

## Work of the Commission on Names of Localities and Physiographic. Objects of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration

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### Abstract

In Poland, as in any other land, the place names inform about place, direction, identify villages and towns. To play the role of the “identifiers” they have to be stable and synchronised with the place name’s system of the land. After the first world war there was the need to standarize and to codify the names of three regions which were under three different administrations (Russian, Austrian and German) so the names could serve the policy of the land, work of the administration, post, railway and other. The foreign names have to be changed or adapted to the Polish language. The government called a special Committee of Place Names and other Topographic Objects. This Committee, today as a advisory body for the Minister of Inner Affairs, works on the basis of Act on Proper Names (which decides that an onomastician is a head of the Committee). Its task is to standarize and codify the place names, to accept the new names, to check if they are correct of the point of view of system of Polish place names, Polish orthography and the norm of the language. In administration and other legal use the place names have to be used in standarized and codified forms. Nowadays we observe new tendencies in building the new names and in changes which take place: I. taking the form of compound names, which 1) bind together place names of two separate villages (type Boguty-Pianki), 2) adding an element specifying the administrative character of the object (Boguty-Kolonia; Osiedle Słup). This type of place names, written with hyphen, is a newer type among Polish place names; II. annulment the names of the parts of villages and towns (even if they have a long history). This tendency is a result of the policy of local administration and the inhabitants. The Committee since 2005 have a new task to settle the names in the minority languages. The work of this Committee serve the functioning Poland as a land, the administration, communication of all types, they are works for the common good.

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We are all aware of the importance of names of localities in our lives. However, for majority of language users, the name of a locality is a some sort of a label used to differentiate between one village/town from another. Names of localities help us organize the world around us, and they are used to get one’s bearings. Linguists also realize the value of names of localities for widely understood research on national history and culture.

I would like to present the work of the Commission on Names of Localities and Physiographic Objects operating by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration in Poland. This work is very important due to the fact that in every-day life we encounter official forms of names; these forms organize our movements in the world. In my presentation, I rely on several articles written by Kazimierz Rymut, Ewa Rzetelska-Feleszko, Aleksandra Cieślukowa and my own experience deriving from the work in the Commission on Names of Localities and Physiographic Objects.

It is obvious that names of localities are subject to changes, similarly to human settlements and the entire linguistic system. Changes of names are known from quite recent past, e.g. names of cities: *Katowice* was changed to *Stalinogród* and then back to *Katowice*. New places emerge which are given new names. A good example here is the establishment of *Nowa Huta*. Variability of names is encountered primarily in the early period of name formation, before the official determination of names, their standardization and codification. And even though it may seem that the world of names which we use is not prone to changes, when we look closer we can see their changeability, movement and penetration of the same tendencies which have been accompanying all spheres of the language. Constancy in

nomenclature is maintained by all official determinations, preparation of registers and control of use of names on the part of the administration.

Determination of fixed names of villages began in various regions of Poland as late as the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was probably then that the state administration started to observe compliance of names that were used with their official lists. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the time of further solidification of existing names by preparation of agricultural registers, cadastres, detailed maps of villages with lands belonging to individual persons. Systematic control of names on the part of the state administration lasted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. by means of official determination or approval of a name for every locality.

After Poland regained independence in 1918, it was necessary to determine joint and uniform geographic names with respect to areas from three partitions. German and Russian influences had to be removed. Polish names of localities had to function efficiently in the operation of post, transportation, administration, courts, etc. It was also necessary to make such names correct linguistically in their sound, spelling, inflection and formation. This was the moment when the Commission on Determination of Names of Localities was established. Operation of this Commission resulted in, *inter alia*, restoration of former Polish names to localities which remained under the impact of German language for many centuries.

Another wave of changes which engulfed Polish geographic nomenclature was related to the shifting of borders of the Polish state in 1945 combined with huge migrations of people. Approx. 32,000 of geographic objects and villages in the so-called Northern and Western Lands received new Polish names.

The Commission on Determination of Names of Localities and Physiographic Objects received the task of determining new Polish names. It was composed of geographers, historians and linguists. When determining new names, state and social issues were taken into account.

The first group of issues was related to the necessity of emphasising the Polish character of the new areas; thence, the desire to recreate the greatest possible number names in line with their historical certificates. This is why former Polish (or Slavic) forms of Germanized names were restored. If a locality had an original German name, a different procedure was adopted: sometimes it was adapted phonetically and morphologically to the Polish language, e.g. German *Konradswalde* became *Koniecwald*; sometimes, names were translated and sometimes completely new forms were invented. Such new names were recreated from names of lost villages or local names from various regions of the country or even completely invented by the members of the Commission, e.g. to commemorate meritorious persons, e.g. German *Sensburg*, former Polish *Ządzbork*, was changed into *Mragowo*, in order to commemorate Krzysztof Celestyn Mrongowiusz.

