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TURINYS / SPIS TREŚCI

I. LITERATŪROS NARATYVAI IR KONTEKSTAI / NARRACJE LITERACKIE I KONTEKSTY

Olena Mashchenko (Ukraina / Ukraina). Gish Jen: Loosening the Canyon of the Canon	9
Kristina Stankevičiūtė (Lietuva / Litwa). Don Juan: the Discourse of Seduction as an Exercise of Power	15
Елена Бразговская (Rusija / Rosja). Поэтика трансцендентного: стилистическая редукция как инструмент репрезентации сакрального	24
Анна Дашенко (Ukraina / Ukraina). «Рассуждения о <i>цы</i> » («詞論») Ли Цинчжао	35
Viktorija Jonkutė (Lietuva / Litwa). Tautinės tapatybės (re)konstravimas XX a. pab. tautinio atgimimo laikotarpio lietuvių ir latvių literatūrinėje spaudoje	45
Элеонора Шафранская (Rusija / Rosja). Контекстуальная семантика заглавия романа Михаила Шишкина «Взятие Измаила»	55

II. LINGVISTIKOS TYRIMAI / BADANIA LINGWISTYCZNE

Donna E. West (JAV / USA). Pretense as Creative Hallucination	63
Ewa Sikora (Lenkija / Polska). Językowo-kulturowa motywacja mazowieckich chrematonimów funeralnych	74
Marek Ruszkowski (Lenkija / Polska). Oboczność typu ‘ambasadorzy // ambasadorowie’ we współczesnej polszczyźnie	84
Oskar Gawlik (Lenkija / Polska). On the Transitive Object Control into -ing Complementation Pattern in Contemporary Spoken American English: a Corpus-driven Study	93
Iwona Kačka-Stanik (Lenkija / Polska). Wpływ metody gramatyczno-tłumaczeniowej i bezpośredniej na nauczanie dzieci języka angielskiego	102

III. VERTIMO TEORIJA IR PRAKTIKA / BADANIA NAD TEORIĄ I PRAKTYKĄ PRZEKŁADU

Robertas Kudirka, Saulė Juzelėnienė, Laima Lazauskaitė (Lietuva / Litwa). Filmų pavadinimų vertimas: vertimo būdai ir problematika	111
Tatjana Solomonik-Pankrashova, Viktorija Lobinaitė (Lietuva / Litwa). Adaptation of the Epic Legend of Siegfried: from Archetypal Hero Myth to Film	121

IV. REKLAMOS TYRIMAI / BADANIA NAD REKLAMĄ

Gabija Bankauskaitė-Sereikienė, Raminta Stravinskaitė (Lietuva / Litwa). Vyriškumo reprezentacija tarpukario Lietuvos spaudos reklamoje	131
--	-----

V. NUOMONĖ: POLITIKOS ISTORIJA / OPINIA: HISTORIA POLITYCZNA

Joanna Sadowska (Lenkija / Polska). The Socialist Youth Union (1957–1976) – Polish Counterpart of Komsomol	147
---	-----

**VI. MOKSLINIO GYVENIMO KRONIKA /
KRONIKA ŻYCIA NAUKOWEGO**

Konferencijų apžvalgos / Konferencje

- Jūratė Radavičiūtė** (Lietuva / Litwa). Opening New Paths for Scientific Discussion:
an Overview of the 9th International Scientific Conference “Man in the Space of
Language”157
- Jurgita Astrauskienė** (Lietuva / Litwa). Idėjų sklaida mokslinėje konferencijoje
„Tarp eilučių: lingvistikos, literatūrologijos, medijų erdvė 2016“160

Knygų recenzijos / Recenzje książek

- Marzena Marczevska** (Lenkija / Polska). The Mystery of Indo-European Languages –
a Few Remarks on the Book by Oleg Poljakov163
- Anonsai / Zapowiedzi**167

