

# A New Tradition. Construction of Cultural Identity of Farmers in „Regained Territories” of Poland After the II World War in the Light of Their Letters to Authorities<sup>1</sup>

Migrations have its special place in the history of Poland. From this point of view several analogies between the history of Poland and the history of United States of America can be demonstrated. One of them is a term of "Wild West", coined in the context of colonization of North America, especially in the XIX century. This expression had been, in a quite unexpected way, applied to the postwar Polish history. A name of "Wild West" was given to, so called, "Regained Territories", which were attributed to Poland after the II World War at the expense of Germany. German-speaking population escaped or was forced to leave their domiciles and farms, unless they were able to prove their Polish nationality. The deserted lands and real estates were subsequently assigned to anyone who wanted to come into possession of it. Conflicts between settlers often resulted in a burst of aggression and blood (Jarosz 1998). There were several huge waves of immigrants to "Regained Territories", from Eastern part of Poland, lost in favor of Soviet Union, and the central part of the country. A great number of population coming back from forced labor in Germany stayed there as well (Halicka 2015: 211). Therefore a mix of Poles, Germans, Ukrainians, and other ethnic groups became the leaven of a new society starting its life on the scratches of Prussian material culture. How did they define themselves? In which way the were constructing their own identity?

The research I am undertaking here inscribes into a methodological scheme pioneered by William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, who used peasants' letters as a source for sociological analysis.

“The Polish peasant, as the present collection shows, writes many and long letters. This is particularly striking, since the business of writing or even of reading letters is at best very difficult for him. It requires a rather painful effort of reflection and sacrifice of time. Letter-writing is for him a social duty of a ceremonial character, and the traditional, fixed form of peasant letters is a sign of their social function”  
(Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918: 303)

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One can suppose that a remark stated by Thomas and Znaniecki in 1918 could be to some extent true also in the period I am referring here: the postwar time — the years 1945-1950. There is though a difference between approach of aforementioned author team and mine own. It is a kind of letters to take into consideration: instead of family letters collected by Thomas and Znaniecki I gathered a corpus of official, formal letters, sent by private individuals or informal groups to the state authorities. It may be that because of the difference in the genre character of the research sample, conclusions concerning literary form of letters are not alike. In the letters sent by peasants to the state authorities in the 40. we don't encounter any clear "fixed form" of "bowing letter" described the team of sociologists (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918: 303).

Thomas and Znaniecki disclose crucial aspects of social life of peasants such as: family structure, social class system, domestic economy, religion, and aesthetics. What would interests myself in my paper is a personal and cultural identity of authors of the letters. The notion of personal identity is a troublesome one, even though the reflection on it has already a very long history in philosophy, starting in antiquity. An important point in the evolution of understanding of personal identity was Cartesian concept of ego, founding a ground for reliable cognition. However the notion of strong, personal identity has been undermined by XIX-century, German-speaking philosophers — the school of suspicions: Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud (Ricoeur, 1970: 32). Consequently, as a key notion of philosophy Jacques Derrida introduces *différance* instead of identity, what had a lot of ramifications as far as contemporary humanities and social science are concerned (Derrida 1997). French philosopher and its followers underline excluding and oppressive power of the concept of identity (Hall, 1996: 5).

Nonetheless, an idea of cultural identity is still alive among theorists and gains even more attention in our epoch of migrations and confrontations of groups of distinct cultural backgrounds.

"One hears today of identity and its problems more often than ever before in modern times" — Zygmunt Bauman states — "And yet one wonders whether the current obsession is not just another case of the general rule of things being noticed only *ex post facto*; when they vanish, go bust or fall out of joint." (Bauman, 1996: 18)

Bauman deems the notion of identity as problematic from its own essence, since no one thinks about her identity, till there is no problem with dealing with the external social world, till the identity is not put into doubt:

"One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence" (Bauman, 1996: 18)

That kind of conditions appeared in the historical moment in question, on so called "Regained

territories”, a frontier, and empty scene to be peopled by new settlers coming from the West, and the Center and the East of the country.

A notion of cultural identity cannot be discussed without reference to the concept of tradition. One could paraphrase Bauman’s words so: identity becomes an object of interest and doubt, whenever there is lack of tradition providing patterns of behavior and set of social and individual values to observe. Tradition consists of all the elements of culture that are preserved by a certain social group or community. These elements constitute continuity through time of a certain entity, i.e. identity of a group, that provides patterns for creation of personal identity.

