The history of transgender activism in Poland

Introduction

This paper is an addition to my lecture during the “History of Rainbow” conference, an event entirely devoted to the history of LGBTQ\textsuperscript{1} movement in Poland. Discussion held during the panel had been a great help in ordering all the information I collected and also helped in entrenching history of transgender\textsuperscript{2} movement in the actual Polish history, not just as a group of unknown and therefore useless dates. Some unofficial conversations, after the panel discussion finished the process and this text was ready to be written. My concept was to not only include activity in aid for transgender people, but also the history of changes in the Polish law, which put the transgender movement wheels in motion.

Here’s a brief introduction to the structure of this paper.

It starts with a little history. 1989\textsuperscript{3} from the transgender activity perspective. Did it really have any effect at all? After that I will characterize all the LGBT organizations helping transgender people (most of them are interested in supporting transsexuals only) and the pure transgender ones. I will also briefly describe the Internet environment, as it is very important for this movement, and – last but not least – a few known and media-active people.

Maybe some of my readers will think that this work is dominated by the Trans-Fuzja Foundation activity characterization, however, in this case I feel my actions are justified since Trans-Fuzja is de facto an unique organization. It is the first and only organization supporting every single transgender person, not only transsexuals (like Stowarzyszenie Pomocy Transseksualistom – Transsexual Help Association used to work).

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\textsuperscript{1}This short name is often used in different forms. Recently Polish press (especially on the Internet) started using at last the easiest of them – LGBT – although it’s still quite common to find the term “gay” (in Polish it refers only to gay men, not all homosexuals), which does not exactly describe the activity of these organizations. Personally, I like to treat the movement as a whole and that is why I usually use a sort of construct, which loses the shortage but gains meaning – LGBTQIAO(H). However, I do not intend to use it in this work.

\textsuperscript{2}The original Polish term used, transpłciowość, is a newly translated form, which was thought as something competitive to the English transgender term and is frequently used by the Trans-Fuzja Foundation. Transpłciowość is an umbrella term for transsexuals, transvestites and transgender people (bigenderists, agenderists and others)

\textsuperscript{3}This is a very important date in modern Polish history, it marks the beginning of democracy after more than 50 years of communism/socialism.
I. In search of a beginning

During the panel discussion most of the participants agreed that the history of Polish LGBT activism begins in 1989. Political transformation enabled creating all NGOs possible and because of that there were quite a few LGB organizations born. But there were no transgender associations. Why?

Legal “sex change”\(^4\) is possible on the ground of order of the Supreme Court (02/25/1978), which makes it legal to change the birth certificate after fulfilling respective conditions. In 1989 Supreme Court found that gender is a private good and therefore should be protected. It was also confirmed in 1995, when the Court decided that parents of complainant (or a guardian if the parents are not present) should be the defendants.\(^5\) Moreover, transsexual surgeries (all of them, not only the final one) were refunded by the National Health Care Program.

The above informations show that soon after the political transformation there was no actual need for organizations that would fight for transsexual rights. Only self-help groups were emerging, usually under the patronage of one of the LGBT association (additional information may be found below).

Transvestites support activities were not yet possible, since back then sexulogists claimed that transvestitism was a perversion. Today, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) separates dual-role transvestism, which is defined as “wearing of clothes of the opposite sex for part of the individual's existence in order to enjoy the temporary experience of membership of the opposite sex, but without any desire for a more permanent sex change or associated surgical reassignment”\(^6\), from fetishistic transvestism, defined as “wearing of clothes of the opposite sex principally to obtain sexual excitement and to create the appearance of a person of the opposite sex “\(^7\).

Transgenderism, as a form of transpłciowość\(^8\), is new to Polish sexuologists and sometimes even rejected because of its range. Transgender people can be bigendered (the feel as both

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\(^4\)We are used to refer to this name as “the so-called-sex-change”, because it does not entirely illustrate all the trouble transsexual people are going trough. Genital surgery is viewed as the final stage of the “sex change process”, even though the whole “transition process” is a total of many stages (like “legal change”). The final operation is only a correction (that is why in English we have the term reassignment), because a transsexual person just customizes their physical appearance to their mind. It's the environment that interprets transsexual therapy as a “Change” (I'm using the capital C because of high social emotions that accompany the transition process).

\(^5\)Legal informations can be found at www.transeksualizm.pl (Polish only).

