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The Polish People from Rosières (Central France) and the Heritagization of Saint-Albert Church

Abstract: We will question the appropriation of a place of worship by various migration communities from the working-class town of Rosières, especially by Polish and Portuguese people. Located in central France, the town was built, in a paternalistic move by a factory of the same name during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All the buildings were built on the initiative of the factory's successive administrations. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the administration started hiring immigrants (first from Poland, then from Portugal and postcolonial countries). By studying the process which led the factory's management to sell the church to the municipality between 1999 and 2003, we shall observe, on the one hand, the shift of the church's status in the townspeople's representations (from a religious symbol to a social one) and, on the other hand, that the mobilization ending with the sale was instigated by those professing Polish ancestry.

Keywords: Heritagization, Catholic Church, Polish, Portuguese, Rosières, Industrial paternalism.

For its inhabitants as well as for people from neighbouring towns, the working-class town of Rosières, in central France, has been a place of intercultural encounters since the early twentieth century. At that time, the factory started hiring immigrants from Poland, who were the first to arrive in large numbers. The factory, specializing in the foundry and kitchen equipment, is located at the centre of a village that was gradually built around it as the company management decided it. Despite the diversity of populations that moved to Rosières throughout the twentieth century, the collective imagination retained Polish immigration as the most striking on a demographic (numerical presence), social (Polish institutions such as a school), sports (football clubs marked by a large Polish presence, cycling), and on a toponymic level. While only the migrants' grandchildren or great-grandchildren remain, representing the Polish population today, this belonging is still highlighted today and often legitimates a discourse turned to the past and to the working-class town's golden age. To understand how the collective memory values this Polish past today, I will focus on a specific element of the town: its church. I will first recall some socio-historical elements of the town in order to understand the particular context in which Polish migrants arrived in. Secondly I will consider the specific object that is the village's church. Invested by successive generations of Poles – but not only – it is now seen as the symbol of the community's golden age, now gone. The church of the village is not the only element to be linked to the Polish immigration. But studying it allows us to describe the process at work in the transition from a religious status to the symbol of the working-class town's golden age, namely a heritage object. This church finally reflects the history and mythologized memories of the past. Ultimately it is the entire local life that can be explained through the building, as Gabriel Le Bras already observed in 1976.

Birth of the working-class town

The emergence of paternalism

The industrial history of Rosières began in 1836, when the first blast furnace was built in the village at the instigation of the Marquis de Boissy. The name Rosières refers to the factory as well as to the village where it settled in the centre of France. The rise of the metal industry enabled the development of the factory, which gradually specialized in foundry: at the end of the nineteenth century, the factory was employing more than 1,200 people. The geographical configuration of the factory and the village, located far away from any major or medium-sized city by at least twenty kilometres, at a time when workforce was often still being hired on a daily basis, led to a paternalistic management style well known at the time (Noiriel 1988). Employers in fact tried to stabilize the local workforce by offering housing built by the factory and by managing the social life of its workers. Within a century, working-class houses, schools, a cemetery, drains and roads were built in the town. Everything belonged to the factory, so that the village ended up being an annex of it. This management of local life was characterized by the fact that it was “total” and “comprehensive” (Gueslin 1992): this system “is born in the work sphere, but aims to integrate, and therefore protect, a person before, during and after, for a day, week, year, life” (Ibid.: 201). Housings were only occupied by workers on duty and by their families. The factory supported workers also outside of the workplace as it was organizing all leisure (sport clubs, theatre).

The town of Rosières, under the administration of the town of Lunery (located a few kilometres south), nevertheless appears as an autonomous town — and still does in the collective memory today. Despite the diversity of paternalistic forms in Europe, Rosières is not an isolated case. Similar examples of paternalism in France can be found in companies like Michelin in Clermont-Ferrand (Védrine 2008), Le Creusot (Martin 1983), to name only the best-known. More similar to our study, the eastern town called Foulange by Nicolas Rénahy (2006) provides eloquent analogies. Foulange, a small village of 600 inhabitants (Lunery municipality, to which Rosières is attached, has 1,400), is also separated from urban centres and is “sort of an industrial implant in the countryside” (ibid.: 110). As Rosières, Foulange hosted many foreign workers and was managed in a paternalistic way, which was abandoned in the 1970s. Sold to a big group, Foulange’s factory (also specialized in kitchen equipment) closed in 1981. In Rosières, this paternalism was rooted in the working-class town until the 1970s. Then the factory gradually withdrew from all social life linked to the village, selling everything it owned. This management method symbolically ended in 1987 when the factory was sold to the Italian group Candy. Unlike Foulange, where the factory closed in 1981, Rosières’ activity continued, although it was very limited compared to its past production and in terms of recruitment (the factory still employs about 150 workers today). In both Foulange and Rosières, the disintegration of the worker’s group raises questions about the group’s reconstruction methods, the idea of autochthony, and about the tools used by those who claim to be custodians of the local collective memory. Our ethnographic study, conducted mainly between 2007 and 2009 (and still ongoing, although through more occasional investigations) led us to question the status of the village’s church in local representations as a witness of a time the Polish descendants are claiming to be the custodians of.



