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Constructing the Identity of a Town as a Strategy of Coping with a Crisis. The Town of Sanok after the Political Changes in 1989

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The article presents the way in which the narration concerning the identity of the town of Sanok is created. The aim of the article is to show who and how “tells the town’s story.” The subjects of the study are narrations functioning in the social space of Sanok.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The research proceeded to establish the “content” of the place’s identity, the entities that construct it, and the ways of maintaining and manifesting them. It was based on the existing data i.e. Sanok photo albums, guide books or websites. The first stage of the research depended on the quantitative analysis whereas in the second stage the data was processed using the qualitative analysis to discover and reveal individual perspectives of perceiving the city adopted by the authors of the texts.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The article describes the process of building a narration on the identity of the place, which is a response to the crisis caused by the process of systemic transformation. It shows how different narrations on the identity of the town are constructed and how they are changed when the socio-economic situation of Sanok is changing.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The data analysis shows that the identity of Sanok is a social construct influenced by many factors. It is not stable and it is being constructed all the time.

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CONCLUSION, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:
Each decade brings changes in the perception of the town's identity. The changing socio-political and economic situation will change the existing narration, which is worth investigating.

KEYWORDS:

identity of the town, narration, crisis, transformation,
new traditions

INTRODUCTION

Situated in the south eastern part of Poland, Sanok is a town having almost 40000 inhabitants. Before World War II this town was a meeting point of many different cultures as its inhabitants represented such nationalities as the Poles, the Jews, (approximately 5400 people what constituted 30% of its population), the Ukrainians (about 1600 people), the Ruthenians as well as quite a large population of the Roma minority (Bańkosz, 2008, p. 65). The Second World War and the years that came after it terminated the continuity of the local urban tradition and the number of inhabitants, decreased to approximately 10 000 people. The Jewish and the Roma minorities disappeared completely and the Jewish district in the town was pulled down. Moreover, after the famous Operation Vistula only about 300 inhabitants of the Ukrainian origin stayed in the city (Bata, 2001, p. 45). It was then, that Sanok stopped to be the town of many cultures, gradually becoming a cultural monolith. It is also worth adding that many prominent citizens of this town, who were at the same time the members of its elite, were killed during the war. With time these people were replaced by those coming from nearby villages, ready to work in the former and newly built factories in the town. New districts composed of block of flats gradually replaced these buildings which had been destroyed during the war. Two decades after the end of war the population of Sanok exceeded the number of 40 000. In the period of Polish People's Republic the identity of the town was primarily created in connection with a fast industrial development which took place at that time. It was then that Sanok started to be

perceived as a fast developing socialist town on the map of the province. The uniqueness of articles produced in the Sanok factories, as well as the rate of their development, were a decisive factor in building the position of the town. All the above mentioned facts seemed to confirm and justify a common belief of that time that it is industry that is responsible for town creating processes. In addition the development of Sanok was also to be contributed by centrally planned development of tourism as this town was then called "the gate of the Bieszczady Mountains" (Bał, 1966, p. 15).

The changes appeared after 1989. It was then that the transformation of the political and economic systems took place. Unfortunately these changes proved to be highly unfavorable for the city, as since that time, the economic situation of the town was gradually deteriorating, which in turn resulted in an increase of unemployment and poverty. It led to the town's depopulation. New local authorities faced the necessity of implementing a new strategy of the development of the town. Also, the bonds existing between the town and its inhabitants needed to be strengthened, hence one of the first decisions taken by the new local authorities chosen in 1990, was to restore the abandoned former name of the city: The Royal Free town of Sanok. Many other traditions existing in the town before the Communism times were also restored.

The study on identity of Sanok was conducted during 2016 and 2017. The main purpose of the research was to establish who and in what way "tells the town's story," so the stories existing in the social environment of the town of Sanok are made subjects of this research, its procedures in turn aim at establishing the "content" of the place identity, which was built, maintained and revealed by the respondents.

