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A New Tradition. Construction of Cultural Identity of Farmers in „Regained Territories” of Poland after the World War II in the Light of Their Letters to Authorities

*Krzysztof Gajewski**

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 the United States of America can be demonstrated. One of them is the 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. The name of “Wild West” was given to, the so-called “Regained Territories”, which were attributed to Poland after World War II 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 blood¹. There were several huge waves of immigrants to “Regained Territories”, from the Eastern part of Poland, lost in favour of the Soviet Union, and the central part of the country. A great number of the population coming back from forced labour in Germany stayed there as well². Therefore a mix of Poles, Germans, Ukrainians, Byelorussians 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 they were constructing their own social and cultural identity?

A typical approach to this topic³ is based mostly on the official, institutional sources, partly on memoirs published by witnesses, and partly on witnesses’

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¹ Dariusz Jarosz, “Chłopi na Ziemiach im Obiecywanych (1944-1948)”, in *Regiony* No 1-3 (1998).

² Beata Halicka, *Polski Dziki Zachód. Przymusowe migracje i kulturowe oswojanie Nadodrza 1945-1948* (Universitäts: Kraków, 2015): 211.

³ Eg. Halicka, *Polski Dziki Zachód*; John J. Kulczycki, *Belonging to the Nation: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Polish-German Borderlands 1939-1951* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) 2016.

testimonies collected by historians, or journalists. It means that the point of view of professional “writers”, such as clerks, academics, or other kinds of “intelligentsia” is taken into consideration, even though it is village “intelligentsia” writing memoirs. The research I am proposing here adopts a contrary direction: instead of top-bottom, I propose a strict bottom-up perspective. Such a methodology 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”.⁴

There is though a difference between the approach of the aforementioned author team and my own. Namely, it is the kind of letters taken into consideration. Thomas and Znaniecki worked on private, family letters, whereas I gathered a corpus of formal letters sent by private individuals or informal groups to the state authorities. One can suppose that the remark stated by Thomas and Znaniecki in 1918 could be true also in the period I am referring here: the postwar time — the years 1945-1950. However, in the letters sent by peasants to the state authorities in the 1940s we don’t encounter any clear “fixed form” of “bowing letter” described by the team of sociologists⁵. On the contrary, formal peasants’ letters to authorities represent the whole spectrum of genre characteristics, spanning from formal, office correspondence to a narrative from close to a short story in the form of oral “skaz”.⁶

On the base of their sources, Thomas and Znaniecki disclose crucial aspects of the social life of peasants such as family structure, social class system, domestic economy, religion, and aesthetics. What interests my research is the personal and cultural identity of the authors of the letters as it is seen and described by themselves. 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 deep antiquity. An important point in the evolution of understanding of personal identity was the 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 Freud⁷. Consequently, as a key notion of

⁴ William Thomas, Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America. Monograph of an Immigrant Group, Vol. I, Primary-Group Organization* (Boston: The Gorham Press 1918): 303.

⁵ *Idem*.

⁶ Krzysztof Gajewski, “Z poetyki listu chłopskiego do władzy. Od stalinizmu do małej stabilizacji”, *Rocznik Antropologii Historii VI* (2016).

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP 1970): 32.

philosophy, Jacques Derrida introduces *différance*, a term that evokes a difference, a distinction rather than identity, which had a lot of ramifications for humanities and social science⁸. French philosopher and its followers underline the excluding and oppressive power of the concept of identity⁹.

Nonetheless, the 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. As Zygmunt Bauman states:

“One hears today of identity and its problems more often than ever before in modern times 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”.¹⁰

Bauman deems the notion of identity as problematic from its own essence, since no one thinks about her identity, till there is a problem with dealing with the external social world, till the identity itself is 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 behavioral 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”.¹¹

This kind of conditions appeared in the historical moment in question, on so-called “Regained territories”, a frontier, an empty scene to be peopled by new settlers coming from the West, 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 a lack of tradition providing patterns of behaviour 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 a continuity of a group through time, what provides patterns for the creation of personal identity.

Jerzy Szacki enumerates three concepts of tradition: a social transmission, a heritage, and 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”.¹² The first concept, a dynamical one, concentrates around the topic of cultural communication through generations following each other. In

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. G. Ch. Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

⁹ Stuart Hall, “Introduction. Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, in: Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay (ed.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage Publications, 2003): 5.

¹⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist — or a Short History of Identity”, in: Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay (ed.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Sage Publications: London 2003): 18.

¹¹ *Idem.*

¹² Jerzy Szacki, *Tradycja* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego: Warsaw 2011): 102.

