

Torsten Lorenz

CHANGING SOCIAL ROLES IN A POLISH-GERMAN  
BORDER TOWN:  
THE CASE OF MIĘDZYCHÓD/BIRNBAUM

**Abstract**

In this article I focus on the questions of how the social roles of Germans and Poles changed after Międzychód/Birnbaum came back to Poland on January 17, 1920; what were the stages in the process of change the town went through; and, what factors were responsible for this change. I begin with a broader introduction presenting, first, the situation in the early modern times, pointing to what it meant to be 'Polish' in a 'German'-dominated urban society in the Greater Poland region; and, second, the change which occurred during the nineteenth century. With the examples of individual biographies, I show the variety of role perceptions in a mixed Polish-German setting. The main section analyses the ways in which the role reversal was enforced in favour of Międzychód's Poles in the arena of local politics, which is preceded by a glance at the impact of an international conflict between Germany and Poland on the lot of German 'optants' – i.e. those who had opted for keeping the German citizenship and who later on were forced by the Polish authorities, in most cases, to leave Poland. My argument is that the role reversal in Międzychód/Birnbaum was a protracted process, which began with the onset of nationalism and was facilitated by economic and social change.

**Keywords:** Polish-German relations, urban history, local history, borderlands, migration.

I  
INTRODUCTION

Borderlands have been basically defined in two ways: first, as territories divided by state borders, second – as territories divided not by 'hard' political frontiers, but rather by 'soft', cultural and ethnic boundaries.<sup>1</sup> In both types of borderlands *the other* – although he or she

---

<sup>1</sup> On questions of definition, see, e.g., Corey Johnson *et al.*, 'Interventions on Rethinking "the Border" in Border Studies', *Political Geography*, 30, no. 2 (2011),

might be on the other side of a political border – is near, is part of thinking, imaginations, and of everyday life. The proximity of *the other* is a basic component of self-definition of individuals or groups, like nations. The presence of difference in everyday life, conflict, coexistence, and cooperation contributes to the definition of roles in borderlands between different cultures.

Międzychód/Birnbaum is an interesting case of borderland, because in history it belonged to both of the above types: when it was part of Poland (until 1793 and again since 1920), it was situated near the border between Brandenburg-Prussia and Poland's Poznań Voivodeship, when it was part of Prussia (1793–1920), it was reduced to an ethnic borderland between Germans and Poles within the same state. It was a (linguistically) German-dominated town in a (linguistically) Polish-dominated rural surrounding. While the town was ruled by a German-Jewish bourgeoisie, Poles – being small in numbers – were an underprivileged group over the centuries; and, this virtually lasted until the town returned to Poland in January 1920. This change of state affiliation provided a major impact for a change of roles between Germans and Poles, but it was not the only one, because nationalism, as well as economic and social change, had already altered roles and role expectations since the last third of the nineteenth century. Moreover, when one takes a look at the social relations in Międzychód/Birnbaum after 1920, it becomes apparent that social roles played by local Germans and Poles did not change completely. It was, rather, a process that took some years, was partly negotiated, went through a transitional stage, but the final result was enforced by the Poles in the arena of local politics.

The fact that Międzychód belonged to the Polish state since 1920 changed the rules of the game fundamentally, but the *longue durée* of ethno-social roles practiced over the centuries and well-functioning (through socially constricted) German-Polish networks averted a sudden change. It was only in the dense situation of international conflict that a 'new' Polish elite of (petty-)bourgeois origin, which had arrived in Międzychód only recently, managed to enforce their role

---

61–9; Józef Chlebowczyk, *O prawie do bytu małych i młodych narodów. Kwestia narodowa i procesy narodotwórcze we wschodniej Europie środkowej w dobie kapitalizmu (od schyłku XVIII do początków XX w.)* (2nd edn., Warsaw and Cracow, 1983); Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference* (Bergen and London, 1969).

expectations. My understanding of social roles is influenced by the 'interactionist' approach, pioneered by George Herbert Mead, for whom social roles of one individual may only exist in interaction with roles played by other individuals. In this sense, social roles of individuals or groups are dependent on each other and being *negotiated* between individuals and groups, no matter whether they are *negotiated* on an equal basis or, rather, *enforced* on the basis of unequal power relations.<sup>2</sup>

