

# PRESERVE FROM OBLIVION - POLISH CULTURAL HERITAGE AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN THE SOCIAL SPACE OF THE POLES IN PIEDMONT

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage of any nation will affect both the supporting national identity, as well as creates collective memory, is shaping it, enriches and makes the material expression. A good example of activity in the field of the protection of the Polish heritage, based on the social, organizational and institutional cooperation is a Polish enclave in Piedmont. There, many of the events recorded in the pages of the history of the two Nations were played. At present, for many Poles in Piedmont in exile a bond with the country of origin is a crucial element of their life. It is expressed in promoting the activities of Polish heritage. It has two main strands. The first is to support Polish customs and traditions associated with the celebration of Polish holidays formula - Christmas and Easter. There are parties for children and youth with Polish-Italian and Italian, organized by members of the Italian-Polish organizations Comunità Polacca di Torino. This is associated with the care of the maintenance of the Polish language among children and young people from mixed families. The second stream of dissemination of Polish heritage in Piedmont is a project of national historical dimension. Honoring the memory of the events of Polish history officially became possible from the period of political transformation in Poland and the socio-political changes in the international arena. Thanks to the cooperation with the city and the region and the Polish diplomatic posts in Italy it is possible to organize a number of important events.

## KEYWORDS:

Polish heritage; Piedmont; national identity;

Cultural heritage of each nation contributes to maintaining national identity; it also creates collective memory, shapes and enriches it, and makes it likely to be expressed in material and immaterial ways. The notion itself is very broad and covers more and more categories of phenomena. Traditionally understood cultural heritage comprises of everything which is passed from generation to generation: from items and material relics to rituals, beliefs, traditions, clothes, songs, and collective social mentality. It is more difficult to define the components of immaterial cultural heritage, usually transmitted via tradition and oral transfer than of tangible heritage (movable and immovable relics). Under the *Convention* adopted by UNESCO on 17 October 2003 in Paris, the intangible heritage means: “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces (...) transmitted from generation to generation (...) created by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.”<sup>1</sup>

The intangible cultural heritage, often quite fragile and ephemeral, significantly affects the formation of identity of all social groups and individuals. It is the case of societies living within a given territory surrounded by state borders, in the frontier areas, as well as emigrant communities living outside their motherland. This kind of heritage contributes to inter-cultural dialogue, diligence, and respect to different traditions, behaviour, and socio-cultural practices. In the case of emigrant communities, the protection of such heritage is the *sine qua non* condition of its survival with all its wealth and diversity. It is particularly important now, in the face of growing globalisation, touching more and more fields of social life.

In order for the taken actions to be effective it is necessary to diversify between the approach to the material and immaterial heritage. While the former is more visible, tangible, sometimes spectacular, in the case of the latter there is much diversity in its understanding and treatment. Financial means, laws and legal acts enabling proper preservation and sustainability of relics, sites, and natural spaces play a different role in this case. The most important issue in the protection of immaterial heritage is to record it, preserve it, and pass it to the subsequent generations. Both individuals and various social groups are not formally and informally ordained to transmit the

<sup>1</sup> Poland signed this *Convention* on 11 August 2011.

knowledge of the nation's history and show its role and significance. Such actions aim at maintaining the constant protection of the memory of the given cultural heritage in time. For this reason, specific action should be undertaken in order to identify and define the immaterial cultural heritage in any given area and in the framework of any given social group.

The protection of the Polish cultural heritage should be an important part of the modern social and institutional activities, and not just within the state borders and in frontier areas. In the territory of a foreign country inhabited by some enclave, such activities are even more significant, as they encounter more formal difficulties. The very sense of identity with their own nation in a community living outside the motherland is hardly ever enough to provide such protection. Without any financial and institutional aid from the country of origin and without the support of local authorities and social acceptance in the country of residence, it is difficult to launch initiatives to maintain the Polish cultural heritage. In the times of a global economic crisis, we may notice the decreasing interest in its protection of both (or perhaps first and foremost) domestic and foreign institutional structures. In such cases, any and all activity of the members of the local Polish community inhabiting the given area plays a crucial role in maintaining the memory of the past. Very much depends on the numerical size of the enclave, since it is individuals who are usually involved in this process.

