



Guebwiller
March 2009



134317-LLP-1-2007-1-DE-COMENIUS-CMP

Conference

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme



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The Pole as cultural emancipation agents in the potassic basin in Upper Alsace

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

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The potassic basin of Upper-Alsace constitutes the last Alsatian country, funded at the beginning of the 20th century.

It is not typical for this region (Alsace) often only seen as in Hansi's engravings (it is too often forgotten that Alsace has been and still is one of the most industrial areas of France).

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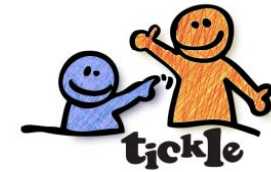
**This country has no physical unity:
the Nonnenbruch forest lies
next to the Ochsenfeld dry prairie
and the green lands along of the river Ill.**

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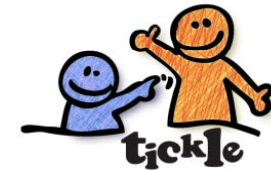
At first sight it has not more human unity: some villages like Richwiller, Kingersheim, Wittenheim are more seen as suburbs of Mulhouse, others, like Ruelisheim, Pulversheim, Ungersheim, Staffelfelden are really villages and Ensisheim, the old capital of the previous Alsace of the Habsburgs is nowadays a county town.

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But, beyond these differences a profound unity exists, a cultural unity on which we will come back.

For the moment we will content ourselves with an anthropological definition which presents four levels:

- **The level of the sensitive: clothing, house fitting, kitchen, odours (as Jacques Chirac did notice once!), etc.**

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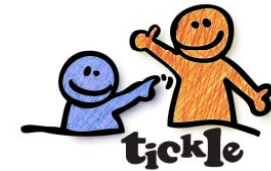
- **The level of the structure of the family: nuclear or enlarged family, existence or not of a family council, place of women, etc.**
- **The level of the codes: etiquette, politeness and membership rites.**
- **The level of the values and the representations of the world: forms of art expression, perception of the world.**

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There exists a cultural community in the bygone Alsatian villages.

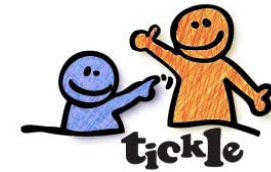
This country draws its unity from son its activity: it is a mining basin, that means a professional territory, but also – we will point it out – a political territory. The mining wells were sunk in a mostly underprivileged area, far away from Mulhouse, the big industrial town.

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**This little country of 200 km²
(25 km from North to South
and 15 km from East to West)
has experienced in 1919
the double shock of modernity,
the return to France
and the industrialisation.**

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I. THE SHOCK OF MODERNITY IN THE POTASSIC BASIN

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**I will not do the exegesis of modernity.
I will only remind you that to be able to
define the question that this concept
which does not belong to anybody can be
simply defined as a mode of civilisation,
which is opposed to the mode of
tradition.**

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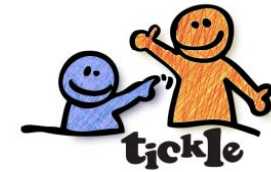
**If we consider only the major lines
modernity and individualism are the main
characteristics. They are opposed to
community and abstract power coming
from the capacity as French citizen and
from the bureaucratic links of society.**

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Innovation and mass men phenomenon (the horizon is not any more the one of the single village) is opposed to the attachment to his village of birth, to the small homeland (*die Heimat*).

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1. Communautarism (community withdrawal) of the traditional society

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I will start by saying it in a provocative way in nowadays background: we had (and still have?) a religious communitarism in Alsace (and in Baden, our German neighbour)... and some people are even missing it.

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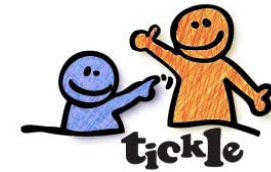
**The small villages in the potassic basin
(and more generally in Alsace)
live withdrawn, and build a community
which is very close.
But is this unity always wanted?
by all the members?**

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The omnipresence and the omnipotence (supremacy) of the traditional executives of the rural world is exerted on this community, mainly that of the Catholic priest (or the Protestant pastor).

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These behave not only like notables who they are by mean of knowledge, money, way of live, relations, but also as potentates because they do possess the means to influence, to impose, to exclude in this closed and rooted society.

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The life of the farmer is regulated by the fieldwork, by the religious celebrations and by the leisure activities initiated by the parish, the cultural society, the *Bangala* (parish house) where are practised music, choral singing, theatre and gymnastics.

This social organisation is so well integrated in the minds of the villagers that the resistance is poor, mainly non-existent.