- VII. REIKALAVIMAI STRAIPSNIAIS /
ZASADY OPRACOWYWANIA PUBLIKACJI**168

CONTENTS

I. ISSUES OF LITERARY NARRATIVES AND CONTEXTS

Olena Mashchenko (Ukraine). Gish Jen: Loosening the Canyon of the Canon	9
Kristina Stankevičiūtė (Lithuania). Don Juan: the Discourse of Seduction as an Exercise of Power	15
Елена Бразговская (Russia). Poetics of Transcendence: Stylistic Reduction as a Tool for Representation of Sacred Meanings.....	24
Анна Дашенко (Ukraine). “Essay on <i>Ci</i> ” by Li Qingzhao	35
Viktorija Jonkutė (Lithuania). (Re)construction of National Identity in the Lithuanian and Latvian Literary Press during the National Revival Period in the Late 20 th Century	45
Элеонора Шафранская (Russia). Contextual Semantics of the Title of Michail Shishkin’s Novel “The Capture of Izmail”	55

II. LINGUISTIC RESEARCHES

Donna E. West (USA). Pretense as Creative Hallucination	63
Ewa Sikora (Poland). Language and Cultural Motivation of Mazowsze’s Funerals Chrematonims.....	74
Marek Ruskowski (Poland). Alternative Variants of the Type ‘Ambasadorzy // Ambasadorowie’ in the Contemporary Polish.....	84
Oskar Gawlik (Poland). On the Transitive Object Control into -ing Complementation Pattern in Contemporary Spoken American English: a Corpus-Driven Study	93
Iwona Kącka-Stanik (Poland). The Influence of the Grammar-Translation Method and the Direct Method on Students’ Results	102

III. THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TRANSLATION

Robertas Kudirka, Saulė Juzelėnienė, Laima Lazauskaitė (Lithuania). The Strategies and Problems in Film Title Translation	111
Tatyana Solomonik-Pankrashova, Viktorija Lobinaitė (Lithuania). Adaptation of the Epic Legend of Siegfried: from Archetypal Hero Myth to Film.....	121

IV. ADVERTISING DISCOURSE

Gabija Bankauskaitė-Sereikienė, Raminta Stravinskaitė (Lithuania). Masculinity Representation in Lithuanian Interwar Press Advertising	131
---	-----

V. OPINION: POLITICS OF HISTORY

Joanna Sadowska (Poland). The Socialist Youth Union (1957–1976) – Polish Counterpart of Komsomol	147
---	-----

VI. SCIENTIFIC LIFE CHRONICLE**Conference review**

Jūratė Radavičiūtė (Lithuania). Opening New Paths for Scientific Discussion: an Overview of the 9th International Scientific Conference “Man in the Space of Language” 157

Jurgita Astrauskienė (Lithuania). The Dissemination of Ideas in the Scientific Conference “Thought Elaboration: Linguistics, Literature, Media Expression: Tell Me 2016” 160

Book reviews

Marzena Marczevska (Lenkija / Polska). The Mystery of Indo-European Languages – a Few Remarks on the Book by Oleg Poljakov..... 163

Announcements 167

VII. REQUIREMENTS FOR PUBLICATION 168

V. NUOMONĖ: POLITIKOS ISTORIJA / OPINIA: HISTORIA POLITYCZNA

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THE SOCIALIST YOUTH UNION (1957–1976) – POLISH COUNTERPART OF KOMSOMOL

The political system of the Polish People's Republic was modelled on the Soviet one. Polish youth organizations had the ambitions of being counterparts of Komsomol: they adopted similar work methods and tried to play a similar role in the country. The obvious differences resulted from the specificity of each country and the differences in the societies. The most deeply rooted in the memory of Poles is the Socialist Youth Union, which, being the most stable, existed for almost 20 years with nearly 1.3 million members in the early 1970s. The Union was closely connected with the Polish United Workers' Party and it had to accomplish two main kinds of political task: to select and prepare future members of the Party, both ordinary and those in the managerial positions, and to educate the whole young generation. The Party indeed treated the organization as its agency, an office dealing with the affairs of youths. However, non-political activity of the Union (culture, entertainment, tourism, etc.) was much more effective and evaluated more positively. Actually, there was much more falsehood in the Union: many members were almost completely passive and the work was often only simulated.