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 life, a certain pattern of culture is chosen as appropriate, gains common approval and is followed as a principle by a group who identifies with this tradition. Tradition is not all we receive as an inheritance, but only those elements, values, behaviours, rules, and principles that we take for granted, which form our cultural background.

Elements of Identity

During the analysis of the research sample, I collected terms referring to numerous persons — actors of narratives described in letters¹³. Because of the kind of the correspondence and its aims letters tell mostly about a conflict between the author of the text and his 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.

Analysis of descriptions of persons and self-descriptions of authors of letters yields several identity dimensions, such as:

1. Nationality
2. Language
3. Institutional affiliation
4. Geographical origins
5. Confession
6. Political engagement
7. Financial status
8. Professional skills
9. Physical shape
10. Gender

The overwhelming amount of instances of identity attributes belongs to first four bigger groups (nationality, language, institutional affiliation, geographical origins), while only a few instances of each of all the others, less numerous groups occur in the research sample. Nonetheless, my research is not aimed into bringing any quantitative results. The orders of the categories roughly reflect the frequency of representatives of each class. Descriptions of the identity of a particular person or persons actually found in peasants' letters often belong to more than one of the ten categories enumerated above. Hence, they should be treated as potential attributes of an identity rather than different, well-separated group of identities.

¹³ Research have been undertaken on the sample of 16 letters: 12 already published and 4 unpublished and read directly from manuscript or typescript.

Pole-catholic and Banderites

The first quotation already exhibits an intricate maze of cultural identity where its numerous aspects coincide with each other, explicitly presented by the author of the letter in a scholastic way, with a precision of a scientist. Moreover, a person is defining herself in relation to other persons related to her. Also, the chronological dimension of identity, namely its continued existence through the whole course of life, is taken into consideration:

“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) I and my children went 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”.¹⁴

This declaration attracts attention not only for 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”.¹⁵ All the ingredients of Polish national identity have been enumerated here in a precise and detailed manner. A national affiliation uncovers its multi-layer structure: 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-defence is based on a presumption that his eviction was caused by a mistaken attribution to him of a Ukrainian nationality. What needs to be emphasized is that he doesn't protest against national segregation as a general principle, but against a mistake of classifying him as a 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 implicit manner. The key feature of identity — Pole-catholic (*Polak-katolik*) — appears on an exposed place of the incipit of the letter. This feature manifests itself in a form of an equation, implied by the use of a substantive (Catholic) in a role of an 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 identity¹⁶. It

¹⁴ The Archives of Modern Records, Ministry of Regained Territories (further AAN MZO) 2/196/0/4/930, Michał Zdolski to Ministry of Regained Territories, Jurkowo, 19.08.1947.

¹⁵ Thomas Stearns Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes; essays on style and order* (London: Faber&Faber 1928): ix.

¹⁶ Maria Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna: fantazmaty literatury* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006).

originates from the XVII century, the epoch of Counter-reformation, and consolidated in the XIX century, during the period of “Partitions of Poland”, when the Polish state lost its political autonomy and for more than a century disappeared from the maps of the world. The main “distinctive feature” of Polish nationality became religious confession. It was brought about by the fact that even Polish language lost its vitality in some social groups and regions. For instance, during the XVIII and XIX century, French language was common among Polish aristocracy 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, with Eastern (Ukrainian, Russian, and Byelorussian) orthodox Christianity.

A figure of a 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. Zdolski decided to explicitly remark that she was a Polish mother, so as an attribute of being a “Polish mother” was a single, atomic feature of a subject. Of course, Mother-Pole cannot have another name than *Maria*, since Mary, the Holy Mother constitutes the archetype of the mother in this cultural context.¹⁷ 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 a male.

Another strategy of building a national identity we encounter in a letter of Klara Kunca. Still the strategy is built on national and linguistic dimensions.