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The pregnancy of the priest is very strong, the religious practices are very regular and very important (they are about 90 % based on the reports of the pastoral visits.

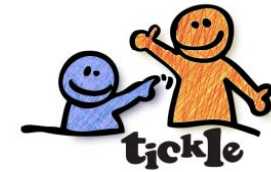
Furthermore, the exclusive use of the dialect as the language of sermon and religious instruction at school (opposed to French which appears as the language of non religious people) heightens this supremacy.

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What I have just grossly outlined is the definition of communautarism, that is a community where everyone's free will and freedom are denied for the benefit of sentences coming from the head of this community (priest or pastor) who has to tell what everybody has to think, do... and vote!...

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He is also throwing anathema on some jobs such as the industrial employment.



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2. The shock of industrialisation

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The exploitation of potassium hydroxide, which is accompanied after the small economic crisis in 1921 by a run for productivity, leads to a total transformation of the landscape. Up to 1919 Germany was the only producing country in the world. France starts an economic war of which potassium hydroxide constitutes only one aspect.

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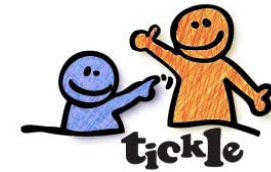
France wants to make profit of its victory (“the Boche has to pay”), France is conscious to fight against Germany’s economical and commercial imperialism, also to weaken and to build on the benefits of the markets of the winning countries.

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Growing up from nothing France wants to take control of one third of the world market.

The industry has to produce more and more. But this battle of production happens in a double context:

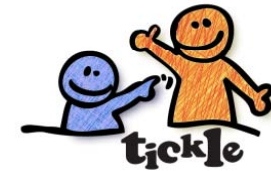
- **On one side we have a shortage of local, regional and national working forces;**

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- On the other a social structure, which matches with a very distinct spatial and cultural gap between the rural economy of the potassic basin and the industrial centre, Mulhouse, administered by social democrats.

The little farmer despises the workman, the *Fabriker* who does not possess land and who can not buy any.

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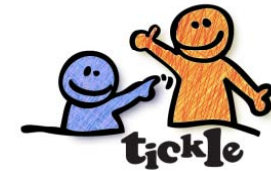
The land represents a sign of distinctness where as working in a factory is considered as lowering. The dialect renders a good account of the difference. The verb *arbeiten* gives a good meaning of the work of a workman where as for the work of a farmer the verb *schaffa* (*schaffen* in German) is used.

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Going to work in a mine is considered as demeaning for an Alsatian, he was only doing it to be able to lay money away to buy some land. The priest (or the pastor) makes everything to keep under his control anyone who could be tempted by industrial work.

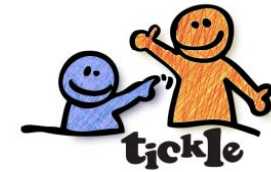
The businesses had to appeal to immigrants because they did quickly reach the limits of recruitment.

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3. The shock of immigration

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The arriving of foreigners was a new trauma for this closed and withdrawn society.

Alsace was not discovering them in 1919, but hitherto they were confined in towns, such as Mulhouse and Cernay and in some big farms (where Pole could be found before World War I), but not in these villages and so many of them.

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**This immigration
is predominantly Polish
(80% of all the foreigners),
starts in the potassic basin in 1923,
takes mostly place in 1924,
and goes on till the middle
of the year 1930.**

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These immigrants are recruited in their homeland by the Société Générale d'Immigration (SGI), an unidentified society whom the French government did entrust the recruitment, who fulfils the orders of the businesses and sends this workforce by train through Europe.

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**It is a legal immigration,
wanted by the country**
(France has signed
an immigration agreement with Poland
as early as 1919 September 3rd).
**Pole are therefore coming fitted with
a working contract for one year.**
**The Alsatian villagers are having a very
negative picture of these immigrants.**

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- **Up to 1926 immigration is mostly male and worrying because these lonely men have no ties, no stability, are under no control and do not respect the underlying social rules.
So this fear emerges, fear that still shows through nowadays: these young people do not have any morality and, what is even worse, they will take our daughters and wives.**

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- **When immigration becomes one of whole families it becomes also visible. The Pole have another sociability: they like to laugh, to celebrate, they clothe differently on workdays and Sundays. The Alsatian look at them (from far away) with envy... “Who do they think they are?” whereas they are poor, even destitute, often illiterate like those coming from the old Russian part.**

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- **The Pole are more free in their private life because they escape the control of the priest.**

The structure of their family is different: women have a higher position than the Alsatian women do, they are more independent.