## II MIĘDZYCHÓD/BIRNBAUM IN THE EARLY MODERN AND MODERN PERIOD

Międzychód/Birnbaum was mentioned for the first time in 1378 as *Mezichod*; in 1400, it appeared in a document as an *oppidum* (town).<sup>3</sup> In the middle of the sixteenth century it belonged to the General Starost of Greater Poland Jakób Ostroróg, who in 1553 converted to Protestantism (Bohemian Brethern), later to Jan Ostroróg, who reconverted to Catholicism. In 1597, the town was sold to the Protestant family Unruh, who was in its possession for almost the following two centuries.<sup>4</sup> This Silesian family led a development policy intended to increase their income and built up a clothing craft. They recruited professionals mainly from Greater Poland (Wielkopolska), but also from the neighbouring regions: Silesia and Brandenburg.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago, 1934).

<sup>3</sup> Theodor Wotschke, 'Die Notlage der Birnbaumer Erbherrschaft im 18. Jahrhundert', *Historische Monatsblätter für die Provinz Posen*, xvii, 4 (1916), 45–51; for the history of Międzychód in the early modern period, see also Helga Schultz, 'Die Bürger von Birnbaum', in *eadem* (ed.), *Preußens Osten – Polens Westen. Das Zerbrechen einer Nachbarschaft* (Frankfurter Studien zur Grenzregion, 7, Berlin, 2001), 18; and, Torsten Lorenz, *Von Birnbaum nach Międzychód. Bürgergesellschaft und Nationalitätenkampf in Großpolen bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurter Studien zur Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte Ostmitteleuropas, 10, Berlin, 2005), 35–6.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Rhode, *Geschichte der evangelischen Kirche im Posener Lande* (Marburger Ostforschungen, 4, Würzburg, 1956), 75; Max Radtke, *Dreihundert Jahre unter Gottes Schutz im Lichte des Evangelii. Versuch einer Geschichte der evangelischen Kirchengemeinde Birnbaum seiner durch 25-jährige Arbeit in Liebe ihm herzlich verbundenen Gemeinde gewidmet zur Feier ihres 300-jährigen Kirchenjubiläums von M. Radtke, Oberpfarrer und Superintendent* (Birnbaum, 1900), 11–13.

<sup>5</sup> The data in Csaba J. Kenéz (ed.), *Das Bürgerbuch von Birnbaum 1668–1853* (Wissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte und Landeskunde Ostmitteleuropas,

Since those specialists were mostly German-speaking, including the Jewish tradesmen, we might say that the majority of townsmen were of a long-standing German background, while Poles were an exception in the ranks of the burghers.

However, we know of some Poles who have been recognised as equal members of the town's upper strata.<sup>6</sup> Jan Tucholczyk, for instance, a tailor of Roman Catholic faith, who became a burgher of Międzychód in 1722, later became the eldest of the local brewer's guild. Tucholczyk must have been a wealthy man, because in order to become a member of both corporations, he had to pay each of them a yearly income. Tucholczyk's advance had been, however, dependent on his social statuses as a burgher and member of bourgeoisie, his economic wealth, and fulfilment of certain expectations from members of these groups. His Polish origin did not play a particular role; neither did his Catholic faith. This general pattern – the possibility of social advance in exchange for complying with the socially defined role expectations – remained intact well into the nineteenth century.

This pattern remained basically unchanged, and unchallenged – neither by the Prussian annexation of Międzychód in the Second Partition of Poland in 1793, nor by the social and economic change that affected the town during the nineteenth century. First, the town had its clothing craft industry destroyed, and underwent reagrarisation as a result of the border changes and border regimes introduced after the Vienna Congress:<sup>7</sup> Birnbaum lost its markets in the eastern parts of Poland, which were now barred by high customs duties imposed by Russia. Moreover, many clothiers left for the region of Lodz, attracted by privileges granted by the Russian authorities, who intended to develop a clothing industry.<sup>8</sup>

115, Marburg, 1982), *passim*, are analysed in Schultz, 'Die Bürger von Birnbaum', 19; and, Lorenz, *Von Birnbaum nach Międzychód*, 36–7.

