

ISSN 1445-1190

# **INTER-CULTURAL STUDIES**

A FORUM ON SOCIAL CHANGE & CULTURAL DIVERSITY



VOLUME 7  
2007

*Inter-Cultural Studies* is published by the  
School of Humanities & Social Science  
University of Newcastle  
Callaghan, 2308  
Australia

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## 4 The Communist ‘Polonia’ Society and Polish Immigrants in Belgium, 1956-90.

Machteld Venken

Substantial research effort has been devoted to various cross-border practices of immigrants, including the correspondence activities with their home countries. However, little attention has been paid to the correspondence that arose in the difficult geopolitical context of the Cold War. In the second half of the twentieth century many Slavic immigrants living in the Atlantic World, for example the approximately 40,000 Polish immigrants in Belgium, could not freely visit or correspond with people from behind the Iron Curtain. Nevertheless, a special Polish organization, the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society, encouraged them to get into contact with their home country by writing letters. ‘*Listy zbliżają ludzi i narody*’, it proclaimed.

The sentence has two possible translations in English: it means either ‘Letters connect people and nations’, or ‘Letters connect people and people’. The double meaning of the Polish word *naród* perfectly indicates how the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society worked. The organization was a political tool set up by the Polish Authorities to counterbalance the paramount anti-communist tendencies in the Atlantic World by means of infiltration and mobilization. The sentence invited Polish immigrants to start correspondence with the Communist nation, the Polish People’s Republic. However, because of the unpopularity of the communist ideology in Western countries, the ‘Polonia’ Society presented itself as a grassroots’ non-governmental organization, organized by people for people. Letters, so says the sentence, are a good way to bring exiles closer to their compatriots at home.

Through an analysis of the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society’s correspondence files with Polish immigrants in Belgium this article questions whether Polish immigrants in their cross-border correspondence with the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society linked home and host country together to a single arena of social action, a practice that has been called transnational at the beginning of the 1990s (Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc-Szanton, 1994, p. 7; Portes, 2003, p. 888). While this concept initially applied to contemporary immigrants’ activities in a global world, many scholars studying past migrations made use of it (Foner, 2000, pp. 169-187; Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 1177). Robert Smith stated that ‘if transnational life existed in the past but was not seen as such, then the transnational lens does the new analytical work of providing a way of seeing what was there that could not be seen before’ (Smith, 2003, p. 725). Using a transnational perspective to analyze the relation of Polish immigrants in Belgium with the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society enables us to assess the intensity and meaning of cross-border correspondence and to research if during communist times something like transnationalism ‘avant la lettre’ existed.

Contrary to the existing research on the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society which predominantly focuses on its role within the Polish Communist Administration, I look at the relationship of the ‘Polonia’ Society with Polish immigrants in Belgium (Cenckiewicz, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; Lencznarowicz, 1996 and 1999, 2001, 2002). I seek to see first

how the political opportunity structure of one host country shaped the options of cross-border practices and wishes also to evaluate the impact of the Communist 'Polonia' Society's strategy on individual lives (Walldinger and Fitzgerald, p. 1180). Among migration scholars recognition grows that both institutional and subjective dimensions influence transnational patterns and identities and that the latter are still underexposed (Levitt, De Wind and Vertovec, 2003, p. 571).

My approach also differs from current research on transnationalism, which often makes a distinction between transnational activities 'from above' (initiated by governments or multinational corporations) and transnational practices 'from below' (coming from individuals). More and more it is stressed that only the latter can be seen as transnational and the former have to be pushed back to the research domain of internationalism and multinationalism (Portes, 2001, pp. 185-187). Nevertheless, the hybrid character of the Communist 'Polonia' Society, that links (albeit camouflaged) governmental with (albeit pretended) non-governmental elements, necessitates researching both transnational activities 'from above' and 'below' (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998). Therefore, I here describe the Communist 'Polonia' Society's mobilization strategies and the reactions of Polish immigrants in Belgium against a chronological background of bilateral relations between the Polish People's Republic and Belgium.