“my Husband doesn’t want anything just calm work and cooperation with Polish Nation, and to give out his forces for reconstruction of our Fatherland, he has been living here on Opole territory (...) my son speaks fluent Polish language, and my Husband wants to admit Polish Nationality.”¹⁸

German family name is written according to the rules of Polish orthography (Kunca instead of Kunza) and awkward Polish grammar and orthography (serial opening capital letter of substantives à la German) disclose ethnic origins of the author. She belongs to the people who had been subjects of the transformation of their national identity. The wife writing in the name of her husband, who, presumably, is not literate, or less familiar with Polish written language, emphasizes his current attitude rather than his personal features and biography. She highlights his desire to “work and cooperation” (“prace i współpracę”), not his personal choices and past activities as in the letter of Zdolski. From the past times, she recalls only one fact, namely his long stay at the place which is not even referred to as Polish territory, but just “Opole territory”. Until now the Opole region is a site of the biggest German minority in Poland. Klara Kunca is not hiding the roots of her family, putting her husband in front of the Polish nation he is willing to cooperate with. Also,

¹⁷ Agnieszka Kościańska, *Twórcze odgrywanie Matki Polki i Matki Boskiej. Religia a symbolika macierzyńska w Polsce*, in: Renata Hryciuk, Elżbieta Korolczuk (ed.), *Pożegnanie z Matką Polką*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego (Warsaw, 2012).

¹⁸ Klara Kunca to the Prime Minister, Stary Popielów, 01.11.1947, in *Regiony* No 1/3 (1998): 135.

as far as regards language acquisition she stresses the fact that it is only the son who exhibits it on the native speaker level, what implies that her husband's Polish language knowledge leaves a lot to be desired. Their wish to become Poles, undoubtedly eager and zealous, leads to a decision which is not so smooth as it could be: the husband admits Polish nationality as a guilt ("chce się przyznać"), supposedly rather unwillingly. A difficulty of this confession is underlined by its "second mouth" way of making: the wife announces it in the name of her tacit husband.

Sometimes national identity is built not on a simple refutation of mistaken national belonging as in the case of Michał Zdolski's letter, but on reluctance, fear, and hate.

"our family village (...) (totally Polish village) during the 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 the Red Army and Polish Army".¹⁹

Here, in a concise and clear way, a structure of identification and refutation was outlined and signs of values have been unequivocally attributed. The sharp line between Germans and Ukrainians from one hand, and Polish and Russian from the other is drawn and stigmatizing traits (fascist bands, terror) leaves no doubts related to the moral evaluation of particular actors.

"400 Banderites attacked an indigenous Polish village (...) There we left those who paid with their blood in the fight against Banderites for our liberty and our life".²⁰

The authors of this letter originated from Tarnopol Voivodeship and "the indigenous Polish village"'s name was Panowice. A very significant appellation, since a term "Pan" was and is until now commonly attributed to "Polish lords" („Polscy panowie") who conquered and for centuries governed the territory of Ukraine²¹, even though the word comes from the Turkish language²². The village was attacked by a group of people called "Banderites" (Banderowcy). This term is very problematic in itself and it's not clear whether it should belong to national or institutional dimension of cultural identity. In popular Polish language (as well as Russian, but not Ukrainian) it gained negative connotations, even though the people designated with it use it by themselves. In its narrow meaning, it's a historical expression standing for a fraction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists lead by Stephan Bandera. Yet, in the Polish language, it is being

¹⁹ Franciszek Jaroszewski et alii to Ministry of National Defense, Zakrzów, nd., in: *Regiony* No 1/3 (1998): 122.

²⁰ Stanisław Smolski et alii to Ministry of Regained Territories, Podlesie, 04.06.1947, in: *Regiony* No 1/3 (1998): 133-134.

²¹ Paweł Jasienica, *Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów* (Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy: Warsaw 1986).

²² Aleksander Brückner, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* (Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza: Cracow 1927): 411.

applied most often in different and derogatory sense of Ukrainians who participated in murders of Jews and Poles during the Second World War under the Nazi German occupation²³. Smolski's letter draws attention with its style abounding with sublime formulas, phrasemes, and idioms.

The identity of the *Other* is constructed in a similar way as the identity of *Self* — with help of relations to other people. Michał Zdolski was a Pole, who had a Polish wife. In another letter, we meet a symbolical counterpart of the Pole-catholic figure: a German. He conducts

„life that is a disgrace for the Polish population. (...) he has close relations with Germans and has a German mistress he is living with (...) he has also a Polish girl he seduced and has a child with (...) on every occasion he expresses bad and disgraceful opinions on Polish nation and simply adores Germans. He said to his mistress that he is closely related to Germans since his father was a German”.²⁴