<sup>6</sup> Tucholczyk's story is told in Schultz, 'Die Bürger von Birnbaum', 23–4.

<sup>7</sup> Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (hereinafter: GhStAPK), I. HA, Rep. 77, Tit. 1605, no. 2, Die Stadt Birnbaum. Die Verwaltung der Communal-Angelegenheiten und die Anstellung der Communal-Beamten in der Stadt Birnbaum 1833–1902, Letter to the Prussian Minister of the Interior, von Brenn, Berlin, 10 Feb. 1833.

<sup>8</sup> On Russian economic policy in the Kingdom of Poland after the Congress of Vienna, see Jerzy Jedlicki, *Nieudana próba kapitalistycznej industrializacji. Analiza państwowego gospodarstwa przemysłowego w Królestwie Polskim XX w.* (Warsaw, 1964); Jonas Scherner, *Eliten und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung. Kongresspolen und Spanien im*

It was rather the combined dynamics of nationalism and economic development, with their social implications, that led to a change in role patterns: nationalism established culture, or, more exactly, language as a marker of social belonging and – with the help of a public sphere under development – attached ethnic labels to social status and created and spread new role expectations, which slowly but surely embraced Birnbaum in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, the ‘old’ patterns prevailed, unless the combined dynamics of economic, demographic, and social change in Birnbaum overthrew them completely in the aftermath of WWI.

A marked change became, however, visible since the 1870s/80s, when brickworks, machine factories, *etc.*, were being established in Birnbaum.<sup>9</sup> The town’s population doubled, from around 1,700 in 1793 to 3,500 in 1900. Most of the immigrants were Poles, while Germans and Jews (the latter almost vanished between 1848 and 1914) tended to leave the region for work in the western parts of Germany or in the New World. After 1900, the Germans were losing ground even in the social respect: as a result of settlement and upward mobility of Polish people, the Polish petty bourgeoisie, composed of craftsmen and tradesmen, were establishing themselves in Birnbaum, because they could count on an ever growing Polish customer base.<sup>10</sup>

An interesting figure – analogous to that of Jan Tucholczyk almost 200 years earlier – is the butcher Walenty Bogajewicz, who in 1900 came from Pinne (Pniewy) to Birnbaum, where he bought the well-established shop of the German butcher Weber.<sup>11</sup> He became member of the local butcher’s guild, earned respect among his local colleagues

---

19. Jahrhundert (Münsteraner Beiträge zur Cliometrie und quantitativen Wirtschaftsgeschichte, Münster, 2001), 154–6; Albert Breyer, *Deutsche Tuchmachereinwanderung in dem ostmitteleuropäischen Raum von 1550 bis 1830* (Leipzig, 1941). For a more detailed account on the developments in Birnbaum, see Lorenz, *Von Birnbaum nach Międzychód*, 45–9.

<sup>9</sup> For more details on the demographic, economic and social development until WWI, see Lorenz, *Von Birnbaum nach Międzychód*, 105–16.

<sup>10</sup> The changes in the structure of the population are reflected in, i.e., Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu (hereinafter: APP), Akta Miasta Międzychód (hereinafter: AMM), 6, Hauptverwaltungsberichte 1896–1913.

<sup>11</sup> APP, Landratsamt Birnbaum (hereinafter: LAB), 3589, Die Einkommensteuer-Veranlagung des Fleischermeisters Valentin Bogajewicz zu Birnbaum 1901–1914; for more on Bogajewicz and the role of the guilds in Birnbaum/Międzychód, see Lorenz, *Von Birnbaum nach Międzychód*, 190–2.

and finally, in 1927, was elected the guild's chairman.<sup>12</sup> By 1912, Bogajewicz had become member of the Polish electoral committee in the campaign for the German parliament.<sup>13</sup> In local politics, however, Poles until 1918 could never really compete with Germans, because the electoral law favoured the wealthier part of the population – which in that case meant the Germans.<sup>14</sup>