Fig. 1. Exhibition about the history of Rosières and the church, inside the church. On the left panel, the Polish choir in the late 1960s. G. Etienne, 2015

A cosmopolitan village

The town of Rosières has been nurtured by various immigration waves throughout the twentieth century. After World War II, there was a lack of workforce so that the factory had to rely on foreign workers — same as in many other French regions. Because of cooperation agreements and the recent independence of Poland, mainly Polish workers sought work in Rosières from 1922 on. Because of this, the local demography was considerably modified, and in 1929 more than half of the population of Rosières was Polish. Instructions at the factory were displayed in both languages and employment contracts were translated into Polish. Later, in the 1960s, Portuguese migrants fleeing Salazar's authoritarian regime, poverty or colonial wars, also moved to Rosières. Other newcomers, Algerians and Moroccans, moved to Rosières at the same period and were the last to influence the local demography¹. Today some clues, like informal toponymy, allow us to understand how migrations, especially the Polish one, marked Rosières' social life (La Soudière 2004). Some people, however, regret that the municipality does not formalize such presence by giving a street a Polish reference. Some districts are known as "Little Poland" or "Warsaw", some epitaphs in the cemetery are in Polish, the town has a Polish choir (The Krakowiak in the late 1960s, nowadays The Polonia): all are testament to the Polish presence that has transcended time in collective memories (see fig. 1, the exhibition in the church). But let us focus our attention on the Catholic religion and the building that, at least until recently, symbol-

¹ Note that these migrant populations are not the only ones present in Rosières. One interviewee boasts the multicultural character of the town stating that Rosières welcomed more than seventeen nationalities over time.

ized it. If sharing the same religion was not always a factor of a good welcome (Schor 1985), Catholicism finally played a unifying role in Rosières for the various populations who practised it, namely the French, Polish and Portuguese. It is around the church of Rosières — a building that closely combines religious, social and professional life — that the perpetuation and the memory of an intense social life, now long lost, symbolically takes place.

Heritagization by conflict

Construction and existence of Saint-Albert Church

The construction of Rosières' church began in 1909 and was completed two years later in 1911. Before that, the village only had a small chapel since 1877, located inside a home and built at the initiative of the factory's director, Jules Roussel. However, Emile Combes, Minister of cults (Ministre des cultes), initiated the future law of separation between Church and State (Loi de séparation des Églises et de l'État) by closing the chapel. Following collective mobilization, the inhabitants of Rosières and the nuns of the patronage managed to reopen the chapel (Marquet, 1934: 64-65). It was however too modest and not appropriate for local religious celebrations. Marie Dumez, widow of Albert Dumez (Rosières' former director), suggested a project for a new chapel. The construction was funded by Marie who then bequeathed it to the factory. Successive managements of Rosières were, during the nineteenth and the twentieth century, attached to the Catholic religion, which had to provide the workers with healthy values. The Dumez couple became the archetype of these values:

Those who founded these powerful factories, which are a major actor in the progress and well-being of the people, have understood that workers need, perhaps even more than others, a faith and religious spirit that prevent souls from getting bogged down in material considerations in order to raise them above and ensure eternity. That's why they built the church at the centre of the village [...] It really is a parish around which the rest of the village revolves. [...] With this delicacy and talent that everyone admires, he [the archbishop] first pays tribute to the memory of the late Mr. Albert Dumez; everything here evokes his memory on this memorable day. Then he congratulates Mrs Dumez who endowed Rosières with the admirable work of her inexhaustible charity. (La semaine religieuse 1927: 284-285-286).

Albert Dumez became a character whose life would be a model to follow. Over twenty years after his death, the local Catholic press reported that, while many children were attending catechism, one wished "that their parents accompanied them and became true Christians, as Mr Albert Dumez who was and still is their role model." (La semaine religieuse 1922: 434).