\(^6\)Part of definition from the International Classification of Diseases. A copy can be found at: http://www.who.int/classifications/apps/icd/icd10online/

\(^7\)Ibidem.

\(^8\)See annotation 2.
genders at the same time), agendered (no gender at all) or any possible aberrance from gender dy-
chotomy. Transgenderism is also understood as a desire to correct some of the physical features
without going through sex reassignment surgery.

Were exactly should the beginning of transgender activism be situated then?

It seems that another 12 years had to pass. In 2001 a very important website was found,
transseksualizm.republika.pl, now known as transseksualizm.pl. It is by far the biggest transsexual
data base made by transsexual people. In the same year, on the 21st May, Alicja Strzelecka and Da-
niel Bąk founded Stowarzyszenie Pomocy Transseksualistom (STP – The Transsexual Help Associ-
ation), which was active for the next four years.

In 2007, after almost two years of no movement in the NGO community, a group of friends
from Wrocław (along with a local branch of Kampania Przeciw Homofobii, Campaign Against
Homophobia, KPH) started a few “genderly equivocal” events. An idea for a new organization was
born. A year later, on January the 28th, The Foundation Supporting Transgendered People Trans-
Fuzja was founded.

II. A minority inside a minority

Contrary to general opinion that LGBT organizations do nothing to help the transgender
community, among numerous initiatives aimed to the homosexual and bisexual community we can
find some concentrated on strictly transgender problems.

II.1. Self-help groups for transgender people organized by LGBT associations

The first self-help meeting was organized in 2003 by Lambda Szczecin association. During
the first two years the meetings (held once a fortnight) were for transsexual people only, after that
the group opened itself for all transender individuals. The activity of this initiative focused on con-
versations and experiences exchange, meetings with families, preparing academic materials, coop-
eration with university lecturers, reaching out to catholic theologians and spreading transgender
awareness in society. Unfortunately, in 2006 Lambda Szczecin stopped all initiatives. However,
word is that a reactivation is planned, which may also means the return of self-help meetings.

In 2005 two groups were founded in Kraków (by the local KPH branch) and in Warsaw
(Lambda Warszawa association)

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9All the informations on self-help meetings (excluding those in Lambda Warsaw) come from the transseksualizm.pl
archive which can be found thanks to archive.org – http://web.archive.org/web/20061120084534/www.transseksualizm.pl/spotkania.html (Polish only).
First of them, aimed to Trans Gender\textsuperscript{10} individuals, had the following goals: building a positive identity of TG people, sharing information on associations, publishing houses, doctors and institutions interested in sexuality, spreading social awareness in the subject of gender identity, organizing conferences, fighting intolerance, helping transgender people contacting professional doctors and also organizing parties and cultural events. Just like Lambda Szczecin, KPH Kraków stopped all initiatives in 2006. It has been reactivated recently, but meetings for transgender people did not return.

Founded by Lambda Warszawa in the same year (and still working) self-help group holds experience exchanging meetings for transsexuals and their partners or family. Starting from 2009, Trans-Fuzja began cooperating with the group. Our transgender self-help group was divided into three different meetings – for transsexuals, transvestites and partners of transgender people.

II.2. Other LGBT organizations' initiatives

I wanted to present four most important, in my opinion, organizations that support transgender people in one way or another. By “supporting” I mean organizing a variety of events, that is why the list consists not only of professional help, but also of organizing parties and other informal meetings.

Lambda Association and Campaign Against Homophobia offer psychological and legal help, they manage small libraries where it is possible to find transgender related materials, both of them also have a help line (but only in Lambda it is possible to talk to a transsexual person). Trans-genders are also welcome to join their youth and students groups.\textsuperscript{11}

Centra Foundation (UFA) organizes transgender themed movie screenings, parties, events and all sorts of meetings meant to spread awareness of this phenomenon. Additionally, it has shared its headquarters with Trans-Fuzja numerous times, until 2009 transgender self-help meetings were held there.

Nothing The Same Scholar Group (Koło Naukowe Nic Tak Samo) from the University of Wrocław has helped organizing events in Wrocław, where STP and TF started their initiatives.

III. Transgender organizations

There were only two organizations of that kind – Transsexual Help Association (Stowarzyszenie Pomoc Transseksualistom) which is not active anymore, probably because it concentrated

\textsuperscript{10}Original spelling.