Although *de facto* discriminated in many respects, Poles were being treated by the ruling elite of Birnbaum as members of the local community – though in a paternalistic manner: every time when being asked by the state authorities, the mayors downplayed the ethno-demographic change and denied the existence of Polish 'agitators' and radicalism in Birnbaum.<sup>15</sup> By doing so, they complied to the pattern of preserving *inside* community solidarity in face of outside *threats* – regardless of ethnic and social cleavages inside the urban community. However, there was an ongoing political mobilisation and radicalisation among the German population – or more exactly, the local German bourgeoisie. Prominent members of this group tried to exploit the presence of Poles trying to forward their own (economic) purposes. These men were so radical that their activities forced the board of the Society of the Eastern Marches (*Ostmarkenverein*, the Hakata) to close down its branch in Birnbaum.<sup>16</sup> So, by 1900 radical nationalism had arrived in Birnbaum, although for political decision-making in the local context it was of minor relevance, because besides the pattern of *Honoratiorenpolitik* a local community spirit persisted, grounded in the minds of the local bourgeois elites and determining behavioural patterns.

Germany's loss in WWI and the establishment of the Second Polish Republic pronouncedly accelerated the ongoing change, altered

<sup>12</sup> APP, Cechy Miasta Międzychód, 9, Protokollbuch der Fleischerinnung Birnbaum, entry under 1 March 1927.

<sup>13</sup> APP, LAB, 947, Die Reichstagswahl im Jahre 1912, Bürgermeister an Landrat, Birnbaum, 2 Jan. 1912.

<sup>14</sup> Local elections were conducted according to an electoral law, which was similar to the notorious Prussian three-class franchise that petrified the rule of the wealthy until the end of WWI.

<sup>15</sup> APP, AMM, 160, Geheim zu haltende Sachen allgemeiner Art 1906–1917, *passim*.

<sup>16</sup> GhStAPK, I. HA, Rep. 195, Verein für die Ostmarken, no. 38, Birnbaum, Hauptverein an Vorstand der Ortsgruppe Birnbaum, Berlin, 3 Nov. 1906; *Posener Neueste Nachrichten* (12 Jan. 1907); more detailed in Lorenz, *Von Birnbaum nach Międzychód*, 166–71.

the status of the ethnic groups and overthrew the legal, political, and cultural framework for the definition and dissemination of social role expectations. Due to the Versailles Treaty, Międzychód/Birnbaum, located a mere 4 km from the new German-Polish border, became (the westernmost) part of Poland. As a result, those who had been members of the dominant ethnic group turned into members of a 'minority', while those who had belonged to a non-dominant ethnic group became members of the titular nation of the state, which meant the 'majority'. In face of the imminent loss of status, many Germans voluntarily left the town and the adjacent countryside soon after the armistice of November 11, 1918; others chose to opt for German citizenship (they would later have to leave), while the rest preferred to stay.<sup>17</sup> While in 1910 the Germans accounted for 85 per cent of Birnbaum's population, by 1921, they only constituted 37 per cent of the town's inhabitants.<sup>18</sup> Their number was to further decrease until the autumn of 1925. There were some members of the 'old' bourgeois German elite who decided not to leave: mostly, real estate owners who were reluctant to give up their properties, then within Poland.

The reverse side of this demographic coin was the immigration of Poles, which seems to have started on a smaller scale after the signing of the Versailles Treaty, and continued well beyond the mid-1920s.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the local economy soon became dominated by Polish craftsmen and tradesmen, who – after a transitional period of about five years, when Germans continued to play a prominent part in the local politics – became the leading force in this sector of public life. These people, who were not less nationalist-minded than a majority of Germans, for the most part came from outside of Międzychód. They did not know the rules of the game, which had been developed in this town over the centuries and which the 'older' Polish members of the local

---

<sup>17</sup> On the process of 'ethnic unmixing', the forces behind it, and the incentives to stay or leave, see Torsten Lorenz, 'Międzychód optiert. Behördenpolitik, Migration und Wandel in einem westpolnischen Landkreis', in Schultz (ed.), *Preußens Osten*, 145–81.

<sup>18</sup> Numbers according to Lorenz, *Von Birnbaum nach Międzychód*, 236.