The Polish enclave in Piedmont can serve as a good example of activities for the protection of the Polish cultural heritage based on institutional, organisational, and social cooperation. This north-western corner of Italy was the scene of many events described in the history of both nations. The most significant were all the actions for independence undertaken by the Poles, beginning with the Polish Legions formed under General Jan Henryk Dąbrowski in the end of the 13th century. The Legions were formed in the neighbouring Lombardy, yet the heroism, bravery, high morale of the soldiers, and common civic and patriotic education made them famous and became the example to follow for the subsequent generations. Polish legionnaires fought on the foreign soil for the independence of their homeland following the motto embroidered on their epaulettes: *gli uomini liberi sono fratelli* (free men are brothers). Several decades later, in the Spring of Nations period, Polish legionnaires from the formation founded by Adam Mickiewicz in Rome in March 1848 were stationed in the Piedmont area (including Turin, Novara, Vercelli). The negotiations on the legal status and role of the Legion were held in Turin. These events did not leave any permanent traces visible today. We can only find on the pages of common history some signals

telling us that a positive opinion on both Polish leaders and legionnaires registered in the memories of both the Italian and Piedmont societies of the time.<sup>2</sup>

The present-day Polish enclave in Piedmont is mostly gathered in Turin. They are people living and working there for several decades. The study carried out in 2012-2014 showed that an important factor for many of them is the bond with the country of origin expressed through involvement in various activities for the popularisation of the Polish cultural heritage. There are two basic trends in these activities to be distinguished.

Among the Poles living in Piedmont, the fundamental aim in the protection of the original heritage is to maintain the Polish traditions, customs, and rites. It is most visible in the form in which the holidays are celebrated – Christmas and Easter in particular. The conducted research showed that the overwhelming majority of Polish-Italian families (involving Polish women) cultivate Polish customs and rites to a greater or lesser extent. Such behaviour not only serves to protect the memory of Polish traditions but also contribute to the transmission to the next generation of many outstanding values of the Polish heritage different from the domestic (Italian) ones, upbringing in the respect for cultural, linguistic, and mental differences.

The yearly organisation of occasional holiday events for children and youth from Polish-Italian and Italian families has become a fixed event in the agenda of the largest Polish diaspora organisation in Piedmont, the Polish Community in Turin (*Comunità Polacca*) as well as other Italian-Polish organisations. The traditional “Mikołajki” (St Nicholas’ Day) and “Zajaczek” (Easter Bunny) are highly popular and bring together throngs of younger and older compatriots and Italians who sympathise with Poland and Poles. Dressing the Christmas tree, preparing the Christmas decorations and presents, singing of Polish carols, and tasting of dishes bring a lot of joy and remind of the wealth of Polish Christmas traditions. In the time before Easter, there are workshops for the little ones in the painting of Easter eggs and making Easter floral decorations. In the carnival season, the Polish Community in Turing holds a yearly ball with a guiding motto. The chief part of the event is the solemn dancing of a polonaise to the music of Polish composers, with an arranged choreography and specific figures stressing the character of the dance. Moreover, as part of their cultural activities, many Polish diaspora organisations in Piedmont celebrate such events as the Mother’s Day, Grandma’s

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<sup>2</sup> The extant correspondence between the command, Mickiewicz, and legionnaires is a good source of knowledge about the life of the legion, places, people, moods, concerns, and mutual relations. Cf. *Listy legionistów Adama Mickiewicza z lat 1848-1849* [Letters of Adam Mickiewicz’s legionnaires 1848-1849], ed. by H. Lutzowa, Warszawa-Wrocław-Kraków 1963.

Day and Grandpa's day, the First Day of Spring with the drowning of Marzanna, and the St John's Eve. The Polish details characteristic of the given event are stressed every time. Children and youth with their caregivers eagerly participate in the preparations and performance. It is worth stressing that students of Slavic studies from Turin join some of the events organised by the Polish Community.