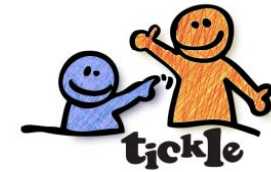
Are these people respectable, do they have an ounce of morality?

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II. THE ALSATIAN – POLE – FRENCH TRINOMIAL

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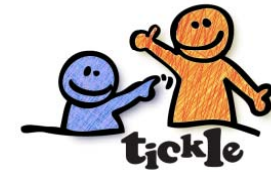
This rejection of the other, this heterophobia coming from the concept invented by the philosopher Albert Memmi (not limited to xenophobia because this rejection affects also those coming from "elsewhere") is not characteristic of the potassic basin. The encounter between French and foreigners, particularly when it does not concern the elite is and stays problematic.

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In 1919 the originality of the country of potassium hydroxide is that the local population is not only facing Poles but also French who consider the Alsatian as 'underage' and do place them somehow under legal guardianship.

The Alsatian are in fact Germans since 48 years and had mostly accepted this fact, albeit nobody will say so.

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They know nothing about the Third Republic, the non-religious nature and the French law, neither do they know the French language.

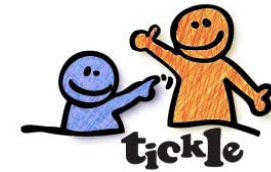
Therefore we are confronted with the French/Pole/Alsatian trinomial instead of facing the usual French/immigrants pair. This characteristic is also doubled by the fact that the exploitation of potassium hydroxide belongs to two firms.

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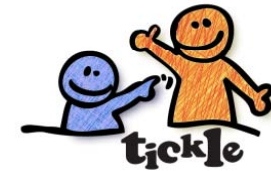
1. The dualism of the firms

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The potassic basin constitutes in this regard a unique case in France in the Twenties and even during the whole time between the two World Wars. Two firms are coexisting.

One, les Mines Domaniales de Potasse d'Alsace (MDPA) is a public business – an industrial state company -, the other is a private business,

les Mines de Kali-Sainte-Thérèse (KST).

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They are independent one from the other. Even if the way of thinking nowadays considers the public firms as an aberration to be suppressed, their policies were different, specially considering the workmen.

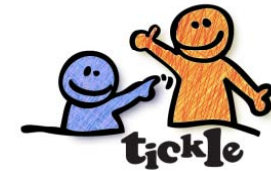
One is under the control of the minister of public works and has to give full account to the government.

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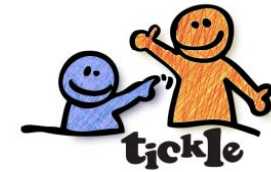
This kind of public business can be considered as the secular arm of the republican state in the country of potassium hydroxide. The other firm is controlled by private shareholders who ask foremost for dividends. But both are French and not Alsatian businesses and are managed by French bosses. But the MDPA is predominant and keeps the *leadership*.

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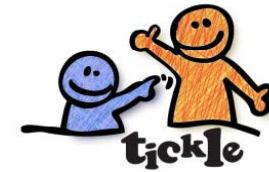
2. The policy of the MDPA

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Under the authority of their general manager Pierre de Retz de Serviès, the MDPA do carry out a double project. First an industrial project: to become competitive on the market of potassium hydroxide, and second a political project: to establish the Republic in the heart of the potassic basin and spread its values. He will play the Pole against the Alsatian.

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Pierre de Retz is a boss of republican right and not of divine right. He leads of course a paternalistic policy, but his paternalism does not refer to the values of religion, family or tradition, but to these of the Republic: individual autonomy, secularism and civic equality.

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He is more patriotic (exemplary during World War I) than nationalist.

Maybe he could be called an 'open-minded nationalist'.

He is as much opposed to the communist internationalism as to Catholicism, and also to regionalism and to autonomism that he fights with all his might.

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He is disseminating the French language against the dialect; he is a Jacobin, who does only refer to the republican state. He is the *missus Reipublicae*, the master of the potassic basin. He represents the republic in front of and even against the Alsatian traditions.

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The cultural integration of the Pole has so been made possible by the state, “which is for itself a culture which rises above society”.

In other words, the cultural integration of the Pole in the potassic basin has been gained in driving them apart from the Alsatian society.

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To ensure the assignment to gallicise and nationalise, the divisional engineer replaces the priest or the pastor.

The task seems to be easier with the Pole than with the Alsatian to the general manager of the MDPA.

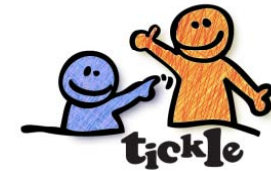
The Pole, who are cut off from the roots and the traditional executives of the Polish society (even if a few school instructors and chaplains are there) depend only on the business.