Two memorial plaques are now placed on the church — one inside, the other outside —, reminding everyone of the origin of its construction (fig. 2). The church's name, Saint-Albert, was given with reference to Marie Dumez' deceased husband. The couple Albert and Marie Dumez profoundly marked the collective imaginary. Albert was one of the directors of Rosières' factory until 1905, when he died. Let us have a look at the couple that became an important figure in local life. Originally from the town of Pomponne in Seine-et-Marne, where he inherited a castle from Marie's family, born Marie Dreux, the couple decided to dedicate themselves to both towns, Rosières and Pomponne. In addition to his leadership position in Rosières, Albert was also mayor of Pomponne from 1900 until his death. Apart from the involvement of Albert Dumez in the management of the factory, it is the construction financed by his wife Marie that raised the couple to an almost mythical status. The



Fig. 2. Plaque in honour of Albert Dumez.

„In pious memory of Albert Dumez. Former head of the Rosières’ Forges, deceased while mayor of Pomponne. His widow Marie Dumez had this church built and dedicated to St. Albert. May God rest his soul in peace, amen”. Around, some representations of the Madonna of Czestochowa. G. Etienne, 2015.

church was not Marie Dumez’s only construction; she also funded the parish’s facilities including a dispensary, a theatre, and a daycare centre she named Cercle Saint-Albert, again as a tribute to her husband. The municipality later also honoured this “benefactors” couple – because it is in these terms that the couple is presented to us by the townspeople – giving Albert Dumez’ name to a street and an avenue. As for the church, the factory owned it and therefore bore the burden of its maintenance. In practice, however, the most faithful townspeople were those performing maintenance duties.

The intervention of migrants

At the time of the « Polish colony » (Rygiel 1997) in the 1920s, the Poles invested the church, including through the regular presence of a Polish priest. Some cults that were little practised by the French, like the Marian cult of the Madonna of Czestochowa (called Black Madonna), also branded the place; representations of the Virgin are still present today. Later, in the 1960s, the Portuguese celebrated the Lady of Fatima in the same church,



Fig. 3. Stained-glass windows depicting Albert and Marie Dumez, offering the Church of Rosières. G. Etienne, 2015

again visible in representations. Some peculiarities therefore mark the presence of both Portuguese and Polish populations. The church's two transepts reflect the presence of the two main immigrant communities. As the son of a Polish migrant explains, you will find the "rather Polish corner" in the right transept. Two representations of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa cover the wall below the stained-glass windows. These windows represent Albert and Marie Dumez kneeling, him facing a saint and her "offering" the church to the Virgin Mary (fig. 3). The other transept also honours Albert and Marie with a painting representing them. But this time it is the Fatima Virgin that is present, in statue and in painting. The interior of the church is still relevant today and, depending on the visitors' origins, recalls the migration movements of people and their ancestors to the working class town. The church is intimately linked to the history of the workers and the factory.

Although there are nowadays no more Polish priests in Rosières, some ceremonies are still being celebrated. Faced with the lack of availability of priests, it is the son of a Polish couple who is available for celebrations such as funerals. A married couple (both of them retired factory workers) emphasizes: "Every year there's a gathering; Poles, Portuguese, they celebrate. They sing in the church". Therefore they are not only sharing a worship place at separate times, but also investing it together while maintaining some specificities (fig. 4). In 2006 for example, the Polish community invited the priest who heads Polish chaplaincy in France to celebrate a Polish mass. The Portuguese annually organize a ceremony in honour of the Fatima Virgin, which then leads to a party bringing together a lot of people, not only the Catholic Portuguese, but also Poles and non-Catholics. The presence of



Fig. 4. Banner of the Rosières' Poles, 1935, exhibited in the church. G. Etienne, 2015

personalities like the mayor also contributes to publicly recognizing the event. A husband and wife who both worked at the factory notice:

People come from all over. There is the [Portuguese] folk group from Bourges. There's the mass and after that everyone meets to toast to friendship. There are people we had never seen, even French ones. There's the mayor with his wife, Father Bernard, everyone comes. And then we party till midnight, one o'clock.

The closing of the church, the triggering of protests

On 26 December 1999, the weather partially degraded the church. Strong winds broke the cross overhanging the steeple and caused other damages that resulted in closing down the church for security reasons. This event sparked a double mobilization by the Rosières' inhabitants: first for the reopening of the worship place and then for the conservation of the legacy that the church represents in their eyes. These two dimensions are not disjointed in their mind, but overlap. However, how to consider this heritage? Architectur-

ally the church is not a real exception² (Deshoulières 1932); and this is not the aspect its defenders promote anyway. Above all the church had until then been seen as a worship place. But its rapid degradation and the spectre of its disappearance raised awareness of its value, not on an architectural or religious, but on a symbolic, historical and social level. Therefore, the mobilization for its maintenance and repair was required by some parts of the population: those who had known the town before it was sold to the Italian group. The mobilization crystallized as a part of a conflict that was at the time already opposing the former inhabitants – employees or former employees of the factory – to the factory management.