Each year, between October and November, many Poles affiliated with Italian-Polish organisations devote their time to cleaning the Polish grave in the municipal cemeteries of the region. It is a very significant gesture, especially when the deceased has no relatives left. The care of such individual Polish cemeteries is not limited to a single activity on the occasion of the All Souls' Day but is performed systematically several times in the year. Among other things, it stresses the sense of a peculiar unity and responsibility for the compatriots buried in foreign ground. It also shows the continuity of the Polish presence in the Piedmont space not only through the participation of known personalities in historical events but also through the life of individual people who found their places in this part of Italy.

An important segment of activities cultivating Polish traditions and customs is the care taken to maintain a good knowledge of Polish among the children and youth from mixed families. In many such families, the Polish parent communicates with the children in her/his native tongue. There are children and young people, however, who did not learn Polish at home. For them, there is an opportunity to learn informally<sup>3</sup> and take part in Polish courses held by qualified personnel (experts in Polish, humanists, lecturers from the University of Turin), usually members of Italian-Polish organisations. By learning the language, young people also become acquainted with the rudiments of Polish history and geography, as well as the most significant examples of Polish literature. Many participants of these courses, having completed the normal Italian education, take the opportunity to pass a certified (and state) exam in Polish. The examination can be taken at certain institutions in Poland or at specific facilities in Italy specified by the Polish Ministry of National Education (e.g., the Polish School in Rome and consulting points at the Polish diplomatic missions). Sometimes the knowledge of the difficult Polish languages turns out to be a valuable skill, useful in finding interesting offers on the Italian job market (translations, international communities, or running a business).

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<sup>3</sup> For years there has been no consulting point overseen by the Polish Ministry of National Education in the Piedmont area.

National-historical ventures are a different form of propagating the Polish historical heritage in the Piedmont area. Cultivating the memory of events from Polish history has been officially allowed since the beginning of system transformations in Poland and socio-political international transformations. It is worth stressing that some activities restoring the memory of events of the World War I period were carried out systematically many years ago thanks to the involvement of the Piedmont authorities, local community, and the few Poles who lived in this region of Italy at the time.

The result of the present-day activity of the Polish enclave in Turin include, above all, the initiatives undertaken as part of the activities of the Polish Community in Turin, now the oldest Italian-Polish organisation in the Italian Peninsula. The Community cooperates with Polish diplomatic missions accredited in the Republic of Italy, such as the honorary consulate in Turin, Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Milan, or the Embassy in Rome. A very important part of the activities of the "Piedmont Poles" in the field of preservation of the memory of the Polish cultural heritage in Piedmont is the many years-long cooperation with the local authorities and self-government organisations. Both the authorities of Turin, the region, and individual communes usually provide every assistance in the organisation of various events related to Poland or the Polish-Italian history, particularly in their respective territories.

One of the regular events in the agenda of common activities are the yearly festivities accompanying the celebration of the Polish Independence Day (11 November). They are meant to regularly recall the memory of events from almost 100 years ago. It is hardly common knowledge that, during the late World War I, a camp for the Polish soldiers-prisoners of war from the Austro-Hungarian army was set up in the small town of La Mandria di Chivasso near Turin. In 1918, thanks to the common effort of the representatives of the Polish National Committee (Konstanty Skirmunt, Maciej Lorey, Jan Zamorski) and Polish Military Mission (Fr Leon Radziwił, Capt. Marian Dienstl-Dąbrowa, and others), and with the permission of the Italian government (Minister of Foreign Affairs Sidney Sonnino), it was possible to move from the prisoner-of-war camps scattered throughout Italy and gather in one place thousands of Polish POWs (December 1918-June 1919). The chief aims of such an activity was to create better hygienic conditions and to train soldiers and form regular units, which could then be transported to France, to the new Polish army being formed there under General Józef Haller.<sup>4</sup> From this large number of Polish soldiers, several

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<sup>4</sup> The so-called Blue Army. From roughly 22 thousand volunteers, five infantry regiments were formed, two artillery regiments, two cavalry units, a group of pioneers, two storm units, a medical and a supply unit, a unit of military police, invalids, and a general staff company. T. Krząstek, A. Zak, *Z ziemi włoskiej do Polski. W 200 rocznicę powstania Legionów Polskich i Mazurka Dąbrowskiego* [From the Italian land to Poland], Warszawa 1997, p. 146.

hundred died of exhaustion and various diseases. They are buried in the Piedmont cemeteries in Turin, Chivasso, Ivrea, and Vinovo.