KEY WORDS: youth organization, communism, Socialist Youth Union, Komsomol.

Introduction

The political system of People's Poland, as Poland was referred to in the period of Communist rule in 1944–1945, was modelled on the Soviet one. However, not all the elements of the Soviet system could be copied as the new system was not as stable and it was undergoing some modifications. An example of political structures whose form was altered many times, sometimes making them more similar to the model and sometimes different, was youth organizations. In this case, the original one was certainly the Soviet All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (*Komsomol*), established in 1918 by virtue of a decree of the Bolshevik Party. Its specific nature resulted from two factors: the leftist ideology and the totalitarian character of the state. The model provided for monopolistic coverage of all the circles and age groups of the young generation, as well as all the areas

of life of the young ones. Thanks to its close relation to the ruling party, *Komsomol* acted as an intermediary between the authorities and the community (Solski 1978: 9–17, Ratuś 1981: 7).

In the countries of the Eastern Bloc, the assumptions of the so-called Leninist concept of youth movement were treated as dogmas, and any attempts to perceive it from another perspective, e.g. questioning the managerial role of the party or the leadership role of working class youths, were regarded as revisionism. In some countries, this model was copied proudly and faithfully (e.g. in Bulgaria, the respective organization even adopted the name *Dimitrov Komsomol*). In Poland, however, especially after 1956, the organizations were not so ostentatious in demonstrating their Leninist character and copying the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League. To the contrary, they began to emphasise the originality of the Polish nation, fitting the Polish reality, and connections with pre-war traditions. As the organization activists admit today they were fully aware that for Poles Lenin was not an authority, nor was Moscow a model to follow.

In Poland under the Communist rule, official youth organizations were divided and combined, some were liquidated and other established. Such reorganizations usually took place in periods of serious political changes (e.g. 1948, 1956, 1980–81). All in all, in the years 1944–1989 there were six youth organizations directly regarded as political, and three organizations which treated political activity as secondary (a scouting association and two student ones). Four of them had the ambitions of being Polish counterparts of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League: they adopted similar work methods and tried to play a similar role in the country. The organization with the strongest position was the Polish Youth Union existing during the Stalinist period (1948–1956), which managed to subdue all the community organizations. Thanks to the pressure exerted on the young people, the number of its members exceeded 2 million. The Polish Youth Union was a fighting and totalitarian organization, it profoundly indoctrinated young people, fought with the Church and *kulaks*, kept the discipline, introduced moral rigour, controlled the private lives of its members, etc. Among them, there were some real idealists, enthusiastically building communism, although they were a minority. But the Union, being too close to its Soviet pattern, did not survive the Polish breakthrough of 1956 (cf. Wierzbicki 2006).

In the other periods – before 1948 and after 1956 – a few other organizations existed in Poland as well. There were organizations for urban, rural, military and student areas, and one for children (scouts), which was a continuation of traditions originated in the 19th century. They differed in the character of activity, the degree of political involvement, and in objectives. But in each period there was one organization with the strongest position, closest to the authority and the Leninist model.

The most deeply rooted in the memory of Poles is the Socialist Youth Union, which, being the most stable, existed for almost 20 years (1957–1976). Over the time of its operation, a total of approx. 5 million young people were affiliated with it. Its activity has already been recognised by Włodzimierz Janowski, Marek Wierzbicki and, especially, by the author of this text who has written the monograph under the title “*Heart and Soul with the Party*”: *The Socialist Youth Union (1957–1976). Political Aspects of its*

Activity (Sadowska 2010). It provides the analysis not only of documents produced by the organization and kept at state archives (hundreds of thousands of pages!), but also materials produced by the Polish United Workers' Party, different state institutions, or the press. In order to obtain the most accurate image, those texts often had to be read "between the lines" and the knowledge had to be supplemented, e.g. by interviews with former activists – both prominent and ordinary ones (cf. Sadowska 2010: 20–23). The monograph explains the political context of the establishment and functioning of the Union, its relations with the Communist Party and describes various aspects of its activity and its social reception.