A few years after the tight Stalinist policy had frozen contacts between the 'capitalist' Atlantic World and 'communist' countries from behind the Iron Curtain, a Polish official came up with the idea to re-activate the relations between Polish immigrants and their home country by establishing a civic centre that would meet the need of Polish immigrants to preserve Polish language and culture (Cenckiewicz, 2004b, pp. 118-120; Lencznarowicz, 1996, p. 47). In 1955, the Polish People's Republic obtained the permission of the Communist Authorities in the Soviet Union to open such a centre under the condition that it would copy the structure and objectives of the Soviet 'Motherland' Society (*Rodina*). That organization was set up a little earlier in Moscow to realize a remigration campaign popularizing the Soviet Union among Russian and Ukrainian immigrants in the Atlantic World and persuading them to move back (Cenckiewicz, 2004a, p. 144; 2004b, pp. 122-123).

Although the assigned objective of the remigration campaign conflicted with the initial aim of the Polish civic centre, the newly founded Communist 'Polonia' Society managed to combine both. As a result, its purpose differed from the way it presented itself. The Communist 'Polonia' Society stood under the sharp control of the Polish communist authorities and functioned as a political tool both to convince Polish immigrants to move back and to counterbalance the power of anti-communist Polish immigrants, but it put itself forward as an organization that tried to meet the cultural needs of Polish immigrants in the host country (Cenckiewicz, 2004a, p. 177; 2004b, p. 197; Goddeeris, 2005a, p. 182; Lencznarowicz, 1996, pp. 48, 53-54).

The discrepancy between purpose and presentation was already visible in the Communist 'Polonia' Society's openings manifesto from October 1955:

'We turn to Polish immigrant foundations, organizations and communities which often work under difficult conditions to preserve Polishness to get into contact with us. The results of our work will depend on our shared effort.'

Write to us about your needs and your work; share your worries with us. The 'Polonia' Society will do everything to help you. We are convinced that our co-operation will pay rich rewards, will contribute to build invaluable treasures of Polish culture and will serve the good of our *naród* (nation/people)'(Cenckiewicz, 2004b, p. 193).

The 'Polonia' Society presented letters as a mean to connect people and *naród*; letters could bring Polish immigrants and (what they had to do) the Polish People's Republic or (what the 'Polonia' Society initially wanted to do and how it was presented to Polish immigrants) Polish people closer to each other.

To realize the remigration campaign, the 'Polonia' Society designed a threefold strategy. First, it tried to get into contact with Polish immigrant organizations and asked for their membership lists. Then, it sent Polish immigrants a standard letter with an appealing offer about cultural support that would hopefully lead to a stable correspondence. Only at that stage, the 'Polonia' Society would explicitly invite Polish immigrants to re-emigrate (Cenckiewicz, 2004b, p. 127; Goddeeris, 2005a, p. 255).

In Belgium, the Communist 'Polonia' Society first got into contact with the National Council of Poles, the leading Polish pro-communist immigrant organization, but since the support of communist ideas among Polish immigrants was limited, the National Council only gathered a few Polish immigrants and could not offer the 'Polonia' Society sufficient membership data. The 'Polonia' Society then opened a subsidiary in the Belgian city Liège which, contrary to the 'Polonia' Society's expectations, failed to gain the prospected popularity. In a third phase, the 'Polonia' Society unsuccessfully organized parents' committees at the Polish Consulate's language schools, committees that presented themselves as apolitical in order to attract Polish immigrants who were unwilling to be involved in pro-communist Polish immigrant organizations, but were interested in Polish language courses for their children. The 'Polonia' Society thus failed to receive data sufficient to contact the majority of Polish immigrants in Belgium, due to which the correspondence activities of the 'Polonia' Society with individual Polish immigrants do not give a representative image of this population.

In all, the Communist 'Polonia' Society sent 656 letters to individual Polish immigrants in Belgium during the remigration campaign. A standard letter presented the Communist 'Polonia' Society as an organization that wanted to get in contact with them, that was concerned about their lives in emigration and promoted the bulletin *Nasza Ojczyzna* (Our Homeland) as a mouthpiece for Polish immigrants that could bring them closer to their Homeland - a concept that could refer to both a country (nation) and a community (people). The letter thus contained a camouflaged message aiming to incite reemigration and to weaken the strength of anti-communist feeling among Polish immigrants. The fact that about 60 percent of the letters remained unanswered shows Polish immigrants were not enthusiastic about the Communist 'Polonia' Society and probably knew its presentation differed from its purpose. In the end, the 'Polonia' Society only managed to get into contact with 268 Polish immigrants.

