hitler himself arrives at the city and uses the occasion to give many political speeches<sup>6</sup>.

Soon after the victory of NSDAP in the election, the Police and SA begin to eliminate individuals and organizations deemed as "dangerous" for the nation, which equals to eliminating potential political adversaries and the opposition. The first forced labour camp, Konzentrationslager Breslau-Dürrgoy, is opened in the city as early as in 1933 just for a couple of months and the first public book burning takes place. The Jewish minority becomes the target of the biggest persecutions. Nearly two thirds of the thirty thousand members of the Jewish community leaves the city before 1938, the Kristallnacht, The Crystal Night, which ends with most of the city's synagogues burned and Jewish shops and houses demolished<sup>7</sup>. It is worth mentioning that Jewish artists and intellectuals, including many academic professors, were a big part of the city's intellectual elite. Their forced withdrawal from the public life and the gradual limitation of their civil rights directly affected the socio-cultural landscape of Breslau.

One of the core goals of the Nazi propaganda was the reinforcement of pride stemming from the feeling of belonging to the German nation. In Breslau, such actions were of particular importance because of the geographical location of the Upper Silesia region, which was a target of ideological battles fought by the Polish and German governments, mainly because of the identity of the local population. In Breslau itself, the Polish minority makes around five per cent of the entire population. Along with the creation of new legislation, all signs and symbols that could somehow undermine the German origins of the city or the Third Reich are removed. Streets are renamed and monuments from the Weimar era are removed. One of the most interesting examples of such actions is the introduction of new crest for the city, which replaces the traditional, five-sided crest with the Bohemian initials for the city, Bohemian royal lion and the head of St. John. In 1938, the medieval symbols are replaced with two elements: the Silesian Eagle and the Iron Cross, a military distinction created at the beginning of the 19th century in Breslau itself<sup>8</sup>. Thus, a symbolical "purification" of the German identity of the city takes place.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 390-394.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 390-394.

On the 1st of September 1939, Breslau becomes one of the most important strategic locations, key for the supply of Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe because it is located just forty kilometres from the Polish border. The units garrisoned in the city are one of the first to be sent to fight. Soon after that, first convoys with workers for the metalworking and rail-making factories arrive and are detained in local jails and temporary camps. The deportation of Jews from Breslau begins in the middle of 1941. Until the July of 1943, thousands of trains transporting Jews that are bound for Auschwitz-Birkenau will go through the city<sup>9</sup>. During one of the stops of such trains on the city's main stations in August of 1942, witnesses spot Edith Stein. This German philosopher and theologian, born in Breslau in 1891 in a Jewish family, patron saint of Europe since 1999, will die in a gas chamber in Auschwitz just a couple days later<sup>10</sup>. The plans for this death camp were partially prepared in Breslau in the mind of local chief of *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security guards), police and security office inspector Arpad Wigand who was also responsible for the extermination of Warsaw Jews<sup>11</sup>.

The war doesn't seem to affect the daily life of Breslau until 1944. The city does not experience any major bombings despite being marked as one of the key air raid targets in the RAF's Bombardier's Baedeker<sup>12</sup> because of the city's power plants and because of its major role in supplying the German units. The waves of routed units appearing in the city during the second half of 1944 are a proof of the propaganda and lies about the victories of the Wehrmacht during the Russian campaign. In the same year in August, Hitler announces that Breslau is now a strongpoint<sup>13</sup>, which, in relation to the uncertain situation on the front, the lack of any urban fortifications and the order to fight to "the last soldier", equals a death sentence. To deal with its supply problem, the strongpoint's command spreads false information about German victories and a possible Ally retreat from France.

On the 12th January 1945, the Vistula-Oder Offensive begins. It becomes clear for the inhabitants of the city that the presence of the Red Army in Breslau is only a question of time. After a week of delay, on the 20th of January, Gauleiter, prefect Karl Hanke decides to order for the forced evacuation of the two thirds of nearly one million people who are currently living in

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 427-428.

<sup>10</sup> Rybińska, Agata - Biografia Edyty Stein. Towarzystwo im. Edyty Stein. Centrum Dialogu Kulturowego [consult. APRIL 30, 2015] Available at WWW: <URL: <http://www.edytastein.org.pl/pl/4-edith-stein/2-biographie/>>

<sup>11</sup> DAVIES, N.; MOORHOUSE, R. – op. cit. p. 425.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 436-437.

<sup>13</sup> HARGREAVES, R. – Hitler's Final Fortress: Breslau 1945. Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2012. p. 25-27.

the city. Those that did not get a spot on one of the already full trains are forced to go by foot to Legnica and Drezno. The journey through snow and subzero temperatures leads to the death of nearly ninety thousand people. One month later on the 16th of February, the Soviets encircle the city and trap nearly two hundred thousand civilians, soldiers, prisoners and workers<sup>14</sup>.