Social aspects consisted in quick inclusion of names into effective linguistic circulation so that they could serve the Polish administration, culture, tourism and other areas of life. The Commission operated between 1945 and 1950; after that, relative stabilization of the Polish geographic names took place, yet the Commission did not cease to operate. Only the scope of its activities was decreased. The Commission operates now by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration. It is an advisory body to the Minister. Its members are linguists (in line with the tradition and the Law on Official Names of Localities and Physiographic Objects from 2003, a linguist is always the chairman of the Commission; former chairmen include Professor Rymut, Professor Cieślikowa, and currently me), historians, geographers, cartographers, representatives of the Chief Land Surveyor, the Central Statistical Office and the army. The Commission has its own Internet site: [www.knmiof.mswia.gov.pl](http://www.knmiof.mswia.gov.pl). It features a brief history of the Commission, its composition, documents which form the basis of work, information about sessions of the Commission and news; a database of names is also planned (currently, the map is at the stage of testing) and useful publications. In the future, the site

will also have templates of applications to be submitted by the communes, along with lists of necessary attachments. On August 29, 2003 the *Law on Official Names of Localities and Physiographic Objects* entered into life; it stipulates the principles and the manner of determining names of localities, making changes and revoking official names of localities and their parts and official names of physiographic objects; from the moment of publication in the Journal of Laws, the name of a locality has to be applied in official dealings without any interferences.

Tendencies for creation of spontaneous new names have not completely disappeared. They are restricted by the operation of offices, yet they become visible in the form of applications and petitions which are sent to the Commission. Such applications are sent by citizens, organizations and individual persons.

It is worthwhile drawing attention to these motivations for changes which turned out to be sufficiently alive and strong to make the applicants undertake the effort of overcoming many difficulties in order to change the name of their village. The procedure in such cases is very democratic. An application to the Minister is sent by the commune. Yet the indispensable condition is discussion about such application during a meeting of village inhabitants; in the course of voting, the inhabitants express their stance for or against such application. Subsequently, the application is submitted to the *starosty* authorities, the poviats authorities and, in the end, to the province authorities. All such authorities have to issue an opinion on such application; the province governor sends the application to the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration. The Commission on Names of Localities examines such application. In line with the above-mentioned Law, the official name may be determined, changed or revoked by the minister competent for the issues of public administration upon his/ her initiative, but also upon the Commission's initiative. Before determination, change or revoking of an official name, the minister applies to the commune council, *starost*, province governor and the Commission, and in the case of a physiographic object – also to the management of a province – for an opinion. The opinion of the commune council is preceded by conduct of consultations with inhabitants of a locality to which the case refers.

It is worth saying a few words about the course of work and determinations made by the Commission. Applications are examined on an ongoing basis at the meetings of the Commission which are organized every 2 or 3 months on average. Before the meeting, a designated member of the Commission checks the documentation of a name, inspects documents sent by the province governor, historical records and motivation of the name and presents his/ her point of view to other members. Frequently, discussions on applications are very animated, sometimes even stormy. In principle, there are two opposing points of view. One is the point of view of linguists and historians, frequently of also geographers, who postulate no rapid changes in names. Names are treated as a monument of national culture. They say a lot about the past, they are witnesses to the life of past generations and have been formed by a tradition of many centuries. The second point of view is revealed in the applications of local communities – they result from a short-term, current situation, e.g. the inhabitants feel offended or ridiculed by the name; they do not use a certain name; they have problems with the post, exchange of identification documents, numbering of houses. However, the question always remains: if the situation is changed – what about the name? When should it be changed again? In the course of the discussion, a compromise is sometimes reached; sometimes voting is necessary. In certain cases, the Commission is trying to convince the inhabitants not to change the name. Applications which have been sent to the Commission in the recent years most frequently refer to names of parts of villages, hamlets and settlements. More frequently than in the case of independent administrative units, the Commission complies with the applications of communes.

It is worth asking why the inhabitants wish to change the name of their villages. Motivations may vary and their structure has been changing in the course of years. I differentiate motivations on the basis of applications from years 1978 - 1983 (20), 1991 - 1994 (40) and most recent ones from 2009 and 2010 (several hundred); some examples derive from an article written by Ewa Rzetelska-Feleszko.