\textsuperscript{11}More on other helpful activity can be found in the section about Trans-Fuzja.
on transsexuals only – it was impossible to find people not scared of coming out to the public. Trans-Fuzja founders pondered this problem and as a result (but it was not the only reason) they created an organization helping all people threatened by discrimination because of their gender identity.

III.1. Transsexual Help Association – Stowarzyszenie Pomocy Transseksualistom (STP)

Founded by Alicja Strzelecka and Daniel Bąk in Wrocław on the 21st of May 2001, its goals consisted of: helping transsexual people by contacting them with people with similar problems, informing and spreading informations on transsexualism (including treatment possibilities, medical and legal contacts). They were realized by: meetings organizing, supporting social LGBT initiatives (e.g. bill on partner relationships by prof. Maria Szyszkowska, signing the open letter in re of preamble to the European Constitution), publications (e.g. „Zrozumieć płeć. Studia interdyscyplinarne” – “Understanding gender. Interdisciplinary studies”), supporting transsexual people, psychological help, meetings, gender-centered workshops regarding masculinity and femininity, organizing lectures on the subject of gender identity and also uploading academic materials on their website.

During their four year activity (last updates on the website come from February 2004, but it is known that the association stayed active until next year) STP had carried out some interesting academic projects such as: organizing The All-Polish Interdisciplinary Conference “Understanding gender” and “Transsexualism in Poland” seminary, preparing masculinity and femininity workshops for a conference titled “Mistaken gender” – “Pomyłona płeć” and taking part in Lower Silesian Initiatives in Aid of Women Forum, which was held on March the 8th 2003 in Wrocław.

Additionally, a wide bibliography was put on the organization's website. It consisted of femininity, masculinity, sexuality, homosexuality, transsexualism themes and some articles on psychology and sexology, from which the most interesting one is a translation of Nancy R. Nangeneroni’s (International Foundation for Gender Education) article titled “Transgenderism”, which was an introduction to transpłciowość and separated sex from gender. Additionally Łukasz Bardeli up-

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12This is only a rumor (confirmed by a short note in transseksualizm.pl archive), there are no official STP statements available that would prove this thesis.


loaded an article “Transsexualism and law”\footnote{http://web.archive.org/web/20030804062410/transseks.republika.pl/informacje.htm – Polish only.} which presented legal aspects of sex reassignment in Poland.

**III.2. The Foundation Supporting Transgendered People Trans-Fuzja (TF)**

Trans-Fuzja owes its name to a series of events organized in Wrocław with the help of Antyfacet\footnote{Antiguy, see http://www.antyfacet.com.pl/ for more details, Polish only.} and activists from KPH Wrocław. In June of 2007 the initiative's website was started and a year later, in January, the founders meeting was held. Some of them were from Wrocław and some from Warsaw, that is why it was decided that there was going to be a Warsaw branch. Today the foundation's headquarters is in Warsaw. TF is active in the capital, Wrocław, Katowice and is preparing to start its activity in Gdańsk.

Trans-Fuzja's goals are as follows:

- taking the discussion on transsexual, transgender, bisexual and homosexual issues to the public and increase it's social representation,
- forming tolerant stances and fighting prejudice and stereotypes of transsexual, transgender, bisexual and homosexual people,
- forming positive identity of transsexual, transgender, bisexual and homosexual people,
- lifting all the laws in Poland that discriminate against sexual orientation and gender identity, according to the orders of the European Union and introduce new legal regulations on the situation of transsexual and transgender people,
- introducing regulations on legal same sex partnerships to Polish legislation,
- fighting discrimination of transsexual, transgender, bisexual and homosexual people and fighting all symptoms of transphobia and homophobia in society,
- promoting awareness of sexual orientations and gender identities also by publishing, cultural activities, sport and recreation, academic social and humanities studies,
- putting the antitransphobic and antihomophobic discourse to the public, which is fragile to excluding and stigmatization,
- prohealth activity, including spreading the awareness on diseases and therapy related to gender identity, preventing addictions,
- human rights actions and spreading the awareness in this subject,
- promoting equal chances politics, including fighting unemployment, social integration, fighting for women rights, developing career education,
- organizing psychological help for people threatened by discrimination,
- organizing legal help for people threatened by discrimination,
- building an open society and supporting democratic ideas,
- forming a standard therapy for transsexuals and situation of different gender identity.