The aim of this article is to give the brief outline of the Socialist Youth Union, not only for Polish readers but also for foreigners, especially from other post-communist countries. A large number of sources (and facts) requires the use of the selective method. Oral history, quantitative research and comparative method supplement the analysis of historical sources. However, the main purpose of the research is not to thoroughly compare the Socialist Youth Union of Poland with the Soviet All-Union Leninist Young Communist League, but to present the specific nature of the Polish organization, especially its political and social role. The obtained image of the organization is ambiguous and indiscrete, just like the image of the Polish People's Republic was in many aspects. It can even be hypothesised that all the characteristics of youth organizations, as well as their dilemmas, divisions and problems, were the reflection of general situation in the country. The period of the Socialist Youth Union's activity was a specific stage in Poland's history. The organization was established at the turn of 1957, when the trust in Communist authorities among Poles was higher than ever, and it disappeared in spring 1976, just before another workers' protest and a profound crisis that the Polish People's Republic was never to overcome. Thus, it operated in the best time of Polish "real socialism", which greatly legitimated the adjective "socialist" in its name. According to an outstanding historian Andrzej Paczkowski: "It was a real "golden age" of the Communism: the society was building their little but individual wealth on its not very fertile soil, those who were active could find some niches to protect themselves relatively well from the ideological interference and take rational actions, an open 'ventilation window to the world' let some fresh air in, people of the culture tried to play with the authorities' demands, driven by political selection but not imposing esthetic norms any more, etc." (1996: 49)

General characteristics of the organization

The Socialist Youth Union was established as part of transformations that occurred in Poland after the death of Stalin, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the brutally suppressed workers' uprising in Poznań. In October 1956, the rule in Poland was taken over by Władysław Gomułka, a Communist persecuted in the Stalinist period. In that atmosphere, the Polish Youth Union was no longer able to operate, and its demise led to the appearance of many youth groups, strongly criticising the Stalinist system and calling for reform. In order to control them, the authorities of the Polish United Workers' Party decided to create five community organizations. Thus, the "Polish model

of the youth movement” was at the time made up of political organizations: the Socialist Youth Union, the reactivated Rural Youth Union and Military Youth Clubs, as well as the educational Polish Scouting and Guiding Association (established in 1918) and the Polish Students’ Association. On the basis of the relations by the former activists we know that Moscow strongly disapproved of the solution adopted in Poland, particularly of the establishment of a separate rural youth organization. The Polish authorities, however, managed to convince the Russian ones that nothing wrong had happened in Poland, that the division was not deep but rather formal in character, and that it did not mean that Leninist principles had been abandoned (Wierzbicki 2009: 43–46).

The original form of the organization assumed the rank-based, “avant-garde” and working class character (Bratkowski 1960: 5). This image differed from the authorities’ expectations, and their pressure resulted in a straightforward declaration of obedience to the party and adopting the mass character.

In 1967, there were already a million members in the union, and in the early 1970s, nearly 1.3 million. Mass membership in the Socialist Youth Union confirmed the legitimacy of the Communist authorities: the rulers could regard those millions of youths as their active supporters. The members were mostly secondary school students, young white collar workers, manual labourers and students (basically, people aged 16–30). The membership was not mandatory, but sometimes pressure was exerted, e.g. by the school. In factories such pressure was impossible, so the workers – still young but already adult, interested rather in their own lives – more rarely engaged in the work of the organization.

Anonymous surveys carried out among the activists showed that they were mostly motivated by the need for social activity and being part of a group. Ideological motivations were less frequently pointed out.

Joining the Union, people expected to have a good time, go to camps, trips and parties. Some admitted they wanted to have easier access to university. Many enrolled because their friends had done so, others focused on potential new acquaintances, especially with the other sex. Sometimes young people joined the Union as a result of advice or an order from parents, if they were politically active themselves (Sadowska 2010: 144–146).

The mass character of the organization was an expression of conformism of the Polish society and the specific doublethink: completely separating private lives from the officially manifested attitudes made the membership possible even for those who distanced themselves from politics or had a critical approach to the reality.