The unusual sympathy and friendship between members of both nations, coined in the times of General Jan Henryk Dąbrowski and Adam Mickiewicz translated many decades later into a very cordial attitude of the Piedmont society towards the Polish POWs/soldiers from the camp at La Mandria di Chivasso. To a large extent, these feelings were the chief carrier of the memory of the events in that area during World War I and later. The enormous assistance received from the secretary of the Turin Committee *Pro Polonia* of the time, an Italian-born Polonophile Attilio Begey, had already cleared the path (by the end of the 19th century) for the activities which brought about many common ventures decades later.

Nowadays, thanks to the cooperation of many Poles living in Piedmont, people of Piedmont, and local and regional authorities, it is possible to regularly organise activities to commemorate the events from almost a century ago. They not only serve to pay homage to our compatriots but, above all, contribute to the formal refreshment of the memory of the Polish part in the creation of history in the Piedmont land. The most important component of the Italian-Polish collaboration in this field is the yearly celebration of anniversaries at the cemeteries where the Polish soldiers from the La Mandria di Chivasso camp lay buried. It is also significant that they did not die in battle but from diseases and exhaustion. For this reason, they were not buried in military cemeteries but civilian ones instead, and their resting places are not protected by specific institutions or organisations established for it. The care of the graves in urban cemeteries is given by members of the Polish community, living mostly in Turin, Ivrea, and Chivasso, and by the Italians to whom the memory of the events from long ago was passed by the previous generations.

In the consciousness of many contemporary Poles living in Piedmont for years, the participation in such events is not only a patriotic obligation. Rather, it flows from the sense of affiliation with the Polish nation and the conviction that it is necessary to sustain this memory for the subsequent generations of both Poles and Italians. The activities of many of them and their cooperation with individual governmental, regional, and local institutions led to the placement of commemorative plaques in the burial places of Polish soldiers. The yearly celebrations commemorating the Polish presence in the Piedmont area and their contribution to the local culture are distinguished by the presence of the representatives of regional, local, and Polish authorities, many members of local organisations, and inhabitants of nearby towns and villages. Many years ago these celebrations were put for good in the agendas of activities of the local

authorities and organisations for whom, in the times of growing cultural globalisation, it is important to invoke the memory of both separate and shared historical events.

Each time the celebrations begin with laying commemorative wreaths at the small cemetery in La Mandria di Chivasso, where a POW camp for Polish soldiers operated from December 1918 to June 1919. It is there that the first twenty soldiers were buried, who died in the camp at the turn of 1919. To honour them, before they finally left the Italian soil, Polish soldiers set two commemorative plaques at the entrance gate to the cemetery on 4 July 1919. The inscription on the plaque on the right pillar of the gate says: *In questo cimitero riposano in pace i seguenti soldati polacchi: ... / alla loro memoria! Nel maggio dell'anno del Signore 1919/ i venti polacchi qui sepolti furono esumati nei giorni 7 e 8 marzo 1934/e, racchiuse le ossa di ciascuno in venti urne, furono/uniti agli altri compatrioti, già' sepolti in Chivasso, nella tomba-monumento/appositamente preparata in quel Camposanto*(Here in this cemetery the following Polish soldiers rest in peace: ... /Hail to their memory! In May 1919 AD/twenty Poles buried here were exhumed on 7-6 March 1934/their bones were placed in 20 urns/[and] buried besides their compatriots buried in Chivasso in the tomb-monument/specially created in that holy place.) Below there is information that the plaque was renovated in 1996 thanks to *L'Associazione Culturale Storico-Artistica „La Mandria Monumentale”* (History-and-Art Cultural Association „La Mandria Monumentale”) and the support of the *Istituto Bancario di San Paolo* (Bank Institute of St Paul of Turin). On the left pillar, a cross-shaped plaque was placed, on which the names and dates of death of the 20 Polish soldiers who lay in this cemetery for 15 years were written. It is telling that out of many plaques with the names of Polish soldiers lying in cemeteries in Piedmont, this is the only one prepared according to the grammar and spelling norms of Polish.