Achieving that detailed aims requires widely spread actions, that us why our foundation tries to be present in every part of modern life. Using Internet (most of transgender people in Poland still choose virtual space as a possibility to pursue themselves, anonymity has a key role here) Trans-Fuzja reaches a lot of people thanks to our web calendar of transgender events, we also upload articles, academic materials (Polish and translated) and comments to political decisions, we also monitor the media, which is a process of collecting, verifying and commenting the materials. Besides Internet, Trans-Fuzja establishes contacts with international organizations of a similar profile (ILGA-Europe, TGEU) and stays active in three Polish cities. In Warsaw with the transsexual self-help group (thanks to cooperation with Lambda Warszawa Association), self-help group for partners of transgender people (a.b.), movie screening with discussion (thanks to KPH), all kinds of cultural events, parties and demonstrations (e.g. International Transgender Dat of remembrance March). In Wroclaw the initiatives concentrate on demonstrations, meetings, workshops, cooperation with Scholar Group Nothing The Same self-help groups. In Katowice a self-help group for all transgender people is active.

Trans-Fuzja's board consists of transgender people (our president Anna Grodzka has come out as a transwoman not long ago in a LGBT magazine “Replika”), but not only them, we cooperate on democratic rules of equality. We are still gaining new volunteers, which is why it became possible to create a student-youth group, which will surely assemble some fine young people ready to do something for the cause.

IV. The Internet

Thanks to the anonymity it provides, the Internet seems to be the safest space for a transgender person. And that how it really is. It is a lot easier to contact someone and confess by virtual net, than meet in person. There is no doubt about it – transgender movement in Poland would had no chances in coming into being if it was not for the Internet. Below you will find a few websites important for Poles that are transgender themed.

1. **Transseksualizm.pl**
- Consists of detailed data on transsexual therapy, it also has a discussion board

2. **Crossdressing.pl**
   - A web portal for MTF transvestites, its discussion board is very active

3. **Transgenderyzm.pun.pl**
   - A discussion board for all transgender people

4. **Miedzyplciowosc.go.pl**
   - A web portal for everyone, who feels gender different, it is especially useful to all people uncertain of their gender identity

V. **Famous characters**

Although most of Polish transgender people choose a life of secrecy, a few characters are known country wide, thanks to the media. Here are the ones worth naming:

- **Rafalala** – known to most Poles as “lady with a penis” (she calls herself that way), an artists, active with the theater.
- **Antyfacet** – sworn enemy of male gender, a men rights fighter who wishes that someday there will be no prejudice against men dressed in women's clothes, a political activist who specializes in demonstrations
- **Anna Grodzka** – president of the Trans-Fuzja foundation, an outspoken transwoman, who is not afraid of spreading the awareness of transgender issues.

VI. **Conclusions**

The transgender movement in Poland is still developing, but it has a great potential. During the preparations of this paper, I did not know that I was going to work on such a rich material. And although its size made it difficult to write about all the transgender issues and sometimes I had an impression that it is impossible to organize all the gathered information, I am happy, I am really happy for this magnitude.

Transsexual autobiographies so far published in Poland („Byłam mężczyzną” / “I was a man” by Ada Strzelec and „Aleksandra Zamojska jest mężczyzną” / “Aleksandra Zamojska is a man” by Daniel Zamojski) had done a lot for the situation of transgender people in Poland. They outlined the problem, hinted the existence. Thanks to these publications (they have a higher value for an average reader than professional, medical study) society became sensitive to the transsexual problem. In 2007 another published literary work (this time it was a compilation) titled “Namaluj
"mi wiatr" / “Paint me the Wind” had the same impact for the transvestitism case. It has done a major step in the social feelings for this phenomenon. I do hope that transgenderism will has its day. And by transgenderism I mean transpłciowość.

It is important to achieve a state of social awareness where the transgender movement would not have to fight for or prove anything to anyone and just help those, who still have trouble finding their place in gender dichotomy.

These are, however, pipe dreams for now. We have a long way ahead of us.

VII. Postscriptum

One of our online reader's added a little information to my lecture. She informed about "Los" Association - an organization founded in 1998 - which helped "persons with gender distortions". She also informed that there were two additional webpages, which I did not mention: Transportal and trans.org.pl¹⁸.

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