

Commemorative Street Naming in Zbąszyń

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Commemorative street naming has been investigated within critical place name studies (Rose-Redwood – Alderman – Azaryahu 2010) also referred to as critical toponymies framework (Vuolteenaho – Berg 2016). It focuses on how collective memory and identity are inscribed in the city landscape through street naming.

The present paper focuses on Zbąszyń, a small town in Western Poland, with 7300 inhabitants and just about 100 streets today. Its small size makes it a good testing ground for hypotheses concerning the long term changes in the town's streetscape.

In this presentation we look at the waves of street (re-)namings between 1918-2018, in particular at the years 1921, 1939, 1945, 1970, 1977, 1989, 1990. The selection of the years for investigation was bottom-up, in that these years mark the peaks of renamings and/or new streets namings. 1921, 1939, 1945 are particularly interesting as they mark the change of the official language from German into Polish (1921, 1945) (cf. Utracki 2013), and from Polish into German (1939), which resulted in the renaming of all streets in the city, including those that are clearly topographic in nature (Kirchstrasse à Kościelna, 'Church Street'). 1970 and 1977 are the years when Zbąszyń underwent housing developments which called for the naming of the new streets. These years are also the time of relative prosperity of the communist state. 1989 and 1990 mark the renamings related to the transformation from communist to democratic and free market society.

In this paper we will look at (1) who were the personages and events that were deemed worth commemorating; (2) to what extent the ideology of the period was explicitly marked in the street names (cf. Zieliński 1994); and in the case of the last wave of the renamings also (3) who were the social agents behind these changes and what their motivations were.

Data sources are the present and historical maps, lists of street names from extant literature (Rzepa 2012), the town hall resolutions, the articles from the local newspaper (1989-2018) and interviews with the representatives of the town hall and the local library.

The data were analysed with the use of Discourse Historical Approach (Wodak 2009) and ethnographic analysis.

The analysis shows that prior to 1989 the tendency was to commemorate people of national importance, like kings, generals or national writers, while post 1989 the focus is on the personages of regional and local significance. The extent of the "ideological robe of the city" depends on the accepted understanding of the term and can be variously interpreted depending on the intensity of the ideological marking of particular names. Arguably, a communist general (Karol Świerczewski) who was a hero of the textbooks and novels has a stronger ideological impact than does a local teacher (Antonina Woźna) who devoted her life to preserving local folklore. In this small town the voices of the inhabitants and social activists had a strong influence on the renamings of 1989.

Selected references

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