Soon, due to the increasing mortality among the Poles in the camp, a decision was made to bury further deceased in the municipal cemetery in the town of Chivasso (about 10 km from the La Mandria di Chivasso camp). On 15 June 1934, a plaque was placed there to commemorate the 118 Poles buried there.<sup>5</sup> The inscription on the plaque says: *L'Italia/nel culto dei morti vincitori e vinti/ha qui raccolto/i resti di 118 prigionieri polacchi/vegliandoli in nome della Patria lontana* (Italy/in honour of the dead victors and vanquished/buried the remains of 118 Polish POWs here/taking care of them in lieu of their distant homeland). The ceremony of setting the plaque was accompanied by representatives of both Italian and Polish authorities: Baron Moro, the mayor of Chivasso, Deputy Wiktor Gosiewski, Polish Embassy advisor Tadeusz Romere, advisor Mieczysław Grabiński from the Combatants Office at the Polish Ministry of Foreign

<sup>5</sup> In the same year, the remains of 20 Poles from the first cemetery in La Mandria di Chivasso were transferred to a common quarter at the *Cimitero Comunale* in Chivasso.

Affairs, Prof. Arturo Bersano from the Institute of Polish Culture “Attilio Begey” at the University of Turin. Moreover, the celebration was attended by the inhabitants of the town and its vicinity. Many of them still remembered the Polish soldiers from the La Mandria camp. It was moving when, after the celebration, a woman from Chivasso addressed the Polish representation saying that Poles did not have to worry because the inhabitants would always remember the Polish soldiers and, visiting their dead at the cemetery, they would also care for the Polish graves. Time showed they have never reneged on this promise.<sup>6</sup>

For the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War I, the authorities and inhabitants of Chivasso honoured the presence of the Polish soldiers in their land by setting a commemorative plaque on the wall by the main entrance to the town hall. The ceremony took place on 17 March 1979 and since then, every year in November, a “Pro memoria” celebration is held there, accompanied by the representatives of Polish and Italian authorities, members of Italian-Polish organisations from Turin and Chivasso, and the town folk.<sup>7</sup>

Similar celebrations are held in Ivrea (about 50 km north from Turin). The celebrations of events from long ago at municipal cemeteries and cyclical accompanying events facilitate the recalling of the memory of the Polish soldiers buried in the Piedmont soil. The speeches of the representatives of Polish, regional, and municipal authorities remind the Poles and the inhabitants of Ivrea present at the events about the historical facts associated with the Polish presence in that area and underline the significance of transferring the memory of the events from 100 years ago to subsequent generations.

In 1923, thanks to the involvement of Attilio Begey, an advocate from Turin and honorary consul of the Republic of Poland in Turin (1922-1928) and of the local authorities of Ivrea, a conference was organised where Begey presented the first source documents regarding the Polish soldiers buried in the communal cemetery. Thanks to his support and the cooperation of the authorities of both countries, a monument commemorating the Polish soldiers was erected in 1925 in the quarters

<sup>6</sup> The list of the names of Polish soldiers buried in the cemeteries in Piedmont can be found in: L. Henczel-Wróblewska, *Polacy w kulturze Piedmontu w XIX wieku i w pierwszych dekadach XX wieku* [Poles in the culture of Piedmont in the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century], Poznań 2014, p. 241-255.

<sup>7</sup> During the visit of Pope John Paul II in this town in 1988, a short prayer was also scheduled at the tomb of the Polish soldiers. The great importance to the Poles of the Polish units formed in La Mandria di Chivasso can be demonstrated by the fact that, during the celebrations of the 200th anniversary of the Polish national anthem (in Reggio Emilia), the official Polish delegation including representatives of the Parliament, Government, and armed forces asked that a visit to La Mandria should be included in the schedule of their Italian Visit to allow them to honour the memory of the Polish soldiers of World War I; *I Chivassesi caduti e dispersi nella Grande Guerra (1915-1918). Militari italiani ed ex prigionieri di guerra Austro-Ungarici deceduti a Chivasso*, ed. by P. Nolli, Chivasso 2002, p. 361.

