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Summary of a doctoral thesis *Everyday and festive life of working-class environment of Nowa Huta in the years 1949-1989. A sociohistorical perspective.*

The decision of the communist authorities in post-war Poland to build a metallurgical plant at the gates of Cracow was a turning point not only in the history of the city but also in the lives of the thousands of its contemporary and future inhabitants. It is difficult to exaggerate the diverse effects – which reverberate until this day – of a project, carried out under the post-war policy of strenuous industrialisation, to build a steel plant together with a city for a hundred thousand physical workers. Being the quintessence of the Stalinisation process forced onto Poland, the process of creating ‘a new city’, which started in 1949, was equivalent to initiating the shaping of ‘a new man’. In this unprecedented sociological experiment, carried out in a span of forty years of the existence of Nowa Huta, from 1949 to 1989, the participation of the society in the building (and then dismantling) of a communist utopia was expressed to the fullest on a national scale.

The idea to create a city in which the utopian ideology and omnipresent propaganda were to shape the entirety of the everyday and festive life of workers and to influence their behaviour, attitudes and mentality was confronted with a reality which the state was able to offer to the citizens in a country struggling to recover from the damage of the Second World War. At the gigantic construction site, many of those who came here forced by their life circumstances – which was a common cause in the overpopulated rural areas of southern Poland – experienced a fundamental transformation of their world views. The fact of receiving relatively fair remuneration for work as well as the awareness of building flats ‘for themselves’ allowed these people to survive the difficult period of living in crowded barracks or workers' hostels. The obtainment of professional knowledge and, equally important, experience allowed the newcomers to look into the future with hope.

Communists based the strength of the regime on a dichotomy, on specifying two separate value systems, two mutually exclusive visions of reality. This is what led to the co-existence of two simultaneous and related processes in Nowa Huta, stretched over two axes: ‘youthfulness’ – ‘oldness’ and ‘urbanity’ – ‘rurality’. The contradictions resulting from both these processes determined the further fate of the district, since what seemed to be the strength of the communist rule – building their power based on creating social divides – proved to be an insufficient tactic after some years, and a tactic that turned against those in power.

Settling in the apartment blocks of Nowa Huta, the newcomers usually did not grasp the essence of the conflict of the two versions of reality presented to them. From each of them, they took what they could comprehend and was in line with their understanding of the world, their beliefs and value systems. They eagerly accepted the benefits coming from the sense of social and cultural advancement, at the same time dissenting against the marginalisation of the Catholic Church, rejecting the foreign origin of the communist political system, which, in itself, remained strange and unfamiliar. Nonetheless, the political and economic circumstances (the appropriation of the entire public sphere by the communist party) made the reality 'inevitable', resistant to change, and one that forced adaptation. It was only after the political changes in the wake of the Polish October that resulted in some loosening of the Stalinist rules of functioning in the society.

In a hostile reality, a strong sense of work ethos of physical, industrial workers formed. Joint work, along with sharing similar worries and problems, became, next to religion, factors which consolidated the community of Nowa Huta. Simultaneously, the city's society was becoming more and more heterogeneous, becoming a cultural melting pot: an almost exclusively working-class society was gradually transforming into a diverse conglomerate of people of all trades and professions. The former countryside dwellers, now added fresh energy to Cracow, at the same time not negating their working-class identity.

In the sequence of mental transformations of the city dwellers, the 1970s played a key role. Edward Gierek's first stint in office, creating a vision of an egalitarian state and a mass social advancement, quite quickly turned out to diverge from everyday reality. Over time, after a few years of a relatively good economic climate, the workers of Nowa Huta were brutally disillusioned when they saw that their expectations were not met and that the social advancement preached by the propaganda was a mere pipe dream. As time went by, this made Nowa Huta a significant centre of social resistance. The emergence of a democratic opposition sped up the tendency to abandon the affiliation between the working class and the institutions of the state, which were allegedly meant to express the will of workers.

In Nowa Huta, the numerous postulates against the ruling authorities were fully formulated in August 1980, during a critical moment in the many years' process of mental transformation. On the one hand, Nowa Huta activists and supporters of 'Solidarity' acted in the spirit of self-restriction of the trade union movement; on the other hand, the workers' opposition against the dictatorship, officially exercised on their behalf, unfolded with immense strength in Nowa Huta. The atomised community, patched together from newcomers from all over the country, proved to be able to undertake joint actions for its own sake. Shaped by the

authorities, the big-city working class did not want to be satisfied with mere declarations of their 'advancing role' propagated by the government. The time in which these slogans were made real by the stakeholders themselves was a unique period of social history.

The disaster of martial law did not stop the mental breakthrough. Although treated as an attempt to deprive the society of all perspectives, the military rule also triggered positive strategies of social activity. The multi-threaded sphere of social self-defence gave hope. It allowed surviving the time, which continued well into the second half of the 1980s, of worsening conditions in terms of finances and quality of living in the Cracow urban centre (ecological disaster). Eventually, the construction of an 'ideal socialist city', which engaged hundreds of thousands of people, ended with a spectacular fall of the ideology which had been forced on Poles, as a result of which the residents of Nowa Huta, like the rest of the Polish society, had to undertake the difficult attempt to 'switch' or even 'leap' to the reality of liberal democracy, previously unknown to them.