

ABOUT SILESIA

Prepared By Franciszek Kurzaj

INTRODUCTION TO SILESIA

Some historians will find the source for the name Silesia [Latin] Śląsk [Polish], Schlesien [German], Slezsko [Czech], in the German tribe of the Silings, others in the mount of Slez, still others in the name of the river Slesus that merges with the Odra [Oder] River. Geographically, the name Silesia refers to the region marked by the Sudety [Sudeten] Mountains in the South, and the basin of Odra [Oder] River, and today lies within the borders of Poland and the Czech Republic.

In the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries, Silesian territory and the people living there were subjected to the early Middle Ages process of creating countries in Europe. As a result of the continuous conflict between the rulers of the Western Empire and the Pope, countries were created such as the Country of the Czechs [Czechia], Poland, and Germany. Silesia, being on the border of these three political entities, played an important role in the process of creating those countries and was influenced politically and culturally by this process. Historically, Silesia was a part of each of those political entities but never became an independent or separate country itself ¹.

Silesia frequently also encountered the terms of Austrian-Silesia and Prussian-Silesia. This division arose as a result of the wars over Silesia between Prussia and Austria (1740-1763). The name "Upper Silesia" has been used to describe the southern territory of a larger region of Silesia. In the years 1855/1860 Upper Silesia, as well as the rest of Silesia, was a part of the Kingdom of Prussia (1701-1871) and the Austrian Empire (1804-1867). At this time, instead of the Latin name "Upper Silesia", the German name of "Oberschlesien" was used.

When, after World War I, in 1918, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (1876-1918) ceased to exist, many new countries were created, among them Czechoslovakia (1918-1993). The Austrian part of Upper Silesia became part of Czechoslovakia and received the Czech name Horní Slezsko. And when, as a result of a referendum that took place in Upper Silesia in 1921, that at the time was part of Germany (1871-1945), part of Upper Silesia (Katowice/capital) became part of Poland. The Latin name Upper Silesia and the German name Oberschlesien became in Polish, Górny Śląsk. After World War II, in 1945, the majority of the territory of Silesia became part of Poland and is described in Polish as Śląsk. The region of Upper Silesia [Oberschlesien], which after the referendum of 1921, remained in Germany, and in 1945 became part of Poland, is known today as the Śląsk Opolski [Opole Silesia].

Over the centuries in Upper Silesia besides the Latin language, the standard German, standard Czech and standard Polish languages were used. Those languages function as the official

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silesia>

ABOUT SILESIA

Prepared By Franciszek Kurzaj

languages. The majority of the inhabitants, however, used the West Slavs ², ethnolect ³ called in Latin "Silesian," in German "Schlasich," in Czech "Slezština," in Silesian "Slunski," and in Polish "Śląski." A citizen of Silesia is referred to in Latin as "Silesian," in German as "Schlesier," in Czech as "Slezané" in Silesian as "Slusok" and in Polish as "Ślązak." A citizen of Upper Silesia is referred to in German as "Oberschlesier," in Czech "Hornoslezan" in Silesian "Gurnoslunsok" and in Polish "Górnoślązak."

Taking into consideration the historical and political past of Silesia, including Upper Silesia, one has to say that the Silesian population is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. It is also important to remember that the use of a certain language by an individual or a certain group of people does not describe the particular nationality of the individual or the group. The opinion of many linguists is that in a territory with many languages in use, the individual decision of the inhabitants of the territory is the decisive factor in this matter. "Although the language can play a significant role in the decision of determining nationality, it is never the only one"⁴.

² By West Slavs we understand a group of people who, from the sixth century, spread to inhabit most of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Present-day Slavik people are classified into East Slavs, West Slavs and South Slavs. Among the West Slavs are the Bohemians (Czechs), Moravians, Slovaks, Silesians, Sorbs (Wendish/Lusatians), Kashubs, and Poles. *Wikipedia* - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavs>.

³ By ethnolect we understand a group of dialects or a language used by certain people. The difference between dialects and language was already determined by the Greeks in the first century BC "The Greeks distinguish in the late first century BC, between 'dialektos' (spoken language) and 'glossa' (written language). This was adopted by Latin writers, and duly reflected in the opposition between dialectos and lingua." Kamusella, Tomasz. *The Silesian Language in the Early 21st Century: A Speech Community on the Rollercoaster of Politics*. Die Welt der Slaven, Vol. 58. No.1, p. 11. 2013.

⁴ Olesch, Reinhold. *Jezyk Polski na Górny Śląsk Jego Stosunek do Jezyka Niemieckiego* [The Polish Language in Upper Silesia and Its Relationship to the German Language]. Kwartalnik Opolski, pp. 153-157. [Reinhold Olesch (1910-1990), a native of Upper Silesia, an internationally renowned linguist, in 1963/1964 conducted scientific research among the Silesian Texans. His research was published in 1970 in Berlin].