The majority of these correspondents were interested in and subscribed to the bulletin *Nasza Ojczyzna*, but only a few systematically renewed their annual subscription. Most individuals dropped it after a year of two indicating that they did not want to get into

trouble with the Belgian police which considered all sympathies to countries from behind the Iron Curtain suspicious, that the bulletin was too expensive or that there was, contrary to the 'Polonia' Society's presentation of *Nasza Ojczyzna* as the mouthpiece of Polish immigrants, no place for contributions of subscribers. Subscribers must have felt that the bulletin was there for them, but not thanks to them.

Only a few individuals among the 268 correspondents responded to the Communist 'Polonia' Society that they were happy with the letter and were eager to start correspondence. In such cases, the 'Polonia' Society only answered the letters of persons whom it considered to be able to give information about anti-communist tendencies in Belgium. This clearly points to the fact that the main purpose of the Polonia Society was infiltration and mobilization. In other words, the little response on the 'Polonia' Society's standard letter shows that it was not an efficient mean of communication, useful information or influence could not be gained this way.

The letters individual Polish immigrants spontaneously wrote to the 'Polonia' Society with questions or pleas for help, by contrast, were more useful for the 'Polonia' Society. The fact that 41 persons wrote to the 'Polonia' Society after they were referred by the Polish Consulate or they had heard of it within their informal Polish immigrant network, proves that already during the first years of its existence, it was known among Polish immigrants in Belgium (Cenckiewicz, 2005, pp. 267-274).

People asked if family members with whom they had lost contact during World War II were still alive, if they could receive their confiscated property back, sell the house of their birth or obtain a visa. Usually the 'Polonia' Society complied with the requests in the hope to establish a stable co-operation, but in every case, correspondence immediately stopped after the 'Polonia' Society fulfilled the requests or announced their unfeasibility. Moreover, the addressees never answered the additional questions of the 'Polonia' Society about their personal situation or the organizational life of Polish immigrants in Belgium.

The Communist 'Polonia' Society's attitude towards the pleas of material help was even more opportunistic. It did not leave those in need out in the cold, but the way it offered support was clearly inappropriate. The 'Polonia' Society sent food packages which were meant to spread propaganda, but were presented in such a way that the recipients would see them as a sign of the 'Polonia' Society's generosity. A package generally consisted of chocolate with a colorful wrapper presenting the renovated city of Warsaw and cigarettes with a picture of the prestigious Polish Belweder hotel on the box, both symbols of the progress the Polish communist regime embodied (Cenckiewicz, 2004a, p. 180). In Belgium, a chronic and destitute invalid Polish immigrant received a package with Polish ham wrapped in the bulletin *Nasza Ojczyzna*.

The Communist 'Polonia' Society established the best contacts with Polish women who arrived in Belgium in the 1950s after they had married a Polish immigrant. These women had lived in the Polish People's Republic, often felt uncomfortable and lonely in their new environment and wrote nostalgic letters to the 'Polonia' Society in which they described how isolated they felt among the numerous anti-communist Polish immigrants, including their husbands. Since the women were an important source of information, the 'Polonia' Society punctually answered their letters and sent presents like traditional Polish cookbooks and little folklore dolls.

Only a few correspondents wrote about remigration issues. Most of them were members of the pro-communist National Council of Poles who mentioned they heard about remigration possibilities, but did not consider moving back themselves. No more than four individuals expressed their remigration plans in their letters to the 'Polonia' Society. It is remarkable that so little words about repatriation can be found in the correspondence files of the Communist 'Polonia' Society, since an estimated amount of 996 Polish immigrants moved at the end of the 1950s from Belgium to Poland (Cenckiewicz, 2004b, p. 182; 2005, pp. 279-280; Goddeeris, 2005a, p. 190; Lencznarowicz, 2002, p. 536). This indicates that it was not the charm offensive of the Communist 'Polonia' Society, but other reasons that motivated individuals to move back. Among the re-emigrants were a surprisingly high amount of old miners who could receive a higher retirement in the Polish People's Republic.