The year of 1989 was considered as the key one in an attempt to construct a narration concerning the identity of the town of Sanok. The political, economic and social changes which were launched then, had an essential influence upon the selection of the content and ideas concerning the history and the present day of this town in the public discourse.

The research was based on the existing data i.e. Sanok photo albums, guide books containing any pieces of information on the town as well as leaflets promoting the city or websites. The first stage of

the research depended on the quantitative analysis of the gathered material the purpose of which was to point out to the most frequently repeating elements whereas in the second stage the data was processed using the qualitative analysis to discover and reveal individual perspectives of perceiving the city adopted by the authors of the texts.

The assumptions of symbolic interactionism and social constructivism were inspirations for this research. It is assumed that the meanings of the objects do not exist in the objects themselves but they are created in interactions between acting social actors. The process of interpretation of these meanings is of social character, in addition the society and its institutions constitute a constant process.

THE IDENTITY OF A PLACE – THE IDENTITY OF A TOWN

The identity of a place – in this case a town is understood as a set of imaginations, judgments and beliefs attributed to the city by its inhabitants. These imaginations take into consideration a set of characteristic features distinguishing a given town from other cities, as well as all these elements which describe the specific “personality” and the character of a given place in a metaphorical way. Piotr Sztompka (2012, p. 253) claims that urban communities belong to one of the most persistent groups i.e. the ones which “preserve their continuity and identity despite the appearance of new members and constant change of their inhabitants.” The city lasts thanks to the continuity of tradition, which is assured by organization and culture. The organization makes it possible to transmit a kind of codified memory about the past of a given group from one generation to another (Sztompka, 2012, p. 254).

Charles Taylor combines searching for identity with narration building. He notices the necessity of possessing knowledge about the past because, as he states: “to possess any kind of imagination of who we are, we also need to have an imagination of the way we have become and where we are heading” (Taylor, 2001, p. 94). The narration is needed to structuralize the process of reconstruction of this “becoming,” as it lets a human being place his/her life within the structure of meaning. Anthony Giddens (1991, pp. 77-78) claims that

personal identity depends on the person's ability to "maintain the continuity of a defined kind of narration," the "content" of which is permanently built up by constant including events coming from the external world. This is because, the self-identity "is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of individual's action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens, 1991, p. 76).

Personal identity is an imagination concerning one's own person built in the process of searching for the answer to the question "who am I?" It is a self image constructed by a human being, a representation of the human ego. According to the assumptions of symbolic interactionism identity is one of many "objects" created as a result of symbolic interaction. These objects in turn create "worlds" existing for individual human beings and groups of people (Blumer, 2007, p. 12). As Herbert Blumer (2007, p. 13) has it: "The meaning of each object must be shaped, learnt and transmitted by the process of indication." People's group life "on the level of symbolic interactions is an extensive process whereby human beings shape, maintain and change objects which create their world by giving them a name" (Blumer, 2007, p. 13). Combined (collective) actions are characterized by the fact, that the interpretation process runs in the form of mutual directions given by the participants. These actions also require establishing common goals (Blumer, 2007, p. 16). Referring to the words of Richard Jenkins Zbigniew Bokszanski (2006, p. 59) notices, that both these forms of "individual" and "collectively shared" identity are closely interrelated as "the processes in which they are created, reproduced or altered are as a matter of fact identical and both forms of identity are «social» in their basic sense." Hence in case of the group or collective identity, the posed question concerns rather the truth, who we are. In both cases these questions are also questions about the origin or what one's small homeland is, the place in the world in which one's process of growing and upbringing took place. This "small homeland" is a decisive factor and a point of reference in the process of shaping personal identity of a human being and becomes an integral part of this process. The biographies of individual human beings create the biography of a given place and such a biography in turn is a key element in the process of constructing individual identity by a human being.