<sup>19</sup> There is virtually no information on Polish immigration to Birnbaum/Międzychód after WWI. From the available figures, however, it can be assumed that the exchange of population must have been massive, especially between the signing of the Versailles Treaty on June 28, 1919 and the first Polish census of Sept. 30, 1921.

society had internalised. Their behaviour plausibly resulted from their social descent, because most of these *homines novi* had advanced from the peasantry only two or three generations earlier. From their newly acquired status as members of the ruling nation, they deduced new role expectations, which stood in stark contrast to those present in the minds of the 'old' townsmen. These different conceptions of the roles that were to be played by the Polish and the German community led to conflicts inside the local society.

### III

#### NEGOTIATING TRANSITION: POLES AND GERMANS IN MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS, 1920–1925

In the first years after Międzychód/Birnbaum was made part of Poland, there were two levels of action of relevance for the development of Polish-German relations in this town: firstly, the national and the regional level, which were controlled by the state administration, and secondly, the local one, which was the playground for bargaining between the two ethnic groups, a process that was relatively unhampered by the state authorities. While the latter had managed, until 1922, to force the Polonisation of most of the administration and public space, the local society was realigning according to the overall pattern whereby Poles formally had to be on top of the civil society's institutions – from professional associations to clubs (and the like), but in general the composition of the leading ethnically mixed institutional bodies reflected a Polish-German compromise. This compromise on the roles to be played by the different ethnic groups was analogous to the nineteenth-century pattern whereby institutions (save for monoethnic ones) were to be headed by Germans, regardless of their ethnic composition. The compromise was negotiated by local activists who had been exponents of municipal self-awareness under the German rule. The 'era of compromise' in municipal affairs, as we might call it, lasted from around 1920 until 1923/4 and was reflected in the civil society institutions and in local politics. I will illustrate this with the help of two examples: a professional society of merchants and municipal politics.

*Towarzystwo Samodzielnych Kupców*  
(Society of Independent Tradesmen)

Taking a cursory look at the local press of Międzychód between the world wars, one might get the impression that a harsh competition was going on between the Poles and the Germans. This impression would not be completely false, because the two Polish newspapers edited in Międzychód in the 1920s were full of slogans like *Swój do swego* ('Each to their own') and admonitions dissuading Poles from buying from shops owned by Germans.<sup>20</sup> These newspapers tried to create an atmosphere of fierce competition and to accelerate economic change in favour of the Polish part of the population by introducing certain patterns of social and economic behaviour, and by suggesting to Poles and Germans different expectations with respect to the parts they were meant to play.

The general impression based on the local sources is, however, that there was much more collaboration than the local press suggests and that certain institutions preserved traditional patterns of cooperative social behaviour, which lasted until Germany's attack on Poland in 1939, though in a form adopted to the new political circumstances and on an ever-decreasing scale. I will illustrate this with the example of what was called the 'Society of Independent Tradesmen'.

Beside the other community-oriented and non-political organisations such as the Voluntary Fire Brigade and the Society for the Beautification of the Town (*Towarzystwo Upiększania Miasta*), the *Towarzystwo Samodzielnych Kupców* (TSK) was unique in the history of Birnbaum/Międzychód. Similar associations of economic character (cooperatives, the *Polskie Towarzystwo Przemysłowe* – a Polish Industrial Society, the German and the Polish agrarian societies) had been established under German rule according to the principle of ethnic segregation.<sup>21</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century, role expectations increasingly demanded that people join those associations,

---

<sup>20</sup> The German *Stadt- und Landbote für die Kreise Międzychód und Szamotuły* was more reluctant, possibly because its owner and editor – Gerhard Buchwald, member of the German bourgeoisie – certainly feared interventions from the Polish authorities, but also because he was an adherent of the Polish-German compromise. The latter might be illustrated by the fact that Buchwald was a prominent member in most associations of a mixed ethnic cast.

