ABSTRACT. This paper reviews the social conditions of suicides in Poland in 1951–82, based on the complete statistical data pertaining to suicidal deaths registered with the Central Statistical Office of Poland (grouped and recalculated by the author for the purposes of her analysis).

Poland has one of the lowest suicide rates for women: the ratio of men to women who take their own lives is 5 to 1. The rates of suicides are higher in the rural than in the urban milieu (that tendency has been observed since the 1970s). But suicides in the rural areas are in general committed not by farmers, but by agricultural labourers, lumbermen, people employed in earth works, geodetic work, communication and transport. Those and other groups of workers are particularly liable to suicide resulting from sudden loneliness (due to becoming a widower or to divorce). During the last thirty years the number of suicides in Poland increased by over 200 percent. As in other countries suicides in Poland decrease in periods of a strong social integration, and increase during social crises.

In Poland in the 1970s suicides accounted for almost as many deaths as did traffic accidents. While Poland holds a middle place in the world statistics of suicides (as do Australia, Canada, the United States, and Norway), the number of suicides increased between 1951 and 1979 by 250 percent. That gradual but systematic increase has recently been stopped: in 1981 there were more than 35 percent fewer suicidal deaths than in 1979. Moreover, the year 1981 witnessed essential changes in the socio-occupational structure of those who committed suicide: the greatest decline was among industrial workers and miners.

Why was that so? What are the reasons for making such a final, most difficult human decision?

There are various schools of thought and various ways of analysing the problem.¹ The present paper is intended to show the latest trends in the light of a sociological theory of suicide.

We know nothing or practically nothing about the motives underlying self-destructive behaviour. But we do know who commits suicide and the share of the various strata and socio-occupational groups in the structure of deaths in the Polish population. In no way can we call that phenomenon specific to the
intelligentsia or the professionals. Nor can we belittle it because of its seemingly small dimensions. Every year over four thousand people in Poland take their own lives. They are people of middle and past-middle age. Every year several dozen children aged 10 to 14 and several hundred young people aged from 15 to 19 take their own lives. The trend showing an increasing share of the lowest age groups in the structure of suicides intensifies from year to year. We know who, and how, people commit suicide. They are as a rule male workers, whose health (mental health included) does not deviate from the standards for comparable groups of the population. Why do they take their lives? What underlies their making the final decision, the decision about their death?

If we replace the question ‘why?’ by the question about the sources and regularities, then we obtain a partial answer only. We start from the assumption that people brought up in a particular culture, who have found themselves in a particularly unfavourable situation, tend to respond to that situation with certain deviant behaviour. All that, however, pertains to certain probabilistic categories. The problem remains open why some children, young children, and adults from potentially suicidal groups take their lives while others in the same groups do not. That problem will remain open.

And yet even a partial answer to that question, shedding some light upon suicidal decisions in the context of their sociological conditions, tells us more about contemporary life than we could expect. It also informs us about contemporary Polish society: the more it is united, the lower its number of suicide. Specialized integrative mechanisms are above all mechanisms of social control, and their weakening is shown by a greater intensity of deviant behaviour, especially that oriented toward self-destruction. The last factor thus serves as a signal that it is necessary to undertake social measures to stop the disintegrating trend of deviant behaviour. This is so because uncontrolled tensions can, as we know, considerably disturb the attainment of most general and common social goals and values.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SUICIDES

Demographic characteristics, especially sex and age, are the fundamental features known about the group of suicides. Poland (next to Spain, Portugal, and Italy) has one of the lowest percentages of women in the structure of suicidal deaths. In Poland, approximately one woman per five men dies as a result of suicide. The sex of a person is found to be an essential factor in