Zdzisław Mach (2008, p. 11) holds that:

Identity can be understood as a socially determined process of mutual identification in the course of social actions. New circumstances, changing conditions of interaction do affect the permanent dynamism of the model of reciprocal identification as well as creating new identity elements and the change of existing images concerning both oneself and other people.

Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2013, p. 190), confirms this point of view by proving that "Identity is not a stable reality but it is rather a constant process or change, as many of its planes interact with different contexts, a given human being goes through or because the self itself strenuously attempts to create itself as something, or somebody different." When the ego constructs itself as someone new the images of places which are important for the subject can also be modified.

CREATING THE NARRATION

The analyzed guide books and photographic albums concerning Sanok preserve a similar content outline. The story of the city starts somewhere in the Medieval times when Sanok is perceived as "an important administrative centre." Other sources such as chronicles mention that this city used to be "the most important defensive borough" between the border and the city of Przemyśl (Bańkosz, 2008, p. 18). In 1339 the city obtains a foundation charter issued by Prince George II Trojdenowicz coming from the Masovian part of the Piast Dynasty (this fact is always underlined.) The Medieval and the Renaissance period is always described very thoroughly, as it is in those periods that the city develops. In those times the inhabitants of the city are visited by Polish kings, queens and princes. It is also worth mentioning that for many years the city of Sanok was a part of the Polish queens' dowager. Those visits of the Polish rulers are described in the most thorough way. For example the wedding ceremony of Władysław Jagiełło – a Polish king and Elżbieta Granowska, taking place in St Michael parish church in Sanok is described in detail. At the end of the 16th century the town starts to deteriorate. This process of gradual deterioration lasts until the middle of the XIX

century. It is then that thanks to the development of railway, as well as oil extraction, which in turn leads to the development of the local industry, the town itself again starts to regain its former importance. The events taking place between the second half of the 19th century and the end of the Second World War are again described in detail in the guidebooks and albums. The descriptions of the town's history in the guidebooks issued after 1989 are usually finished in the forties of the 20th century. The period of communism in the development of the city is not mentioned at all in those guidebooks, contrary to the photo album entitled *Ziemia Sanocka* issued in 1966 which in turn comprises a detailed description of the post-war city development.

In 2008 "13 Wonders of Sanok" are chosen and listed. This list comprises the following entities: The Bieszczady Mountains, the open air museum of Sanok, two images of the Mother of God coming from the Sanok churches, icons, the collection of Beksinski's paintings, the castle "built in Sanok for the Polish queens," the steps, some unique wooden buildings, the monument of Szwejk (a character from one of the novels written by Jaroslav Hašek), which some time ago was the only one monument of this type in Poland, the treasures of nature, the melting pot of cultures and religions and the bunkers dating from the period of the Second World War (Bańkosz, 2008, p. 37). The photographs of these historic buildings, which accompany the text, are to emphasize the esthetic values of the photographed objects. They also aim at delivering as many details of these objects as possible, hence the choice of the best weather conditions, season of the year or even the choice of time when a given photography is taken is not random. Also, the perspective from which these photographs are taken, is intended to depict the object usually in the frontal position.

In the guidebook written by R. Bańkosz (2008) the outline of presented landmarked buildings, museums or other interesting places in the city is not consistent with the list of wonders of Sanok mentioned above. This guidebook does not even suggest any walking routes around the city. The first place is granted to the description of the Sanok castle which is described even twice. For the first time as an architecture treasure and a museum and then at the end of the chapter, once again as a museum. The open air museum in turn is discussed at the end of the chapter which is finished by a description of Szwejk sitting on a bench. To prove the uniqueness of the city the

publications present such facts, which let their authors present the advantages of the city. That is why the authors mention the fact that Sanok possesses the greatest collection of orthodox icons in Europe or the greatest collection of Beksinski's paintings in the world. They also claim, that it is in Sanok where the most interesting cultural trails of the region begin (Blecharczyk, 2008, pp. 5-6). The photo album "Sanok" issued in 2016 mentions two museums which are of international importance or the biggest open air museum in the European Union. The authors also perceive the town as the greatest industrial, economic, cultural and communication centre of the region (Bańkosz, 2016, p. 99).