Not only the Polish immigrants who answered the standard letter and the ones who spontaneously wrote to the 'Polonia' Society, but also pro-communist Polish language teachers stood in contact with the Communist 'Polonia' Society. They received didactic propagandist materials and sent Polish children's homework to the special correction service of the 'Polonia' Society. The correspondence indicates that in the 1950s seven teachers received personal advice from the Communist 'Polonia' Society. It asked a teacher for instance to let the children learn by heart the history of Poland exactly as described in the 'Polonia' Society's handbook, which could help to spread the legitimization of the Polish People's Republic among anti-communist Polish immigrants.

In other words, the strategy of the Communist 'Polonia' Society focused in the first place on infiltration and mobilization and only aimed to start remigration propaganda later, but the lack of interest and the animosity of Polish immigrants in Belgium hindered its realization. The connection between people and nations (or people) therefore remained limited. The Communist 'Polonia' Society could not receive a representative amount of contact data of Polish immigrants, 60 percent of the individuals who received a standard letter did not reply and most of the respondents only subscribed for a short time to the bulletin *Nasza Ojczyzna*. The people the 'Polonia' Society succeeded to get into contact with were mostly no useful informants. The individuals who wrote spontaneously to the 'Polonia' Society for instance predominantly did so for pragmatic reasons. The 'Polonia' Society only established intensive contacts with a few newly arrived Polish immigrant women and members of the umbrella pro-communist Polish immigrant organization, people who already knew the Polish People's Republic and had a negligible influence on the community life of Polish immigrants in Belgium.

By 1960, the Communist 'Polonia' Society's approach toward Polish immigrants became more influenced by the political philosophy of Poland's leader Władysław Gomułka, who had exchanged the harsh Stalinist policy of his predecessor for a more human socialist course a few years before. Instead of sending individual letters with camouflaged remigration propaganda, the Communist 'Polonia' Society now focused on the concerns of Polish immigrants to retain their cultural identity by supporting Polish immigrant organizations and subsidizing summer camps for immigrant children (Lencznarowicz, 1996, p. 58). The fact that these summer camps were an ideal mean to present Polish immigrant children a glorious image of the Polish People's Republic that could help to erode the anti-communist ideas of their parents, demonstrates that if the

Communist 'Polonia' Society's had abandoned the remigration objective, it had not changed its aim to change the anti-communist political opinions of Polish immigrants.

Merely three years later, at the end of 1963, the 'Polonia' Society ceased to finance the Polish Consulate Schools in Belgium. This was only the first sign that the Polish socialist policy with a human face began to harden, because later in the 1960s, Polish Communist Authorities demanded contacts with the Atlantic World be diminished and reoriented. They reduced the Communist 'Polonia' Society's staff by almost two-thirds and asked it to increase its propaganda activities (Lencznarowicz, 2002, p. 177).

In 1966, the 'Polonia' Society held a Millennium campaign that aimed to legitimate the a-religious Polish People's Republic as a natural descendant from the first Polish State established in 966. Since Polish citizens and Polish immigrants linked the beginning of the Polish State with the baptism of the first Polish King Mieszko, it was a difficult task to detach this conceived intertwinement of religion and politics (Cenckiewicz, 2002, p. 180; 2004a, p. 182; Lencznarowicz, 1996, p. 58). In Belgium, exhibitions informed Polish immigrants about their 'Homeland' and balls encouraged those immigrants who did not stand individually or through a Polish immigrant organization in contact with the 'Polonia' Society to make friends with people who already enthusiastically co-operated. Also, newly founded immigrant Millennium Committees collected money for the building up of Polish monuments destroyed during the Second World War (Eder, 1983, pp. 180-181). The success of these actions might suggest the 'Polonia' Society found a more appropriate way to approach Polish immigrants than during the remigration campaign of the end of the 1950s. However, since the Communist 'Polonia' Society corresponded in this period mainly with immigrant organizations, we can only guess how individual immigrants reacted on the 'Polonia' Society's working. It is at least remarkable that individuals who wrote the 'Polonia' Society for a personal favor do not mention the Millennium actions one single time.