Political role

According to the Leninist concept of the youth movement, “party management” officially involved adjusting the union’s actions to the directions ordered by the Polish United Workers’ Party. But even more important were the people: candidates for the supreme positions were always discussed with the voivodeship committees or the Central Committee of the Party, and the vast majority of the Union’s apparatus were party members. Even their headquarters were often erected in close proximity. As former activists admit today all the serious decisions and plans were consulted, from draft resolutions or policy documents up to detailed event scenarios. The Union was financed by budgetary subsidies, it also

made use of party instructors and facilities. It could not exist without the Polish United Workers' Party.

In return, it had to accomplish two main kinds of task: to select and prepare future members of the Polish United Workers' Party, both ordinary and those in the managerial positions, and to educate the whole young generation.

Greater importance, however, was invested in the system of recommending and endorsing particular candidates for the party. The number of recommendations in each half year in a voivodeship of *poviat* was a very important piece of information for the Union, used to draw conclusions concerning its level of activity. Usually 20–35 thousand people were recommended in a year; the year 1969, when nearly 46 thousand Union members were recommended for the Party, was record-breaking. Endorsement was to be granted to most active members manifesting attitude beyond reproach, but in practice it was hard to find as many individuals willing to join the Party. For the majority of ordinary, often passive Union members, party affiliation could be too serious and too politically conspicuous.

Human resources connections were a phenomenon beneficial to both sides. The Party gained young people, energetic and tested at work. The youth organization, in turn, having its supporters at different authority levels, could strengthen its position and accomplish more. For the activists themselves it meant promotion, an important step in the career. One of the first secretaries of the Union, Marian Renke, later became an ambassador (in Cuba, Jamaica and Spain) and the chairman of the Polish Olympic Committee; another one, Andrzej Żabiński, later served as the 1st secretary of the Voivodeship Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party in Katowice and a member of the Political Bureau of the Polish United Workers' Party. Leszek Miller, a Prime Minister in the already democratic Poland, had also begun his political career in the management of the Social Youth Union (Sadowska 2008: 222). The same mechanism obviously occurred in the USSR and other socialist countries – all the leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, beginning with Brezhnev, had been *Komsomol* activists when young, and one of the founders and chairman of East German FDJ (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*), Erich Honecker, later became the leader of the ruling Communist party (SED).

The other task of the Union was to educate the society to comply with the needs of a socialist state, in the spirit of approval for the system, ideology, and authority, and to engage the young generation in activities (e.g. economic ones) initiated by the authorities. The statutory objective of the Socialist Youth Union was *to educate young people in a socialist way, to prepare and organize them to active participation in building socialism in Poland* (Sadowska 2011: 257). Adopting the concept of mass organization, the Union had to give up on requiring certain views from its new members and assume that those views would develop under the influence of the organization. But inculcating ideology was sometimes difficult. Its basic form was theoretical training sessions, following the model of *Komsomol* agitation schools. They usually included subjects concerning the Marxist philosophy, the history of working class movement, the political economy of socialism, etc. Those issues were of little interest to young people; besides, they were deterred by the newspeak and slogans used to convey them. Hence, low attendance was

the problem, and to overcome it, training sessions were often combined with entertainment and recreation. The organization activists and full-time workers were educated separately; evening schools were established especially for them. A few people were selected to go to the Higher Komsomol School in Moscow each year.

For ideological as well as practical reasons, education through work was often applied, and its forms were borrowed from *Komsomol*. Introducing the young to hard work was presented as an element of patriotic education, but specific economic needs played a role as well. Since the inflated plans and large-scale investments, especially of the 1970s, were coupled with dramatically low work efficiency, each pair of hands and each hour spent at a construction site or factory was of vital importance. The forms of production or community actions were borrowed from the USSR (e.g. Soviet *subotniki* and *woskresniki*), as well as the labour race (in Polish conditions rather referred to as competition), or patronages (following the *Komsomol* group constructions) – the organization’s supervision of a project, usually a production or construction one. Regarding youths, such patronage referred to residential buildings, resulting in “Youth Districts” created in many cities, and huge investments, e.g. the “Friendship” pipeline or “Katowice” Steelworks. It is hard to decide whether young people’s input had more economic or propaganda importance in this case (Najdowski 2002: 113).