### 1. Historical motivations

In 1983, the communal circle of the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Independence in the village of Miedzno in the Częstochowa Province applied for change in the name of the village of *Mokra* to *Mokra Ułańska*. In 1939, a bloody battle took place near this village in which the cavalry brigade participated. The province governor emphasized historical aspects in the application along with broad social approval for this change. A reference was also made to a precedent in the form of the name of Studzianki Pancerne in the Radom Province.

In 1979, the inhabitants of the village of *Zalesie* applied for change in the name of their village to *Myśliwiec*. The motivation for the change was the fact that the name *Zalesie* was new and has been functioning solely for several years. The name of *Myśliwiec* was older – it was confirmed in documents from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

As can be seen, historical motivations refer to facts from distant and more recent history. However, these applications were rejected by the Commission and names remained unchanged. Such decisions were made on the basis of pragmatic and financial reasons.

The inhabitants of a village called *Polanka* wished to return to the name of *Polanka Hallerowska* or *Polanka Haller*. In the past, the village belonged to the Haller family and the name in the form of *Polanka Hallerowska* remained functioning until 1964. The communist authorities, having a negative approach to General Haller, removed the second part of the name and in the 1990's the population of the village wished to indicate the fact that the famous Polish commander came from there.

### 2. Prestigious motivations

The inhabitants of *Kamień Pomorski* would prefer, due to prestigious reasons, for their town to bear the name of *Kamień-Zdrój* in order to indicate its most important function of the centre of spa treatment. Due to the solidified name of *Kamień Pomorski* the application was rejected.

### 3. Interpreting the name as embarrassing, ridiculing or humbling for the inhabitants

The feeling of ridicule or even humbling of the inhabitants results from exceptionally lively perceived semantics of the name, deriving from various connotations. Names of localities deriving from words such as *krowa* 'cow', *kobyła* 'mare' and *kot* 'cat' are not well-liked. Therefore, the inhabitants asked for the name of *Krowia Góra* (English: Cow's Mountain) (Świętokrzyskie Province) to be changed to *Zagórze*. The inhabitants of the village of *Parchacin* (Zachodniopomorskie Province) would prefer to live in *Łaziszcze*. They wrote in their application: "The name of *Parchacin* evokes unflattering associations with mange." In general, the Commission consents to such requests.

In the application of the inhabitants of the village of *Wielka Bieda* (English: Great Poverty) (Polskie Province), we can read: "the name of *Wielka Bieda* is a reason for ridicule on the part of inhabitants of other villages. All farmers would like to have the name changed at any price." They showed great activity in this case, involving the press in their struggle. The *Kurier Polski* magazine featured an article entitled "It is sad to live in *Wielka Bieda*." Due to the fact that the name was proposed after 1945 instead of a German name, the request in the application was granted and the name was changed to *Średnica*.

The inhabitants of the village of *Poździacz* (Podkarpackie Province) asked to change the name of their village to *Leszno*. The name *Poździacz*, deriving from the name or the nickname of *Poździak* (: późny 'late') has been known since the 15<sup>th</sup> century and did not bother anybody until 1977. In 1977, along with the entire group of Bieszczady names, it was changed to *Leszno* and in 1981 the historical name was restored. It was then that the people came to the conclusion it was offensive and that it evoked associations with a vulgar word (in the local Ukrainian dialect  $o > i$ ). Ineffectively, the Commission tried to convince the inhabitants to maintain the historical name.

It is hard to be surprised that the inhabitants of village called *Haźlach* wanted to change the name to *Haźlach*. The original German name *Haslach* (= German *Haslach* 'hazel') was locally internalized as *Haźlach* (Śląskie Province). The officially determined name of *Haźlach* was associated with ap. *haziel* which, in the local dialect, denotes an outhouse. The request of the inhabitants was granted.