<sup>21</sup> See Lorenz, *Von Birnbaum nach Międzychód, passim*.

which were labelled as belonging to their *own* ethnic groups. The TSK was established at the end of February 1922, when numerous Polish and German tradesmen met at the 'Bristol' Hotel in Międzychód, in order to deliberate on a draft charter for the society.<sup>22</sup> About a week later, TSK members elected a board, whose cast was ethnically mixed: a certain Mr. Włodarczyk, director of the local machinery factory, was elected executive director, and a German textile tradesman named Max Weise was elected his deputy. Four of the remaining posts in the board were assumed by Poles, and the other two, by Germans. The arbitration panel had, for a change, three German and two Polish members. Interestingly, among the latter was Paul Fechner, a German owner of a construction company, whom the authorities considered to be one of the leading German nationalists; beside him was a Polish tradesman Julian Falkowski, editor of the fiercely nationalistic newspaper *Gazeta Międzychodzka*.<sup>23</sup> So, the willingness of the local economic elites to forward their interest independently of their ethnic status outweighed ethnic and economic competition. Interethnic cooperation required, however, that the rules of the game be complied with, and the expectations be met: Germans were expected to conform to the role of a minority, while the leading parts were to be taken by members of the majority. When the minority did not meet the majority's expectations, they were more or less directly forced to accept their secondary role. (I will illustrate this mechanism with another example, of local politics.)

The establishment and activities of the TSK show that the ethnic groups were negotiating a new mode of co-existence, which was pragmatic and reflected their common economic interest. It was very similar to the mode of co-existence before WWI where, for instance, the local Riflemen's Association adhered to an unwritten rule that its champion had to be an ethnic German, even if an ethnic Pole had actually won the contest. To this end, the best German contestant was declared the champion, and the Pole who actually won the title received a secondary honour.<sup>24</sup> The important difference afterwards was that the Poles were the titular group of the state.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Stadt- und Landbote für die Kreise Międzychód (Birnbäum) und Szamotuły* (hereinafter: SuLB), 28 Feb. 1922.

<sup>23</sup> SuLB, 9 March 1922.

<sup>24</sup> I owe this information to Mrs. Ingeborg Felten of Hamburg (based on my notes from an interview with Ingeborg Felten, Hamburg, Nov. 4, 1999).

Nonetheless, from 1926 onwards the compromise started to erode because of an increasing trend towards institutional segregation. As part of the regional consolidation efforts of the German minority, Germans from Międzychód were increasingly leaving joint associations and founded their 'own' ones, which they linked to the regional network of similar German associations; German tradesmen entered the Association of Trade and Industry (*Verband für Handel und Gewerbe*, VHG), established in April 1926.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the role patterns which had been dictated by the ethnic peers finally gained the upper hand over those negotiated inside the local community.

The supra-national organisation of the TSK, however, survived in the Society of Christian Tradesmen (*Towarzystwo Kupców Chrześcijańskich*, TKC). The leading posts in the exclusively German VHG and the TKC even in 1938 did not mutually exclude each other. Gerhard Buchwald, for example, was in 1938 head of the VHG and member of the TKC's audit commission, while the German tradesman Gerhard Weigelt was deputy of the TKC and treasurer of the VHG at the same time.<sup>26</sup>

### Municipal politics

Role expectations and patterns in local politics were very similar, but negotiated more fundamentally, emotionally. This was so because politics was fundamental to the role expectations and self-consciousness of the members of the 'old' and the 'new' ruling nation. In this realm the change of roles in Międzychód is clearly divided into two stages: a transitional period of cooperation on an almost equal basis (1920–5) and a period when municipal politics became dominated by Poles, while Germans were pushed to a marginal position. The hinge between the two stages was a harsh conflict between Poles and Germans over the municipal elections in 1925. The background was provided by the conflict over the future of the 'optant' population, which still had not left for their respective 'homelands'.<sup>27</sup> This international

<sup>25</sup> SuLB, 6 Dec. 1928.

<sup>26</sup> SuLB, 8 April 1938.

<sup>27</sup> The intentions of Germany and Poland were contrary: while both parties treated Germans in Poland as an argument for a possible revision of the Polish-German frontier, Germany tried to 'keep' as many Germans within Poland as possible, while Poland was interested in 'getting rid of' as much Germans

conflict was reflected in Międzychód in the rise of emotions and in increasingly fierce debates on which of the ethnic groups was to play a special role in local society.