Around the same time, the Polish Minister of Internal Affairs together with the Communist 'Polonia' Society started a remigration campaign specifically directed towards Polish ex-combatants (Dudek and Paczkowski, 2005, p. 282). Since re-emigrated ex-combatants who had fought in Western Europe with the Allies had been suspected of betrayal by the Polish State at the beginning of the 1950s, their compatriots living abroad were ardent anti-communists (Mieczkowski, 2004, pp. 186-218; Wróbel, 2005, pp. 185-240). Although the 'Polonia' Society could not convince one single Polish ex-combatant living in Belgium to re-emigrate, it managed to burst through the anti-communist ex-combatant cordon and to start co-operation with two small Polish immigrant ex-combatant organizations (Cenckiewicz, 2005, p. 280). However, for the ex-combatants the material support was probably the incentive to switch political camps, because nowadays they do not see their behavior as an act of betrayal, but one of pure opportunism. The support for ex-combatants was only possible because the Communist 'Polonia' Society cut back on the privileges previously given to loyal pro-communist immigrants. The plaint of a faithful follower suggests they knew the Communist 'Polonia' Society favored contacts with 'anti-communist' Polish immigrants above their loyalty.

At the end of the 1960s, the Communist 'Polonia' Society's contacts with Polish immigrants in the Atlantic World clouded again. The Cold War reached one of its peaks with the six-day's war of 1967 in the Arab countries, anti-Semitic campaigns and repressed

student protests in the Soviet Bloc and the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968 (Lencznarowicz, 2002, p. 173).

In short, at the beginning of the 1960s, the 'Polonia' Society, by addressing the needs of Polish immigrants, implemented a policy that could help break the power of anti-communist tendencies among Polish immigrants. However, its camouflaged aim remained the convergence of Polish immigrants' political opinions with the communist ideas of the Polish People's Republic. Later, the Communist 'Polonia' Society leaned over to its former strategy of propaganda and remigration objectives. But although its campaign at the end of the 1960s was still called a remigration campaign, the aim was infiltration and mobilization. Moreover, the quality of contacts became more important than the quantity. Contacts with Polish ex-combatants were considered more effective to connect people and nation/people than the co-operation with immigrants with communist sympathies.

At the turn of the decade the international détente again facilitated the co-operation between the Atlantic World and countries from behind the Iron Curtain. With Edward Gierek taking over the steer from Władysław Gomułka in 1970, the Polish People's Republic received a First Secretary who had lived himself in emigration and had even been the President of the National Council of Poles in Belgium in 1948 (Goddeeris, 2005a, p. 38). As a result, the policy directed towards Polish immigrants widened. All indications of co-operation with Polish immigrants were now seen as a sign of recognition of the Polish People's Republic (Cenckiewicz, 2005, p. 189; Lencznarowicz, 1996, p. 49).

The Communist 'Polonia' Society picked up the thread, starting at the beginning of the 1960s, by offering support to various Polish immigrant organizations and, additionally, tried to get into contact with Polish immigrant businesspersons and members of the intelligentsia active in economic and scientific fields (Lencznarowicz, 2002, pp. 178-181). These people could help to import knowledge and capital in the Polish People's Republic which lacked the means for innovative research and had problems with importing goods due to a shortage in foreign currencies. Where the interest for ex-combatants at the end of the 1960s was seen as important to reduce anti-communist tendencies among Polish immigrants, the co-operation with businesspeople and intelligentsia had a sole home country-related motivation. The policy of the Communist 'Polonia' Society was now concentrated on getting economic benefits for its own citizens instead of focusing on the political opinions of Polish immigrants.

In order to increase economic contacts with Polish immigrants in Belgium, the 'Polonia' Society intensified its contacts with the Belgian-Polish Friendship Associations gathering respectable Belgian dignitaries and Polish immigrant entrepreneurs. In 1974, it managed to invite a few members to the Polish People's Republic, but their ignorance with regard to the communist ideology made further co-operation impracticable. Only one file in the 'Polonia' Society's correspondence with Polish immigrants from Belgium relates to scientific co-operation. A Sports Professor of Polish decent working at a Belgian university once attended a meeting of Polish immigrant academics in Cracow.