The guidebook entitled *Zabytki, muzea i inne ciekawe miejsca w Sanoku. Miejski szlak historyczny* (2016), does not reflect any particular walking route in the town either. The described places are numbered what might suggest the existence of certain kind of hierarchy of importance. The first discussed object this time is the open air museum. The second place is in turn occupied by the castle, whereas the parish church is described as the eighth. A piece of information concerning the uncovered substructures of the church in which the royal wedding ceremony took place, accompanied by a small photography depicting a computer reconstruction of this object, is given under the main comment. In the photography of the parish church taking the space of the whole page of the guidebook one can spot a tiny piece of stone brick, marking the substructures in the bottom edge. In case of the former Landwehra barracks buildings, as well as the former House of Soldier up to date photographs are accompanied by older ones depicting the pristine (unfortunately lost) state of these historic places. There seem to be more "visually average" places of this type, but their presence seems in turn to be justified by a historical comment.

The mural created in 2016 by two Sanok artists Arkadiusz Andrejko and Marek Szatkowski on the commission of the City Council of Sanok, situated on the masonry revetment sustaining the city declivity, might be a kind of a summary and a prime example of the narration concerning the town. Metaphorically speaking the place in which the mural was created, as well as its content, can be regarded as a kind of foundation, on which the identity of the town is based and it is on this foundation that another layers are built. The mural itself is composed of 11 motifs chosen by the authors from a list

provided by the City Council. These motifs are as follows: St. Michael the Archangel, the patron Saint of the city, the scene of foundation of the city with the inscription of the date of this event (January 20th 1339), Władysław Jagiełło – a Polish king (A piece of information on his marriage to Elżbieta Granowska which took place in Sanok on May 2nd 1417 is also included), Bona Sforza – a Polish queen of Italian origin who contributed a lot to the city development, Jacek Dydziński – a famous soldier coming from Sanok, who lived at the turn of the 16th and 17th century, Gregory of Sanok – a humanist, poet and a bishop, Józef Szwejk – a fictional character created by a Czech novelist Jaroslav Hašek, Marian Zaręba – a Polish soldier killed in a heroic battle of nearby Bykowce on October 10th 1939, the famous bus San H – 01 A which was produced in Sanok Bus Factory “Autosan” from 1950 to 1961, a Beksinski’s painting and finally the coat of arms of the city. This mural constitutes a kind of repetition of the content known for nearly three decades reinforced by visual aids. The main goal of this piece of art is to depict and inform both the inhabitants and the visitors (the mural is situated close to a car park) what the objects of the local pride should be, as well as to make them remember about them.

With his two stories on Sanok Janusz Szuber is placed somewhere “between” on the border of these two narrations distinguished before. The first story which can be found in an album *Sanok*, issued by Bosz – a local publishing house is in many places parallel to the contents of the publications discussed earlier. The poet proudly mentions Gregory of Sanok, Jagiełło’s wedding or the castle of Sanok. He nevertheless also writes about the municipal grammar school and its graduates or recalls the fact that Jan Parandowski, one of famous Polish writers used to visit the city and even write about it. On the other hand he tries not to forget about the more indigent part of the city, namely about the Jewish district. He writes about the town, which: “had lost its Jewish quarter, now a desolate emptiness; and still with recent memories of the irretrievable losses and fratricidal fighting in the nearby Bieszczady Mountains; bereft of the neighbouring country houses, and with the orthodox churches overgrown with weeds” (Szuber, 2001, p. 6). He describes a bygone Sanok which seems to have elapsed after the war or about “the taste and smell of the Polish Jewish Ukrainian idiom which has faded” (Szuber, 2001, p. 11).