The Soviet air forces keep bombing key strategic points and level more and more industrial and residential districts. However, the defenders also take part in the destruction of the city. German soldiers gradually set fire to the southern districts, which comprise of villas and small mansions, creating a set of flaming barricades. The mobilized civilians are used to deconstruct apartment houses and to build a spare airfield in the middle of the city. During Easter, on 31st of March and 1st of April, the bombardment reaches a new high and affects Ostrów Tumski, the historical and landmark-filled centre of the city. Local fires are left unattended and, due to strong winds, consume entire districts<sup>15</sup>. Father Paul Peikert, a rector of the local parish of St. Maurice is a witness of this *Gotterdammerung*, Twilight of the Gods. Every day he updates his diary with detailed description of the siege, the everyday life of his flock and the progressive devastation of the city from the hands of Russians and Germans. He blames the tragedy of war on the nation of "poets and philosophers" turned by Hitler into "the most backward country in the world"<sup>16</sup>.

On the 6th of May 1945, the command of the city, without Hanke who fled a day earlier, surrenders two days before the official capitulation of the Third Reich. However, the end of the war does not mean the end of the destruction and fighting on the streets. Russians continue to set fire to the ruins. However, they do not stop at that: The Library of the University, along with its precious collection of books and scripts, and the City Museum are set ablaze. The plundering of abandoned apartments, shops and factories begins<sup>17</sup>. Everything that has any value, from windows and porcelain to lanterns and pianos, is disassembled and shipped away, as many sources from that time claim. Trains filled with stolen property are bound east to the Soviet Union<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> DAVIES, N.; MOORHOUSE, R. – op. cit. p. 438-440.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 49-52.

<sup>16</sup> PEIKERT, P. - Kronika dni oblężenia. Wrocław 22 I – 6 V 1945. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1984. p. 66-68.

<sup>17</sup> DAVIES, N.; MOORHOUSE, R. – op. cit. p. 54-55.

<sup>18</sup> N. Davies and G. Thum quote many testimonies of eyewitnesses; they are similar in tone to memories and histories transmitted in the family of author.

On the 9th of May, thirteen representatives of the Polish administration arrive at Breslau. Bolesław Drobner, the new mayor of the city, and members of the Security Office are in this group. These "Pioneers" take residence in the city centre, in three buildings that survived the shelling and place the Polish emblem on the doors of each of those buildings. All these officials were nominated by Stalin between 1944 and 1945. There is no Polish government yet that would be officially accepted by the international community, there are no new borders set and the Potsdam conference is still four months away. However, the accomplished facts matter for the communists: thanks to the political dexterity of Stalin, the favourable for the Soviet Union Potsdam resolutions put Breslau "under temporary Polish administration," which goes against the initial plans of Churchill and Truman. The cunning wording of these resolutions implied a temporary solution and not a legal annexation. The final decision was to be made during a peaceful conference that never took place. The entire idea of "Reclaimed Land" was based on these resolutions. When Breslau fell, there were virtually no Poles in the city, apart from the prisoners of the force labour camps and a group of railway workers. Before 1945, no major Polish political party demanded Breslau from Germany and the city did not exist in the national identity, as opposed to the area of Eastern Borderlands and cities such as Wilno or Lwów, which were taken by the Red Army in 1939<sup>19</sup>. In such situation, Poles had to be convinced that Breslau was always Wrocław.

The first changes can be noticed in the national structure of the city. At the end of 1945, there were as many as thirty thousand Poles and one hundred fifty thousand Germans in Wrocław. Only a year after that, these proportions are reversed<sup>20</sup>. The reasons for this change are repatriate/resettlement transports of Poles from the Central Poland and Eastern Borderlands, mainly from small towns and villages, and Germans who were sent to Germany (the last transports were sent in the summer of 1947<sup>21</sup>). Breslauers who decided to stay have to adapt to the new reality, which usually meant moving to less desirable locations to give place to new

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 446-449.

<sup>20</sup> LAGZI, G. – Multicultural Past and Present in the Cities of Central Europe: The Cases of Wrocław/Breslay and L'viv/Lemberg/Lwów. *Deeds and Days* [on-line] vol. 60 (2013). [consult. April 30, 2015] Available at WWW <[http://www.academia.edu/10242728/Multicultural\\_Past\\_and\\_Present\\_in\\_the\\_Cities\\_of\\_Central\\_Europe\\_The\\_Cases\\_of\\_Wroc%C5%82aw\\_Breslau\\_and\\_L\\_viv\\_Lemberg\\_Lw%C3%B3w](http://www.academia.edu/10242728/Multicultural_Past_and_Present_in_the_Cities_of_Central_Europe_The_Cases_of_Wroc%C5%82aw_Breslau_and_L_viv_Lemberg_Lw%C3%B3w)>

<sup>21</sup> DAVIES, N.; MOORHOUSE, R. – op. cit. p. 461.

burghers and new-old owners. The polonization of German surnames helps them to become less noticeable among their neighbours and less suspicious to the new government<sup>22</sup>.

The city becomes a transfer point, the beginning and the end of hundreds of thousands of journeys. Repatriation is for the majority of Poles only a myth. Their journeys are forced and the destination, which is commonly seen in many memories as "The Capital of the Wild West", is located on a completely unknown and foreign territory. The picture painted by propaganda does not mention the daily rapes, murders, the fact that stealing is the best way of getting supplies, the lack of interest from the new tenants about the state of the surviving buildings, the sea of ruin and rubble that will later on become the source of materials for the grand national project of rebuilding Warsaw<sup>23</sup>.