More precisely, Jerzy Szacki enumerates three concepts of tradition: tradition as a social transmission, tradition as a heritage, and tradition as a value. The first concept points out tradition as “an act of transmission from generation to generation such or other, mostly spiritual, goods of a certain community” (Szacki, 2011: 102). The main interest of the researchers here concentrates around the topic of cultural communication of generations following each other. In the second concept the tradition is perceived not as an act, but as an object to be preserved through time. In this sense tradition becomes almost identifiable with the culture *en bloc*. The third approach, tradition as a value, stresses deontological, normative aspect of a tradition. Namely, a certain way of living, a certain pattern of culture is appreciated and followed as a principle by a group who identifies with this tradition. Tradition is not all we receive in inheritance, but only those elements: values, behaviors, rules, and principles we take for granted, which form our cultural background.

## Elements of Cultural Identity

Research whose results are presented below, have been undertaken on the sample of 14 letters: 12 already published and 2 unpublished and read directly from manuscript. During the analysis of their content I collected terms referring to persons — actors of narratives described in letters. Because of the kind of the correspondence and its aims letters tell about conflicts between author of a text and her opponent, who can be a private individual, an informal group, or an institution. Nevertheless, it’s not the story I am interested in, but the actors of the story.

After the analysis of descriptions of persons and self-descriptions of authors of letters I collected several identity aspects, such as:

1. Nationality
2. Language
3. Confession

4. Political engagement
5. Institutional affiliation
6. Geographical origins
7. Financial status
8. Professional skills
9. Physical shape

Descriptions of personal identity actually found in peasants' letters often belong to more than one group of above-mentioned. Hence, they should be treated as potential attributes of an identity rather than different, separated group of identities.

## **Pole-catholic and his Symbolic Background**

The first quotation already exhibits an intricate maze of cultural identity where its several aspects coincide with each other, spanning additionally to other persons related to the author of the letter:

"I am Polish, a Roman catholic, during the whole life I was (...) a loyal citizen and I am a good son of democratic Poland, because a) went I and my children to a Polish school, b) I use at home a Polish language only, inasmuch as I didn't know other language and I don't know, c) I served in 1930/31 in Polish Army, d) during the occupation I was and I have got identity document as a Pole, e) I carried on with all the burden of obligatory deliveries and taxes as an honest Polish farmer, f) my wife Maria is Polish as well, a Roman catholic and a good Polish mother" (MZO 2/196/0/4/930, Michał Zdolski to Ministry of Regained Territories, Jurkowo, 19.08.1947)

This declarations attracts attention for not only its rich, detailed content presented in a methodical, crystal-clear way, but also by its elaborated composition, almost echoing with T. S. Eliot's self-description as "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion". All the ingredients of Polish national identity have been enumerated here in a precise and detailed manner. A national affiliation uncovers its ramifications and a structure of rhizome, or even fractal: not only the author of the letter is Polish, a Roman catholic, but also his wife is Polish, a Roman catholic.

The author of the letter, Michał Zdolski, had been forced to abandon his farm, to move almost 250 miles to "Regained Territories", and was given no farm in exchange. His line of self-defense is based on a presumption that his eviction was caused by attribution to him Ukrainian nationality. What need a stress, he doesn't protest against national segregation as a general principle, but against a mistake of classifying him as an Ukrainian. To prove this mistake he dissects his cultural identity, referring to the most important points of the tradition he is identifying with, both in explicit and in

implicit manner. On exposed place of incipit of the latter the key feature of identity appears: Pole-catholic (*Polak-katolik*).

What is interesting is that this feature manifests in a form of an equation, implied by use of a substantive (catholic) in a role of attribute of a subject (Polish). A stereotypical figure of Pole-catholic, joining in itself a national and a religious dimension related to each other so close as two sides of the same coin, constitutes one of the most important symbols in Polish national identity (Janion 2007). It originates from the XVII century, the epoch of Counter-reformation, and consolidated in the XIX century, during the period of “Partitions of Poland”, when Polish state lost its political autonomy and during more than a century disappeared from the maps of the world. The main “distinctive feature” of Polish nationality became confession. It was brought about by the fact that even Polish language lost its vitality in some social groups and regions. For instance during XVIII and XIX among Polish aristocracy French language was common and some of their representatives didn’t speak Polish at all. From the point of view of cultural identity Roman catholic religion is contrasted with, on the one hand, Prussian and in general West European Protestantism, and, on the other hand, from Eastern (Ukrainian, Russian, and Belorussian) orthodox Christianity.

A figure of Pole-catholic, which opens this quote, is accompanied by a figure of Mother-Pole (*Matka Polka*). It didn’t suffice to say that the wife is Polish, the Zdolski decided to explicitly remark that she is a Polish mother, so as an attribute of being a “Polish mother” were a single, atomic feature of a subject. Of course, Mother-Pole cannot have another name than *Maria*, since Mary, the Holy Mother constitutes archetype of a mother in this cultural context (Kościańska 2012). Mother-Pole is a female counterpart of Pole-catholic, as the latter in a decided way represents a male gender and embodies a figure of male.