In the album entitled *Mojość* (2005), Janusz Szuber primarily re-traces the world of his childhood, for instance the map of former streets and houses, the taste and smell. He still seems to remember from those times as well as the people who were somehow important for him but absent in the official story of the town. The photographs and watercolor paintings created by Władysław Szulc whose main themes are the views of old trees, orchards, partly destroyed bricks and shutters as well as tangled grapevines are equally personal as they recall the thoughts concerning the time flow and the process of becoming old.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE IDENTITY BASED CONTENT

It is possible to trace the mechanism of constructing the narration concerning the town's identity going back to 1990. The restoration of the full name of the city, namely The Royal Free Town of Sanok resulted from the need to restore pride and the feeling of uniqueness to its inhabitants. This restoration takes place at the time when the town is struck by a growing crisis. Anselm Strauss (2013, pp. 20-22) notices that the purpose of the name change is to hide the real identity and start being perceived by others in a way one would like to be perceived. Since names are somehow linked to "properties" and "classifications" such a name change places the object in another position where the links between these classes are completely different, what is more the act of adopting a new name is happens in certain new perspective, and this new name establishes new goals to further actions (Strauss, 2013, p. 24).

In case of Sanok proclaiming the new and at the same time old (former) identity launched the quest for the traces of "great" history and tradition of the city which confirm its royal origin. The first step was the restoration of organizing city fairs. The privilege of organizing them was given to the city by Casmir the Great – a medieval Polish king. This fair which is now called the Icon Fair (Jarmark Ikon) is organized annually during the school holidays. Also, a special play on Bona Sforza has been written for Sanok kindergartens to be acted out on this occasion in Sanok cultural centers. In 2008 Henryk Nicpoń, an employee of the Sanok city council, wrote and issued

a book entitled *Lewiatan Królowej Bony* which is another story on the town's history and its position. Shortly after during the renovation of the city buildings the substructures of the parish church – the place of the royal wedding ceremony were uncovered and historical reenactments of this event were organized. Eric Hobsbawm, defines this type of actions as “inventing tradition.” Invented tradition

is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past (Hobsbawm, 2012, p. 1).

It is only these facts taken from the rich history of the city that connect it with kings, queens, famous historic characters or important Polish historic events which were taken into consideration while creating the official narration of the city. According to Eric Hobsbawm (2012, p. 13), the element of invention “is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so.”

While studying the content of the guidebooks concerning Sanok one can infer that the citizens of Sanok do not want to be associated with a small town of little historic importance. They rather would like to inhabit a big city. The guidebook issued in 2008 informs that “Sanok has more than 42 000 inhabitants” (Bańkosz, 2008, p. 11), whereas the Central Statistical Office recorded a decrease in the number of the town population (2006 – 39.381 inhabitants, 2007 – 39.224, 2008 – 39.231).¹ A prime example of aspiring to the position of a big city can be establishing Offices of Art. Exhibition in those towns which used to be the capitals of former voivodships (i.e. Rzeszów Krosno or Przemyśl)² in 2006 or a book entitled *Lewiatan Królowej Bony*, intended for the youngest citizens of the town in which one

1 Statistical data of the Central Statistical Office, <http://stat.gov.pl/>.

2 After a conference held in Nieborów in 1949 the communist authorities established the Central Office of Art Exhibition (BWA) as well as a network of such offices in each provincial city to control the artists' activity. After 1989

can find out that “there were gossips that the Polish Queen Bona Sforza was going to stay in the Sanok castle after the death of the king Sigismund the Old (...). Some even tried to foresee that Sanok was going to be the real capital of the country” (Nicpoń, 2008, p. 6).