#### 4. Desire to preserve linguistic features proper for a given region in the name

Official names of villages and towns have, in principle, such forms as they should have in the Polish general language, i.e. without taking into account their local dialect pronunciation. The names are the property of the entire society (they are present on maps, in tourist guidebooks) and not only the property of a local community. Therefore, the Commission in principle does not accept applications for changes to the form of the name in a local dialect, especially when the applications include such feature of the language as the Mazovian pronunciation. The history of the name of *Wola Żarczycka* (Podkarpackie Province) is well known in Poland; its inhabitants desired to change it to *Wola Zarczycka*. The Commission rejected the application three times trying to indicate to the inhabitants that the name bears features of the Mazovian pronunciation. The inhabitants referred to the 18<sup>th</sup> century documents where the name is written with Z or with Z crossed out in the middle. They did not accept the arguments that in handwriting of this period, diacritic signs were used rarely. The copy of the document that was sent also features the word “*żeby*” written as “*zeby*”, yet nobody paid attention to that. The inhabitants of the village were stubborn and applied to the members of parliament – on their behalf, the interpellation was submitted by one of the MPs, who additionally used political arguments that the inhabitants cannot be responsible for errors made in centuries past. Yet the people who are guilty of such errors are local officials who did not respect the decisions of the ministry. The commission tried to persuade the MP not to change the name. This had no effect. An application was sent again to change the name to *Wola Zarczycka* and this time it was accepted, taking into account the facts related to former and contemporary administrative and official practice confirming exclusive use in this circulation of the form *Wola Zarczycka* and the arguments of Professor Kazimierz Ożóg, who wrote “nowadays, in the unifying Europe, special attention is drawn to cultural separateness of various regions. The name of *Wola Zarczycka* is the property of its citizens; it is a strong element of identification and identity. It necessary to retain this name mainly on account of respect for the entire community of this village and for all citizens who, in line with linguistic and cultural rules, use this name.”

Changes of names in Silesia are accepted, such as *Grabczak* to *Grabczok* because they are typical for this region and are historically confirmed. The ending of – *owiec* is changed to – *ówiec*; such endings occurred first in the names in Kujawy and Wielkopolska, later in other regions because this feature is typical and names in this form have been functioning for a long time.

Applications of this type have been particularly frequent since the 1990's. The Commission consents to only some of them.



## 5. Administrative motivation

Administrative divisions of the country are subject to constant changes. This is visible most clearly in cities: communes and districts are established and liquidated after several years and new formations are created. The same happens in the country; this refers both to communes and smaller administrative units. *Solectwo* (smallest administrative unit in Poland) is subject to changes particularly frequently – if such unit is too small, it is united with another one, if it is too big, it is divided. Extending villages try to get divided and separate their individual parts. Other times, disappearing and depopulated villages have to be merged. Moreover, local administration aims at ordering house numbering and the adopted concept requires clear divisions into villages, their parts, *solectwo*, etc. In turn, this is related to the problem of names. For the local administration, the easiest thing is to resign from names of parts of villages (because no numbers have to be assigned to them and no borders have to be set out), yet names testify to the history and culture. One of the arguments brought up by applicants is the fact that a name is not used and that nobody is registered in such a part of a village or a settlement; other arguments say that names do not occur in property documents and others. This argument is completely unjustified due to the fact that people cannot be registered in a unit that is not independent administratively; they can only be registered in main villages. On the other hand, preservation of names of parts of villages, hamlets and settlements – sometimes quite distant from the village – has its pragmatic significance. It facilitates access for emergency services, police and census representatives. Frequently, the Commission dismisses applications for abolishing names of parts of villages, hamlets and settlements which used to be separate villages recorded - in many cases - since the Middle Ages. In such situations we try to save names of such objects from oblivion. Current administrative aspects cannot shape the names. Applications inconsistent with the Polish spelling are dismissed; this primarily refers to the spelling without hyphen of names consisting of two nouns, such as *Górka-Kolonia*, when the element *kolonia*, *wieś*, *las*, *zdrój* etc. is in the second place. Recently, the Commission dismissed an application of the town of *Jastrzębie-Zdrój*, whose inhabitants wanted to write the name without the hyphen. The city authorities came to the session of the Commission in order to convince us about their arguments. The Commission kept up its standpoint in order to write the name with a hyphen. Applications where the differentiating numerical-derivative parts are expressed by a Latin number are rejected. In such cases, it is impossible to determine the inflection of the other part of the name, which, in the functioning of names, is an important issue.

It is necessary to pay attention to one more task of the Commission. On January 6, 2005, the Law on National and Ethnic Minorities and the Regional Language became effective. In line with the Law, national and ethnic minorities have a right to use, next to Polish official names, also names in their own language. The condition for adding such additional name is a proper number of inhabitants and the necessity of it being a historical name, confirmed before 1933, and not given by the authorities of the Third German Reich of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. The task of the Commission is to issue opinions on applications sent by the communes. This is a difficult task, sometimes very sensitive, due to the fact that such changes may lead to local social conflicts. Proposals of the Commission are accepted by the Minister competent for religious denominations and national and ethnic minorities. So far, we have issued opinions on applications from the area of Silesia and Kashubia; now, we are starting to receive applications of Belarusian minority, mainly from the Białystok area and applications of the Lemko minority.

Operation of the Commission constitutes work for social welfare. Such work demands a lot of involvement and time from its members, but it is important that the geographic names are not changed too often due to cultural, linguistic and pragmatic reasons. The names should remain something that belongs to the inhabitants; something that is native and close.

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