

Old Cantionals

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"In days of old, song was a person's friend, accompanying him in joy and sorrow," reminisced Jan Tacina, folk historian from Cieszyn Silesia, back in the 1970s. Yet even today there remain some individuals who hold the old Silesian singing traditions dear

I began my research among members of the Evangelical-Augsburg Church living in Cieszyn Silesia in 2006. This region remains Poland's largest cluster of Lutheran communities, despite what sociologists have described as a blurring of religious identities in the 1980s caused by population migrations. My research project (carried out between 2006–2008) coincided with a crucial moment for Poland's Evangelical-Augsburg Church, which had just completed a repertoire reform endorsed by the publication of a new *Evangelical Hymnbook*. Used since 2002 in the Evangelical-Augsburg Church and the Evangelical Reformed Church in Poland, as well as the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in the Czech Republic, this new hymnbook reflects the dynamic transformations of these groups' musical tastes and needs.

Song-filled lives

The aim of the project was to record the older traditional religious repertoire taught in the family home and still remembered by the performers from their childhoods. Interviews and recordings were carried out in the towns of Wisła, Ustroń, Golezów, Cisownica and Istebna, with Evangelical protestants born before or just after the war (between 1926–1940). Interviews were mostly carried out in small groups, in the performers' family homes. In Wisła, where Evangelical traditions are particularly well nurtured, we also recorded four local vocal groups (known as Czernianie, Stejzibianki, Uścieńkowanie, and Wańcy).

The majority of performers come from homes where religious song played an important part in everyday life, as well as during religious festivals. The day would

begin with solemn song and end with sung prayer before setting down for the night. The interviewees recalled that these religious folksongs accompanied their parents and grandparents throughout their daily routines, while they were sweeping, preparing breakfast, or tending household animals.

They frequently described customs such as religious services held at home on Sundays when it was impossible to attend church, and solemn celebrations of the Christmas Eve supper accompanied by now near-forgotten Advent and table songs, nowadays almost replaced by popular Polish carols. The performers, who once carried such functions as that of a funeral "*śpiewok*" or "*czytok*" – Silesian dialect for people who sung and prayed over the deceased – told of old customs of holding vigils at home.

For the majority of performers, making the recordings was like taking a journey back in time. Performing songs from an old, now unused cantional by Jerzy Heczko, they relived memories and pictures from the past – of once close people now long gone, or of momentous events from their lives such as weddings or confirmations. Even though they were drawing upon this

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Our project recorded groups of singers who perform religious as well as regional songs in the town of Wisła. Pictured: the vocal group Stejzibianki, dressed in contemporarily reconstructed shepherdess' attire

hymnbook for the first time in fifty years, they retained an excellent understanding of its content, and served as invaluable guides through Silesian tradition.

Ancient hymns

The religious repertoire of Evangelical protestants from Cieszyn Silesia stands out with its relatively long lineage of texts and melodies, and has a mixture of Polish, Czech and German influences. The hymns were popularized through the first cantionals published here: one in Czech, by Jerzy Trzanowski (*Cithara Sanctorum*, I ed. 1636), and one in Polish, composed by Jerzy Heczko (*Kancjonał, czyli śpiewnik dla chrześcijan ewangelickich - Cantional, or a songbook for Evangelical Christians* - I ed. 1865). Some of the hymns became mainstream thanks to their inclusion in the *Śpiewnik Kościoła Ewangelicko-Augsburskiego w PRL* (*Songbook of the Evangelical-Augsburg Church in the People's Republic of Poland* - I ed. 1956) and later in the *Śpiewnik Ewangelicki* (*Evangelical Songbook* - I ed. 2002). However, a significant number of the hymns have been slowly eliminated from liturgy, either because of their archaic lyrics or on account of austere melodies, ill suited to today's tastes.

Noteworthy among the oldest recorded songs are the Christmas hymns, dating back to the Middle Ages and noted in almost all Old Polish cantionals. They are of an even rhythm and are accompanied by dignified choral melodies using church scales. Many of the melodies that go with texts for morning and evening songs, on the other hand, have their origins in folk music. They were rarely sung in church, so they have many variants (with embellished melodies or rhythmical changes usually incorporating syncopes and dance rhythms).

Recorded for posterity

The folk style of Lutheran performance chorales in Cieszyn Silesia has until now not been closely studied - a bitter gap in our knowledge, especially given the rich research traditions of Scandinavian and Baltic countries (in particular Estonia and Lithuania). The traditional household performances of Evangelical hymns were rarely recorded. Part of this project's recorded material has been published as a double album to help popularize old hymns and showcase their neglected beauty. The oldest songs that document tradition going back several hundred years were strongly highlighted. The two CDs feature two types of songs that pervaded the lives of Evangelical protestants from Cieszyn Silesia. The first includes the repertoire for the most important Church festivities, from Advent to Pentecost (including Christmastime table songs unique to this region), with the addition of single pieces for the Harvest Festival, Reformation Day, and anniversaries of church conse-

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Cieszyn Silesia is a cultural borderland. Protestant cantionals published in the region have reflected three intertwining traditions: Czech, German, and Polish

crations. The second CD includes songs that represent personal experiences of faith, including morning and evening songs, and those performed during weddings and funerals.

All in all the album represents the outcome of authentic documentary work, presenting singing that is both spontaneous and natural, not preceded by much rehearsal or corrected to achieve a better sound. Entitled "*Pieśniczki z kancenola*" (Silesian dialect for religious songs), the two-CD set has received critical acclaim and was awarded 1st prize in a competition for the best album of authentic folk music organized by Polish Radio's Center of Folk Culture. ■

Further reading:

Pieśniczki z kancenola - pieśni religijne ewangelików ze Śląska Cieszyńskiego [*Pieśniczki z kancenola*] - the religious songs of Lutherans from Cieszyn Silesia], published by the Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, 2008; recording, selection and compilation by Arleta Nawrocka-Wysocka (funded in 2005-2008 as research project no. 1H01E01529 on *Religious repertoire of Lutheran communities in Poland*).