It is remarkable that the Communist 'Polonia' Society's economic and scientific contacts did not amount to much, while its support in the cultural domain paid rich awards. Following the signing of a Cultural Agreement between the Belgian State and the Polish People's Republic in October 1972, efforts were put into setting up a first European Festival for Polish immigrant Folklore bands in Belgium and building a new rehearsal place for an

immigrant folklore band in a mine town (Goddeeris, 2005b, p. 62). Contrary to the former years, the Polish folklore bands' membership grew exponentially and the Communist 'Polonia' Society got into broad and intensive contact with the second and third generation of Polish immigrants (Poolse zang- en dansgroep 'Krakus', 1979).

The Communist 'Polonia' Society had difficulties with understanding why its policy all of the sudden became successful, and came up with an interesting explanation:

'As a result of the national rivalry of Walloons and Flemings and, after World War II, the impetuous inroad of technical civilization that ruined the native folklore, cultural Belgian agents seem to support the development of national cultures of other ethnic groups and favor folklore bands' activities of any kind'.

Neither the first Belgian State Reform in 1970, which gave the two Belgian districts Wallonia and Flanders autonomy in cultural and linguistic policies, nor the economic boom after the World War II, affected so much the rise of folklore bands in Belgium. The explanation of their successes laid more in the spirit of the 1970s. Following the wake of May 1968, folk music, cabaret and the hippie movement found increased support among Belgians. Additionally, the economic crisis increased unemployment and the Belgian government launched a labor immigration stop. Consequently, much more focus was put on the cultural integration of immigrants into the Belgian society, which induced a strengthened discourse of culture in the mine regions and a shift in the immigrants' identification (Beyers, 2007, 129). The reason for Polish immigrants' interest in the Communist 'Polonia' Society lays therefore more in the search for a cultural identifier than in a political preference. Put differently, in the 1970s, some Polish cultural pro-communist immigrant organizations in Belgium became for the first time since the existence of the Communist 'Polonia' Society more popular than the anti-communist ones because the 'Polonia' Society's objectives matched with the opportunity structure of the Belgian society.

However, at the beginning of the 1980s, the success of the Polish immigrant folklore bands quickly decreased because of three reasons. First, following the oppression of the trade union Solidarity, most folklore bands stopped to co-operate with the 'Polonia' Society. Second, since the job opportunities in the isolated mine regions kept on decreasing, Polish immigrants moved away and lost contact with the local community life. And lastly, folklore could no longer attract a broad Belgian public, but became a niche.

The Communist 'Polonia' Society's support of Polish folklore groups in Belgium in the 1970s was remarkably successful. The increased influence of the Communist 'Polonia' Society in the mine regions resulted from a coincidental match between the 'Polonia' Society's objectives and the opportunity structure of the Belgian host country. Polish immigrants co-operated with the 'Polonia' Society because they were in search of a cultural identification (which is a connection of people and people), and not because they supported the communist ideology (which is a connection of people and nations). The Communist 'Polonia' Society was surprised and not fully satisfied with its cultural success among Polish immigrants in Belgium, because it much more wanted to attract businesspeople and intelligentsia in order to import knowledge and capital.

In 1980, the strikes and the foundation of the anti-communist trade union Solidarity caused an increased interest of Western trade unions with Polish immigrant members in the

Polish People's Republic. Initially, the Communist 'Polonia' Society welcomed this interest, because it thought a strong co-operation between Solidarity and Western trade unions with Polish immigrant members could form a counterbalance for the strong hostility of the Polish immigrant Church. It therefore supported the Polish section of the Belgian Christian trade union to function as an information platform of Solidarity's working for all Polish immigrants regardless of their political opinion, thanks to which the section became the biggest Polish immigrant organization gathering almost one tenth of the Polish immigrants in Belgium (Gałazka, 1987, pp. 35-37). It was, after the folklore success in the 1970s, the second time the Communist 'Polonia' Society's working found such a response among Polish immigrants in Belgium.

However, the declaration of Martial Law in December 1981, which deprived Solidarity of its legal status, paralyzed the contacts between the Polish People's Republic and the Atlantic World and shrank the Communist 'Polonia' Society's sphere of action. The 'Polonia' Society could not hinder a network of anti-communist Polish immigrants developed contacts with citizens of the Polish People's Republic. Several immigrant organizations that had never had contact with the Polish state before, now coordinated relief activities on Polish territory and, by doing so, officially showed that visiting the country did no longer also had to mean they accepted the communist regime (Lencznarowicz, 2001, pp. 549-551). At the same time, a new immigrant wave of Polish refugees seeking political asylum arrived in Belgium. These immigrants had often been active in political opposition networks in the Polish People's Republic and became key players in the relief activities. When the cross-border contacts between Polish immigrants in Belgium and Polish citizens were more intense than ever before, the 'Polonia' Society failed to play any role in it. During Martial Law, it even did not receive one single letter from a Polish immigrant in Belgium.