A Polish wife of Zdolski, a Mother-Pole is confronted with a “German mistress”. The latter is infertile, what stands in contrast to the fertility of Polish women. The previous wife of the hero of Kuna's letter (unmentioned in the quotation) had two children and his “Polish girl” gave birth to a child too. A German woman is not supposed to obtain a status of a legal wife and her infertility confirms this deficiency. Another element of national identity appears here, namely, a personal opinion on a given nationality. A nationality one identifies with and aspires to becomes an object of explicit approbation (“he adores Germans”), whereas a nationality one is refuting is described in derogatory terms (“disgraceful opinions on Polish nation”). However, the most important and ultimate factor attesting national is the moral attitude. The life of the hero of Kuna's letter is “a disgrace for Polish population”, what implies in the same time it wouldn't be such for another population. The whole construction is based on a presumption of his actual Polish national affiliation. This kind of accusations wouldn't make any sense in the case of a person of German nationality. Any hint that could undermine this assumption is at once put into doubt. When the hero of Kuna's letter himself declares his ethnic belonging, his utterance is delivered in a mode of reported (indirect) speech: “he said to his mistress”. In this way the credibility of this statement is attenuated, since he could be not sincere to his “mistress” as far as his national belonging is concerned.

Polish soldiers and Hitlerites

Apart from ethnic, 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

²³ Conf. Grzegorz Motyka, *Ukraińska partyzantka 1942-1960* (Rytm: Warsaw 2006).

²⁴ Władysław Kuna to Ministry of Regained Territories, Kielcznowice, 9.04.1947, in: *Regiony* No 1/3 (1998): 125.

as a “son of democratic Poland”. Democracy is another 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 the XVII century. “Noble democracy”, as the very term discloses, was limited to representatives of the aristocracy. Only the most powerful social group was allowed to participate in royal elections convoked upon the death or abdication of the reigning king. Of course, Zdolski alludes not to “noble democracy”, but to “peoples’ democracy” — one of the slogans of Polish United Workers’ Party that governed Poland at that time.

An institutional dimension of cultural identity is exemplified by a further point of Zdolski's list, the one concerning his military career. What strikes is that he mentions a period of time long before World War II that just finished (Zdolski writes his letter in 1947). This fact can only testify the value and meaning of such an element for the whole identity. His military service in peacetime, done fifteen years earlier is worth to mention, even at a cost of revealing lack of military engagement during the war.

The military service is a common identity element, which is quite comprehensible in the post-war period. Authors of letters describe themselves as active or demobilized soldiers or indicate others as such²⁵.

“We (...) ex-service men of Polish Army along with our families (...) we left our family village in a compact group (...) please, settle us with a right of military settlers”.²⁶

Authors of the letter just quoted seem to pretend to a special treatment as “military settlers”. Privileges for war veterans are quite uncontroversial demand, especially in Poland, where a profession of soldier has always enjoyed a high social trust.²⁷ What in fact could an inquiry to be treated as “military settlers” mean? In the case of this letter, it's not a big thing; they just request to be settled all together, “in a compact group”, in the same way they left their village.

“From part of the local repatriation office we see a tendency to scatter us one by one on the whole area of the all regained territories; in such conditions we will be withering like unacclimated plants on a foreign ground, whereas in a compact group we are able to work usefully and fruitfully on the regained territories as genuine pioneers, in every moment ready to defend free and democratic Poland”.²⁸

Their military belonging serves only as a pretext to help them to protect their real identity which is related neither to institutional affiliation, nor to a place of origins, but to a group of people living together. The place of their life counts less

²⁵ Eg. AAN MZO 2/196/0/4/930, Alfons Olejnik to Citz. Prime Minister Edward Osóbka Morawski, Kochanowo, 21.07.1946.

²⁶ Jaroszewski et alii to Ministry of National Defense, 122.

²⁷ Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, Komunikat z badań nr 18/2016, p. 14, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2016/K_018_16.PDF, 01 December 2017.

²⁸ Jaroszewski et alii to Ministry of National Defense, 122.

than the fact of their being together in a community in Ferdinand Tönnies' sense of this term, a group integrated with natural will.²⁹ This voice sounds unexpectedly contemporary in the epoch of mass nations' movement and a question of assimilation and, at the same time, of preserving national and ethnic cultural identity.

In the cases described above identification based on institutional affiliation, such as military, was appointed by subject oneself and, consequently, revealed a positive evaluation of the thing denoted. Army belongs to the most beloved and trusted institutions in the public sphere in Poland. This very same label, however, is equally often used to stigmatize someone as an enemy: a soldier of an opposite army. In the historical reality of those times it is a question of nationality of a soldier, as in the case of a "Hitlerite" ("hitlerowiec"):

"after getting of rehabilitation by a Hitlerite (...) I was removed with my family (..) indeed in a Hitlerite way (...) rehabilitated Hitlerite took all my one and a half year of work".³⁰