where they were buried. The following notable words by Begey were written on the plaque: *Lontani dalla Patria/quando Iddio ne spezzava le caten/morirono sospirandola e benedicendola* (Far from the Motherland/when God was breaking its bonds/they died sighing to it and praising it). Today, there is no trace of the original quarters, monument, or plaque. After several decades the buried were exhumed, and their cremated ashes were put in individual cells under the columbarium, by one of the main alleys of the cemetery. Their names, written according to Italian phonetics, with the word “soldier” and a date of death are written on plaques. Seven Polish soldiers of Mosaic faith who died at the hospital in Ivrea were buried in the Jewish quarters of the same cemetery. Currently, the matzevah with their names is the sole burial monument devoted to the Polish soldiers who died in 1919 preserved in its original condition.<sup>8</sup> The inscription on the plaque says: *La grande guerra vi dinsgiunse dai vostri cari/La pietà dei vostri cor-religionali/vi ricorda in terra consacrata/Ivrea 1919*. (The great war separated you from your relatives/the Piety of your fellow worshippers shall preserve your memory/in this hallowed ground. Ivrea 1919).

The ceremonial unveiling of the commemorative plaque on the columbarium wall took place on 6 November 2010. Representatives of Polish authorities were present, as well as town’s hosts, representatives of Polish and Italian clergy, members of the Polish Community in Turin, the local Italian-Polish organisation, and the inhabitants of the town. The Polish community in Ivrea gives much care to preserve the memory of the sojourn of the Polish soldiers in Piedmont among the local society.<sup>9</sup> The bilingual inscription on the aforementioned plaque reads: *DA PRIGIONIERI A UOMINI LIBERI/Ai duecento soldati dell’Armata Polacca/Costituitasi nel 1918 alla Mandria di Chivasso/Lembo dell’ospitale terra Italiano/Che qui riposato accanto ai soldati italiani/Caduti nella prima guerra mondiale 1915-1918/I CONNAZIONALI CONSACRANO QUESTA LAPIDE IN LORO ONORE* (FROM IMPRISONMENT TO FREEDOM/ In honour of two hundred soldiers of the Polish army/formed in 1918 in Mandria di Chivasso/in the hospitable Italian land/lying here buried amidst the Italian soldiers/victims of World War I 1915-1918/THEIR COMPATRIOTS DEVOTE THIS PLAQUE TO THEIR MEMORY/IVREA A.D. 2010). Although

<sup>8</sup> They were, in the order on the matzevah: Bisaga Giuliano (Julian), Szow Israel, Babiaz Walenty, Akerbak Gew, Katz David, Hanz Zygniud (Zygmunt), and Friedrick Mendel. L. Henczel-Wróblewska, *Polacy w kulturze Piedmontu w XIX wieku i w pierwszych dekadach XX wieku* [Poles in the culture of Piedmont in the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century], Poznań 2014, p. 189.

<sup>9</sup> The most distinguished person for maintaining the memory of the presence of the Polish soldiers of World War I in Ivrea is Zenon Skurzak, who has lived in the town for several decades. His active collaboration with the local authorities and the members of the Polish Community in Turin enabled carrying out the activities associated with the renovation of the burial place of the Polish soldiers and commemoration of the events from long ago by the placement of the commemorative plaque.

the plaque mentions 200 Polish soldiers, the actual number according to the names on the burial plaques in the columbarium and in the Jewish quarters gives the total of 187 people. Still, oral statements from inhabitants of Ivrea suggest that some cells may contain the remains of two or even more soldiers of unknown names. It is likely to have resulted from the situation which occurred during the exhumation and transfer of the remains to a new location. The whole operation was carried out in a hurry, without following the appropriate procedure or the sequence of actions associated with organisation of remains. An additional difficulty resulted from the lack of proper identification and proper record of Polish names according to the soldiers' documents.

The Cimitero Monumentale in Turin is the place of burial of 138 soldiers. The remains of those who died in the hospitals of Turin were placed in individual cells in one of the walls encircling the cemetery. Their memory is evoked every year during the event celebrated in the presence of Polish and Italian authorities, members of the Polish Community in Turin, and other interested parties: Poles and Italians. Not earlier than several years ago, on 30 October 2012, the plaque was unveiled, commemorating the Polish soldiers who died during World War I and were buried at that cemetery. The inscription on the plaque says: *In memoria/dei 138 soldati /dell'armata polacca in Italia/(1918-1919)/sepolti in questo cimitero/accanto ai combattenti/dell'armata austro-ungarica/i connazionali posero/AD 2012* (To the memory/of 138 soldiers/of the Polish Army in Italy/(1918-1919) buried in this cemetery/among the soldiers/of the Austro-Hungarian army./The plaque was set by their compatriots/ AD 2012).