In accordance with the Union’s ideological assumptions, close connections with the Party were also to better secure youth’s interests. The Polish United Workers’ Party indeed treated the organization as its agency, an office dealing with the affairs of youths. It was supposed to meet the needs of the young generation, and young people who wanted help were directed to that organization. Union management boards were flooded with requests, complaints and denunciations, and sometimes even personal confessions, not only of its members. Most frequently, people asked the organization to help them find a job or a flat, or complained about a dismissal or the lack of promotion. The Union could really help only in a minority of those cases, e.g. supported the person at the workplace or an office, or even represented them in court (Bajorek, Markowa 1971: 3).

The effects and range of educational and propaganda influence of the Union were perceived as unsatisfactory. This was proved by the youths’ attitude expressed during political crises of 1968 and 1970. In March 1968, a wave of students’ protests against limitations in culture and science spread throughout the country. In December 1970, workers, mainly young people, went out to protest, demanding better living conditions. The result was the death of over 40 persons and Edward Gierek replacing Władysław Gomułka. In both events, members of the Socialist Youth Union fought on both sides. The Union was unable to play any significant role, to help masses calm down, or to earn young people’s support for the Party (Eisler 2000, 2006).

“Non-political” activity

The so-called “non-political” (although ‘less political’ is a more correct term) cultural and recreational activity of the Union was much more effective and evaluated more positively. For the majority of members, it was only a youth association, and the political character

was treated as a ritual being the result of the specificity of the country they lived in. For many, an important – and later, the most important – area of the Union's activity was culture and entertainment. Although the belief in fully free culture in Poland proved to be delusive after 1956, some new trends managed to get through, and the authorities' tolerance slightly increased. The attitude to culture and customs was one of the most visible differences between the Socialist Youth Union and its Stalinist predecessor or Leninist original. The organization did not impose any trends on the young people but adapted to their expectations. It accepted the fascination with Western mass culture, though not very enthusiastically. Young Poles listened and danced to *rock and roll* and some Polish bands tried to copy Elvis Presley, *The Beatles* or *The Rolling Stones*. They boosted up their moods with fashionable hairstyles and clothes, often obtained with great effort.

The Socialist Youth Union treated the youth culture as an opportunity and became an important organizer of it. The mechanism was beneficial to both sides: the organization warmed up its image and attracted new members, and the new trends became quite safe under the Union's shelter. It mainly involved different clubs, usually established at factories or schools. Some of them were located in small rooms where about ten people could meet, while others were large centres which offered various activities and simultaneously organized significant cultural events.

The clubs ran various extracurricular classes, devoted e.g. to arts, literature, theatre, singing, dancing, technology or photography. Guitar bands which later played *rock and roll* at the organization's dancing parties used to practice there. A delegation from the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League which visited the Union in Bydgoszcz in 1957 reported: *We enter the club: in one room they're drinking coffee and reading magazines, in another they're playing bridge, but in the third one... rock and roll. The Socialist Youth Union and rock and roll! That was unthinkable for us* (Anon. 1957). Educational activity (lectures, meetings with interesting people, discussions) and events on state holidays, anniversaries, etc. (e.g. Lenin's birthday or the end of WWII) or important political events were organized in the same clubs.

Another incentive for joining the Union was its recreational offers, including sports and tourism. It began with football tournaments on school pitches and walking trips to the countryside, and ended with bus trips to France. One of the greatest achievements of the Union was organizing holidays for hundreds of thousands of young people. Its members spent holidays in tents, summer houses or the organization's resorts in good locations at the seaside, at the lake or in the mountains. Officially, the camps were educational. Every day there were some discussions, lectures and workshops scheduled, considered by many as an interruption in their summer rest.

The ideological/political character of the recreational activity was also visible in combining it with large political events. A specific form was youth conventions. Gathered in the open air, members of all youth organizations manifested their devotion to the socialist state. The largest was the Grunwald Convention organized in 1960 to celebrate the 550th anniversary, in which 40 thousand people participated (Dąbrowa, Janusz 2002: 132).