In the first years under the Polish rule, members of both groups were more prone to political compromise than in the later period. This strive for cooperation found its most pronounced expression in the election to the town council at the end of November 1921 and the election to the county council a few weeks later. The leading representatives of both ethnic groups agreed on setting up joint electoral lists, which contained about a third of German candidates.<sup>28</sup> The 'Kokociński list', as it was called by the contemporaries, was the outcome of the efforts of Ludwik Kokociński, a master tailor from Międzychód.

His biography is another example of how Poles in German Birnbaum met role expectations simultaneously fostering their own professional advance. It is completely different from that of the aforementioned butcher Walenty Bogajewicz. Kokociński showed another understanding of his role in German-dominated society. This tailor agreed, to a larger extent than Bogajewicz, to the rules set by the German majority, and at least partly assimilated to their culture. In contrast to Bogajewicz, Kokociński never engaged in the Polish national movement; instead, he was active in the social realm, for example with the board of a Catholic Church parish, non-political associations, or the Council for the Indigent. Kokociński arrived in Birnbaum in 1876 and got employed at a local tailor's shop. In the 1890s, he opened a textile store, with an annexed made-to-measure tailoring shop. Before WWI he became the head of the local tailor's guild, the only Pole who led a guild at that time.<sup>29</sup>

It can be assumed that Kokociński's advance was at least partly accelerated by his willingness to assimilate. He was married to a woman of German origin. Kokociński's idea of the role a Pole

---

as possible. The optants – those who had opted for the citizenship of their ethnic homeland – formed part of these Germans being, actually, the most vulnerable group because they lived as citizens of a foreign country in Poland and Germany, respectively, but were to a certain degree protected by the provisions of the Versailles Treaty. For more on this issue, see Lorenz, 'Międzychód optiert'; of the studies in Polish, esp. Marek Stażewski, *Exodus. Migracja ludności niemieckiej z Pomorza do Rzeszy po I wojnie światowej* (Gdańsk, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> *Orędownik Powiatu Międzychodzkiego* (hereinafter: OPM), 78 (1921).

<sup>29</sup> SuLB, 9 July 1931.

should play in a German-dominated society made him, on the one hand, an integrating figure in the years immediately following the war, but on the other suspect to those who arrived in Międzychód immediately after the war. Kokociński's list was, even more than the TSK, a reservoir of highly different characters: radical nationalists from both sides were included in the list.<sup>30</sup> The only feature that bound them together was their social belonging and their adherence to the pattern of *Honoratiorenpolitik*: almost all of them belonged to the bourgeoisie and owned enterprises in Międzychód; some had been members of the town council before the war. The fact that the Kokociński list competed with a list of the National Workers' Party (*Narodowa Partia Robotnicza*, NPR) suggests that the class aspect turned the balance, this time, in favour of supra-ethnic unification instead of ethnic segregation.

It was mainly the eruptive political style of the NPR that brought about a change: while the Kokociński list, with ten of the eighteen seats in the town council of Międzychód (three of whom were taken by Germans), held a majority, the eight members from the NPR ranks, assisted by *Gazeta Międzychodzka*, dictated the style of discussion. Kokociński's men were confronted with the dilemma of what role they ought to play in municipal affairs. In the end, they increasingly voted together with the NPR, acting as Poles, and not as members of a supra-ethnic bourgeoisie. Beginning with the second half of 1924, the decisions voted by the municipal council became more and more anti-German, and several attempts to elect a German as a commission member failed. The German members of the municipal council eventually declined to countersign the protocols.<sup>31</sup> The stage was set for the final act.

The next election for the municipal council on October 4, 1925 was held in the dense atmosphere of international conflict: in order to prevent Poland from expulsing the German optants, who were to leave Poland in summer 1925, Germany had started the 'customs war'. The border-town of Międzychód now became the arena of huge anti-German rallies, which further fuelled ethnic strife.

In face of these developments, the local Polish bourgeoisie ran on two bourgeois lists, while its most prominent members ran for

---

<sup>30</sup> OPM, 78 (1921).

<sup>31</sup> APP, AMM, 299, Protokolarz Rady Miejskiej 1924–1928, *passim*.

the NPR, which by that moment had become an all-integrating force of the Polish community in Międzychód.<sup>32</sup> The electoral campaign of the Polish lists was anti-German and had an object of projection in the unusual figure of Eberhard Wick, a Roman-Catholic priest who was promoted to the leader of the Germans in the municipal council.