Polish traces of the past can also be found in several small towns and villages in Piedmont. In Carmagnola (about 30 km south from Turin), there was a small camp located. The POWs came mainly from Czechia, Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, Bosnia, and other Balkan countries. There were also a few Poles. The POWs were used in gardening work, and many of them could gain professional competence as carpenters in winter. A plaque was mounted on the wall of the local Benedictine monastery in 1998, which commemorated 8 soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian army who died at the local hospital during the Spanish flu pandemic. Next to the names of four Hungarians and two Austrians, there are also the names of two Poles (Starzec Michał and Komor Jan). Their remains were most likely transferred to a common grave at the local cemetery some years later. At the communal cemetery in Vinovo, there is a tomb where three Poles who died of flu during World War I are buried. The headstone bears no inscription, yet the information on the event has been passed for generations by the inhabitants of the town, who take the everyday care of the grave.

The analysis of the data of the soldiers buried in the Polish quarters of Piedmont cemeteries shows that the majority of them came from Galicia. Nonetheless, the extant information on their places of birth reveals that a large number of them hailed from the Czechia, Moravia, Hungary, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Bosnia. For example, Czechia (Ulrick Heinrich, Zipser Karol), Moravia (Labiak Antoni, Lesiak Maciej); Bucovina (Michalczuk Wasyl); Hungary (Rega Ilko, Albrecht Georg, Barbely Sandor, Horvath Ianos, Schwartz Marton, Simon Josef, Zsoka Istvan, Nikolay Magir, Babi Anton, Callea Gomes, Kowalczuk Ilko, Samuch Miklos); Ukraine (Berebcz Stefan, Derych Wasyl, Kondaszko Ivan, Krasilowicz Ivan, Krasnopelski Ivan, Sachnik Michail, Skoropad Wasyl, Cap Dymitr, Kadus Ivan, Keczo Dymitr, Stasik Ivan, Kruba Dymitr); Bosnia (Hahn Miklos); Slovenia (Horvath Myo, Slavic Petar)<sup>10</sup>.

They fought hand in hand wearing the Austro-Hungarian army uniforms in World War I, went through its combat trail, were placed in the same camp for Polish prisoners-of-war, and co-created the basis of the Polish army. Many of them stayed in the Piedmont land forever. Even though they came from various parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of the time, all of them (more than 450 men) are buried together in the Polish quarters of the Piedmont cemeteries.

In the Piedmont area, there have been many plaques unveiled in the recent years to commemorate the heroic struggle of Poles for the independence of their motherland, in line with the 19th-century motto: "For Your and Our freedom". Today, these sites are present in the consciousness of the "Piedmont Poles". By the co-hosting an participation in anniversary celebrations, they cultivate the memory of past events, which they strive to propagate among the Italian society. Such efforts also provoke further searching for the meeting points in the histories of both nations and to pass the memory of the common heritage to the young generation.

After World War II and demobilisation, a small group of Polish combatants from the Polish II Corps commanded by General Władysław Anders found their way to Turin. Many of them studied at the Turin Polytechnic and became co-founders of the Polish Community (1949). For many years they took efforts to commemorate the presence in Italy of Polish soldiers of World War II. On 24 November 2007, one of the squares in Turin was named Piazza Polonia, and a monument devoted to the soldiers

<sup>10</sup> L. Henczel-Wróblewska, *Polacy w kulturze Piemontu w XIX wieku i w pierwszych dekadach XX wieku* [Poles in the culture of Piedmont in the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century], Poznań 2014, p. 241-255.

of General Anders was erected in the city's central square. It is yet another site on the map of yearly celebrations linked to the Polish Independence Day. Until recently, the combatants of the Polish II Corps used to meet there. Now, their descendants do.

Some other events should be added to the list of the yearly celebrations mentioned above. They may not be as spectacular or gather as many participants but they attest to the Polish presence in Piedmont in the past centuries.