At first, only a few people, including practising Catholics, required from the factory leadership to see to the repair of the church in order to allow its quick reopening. The factory owning the church, they considered it was responsible for its maintenance. It was not the first time something like this happened: uncut vegetation, rusty gates, and so on, were the source of regular requests. Even so the factory management, having gradually removed from the social life of the working-class town over the previous decades, refused to undertake the work. It offered to hand over the building to the municipality in exchange for one symbolic Franc, but the municipality refused given the amount of work required.

Faced with this refusal, mobilization expanded to reach a wider population, the inhabitants of Rosières to whom the symbol made sense: those who considered themselves as the “Elderly”, meaning those who had experienced the working town during its golden age, as they tend to refer to when speaking of a time when social life was intense and there was full employment. Finally the factory began repairs in May 2000 and the church reopened. However the iron cross could not be replaced and remains, even today, set in the churchyard (fig. 5). The heritage function of the church is exacerbated, longterm history is recalled, as well as the symbols that are associated with it and its close connection with local history – be it religious, industrial or merely social. “Every industrial environment then generates its culture and creates a sense of belonging that seems to go beyond only the workers to cover the entire population” (Morel & Vallerant 1984: 5). In this sense the conflict mobilized far beyond the few practising Catholics living in the village. The conflict with the factory had a territorialisation effect (Melé 2003): even though it did not contribute to building a pre-existing group, however, it helped uniting this group at a specific time. This group was therefore based on common, shared values and solidarity of destinies. While an industrial heritage is often built around the remains of the working activity (Tornatore 2004), here it settled on an element that was related to but didn’t define a professional practice.

Regretting the golden age

What are the common interests that the townspeople are trying to preserve through the church? To better understand these interests, we must look at the town’s history. Historically the town of Rosières was built starting with Rosières’ plant; it developed until becoming a real annex. Like other towns based on the same model, it took the appearance of a community because of its relative geographical isolation, the fact that almost all inhabitants knew each other – which was made possible by the small population and the co-presence of everyone at work –, and the proximity of housing, social, sporting and worship activities. The feeling of autonomy afforded by the factory’s social management of the village is well anchored: mutual aid society, leisure, medical care – everything was availa-

² The French Society of Archaeology noted in 1932 that “sculpture and outdoor setting can lead to some criticism”.



Fig. 5. The Church of Rosières. In the foreground, the cross fallen in 1999. G. Etienne, 2015

ble in the town. It even had its own currency, the “Rosières bee” (*l’abeille de Rosières*), allowing purchases at the food cooperative.

This sense of autonomy kept going until the 1970s, when the factory began withdrawing from the village’s social life by selling the first houses. Some remember and a posteriori reconstruct the social cohesion within the town. Many emphasize the peaceful and harmonious co-presence of diverse populations. Thus a Moroccan migrants’ son explained:

“It’s a pretty cosmopolitan village. There have never been problems between the communities. We could say it was a golden age. We had fun at school... In the end, I didn’t know there were differences. I grew up without differences. There were never differences between us. I don’t know what difference means. I saw a person in front of me, I didn’t see... there was no apprehension.”

The sale of the factory housings introduced a change in the apparent autonomy of the village. Even though some workers bought the home they had been living in for a long time, other people from outside the village also came and acquired housing that was more affordable than elsewhere. They did not work at the factory or in the village. They did not share, in the eyes of the elderly inhabitants, the common history, a common past. At the same time, their arrival went along with and eventually symbolized the end of a paternalistic era. A collective disapproval made these “outsiders” (Elias & Scotson 1965) largely re-

sponsible for the decline of social and economic activities in the town: "People, they move. Not even to go to Saint-Florent [a small nearby village], but to go to supermarkets in Bourges [a bigger nearby town]," said a retired man from Poland who had worked all his life at Rosières' factory. In 1987, with the sale to the Italian group, Rosières confirmed the end of the proximity between the factory and its workers: and so the representation of a "local" factory disappeared.