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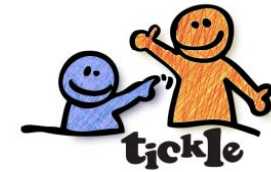
The Alsatian remain linked to the community of their village of origin. Some more or less latent conflicts break, in particular between the manager and the mayors and/or the priests. Both Pole and Alsatian seem to be foreigners for the MDPA boss. But the strangest of the foreigners is not the one we think.

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Pierre de Retz creates an original territory to gallicise and nationalise the Pole, a French territory, opponent and in any case up to compete with the Alsatian village. He thinks that culture is not given but a continuous creation (see the Greek myth of Theseus's ship) in relationship with a social group, which can be either professional or national and with a territory. A territoriality of culture does exist.

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3. A French territory

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To receive the polish workmen, you have to accommodate them.

It is not only a necessity of management, but it is also a contractual duty required by the immigration Agreement signed in 1919 September 3rd.

MDPA's general manager starts to build exemplary garden cities –he calls them workmen's villages-.

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They are a kind of show window for the benefits, which the Republic can bring to Alsace and the Alsatian. It would be simplistic to see there only a show window, a propaganda act and a kind of publicity placed in the potassic basin to convince the population of the generosity of the nation.

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It would also be considering the country of potassium hydroxide as a space, that we would call nowadays an advertising space. And yet, even if we can see a space which has been made their own by the Pole, it is more than a space, it is a territory build by the MDPA, that is by the Republic.

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« The territory... refers to the order of law and to the practice of specific rights, whose of property and, whereas it is about France in general, the rights of sovereignty. »

The territory is organised by will of the prince, while a space is built according to inherent rules.

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In order to do that, the space is laid out, organised and under surveillance. Thus by nationalising the territory, the MDPA did nationalise the society, for these garden cities belong to France, not to Alsace.

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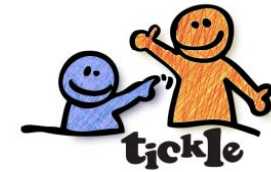
III. CULTURAL FORMS AND EMANCIPATION

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**In the potassic basin we can see
a territory with two cultures,
a professional and a political one.**

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1. The opposition between village and city

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In the potassic basin the words city or Garden City are not used, people use the German word *Kolonie* – implied is colony of miner-. Colony, the word deserves that we dwell on it because the vocabulary brings up some strange connections.

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In this place colonised by the miners and built out as a territory by the state mines colonies are established.

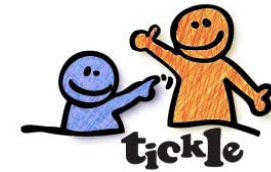
Arbeitskolonie is what were called in German the mining Garden Cities and where a big polish colony (in 1930 12 to 13 thousand persons) settles down.

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**These colonies –only these of the MDPA–
are organised as real villages
with their church or chapel,
their co-operative society,
their school, their festivity house,
their free health centre.
Only bars are missing,
they are completely forbidden
by the management in the name
of hygienism.**

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**The colony is a world on his own.
The old village has a past, a history,
an interpersonal life, and values
which are those of the Alsatian tradition.
The colony has no past and is not related
to the village.
It is a pioneer frontline
where life has to be invented.
The Pole were the main actors of it.**

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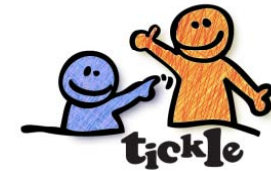
1. Different cultural forms

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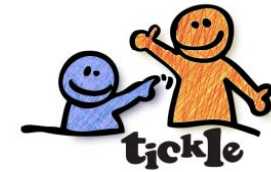
**Various Garden Cities where Pole
were concentrated were often called
"small Poland";
this underlines the intensity
of the original culture
and the great difficulty to gallicise
these immigrants.**

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Translated by
Daniel LIND



Guebwiller
March 2009



But I have written this too quickly and, going back to Janine Ponty's wording, I should speak about "new Poland" to really show that they are not just an exact copy of the country of origin because the territory plays also his part.

