

6.4.2017 Silesia. The depths of Europe

The history of Silesia is the story of a nation that has suffered the worst consequences of the insanity of European wars throughout the 20th century: the First and Second World Wars, and then more than three decades under the dead hand of the cold war and the iron curtain. Silesia is gradually reconnecting with Europe, with its own history and with its identity. The *Ruch Autonomii Slaska* [Assembly of Silesian Autonomists] has launched the recapture of this battered and long-suppressed identity.

The Silesian people is one of the Slav nations which, positioned between Russia and Germany, was at the centre of the worst atrocities of war. Poland, the Czech Republic, Moravia, Slovakia and Silesia are all Slav nations which emerged from the feudal wars of the Middle Ages, all adhering to Catholicism while Russia was Orthodox and Prussia, Lutheran. The most powerful of these was Poland, which wanted to annex the rest to form a "Greater Poland", to the detriment of Silesian identity, rather in the way that the Republic of Genoa or Mussolini's Italy treated Corsica, while Russia and Germany always regarded these territories as fair game for their colonialism and imperialism. In these great expansions of central Europe, the geography of peoples is less easy to grasp than elsewhere in Europe, but a national territory was gradually sketched out, rich in Lower Silesia [Breslau/Wrocław], rural and poor in Upper Silesia, around the boom town of Katowice, which grew out of the 19th century industrial revolution.

For, if the 20th century saw every kind of barbarism, Silesia had experienced the 19th century as a time of industrial prosperity, above all thanks to the discovery of one of the largest coalfields in Europe on the site of today's Katowice. But Katowice was more than just a coalfield fuelling one of the wealthiest steel industries on the continent of Europe. It was also a sort of European Silicon Valley for metallurgy, because it was there, in the mid-1800s, that they discovered the virtues of zinc, which makes steel stainless and hence resistant to all kinds of corrosion. The zinc on the bar counters in our villages, the zinc in the gutters or the zinc cladding protecting the metal frames of the great covered markets, all that was made possible by the industries of Katowice. And the production of zinc and zinc-coated steel was an incomparable source of economic riches.

These were years that saw a huge influx of peoples: Silesians leaving their poor rural areas, Poles drawn by the offer of work, and Germans. There was no lack of work in Germany, since the Ruhr was the most important industrial area in Europe. It was capitalists and entrepreneurs who set up in Silesia, to tap the economic riches discovered there. This was the time of Bismarck, when Germany was by far the most socially advanced country in Europe. German social capitalism had invented the social security from which Alsations, German from 1870 to 1918, benefit to this day.

Nikiszowiec, classified as a World Heritage of Humanity site by UNESCO, symbolises this golden age. Two German architects drew up the plans for a workers' town with miners' homes that were ultra-modern for their time, equipped with electricity and running water as early as the first years of the 20th century and with social services financed by the mining company, from the church to the hospital, the school and the post office, via a mechanised collective laundry where miners' wives washed their menfolk's clothes on their return from the mine. The architecture is magnificent, worthy of Le Corbusier, and thousands of working class people still live there today.

But the twentieth century quickly plunged into horror with the arrival of the First World War. Silesia and its economic basin, between Poland and Germany, was a geostrategic target in the conflict, and once the war was over it was called upon to choose between Germany and Poland. A referendum held in 1920 divided the territory in two, before Poland seized sovereignty of the whole territory with the

support of the allies. Four million Germans who had been established in Silesia for two generations and more were expelled en masse, by force, along with a good number of Silesians whose possessions the Polish conquerors wanted to seize. New influxes of peoples came from the rest of Poland and Ukraine in an example of settlement colonisation.

This was one of the deepest humiliations suffered by the German people, on which Hitler constructed the rise of the Third Reich. Until the invasion by the Wehrmacht, which triggered the Second World War.

Auschwitz stands today as the darkest symbol of these dark years. Then came a 'liberation' which was no true liberation, since the region, along with Poland as a whole, fell under the Soviet yoke of Stalin, who multiplied the killings in his turn, culminating in the atrocity at Katyn where almost all the entire officer class of the Polish army were executed en masse by the Red Army which then tried for decades to put the blame on the Nazis.

All the events of this tragic history are recounted in vivid style in the ultra-modern museum at Katowice. This museum, largely funded by the European Union, is an exercise in memory and moral and psychological reconstruction for this people traumatised by history.

Created at the town's pit head, its design is revolutionary. Instead of rising several storeys high like any other museum, instead it dives many levels down into the depths of the earth, like the coal mines it replaces. Light shafts cunningly arranged on the surface illuminate its exhibition galleries. The effect is striking.

The history of the town is skilfully evoked. Visitors experience all the oppression suffered by the generations sacrificed first to work and then to war, the hope that Solidarnosc brought at last, and then the impact of integration into the European Union, which offered the Silesian people, battered by history, crushed by occupations, denigrated by Warsaw, an historic opportunity to be themselves once again. The Museum is also one of the few public places where the Silesian language is visible. From the depths of its soil, the Silesian people can finally be born again.