The motto of "the return to the motherland", strongly popularized in the forties and fifties, seems effective. However, it still lacks any historical grounds that would lay foundation for building a community. This is why the post-war academic papers about Wrocław include a great deal of false, manipulated information that depicts the alleged Polish-German conflict. There is no mention of the connection of Wrocław with a historical region of Bohemia; the transfer of the city into the German hands is portrayed as a result of an intrigue. Historians invent whole chapters of the city's history, in which all German themes are negative. The popularity of prehistoric studies is rapidly expanding. These studies are aimed to discover evidence for the Slavic roots of the city. The history of Wrocław's landmarks, especially the medieval ones, is being diligently written: the gothic style is mistakenly associated with the first Polish rulers<sup>24</sup>.

The re-polonization of the urban toponymy is similar to the actions of Nazis in the thirties. The only differences are the heroes mentioned by the government: instead of the heroes of national socialism, the heroes of communism are revered. Until the spring of 1946, all streets are renamed but not without difficulties. There are not enough Polish and Russian names that can be associated with the history of the city. Another aspect of the re-polonization that proves to be

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<sup>22</sup> LAGZI, G. – Multicultural Past and Present in the Cities of Central Europe: The Cases of Wrocław/Breslay and L'viv/Lemberg/Lwów. *Deeds and Days* [on-line] vol. 60 (2013). [consult. April 30, 2015] Available at WWW <[http://www.academia.edu/10242728/Multicultural\\_Past\\_and\\_Present\\_in\\_the\\_Cities\\_of\\_Central\\_Europe\\_The\\_Case\\_of\\_Wroc%C5%82aw\\_Breslau\\_and\\_L\\_viv\\_Lemberg\\_Lw%C3%B3w](http://www.academia.edu/10242728/Multicultural_Past_and_Present_in_the_Cities_of_Central_Europe_The_Case_of_Wroc%C5%82aw_Breslau_and_L_viv_Lemberg_Lw%C3%B3w)>

<sup>23</sup> THUM, G. – op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 257-274.

difficult is the removal of German landmarks and typography from the public space. The latter, which was covered with a poor quality paint, survived in some places to this day<sup>25</sup>.

The creation of new identity of the city based on blatant propaganda and direct interventions made by the government of the Polish People's Republic took 20 years – an amazingly short period of time for such a feat. Until 1989, the past was associated with the worries that Germans might demand a return of the goods and properties left in Wrocław in 1945. Only after the fall of communism and after signing the 1990 Polish-German border treaty, the Potsdam understatement ends. However, it is too late to save the physical indications of a German Breslau. On the verge of entering the 21st century, the city begins a project aimed at rebuilding the multicultural identity. The turn towards historical memory, which was negated throughout decades, is symbolically marked by adapting the "Wrocław, the meeting place" motto, which was taken from the speech John Paul II gave during the Wrocław's Eucharistic Congress in 1997. This motto becomes a tourism slogan and guides other renovation projects aimed to restore places and urban areas connected with Wrocław's history, which are often visited by German tourists, descendants of the Breslauers that want to learn about their roots. The cultural district of Four Temples (Jewish, Catholic, Evangelical and Orthodox) is one of the biggest such projects. Commemorative plaques providing information about destroyed landmarks, historical events and figures start appearing on the streets.

Two years after the grand celebration of a millennium of the foundation of the Wrocław's bishopric, a book written by Norman Davies and Roger Moohouse commissioned by Wrocław's City Council called "Microcosm. Portrait of a Central European City" appears in bookstores. The growing interest in the past of the city can be also attributed to a series of detective stories about Eberhard Mock, a German detective living in Breslau in the thirties. The cityscape presented by Marek Krajewski, along with the original toponymy, is amazingly detailed and precise. To reach this level of detail, the author used old German chronicles and newspapers from the beginning of the 20th century. These books earned a huge following and Breslau became a part of the pop-cultural puzzle.

These short observations about the ways the historical identity was built, destroyed and reclaimed are in no way final and do not exhaust the topic. The history of Wrocław's identity is a story of changes, often forced, which can be exemplified by the Nazi germanization and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 285-322.

communist polonization. Some of the last remaining Breslauers still, to this day, live in Wrocław, as well as the first Polish inhabitants. Both these groups remember the difficult periods of hunger, sprawling ruins, empty German apartments and the furniture, paintings and clocks taken from those apartments. They also remember the feeling of uncertainty and temporariness. These are also the memories of my grandmother who was born in Wilno in the twenties and who arrived at Wrocław in 1946 in one of the many transports of Poles from the Eastern Borderlands. My mother will be born in the same city in the bleak fifties, and I will be born thirty years later in the last years of communist Poland. The family history of many of my colleagues is very similar. For us, the reconstruction of the past provides a way to construct not only the future but also the entire identity.

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