Sometimes the binary oppositions between nationalities become sharper. National identity is built not on a simple refutation of (mistaken) national belonging, but on reluctance, fear, and hate.

“our family village (...) (totally Polish village) during long time of occupation defended itself heroically against fascist Ukrainian bands, and against German terror and persevered at the post, until it was liberated by Red Army and Polish Army” (Franciszek Jaroszewski et alii to Ministry of National Defence, Zakrzów, nd. , "Regiony" 1998 No 1/3, p. 122)

Here in a concise and a clear way a structure of identification and refutation in the universe of nations was outlined and signs of values have been unequivocally attributed.

Apart from national, language, and religious components of cultural identity a political one appears as well. Michał Zdolski claims to be a “loyal citizen”. Political tradition the speaker evokes is characterized further by his self-description as a “son of democratic Poland”. Democracy is

another one element of cultural heritage Zdolski would like to identify with. Poland has a tradition of the earliest democracy in Europe, so called “noble democracy” from XVII century. “Noble democracy”, as the very term discloses, was limited to the representatives of the most powerful and the richest social group. Only aristocracy was allowed to participate in royal elections convoked upon a death or abdication of reigning king.

An institutional dimension of cultural identity is exemplified by a further point of Zdolski's list, more specifically by one concerning his military career. What strikes is that he mentions a period of time long before the war that just finished (Zdolski writes his letter in 1947, 2 years after the end of the war). This fact can only testify the value and meaning of such an element for the whole identity. His military service in a peace time, done fifteen years earlier, is worth to mention, even at a cost of revealing lack of military engagement during the war. In most cases authors of letters describe themselves as active or demobilized soldiers, or indicate others as such. Apart from soldiers, of many nationalities, next to Polish, also Russian and German, an example of an identity based on institutional affiliation is an officer of Security Service (*Sluzba Bezpieczeństwa*) — secret “political police”.

A place of origin is another critical dimension of cultural identity. By a place of origin I mean a space occupied by a person directly before coming to “Regained Territories”, not necessarily her place of birth. The samples of letters confirm finding of historians of the topic, who separate three groups of immigrants to “Regained Territories”: exiles from the East, emigrants from the Central Poland, and victims of forced labors coming back from Germany (Halicka 2015: 211). Aside from immigrants, some local, German-speaking population remained and contributed to creation of a new society, making German diaspora the biggest national minority in contemporary Poland (Kulczycki 2016). Exiles from the East identify themselves mostly as a “repatriate from behind the Bug”, “repatriate from Eastern Borderlands” (*Kresy Wchodnie*).

National and language components, along with institutional attribution and geographical origins are the most abundant elements — “atoms” of cultural identity. Still, there are few others, less frequent, nonetheless present, such as financial status, professional skills, or physical shape.

“I am a repatriate from Easter Borderlands and I lost big properties” (Władysław Czarnak do Starostwa Powiatowego, Wierzchowice, 21.09.1946, "Regiony" 1998 No 1/3, p. 122)

Possessions left on the East are trying to be historically counterbalanced by goods encountered on the West, on “Regained Territory”, a land of legendary Piast the Wheelwright, the semi-legendary founder of the royal dynasty of Poland. West Poland become “Wild West” in a sense that during the times of the beginning no official, state intervention and control was possible and the

settlers should have created and executed the law with their own means. The goods left by Germans, real estates and its equipment, quickly became objects of looting (*szaber*) and robbery. A specialized group of people making their living with a robbery got a name *szabrownik*:

“*szabrownik* can have two houses (...) whereas I am not supposed to have any decent house” (MZO 2/196/0/4/930, Alfons Olejnik to Edward Osóbka Morawski, Kochanowo, 21.07.1946)

The author of this letter, who declares himself as a demobilized soldier is embittered, since he came too late, when all the farms had been already taken. His economical status is much lower than one of a *szabrownik*, who seems to belong to a financial elites.

Cases of identification founded on professional skills can be noted, when an author refers to

“farms illegally occupied by non-farmer (...) non-professionals” (Stanisław Smolski et alii to Ministry of Regained Territories, Podlesie, 04.06.1947, "Regiony" 1998 nr 1/3, p. 134)

Also, one of the letters contained as an element of the author self-description as a handicapped person.

“I (...) a repatriate from behind the Bug served in Polish Army, I am as an invalid” (Paweł Zawada to Ministry of Regained Territories, Prusinowice, 17.03.1947, "Regiony" 1998 nr 1/3, p. 132)

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