Reactivating a local social life

People had the feeling of being abandoned by public policy. Lunery's municipality, from which Rosières depends, was suspected of doing nothing for the working-class town and to only financially assist the town of Lunery. For them, neglecting the church was another sign of services and amenities in the village being abandoned. For religious people the condition of the church and its services already were a challenge before the conflict started. Especially the very irregular presence of the priest suggested the place would be abandoned in the short-term. It is indeed a priest from Saint-Florent-sur-Cher, a nearby village, and not any longer a priest from Rosières who celebrates mass from time to time: "If the priest doesn't come, it means he has no time. As he's responsible for the mass in Saint-Florent, he wants to do everything there. Now it's up to us to go. We have to go there." Closing down the church therefore caused a mobilization based primarily on the idea of a decline of the town's social and economic life. The mobilization expanded around this idea: the church became the symbol of a social life to be saved: „Religious or not, people value their heritage," noted a local newspaper when the church was to be closed down (La Nouvelle République 2000: 7). While the factory refused to undertake repair work, mobilized people challenged the municipality with the help of the media: local television and newspapers relayed the information. One of the custodians of this heritage reports the facts: "When there was the storm in 1999, at Christmas 99... The church cross, the bell tower, it was destroyed. So it was down for safety reasons. With my sister we struggled, because people told us: 'Ah well, you need to do something because you know Rosières.' So we took action, I worked a bit with the press since I knew lots of guys. Then Le Berry Républicain, La Nouvelle République [local newspapers], television, they gave us a hand to reopen this church. Otherwise I think it would have stayed that way. This is the only heritage remaining in Rosières."

If the church was able to reopen in 2000, the factory, however, wished to get rid of this heritage it considered too expensive. Thus it again offered the church to the municipality. An elected member of the municipal council says that, during the municipal electoral campaign of 2001, the problem took the appearance of an electoral issue, some residents directly asking about the church as a means to decide who to vote for. This member of the municipal council, who is from Polish descent, therefore partly dedicated his involvement in Lunery's public life to this purpose: "When I ran for the town council election, one of the goals was to recover this legacy." This person however does not attend church and confesses to not knowing the presence inside the church of Polish religious symbols (the Black Madonna of Czestochowa). The object of his commitment is not to defend religious values but a heritage linked to the history of the working-class town. It was not until 2003 that the municipality finally accepted the church as a gift, thus responding to local requests. A few years later, the town fully took over the church's patrimonial character by organizing the celebrations for the centenary of its construction in 2011. It took part in the organization of the permanent exhibition that is located at the church entrance.

The mobilization fed the heritagization process, while the church was not explicitly considered a legacy before. What is significant here is that the mobilization began through the descendants of Poles, including two siblings considered as the spokespersons of the “elderly inhabitants”. The brother has actually been enjoying the status of “local scholar” for many years and, in his lectures on Rosières or interviews with local newspapers, he never fails to emphasize the importance of the Poles in Rosières’ history. The man acquired his expertise on local history by combining all the features of the „Elderly”: he is a former factory worker and, as the son of Polish migrants, grew up in the working-class town. He therefore has a special relationship to the past and the territory, and is by extension the representative of a local identity (L’Estoile 2001), inseparable from the Polish community. All residents recognize the ability of the two siblings to represent the interests of the town in defending the church. By becoming the spokespersons of the mobilization, the son and the daughter of Polish migrants who arrived in the 1930s indirectly legitimize the social contribution of their parents and all other migrants to the social life of the town. Nowadays some observers, such as this reporter, even say the emergence of the working class town is linked to the Poles: “Overall more than 3,000 Poles settled in Rosières, thereby creating the village” (La Nouvelle République, 2014). The former migrants and their descendants are thus placed at the heart of an “us” made of the working-class culture and the parish, which redefines the boundaries of autochthony and allochthony.

CONCLUSION

The destruction of the church cross during the storm can finally be seen as a positive point by people who defended the reopening since the event triggered major changes: acquisition of the church by the municipality, which promises a better management and to have the damages caused by the storm — but also those caused by many years of disengagement by the factory — repaired. Some other cases of destruction can be similarly considered. During the destruction of Luneville’s castle (in eastern France) by fire in January 2003, Thibaut Gorius (2006) observed multiple representations of the fire: it was first experienced as a tragedy for the historical heritage that the castle represented. Then it was experienced as a social loss, the castle referring to various stages of social life (e.g. weddings took place there). Finally, the fire was also seen as an opportunity to reconstruct a place that had started deteriorating long ago. Another example is the park of Versailles, which had its trees destroyed in 1999 (Dassié 2014) by the same storm mentioned above. The renovation of the park had been an open discussion for a long time without an actual decision ever being made; the storm, though, required immediate action. The dynamics of the conflict that followed the degradation of the church cross are quite similar. Although the facts are in the end not described as positive by local actors, ultimately it is the mobilization that triggered the repair process and therefore the church becoming a legacy. The mobilization for the building has had the effect of enlivening a collective memory based on a common interest: the conservation of the church. Initially people all had various reasons to request the reopening of the church (religious and patrimonial aspect). But only through conflict could the mobilization be structured, could the group carried by the Poles develop, and heritage be built.

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