The roles Wick played during his lifetime differ from those described earlier. Wick's political profile and national identity were far from being constant. A Catholic priest from Silesia, whom the Polish authorities approached in positive terms, naming him a 'Polish patriot' for his participation in the Third Silesian Uprising (1921), now was criticised for his engagement in favour of the Germans. His ethnic affiliation (not coincidental) was changing and possibly not too far developed. His only loyalty seems to have been his Catholic faith.<sup>33</sup>

Due to their high degree of ethnopolitical mobilisation, Germans managed to win six of the eighteen seats in the municipal elections, which was proportionally a little more than their share of the population. Wick, who headed the German group, was in the following two years stigmatised as a German nationalist by the NPR. Local Polish newspapers wrote that there were rumours he was a German spy.<sup>34</sup> Since his election the Polish members of the municipal council tried to revoke his seat, arguing that his citizenship was unclear (during the electoral campaign of 1925, similar attempts to ban the German list for this reason had failed). They finally succeeded, and on April 14, 1927, Wick lost his seat in the municipal council – with eight votes in favour, four against, and four abstentions.<sup>35</sup> While the German group in the municipal council decomposed, Wick continued to live in Międzychód; it was said that he intended to teach Polish among the Poles living in the border region. Then, in 1931, he held a state-supporting speech during a celebration of the parastatal Riflemen's

---

<sup>32</sup> *Orędownik Międzychodzki* (hereinafter: OM), 8 Oct. 1925); see also the candidates' lists in *Gazeta Międzychodzka*, iii, 108 (16 Sept. 1925).

<sup>33</sup> APŁ, Starostwo Powiatowe Międzychód, 276; Archiwum Archidiecezjalne w Poznaniu (hereinafter: AAP), Konsystorz Arcybiskupi (hereinafter: KA), 16128; SuLB, 30 Nov. 1933; for more on the elections and the Wick case, see Lorenz, *Von Birnbaum nach Międzychód*, 259–64.

<sup>34</sup> SuLB, 6 Jan. 1927; 22 March 1927; 3 April 1927; 21 April 1927.

<sup>35</sup> APŁ, AMM, 299, Protokolarz Rady Miejskiej 1924–1928, entry for 2 June 1927.

Association (*Związek Strzelecki*).<sup>36</sup> This change of roles towards a pro-Polish, Piłsudski-ite position was certainly intended to serve Wick's 'reintegration' into the Polish society. This attempt seems to have been at least partly successful: we find his name for the last time in a local document from 1947, when he was still living in Międzychód.<sup>37</sup> But even then Wick was accused by an anonymous person to be, and always have been, a German.

#### IV CONCLUSION

The social roles and role expectations in Birnbaum/Międzychód were a *longue durée* phenomenon: they were formed and practiced over centuries in a socially (rather than ethnically) divided society and were, consequently, defined in social terms. Until the nineteenth century, cultural aspects did not play a particular role: it was possible for Polish-speaking Roman Catholics to become prominent members of the local society dominated by German culture in a premodern sense. The preconditions were that these people were wealthy enough to become burghers and members of local guilds and associations.

With the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, socially-defined roles acquired an ethnic dimension, which finally prevailed. Although the relation between the social and the ethnic dimension was changing in favour of the ethnic one, the social dimension in the 1920s was still an important feature of social roles and was the foundation of supra-ethnic coalitions. This fact is paralleled by the observation that certain patterns, which granted a leading role in the public sphere to the dominant ethnic group, were applied under German rule until 1919 and thereafter, under Polish rule, from 1920 onwards, in virtually the same way – just with the other ethnic group taking primacy.

This major political change had far-reaching consequences, though, as it fundamentally altered the power relations between the ethnic groups and, finally, facilitated the marginalisation of traditional role patterns in favour of ethnic ones.

*proofreading* Tristan Korecki

<sup>36</sup> OM, 31 (23 July 1931).

<sup>37</sup> AAP, KA, 16128, Władysław Staniszewski to the Archiepiscopal Court, Międzychód, 9 Feb. 1947.