The contacts between Polish immigrants in Belgium and the 'Polonia' Society were only re-established in the second half of the 1980s. The Polish section of the Belgian Christian trade union renewed its correspondence with the 'Polonia' Society, but since it lacked the public support of 1980, the co-operation did not amount to much. In 1987, the Communist 'Polonia' Society started to talk with the Polish immigrant Church, but the time was too short to develop a co-operation since the 'Polonia' Society ceased its activities shortly after the collapse of communism in 1989 (Lencznarowicz, 1996, p. 56-58).

The 'Polonia' Society's activities in the short period between the establishment of the Solidarity trade union and the declaration of Martial law came the closest to the 'people and people' connection which has been called transnationalism in academic literature, but even during this period of time, the purpose of the Communist 'Polonia' Society, which aimed to counterbalance the hostility of the Polish immigrant Church was 'people and nation' connection oriented. After the declaration of Martial Law, all institutions of the Polish People's Republic lost their credibility in the Atlantic World and the reputation of the 'Polonia' Society stood at an all-time low. The relief activities of anti-communist inspired Polish immigrants were the most vivid and prominent transnational connection between 'people and people' during communist times, but the Communist 'Polonia' Society failed to play any role in it.

The Polish People's Republic had a special institution to address itself towards Polish immigrants: The Communist 'Polonia' Society. Subordinated to the Polish

Communist Authorities, it functioned as a tool ‘from above’ to increase the regime’s influence among Polish immigrants and to counterbalance anti-communist tendencies; it meant to connect people and nation. Towards Polish immigrants, however, it put itself forward as a civic, non-governmental organization ‘from below’ that was concerned about their fates and wanted to help them solve their problems; it pretended to connect people and people. Letters seemed an excellent mean to do so.

Since Polish immigrants in Belgium clearly saw through the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society’s policy, the correspondence service of the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society was never an effective mean to connect people and nations. It could, however, only sometimes and not on the most important moment in the mid 1980s, connect people and people. We can therefore say that Polish ‘transnationalism *avant la lettre*’ existed, but had a specific context and was very limited. The individual letters the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society sent to Polish immigrants during the remigration campaign in the 1950s did not yield any success since the ‘Polonia’ Society only managed to establish intense contacts with people who shared its political opinions and hence already believed in a connection of people and nation. Individuals who spontaneously sent mail to the ‘Polonia’ Society did so for opportunistic short-term ‘connecting people and people’ purposes and did not endorse the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society’s working.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society listened to Polish immigrant organizations expressing the needs of Polish immigrants in their letters, but answered their cultural ‘connecting people and people’ requests with ‘connecting people and nation’ practices like subsidized summer camps. When the communist policy in the Polish People’s Republic hardened again, the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society’s preference for a ‘people and nation’ connection received an additional feature. The fact that it preferred ties with Polish ex-combatants above the ones with loyal Polish immigrants, because that could increase its influence in a strong anti-communist segment of Polish immigrant networking, indicates the ‘Polonia’ Society considered the quality of contacts to be more important than their quantity.

Although the results of this strategy remained marginal, the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society also in the 1970s specifically searched for co-operation possibilities with Polish immigrant business people and intelligentsia. However, it became successful through its support of folklore initiatives because Polish immigrants in Belgium were in search of a cultural identification, which is a connecting people and people motivation.

In 1980, the Communist ‘Polonia’ Society initially managed to build up a ‘people and people connection’ through its co-operation with trade union affiliates. However, after the declaration of Martial Law, it lost all credibility in the Atlantic World and could only passively stand by when an alternative network of anti-communist Polish immigrant organizations set up the biggest connection between Polish citizens and Polish immigrants during the era of the Cold War. The Communist ‘Polonia’ Society was finally dissolved shortly after the collapse of communism.

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