In Cuneo (about 80 km south from Turin), the Polish Military School operated for a few months in 1861-1862. In March 2012, on the 150th anniversary of the event, a commemorative plaque was set on the wall of the former church of St Francis where the school resided. The participants included representatives of the Polish diplomatic corps, town and regional authorities, inhabitants, and representatives of Polish diaspora in Piedmont. The history of the school was recalled, the context in which it was abolished after a few months' operation (an absolute condition set by Russia for the recognition of the united Italian state), and its role and significance for Poles and the society of Piedmont. The reconstruction of the history of the school was made possible by the source materials and the local press, preserved in the Historical Archive of Cuneo. They show the kindness and respect, as well as long-lasting memory of the Polish cadets and lecturers of the school even at the beginning of the 20th century. The information passed from generation to generation survived in human memory until today and still gathers many nearby inhabitants on the occasion of anniversary celebrations.

Apart of commemorative plaques devoted to historical events which took place in the Piedmont area, invoking some traces of the "individual" Polish presence has proven successful during the recent years. In May 2014, the re-setting of the commemorative plaque for the Polish General Aleksander Isenschmidt-Milbitz was celebrated. He fought in the units of General Giuseppe Garibaldi at Velletri and in the defence of Rome in 1849, was promoted to the rank of Major-General of the Italian Army and received many medals for his merits in the field of battle. In 1871 he moved to Turin, where he died in 1883. Five years later, a commemorative plaque was set on the house where he lived on the initiative of his brothers-in-arms. So far, it is the only trace of this kind in Turin devoted to a Pole. In June 2012, on the initiative of the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Poland in Turin and with the collaboration of representatives of Polish diplomacy and local authorities, a commemorative plaque was funded in San Remo on the house where Józef Ignacy Kraszewski lived in 1885-1887.

The activities of the “Piedmont Poles” and some Polish diaspora institutions aimed at the commemoration of historical events in the Piedmont area include, among other things, the organisation of occasional and anniversary exhibitions (e.g., *Da prigionieri a uomini liberi. La formazione dell’Armata polacca al campo della Mandria di Chivasso/ From prisoners-of-war to free people. The formation of the Polish army in the camp of La Mandria di Chivasso*, Nichelino 2008; on the 150th anniversary of the Unification of Italy – *Per la nostra e la vostra libertà. I polacchi nel Risorgimento Italiano/For your and our freedom. The participation of Poles in the Italian Risorgimento*, Turin 2011), concerts, films, and performances involving Polish artists and performers. Moreover, thematic conferences, seminars, and meetings are organised, which supplement our knowledge so-far about the Polish-Italian history of Piedmont. The one-time and cyclical events gather each time not only the representatives of Polish and Italian authorities, people of science, artists, but above all the “Piedmont Poles” and Italians-sympathisers of the Polish culture. During the celebrations of events both the Polish and Italian national anthems are played (sometimes the European one too), and bilingual speeches are given.<sup>11</sup>

The above examples are indicative of multi-lateral activities carried out by the Poles living in Piedmont, mostly the members of Italian-Polish organisations. With the cooperation of the local authorities and representatives of Polish diplomats, Polish and Italian institutions, and individuals, they try to resurrect the memory of the Polish presence in the Piedmont land in many places in the region. They invoke from the past the events and names which had entered the common history of both nations. They stress the role and significance of this presence both then and in the consciousness of their contemporaries. On the one hand, such activities facilitate the preservation from oblivion of important components of the Polish heritage in its historical dimension. On the other, they attest to the will of ongoing cultivation by the present-day Poles of the memory of the Polish presence in Piedmont in the past centuries, and passing

<sup>11</sup> The importance of the yearly November celebrations in Turin as well as of Christmas and Easter holidays is also stressed by the common participation in the commemorative service, usually celebrated by the pastoral guardian of the Polish community in Italy. The solemn mass is offered at the Cappella Pinardi in the Salesian Complex in the Valdocco quarter in Turin.

this memory to subsequent generations. Instilling the care for the maintenance and preservation of the Polish national heritage is a fundamental factor in all the activities of the Polish diaspora organisations and the Poles who live in the Piedmont enclave.

TRANSLATION: Andrzej PIETKIEWICZ

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