Copying the *Komsomol* “Rally along the trail of revolution, military and production glory of the Soviet nation” and others of the kind, the Socialist Youth Union organized a rally “Along the trail of Pomeranian Wall conquerors” or the Lenin Rally. During the rallies it was customary to visit the appropriate structures and listen to stories or lectures.

International relations

The Union sought to be perceived as an organization that opened wide the world to its members, so it did not limit itself to domestic tourism. Every year, through the “Juventur” travel agency, it sent a few thousand people abroad. The most popular destination was of course the USSR and other socialist countries, but from the mid-1960s it was also possible to go to the West, at first to France and Italy. Obviously, such trips were extremely attractive and treated as rewards for the activists. The first of them left for the USSR on 28 December 1960 upon the invitation of the Central Committee of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League. The participants had a rest, went sightseeing, took part in cultural and sports events and in meetings at workplaces (Dąbrowa, Janusz 2002: 133).

The Socialist Youth Union maintained international relations not only with the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League but also with its counterparts in other countries of the Eastern Bloc. The forms of cooperation were very different: participation in official delegations of the highest management in congresses of the “brotherly” organizations, international conferences, meetings of particular circles (e.g. of young miners or editors of youth magazines), as well as many “Polish-Soviet Friendship Camps”, “Friendship Relay Races”, “Friendship Meetings”, the already mentioned “Friendship Trains”, international sports events, or exhibitions of achievements. Pairs of cities were selected to collaborate, e.g. Katowice–Ostrava, Kraków–Bratislava (Wasilewski 1974). The highest number of young people went on holidays abroad as part of exchange. It was a cheap and convenient solution: the exchange participants mutually covered the costs of food, accommodation at student hostels, boarding houses, etc. Moreover, they often used the opportunity to earn some money unofficially by trading with commodities in short supply, and sometimes even illegally imported.

Interestingly, the Union tried to maintain some relation with leftist (especially Communist) youth organizations from Western countries too, e.g. from Denmark, Finland, West Germany, Austria, Italy, Cyprus and France. However, due to the cautious approach these contacts were not very intensive. Cooperation was usually limited to the exchange of letters or visits of management delegations of a few people.

Concluding remarks

Although only some forms of the organization’s activity are listed here in comparison with its vast number of various activities, many members were almost completely passive. They were not removed from the lists for years, mainly for the sake of statistics. Actually, there was much more falsehood in the Union: the work of the clubs was often only simulated, the reports glossed over or completely fake, and the ideological involvement only apparent.

For many, it was a lesson in coping with the reality and adapting to the system, though not planned by the organization. In it, young people learnt pragmatism and opportunism, which later made it easier for them to cope in adult life, to deal with the world of socialist absurdities, and even to succeed professionally. Thus, the organization had its contribution to educating a generation that in general approved of the existing political system and tried to make the best of living in it.

The Union ceased to exist in 1976, when unification and centralization goals again led to an attempt to unite all the youth organizations in one: the Polish Socialist Youth Union. This attempt was only partly successful (the scouting and student organizations resisted the incorporation) and only for a short period of time – the organization was discredited and greatly weakened in the time of “Solidarity” (1980–1981). The events which began then showed that the adaptation of the “Socialist Youth Union generation” after all did not mean their lack of criticism towards the authorities and the system. They participated in a great social rebellion, some of them contributed to the decline of communism in Poland, others only watched the process, but virtually nobody tried to protect the system. The most lasting achievement of the Union was promoting a vast number of activists who managed to find their place not only in the reality of the Polish People’s Republic but also in the conditions of a democratic country, and who are still active on the political scene.

Most of the above observations probably refer as well to the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League and youth organizations in other socialist countries. The obvious differences resulted from the specificity of each country and social differences. It can be assumed that since Poland was a rather unstable and unpredictable country in the bloc, Polish youth organizations were also deviated from the model against the background of other countries. Such extensive comparisons would make it possible to draw serious conclusions, thus it seems to be an interesting idea for further research.

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