Those who attempt to create the narration of the town identity on behalf of the inhabitants often do it from the perspective of the tourists visiting the city. It means that they actually reflect the tourists’ point of view and this in turn means that they accept the fact that it is the visitors who decide and de facto point out what the inhabitants should be proud of. The unique entities are these which the tourists and newcomers consider unique hence despite the rich town history (exhibited primarily locally) the first position among “the Sanok Wonders” was at first occupied by the Bieszczady Mountains situated within the distance of more than 30 kilometers from the city. Zdzisław Mach (2008, p. 9) remarks that “in different situations taking into consideration different partners a human being exhibits this aspect of his/her identity which he/she considers to be the most adequate in a given situation.” According to Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2013, p. 42): “We have thousands different ways of introducing ourselves, which allows us to respond to events in a proper way.”

In 2008 such an element of identity was the cultural wealth underlined in another new name – Sanok – the Town of Culture. It was then that the uniqueness of the town as well as the wealth of its culture were underlined. Also the local traditions connected with the town started to be upheld. The guidebooks and photo albums issued at that time underlined multicultural traditions of this place hence it may be strange that the outline of content of these books allows to clearly separate the history of the town from the history of the minorities living in the city and discuss them in such a way. It can be clearly seen when one takes into consideration the Jewish minority. Although the Jewish people started to settle down in the city as early as in the 14th century contributing considerably to the growth of its prosperity and culture, the history of this nation is not treated in the guidebooks as a part of “the royal history of the town” but the story described separately in one of the chapters. Also, the

most of these galleries changed their names so as not to be associated with centrally planned exhibitions and the ubiquitous communist censorship.

places connected with the existence of the Jewish community are not marked. The open air museum and the icons occupy the second and the third place on the list of the Sanok wonders respectively whereas the problem of multiculturalism holds the penultimate place.

After the media stuff that appeared after the renovation and rebuilding the Sanok castle as well as making it possible for visitors to see the Beksinski's works in 2012 or the success in promoting Magdalena Grzebałkowska's book entitled *Beksińscy: portret podwójny* and the film *Ostatnia rodzina*, the slogan "Sanok the town of Culture," is replaced by the following: "Sanok the town of Master Beksiński." This change results in critical comments made on the local Internet forums, by the inhabitants who declare that Sanok has always been and will always be the Royal Free Town. The places connected with the life of the artist and his ancestors have been marked, and the Beksinski's family symbolically return to their home town, after they were forced to leave the city in the 1970s by the communist authorities.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the gathered data leads to a conclusion that the identity of the town of Sanok is not stable. On the contrary it is rather an infinite process whereby all the involved elements are constantly valorized and socially negotiated. Depending on the situational changes or on the subject defining the meaning the same facts, objects or actions can be perceived in a different way. The notion of narration used in the research helps to display these moments in which the story being told about a given place starts, changes or disappears giving way to new plots. It can also be observed that constructing the identity of the town is to some extent consistent with the process of creating the brand of a given place or a local product. The list of places, events or people important for the history of the town depicting and underlining the uniqueness of Sanok changes depending on the trends of territorial marketing. This identity has its own version created for the inhabitants, who are gradually internalizing it. It is then modified and becomes a kind of a hint as to what actions should be taken as a result. There also exists a commercial version of such identity which is more often and quicker updated.

One should mention the huge role of city images created in the media and publications about Sanok. This representative concept of the city builds a sense of pride and captures the desirable identity of the place in the collective consciousness. According to Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2013, p. 102):

The picture is an incomparable propaganda instrument, the picture is deceptive, it simplifies and fixes (at a certain angle) the infinitely elusive and complex reality (...). In some cases, the picture may turn out to be more useful than the lived and become the decisive moment of reality creation.

In many aspects, citizens internalize the image of the city created for the purposes of its promotion, and not the one experienced on a daily basis.

According to Zygmunt Bauman (2008, p. 185), identity draws one's attention and raises emotions as it is a surrogate of a community, which is allegedly "natural home" which is somehow absent in "the world which is being rapidly privatized and individualized." On the other hand "the uncertainty connected with solitary identity building makes builders seek common ground for individually experienced fears or anxiety", which in consequence leads to creating "the community of common grounds" (Bauman, 2008, p. 186).

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