A persistent tradition says too that the Pole have been strictly flanked by their chaplains and their schoolmasters.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



Guebwiller
March 2009



**That should have contributed to maintain the influence of their homeland.
This assertion which has to be moderated even on national level can not be verified on the territory of the MDPA.**

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



Guebwiller
March 2009



The term living culture refers also to sociability. These can not be separated. With the help of Maurice Agulhon I will distinguish two types of sociability, one coming from the private setting, from the neighbourhood, from the district and the other which is an institutional sociability and which will stay under the influence of the public business.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
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March 2009



**We have no problem with the first one
but with the second one.**

**Pole speak their language in private,
preserve their way of cooking,
their eiderdown duvets, play their music,
tell their legends and keep their love for
the fatherland.**

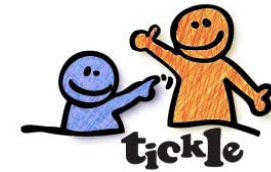
**The polish community is definitely
a reality.**

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



Guebwiller
March 2009



But there is no clannishness because nobody is speaking for everybody and locking up all the Pole in the group. Nobody is imposing his dictatorship on each member of the community. Nobody is expelling or is banned and nobody has to render an account.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

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Guebwiller
March 2009



Whenever chaplains or school instructors tried to take command the general manager would quickly put an end to this attempt and if needed expel the concerned persons.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



Guebwiller
March 2009



The institutional sociability is lived in many associations created by Poles. The general manager who is supporting and funding them encourages these associations. They organise well-established events. The “Polishness” becomes very apparent in the colonies... and even in the Alsatian villages.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

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March 2009



This “Polishness” was not confined to the private sphere. But all these associations are closely controlled by the state business, which is letting them running, as long as they do not question the republican values.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
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March 2009



**They have to refer to the Republic,
not to Alsace.**

**MDPA's boss goes as far as financing
the building of a magnificent church
in Wittenheim-Ruelisheim's
Sainte-Barbe colony.**

**He can so allow Pole... and others
to elude the influence of the local
regionalist et even separatist clergy.**

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

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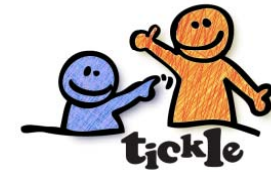
3. The cultural emancipation

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
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March 2009



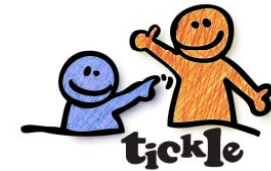
A lot of cultural associations flourish quickly in the potassic basin: dancing associations such as Tatry in Ensisheim and L'Aigle Blanc (White Eagle) in Wittelsheim, choral groups, music societies, theatre companies and patriotic societies. Even an education and think tank association named *Oswiata* (The Enlightenment) is created as soon as 1924.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

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March 2009



These associations are doubtlessly controlled par the MDPA, but everybody is free to adhere or not and this is not discrepant with joining the trade union...

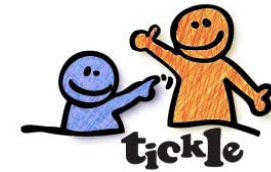
This phenomenon attests most of all of an extraordinary vitality.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



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March 2009



Opposed to this vitality, this variety and even this modernity, the parish *Bangala* (parish house) appears very restricted and very oppressive. More and more Alsatian look at these newcomers with envy.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



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March 2009



**They are far from being rich,
but they enjoy the use of their freedom,
express a joie de vivre...
becoming soon communicative
and they show numerous cultural
interests.
The Pole have brought the cultural life
and even life as such in this small country.**

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



Guebwiller
March 2009



The Republic has liberated the cultural life in the potassic basin through the MDPA and has so emancipated the Polish or Alsatian people.

The Pole have been the emancipation agents, who were of course used by MDPA's general manager to break the religious communitarism of the rural Alsatian world.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



Guebwiller
March 2009



**There was nothing like this going on
in the villages
where the mining exploitation belonged
to the private business!**

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



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March 2009



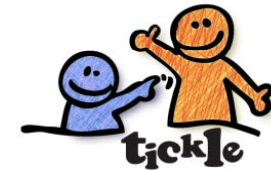
**My conclusion refers to nowadays questions. To cite Alfred Wahl:
“Some people wanted first to recognise communitarism as a progressive movement which should be supported. That is the reason for the spreading of the rallying cry "right to be different" which has been transformed by the concerned communities in a systematic will to become different.**

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

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March 2009



But as the tensions result also in denying the universal values and the republican principles of liberty, equality and secularism. We have to give in to the obvious: this communitarism is going back to archaism and obscurantism which we thought were receding.”

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

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Yes, cultural communitarism is dangerous. Yes, culture is emancipating; but only if the Republic there lays its honour, wants to put them above religious or other divisions of opinion.

That does not mean that the culture of the different communities will be suppressed, but on the contrary that it is opening to the universal values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND



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March 2009



**Thank you
for your attention**

Yves FREY
14/03/2009

Translated by
Daniel LIND