This label plays similar function as "Banderite", mentioned above, even though its semantic and axiological structure is not alike: the former is unequivocally pejorative, whereas the latter is currently being an object of a political struggle. Among others stigmatizing labels of this kind are "a Ukrainian soldier", "a Russian soldier"³¹ or even "Teutonic Order" ("krzyżactwo").³² The latter one evokes an association still present in Polish national consciousness between German nation, East Prussia, and Teutonic Order as an embodiment of the "dark side of power", a satanic kingdom, an eternal enemy of the Omnipotent Good and the Polish nation. An image of Teutonic Order in Polish national imagination was developed mostly on the base of Henryk Sienkiewicz's epic novel ("Krzyżacy", published in 1900) and its screening by Aleksander Ford in 1960 in a form of a monumental and colourful battle epic on a widescreen about the victory of good over evil.

Alfons Olejnik, as we could presume, borrowed this epithet from Edward Osóbka-Morawski, the prime minister of Polish government during 1944 to 1947 and the addressee of the letter of Olejnik. The author begins his with a memory of his attendance during Osóbka-Morawski speech in 1944 given "on a glade in the forest", just before the victorious march of Polish Army to Berlin "to hit the final blow to the Teutonic Order".³³

²⁹ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and civil society*, tr. J. Harris, M. Hollis (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge; New York 2001).

³⁰ Bronisław Pastuszek to Citz. President of the Polish Republic, Mikołów, 17.03.1948, in *Regiony* No 1/3 (1998): 135.

³¹ Julian Szpeciński to the Land Office („Urząd Ziemski”) in Warsaw, Dobrzyce, no date, in *Regiony* No 1/3 (1998): 136.

³² Olejnik to Citz. Prime Minister Edward Osóbka Morawski.

³³ Idem.

Repatriates, Centralaks, Locals, and Others

A place of origin is another critical dimension of cultural identity. By a place of origin I mean provisionally a space occupied by a person directly before coming to “Regained Territories”, not necessarily her place of birth. The sample of letters roughly confirms findings of historians of the topic, who separate three groups of immigrants to “Regained Territories”: exiles from the East, emigrants from Central Poland, and victims of forced labour coming back from Germany³⁴. Certainly, with a closer view, the image gets complicated. Aside from immigrants, some local, German-speaking population remained and contributed to the creation of a new society³⁵, sometimes keeping its dominant position, making German diaspora the biggest national minority in Poland³⁶. Exiles from the East identify themselves mostly as a “repatriate from behind the Bug” or “repatriate from Eastern Borderlands” (*Kresy Wchodnie*).

The reader of peasants’ letters often meets such expressions as “centralak”(ang. “centraler”) or “repatriant” (ang. “repatriate”). The first one refers to a member of the population of Central Poland, while the latter denotes people from the Eastern part of Poland before World War II. “Centralak” is a derogatory term. It expresses condemnation of a person designed by it. In this function it is used by Smolski (“farms illegally occupied by (...) centralaks”³⁷). “Repatriate” is a neutral, or even positive term, commonly used as a self-description; Smolski and his comrades identify themselves as “we the repatriates”³⁸. This phrase repeated constantly in many letters as a self-description seems to sound proud and play a role of self-appraisal. Belonging to a repatriate wave from the East is often associated with a loss of economic goods:

“I am a repatriate from Easter Borderlands and I lost big properties”.³⁹

Another testimony:

“I left the farm of 7 hectares behind the Bug, buildings, oil mill and locksmith-blacksmith’s workshop for which I have evidence”.⁴⁰

Here another dimension of cultural identity emerges, namely, a financial status, which deserves to be mentioned even though it belongs to the past.

³⁴ Halicka, *Polski Dziki Zachód*, 211.

³⁵ See Kulczycki, *Belonging to the Nation*.

³⁶ After Silesians and Kashubians. Nevertheless, this situation is changing dynamically in past few years and currently Ukrainians outnumber Germans, but there is still no reliable research on the topic.

³⁷ Stanisław Smolski et alii to Ministry of Regained Territories, 134.

³⁸ Idem.

³⁹ Władysław Czarnak to Powiat Eldership, Wierzchowicze, 21.09.1946, in *Regiony* No 1/3 (1998): 122.

⁴⁰ AAN MZO 2/196/0/4/930, Józef Piotrowski to Ministry of Regained Territories, Marcinkowo, 10.06.1947.

The distinction between a repatriate and a settler from Central Poland is often underlined: “above-mentioned citz. Eljasz is a settler, not a repatriate”.⁴¹ In the eyes of Józef Piotrowski, the author of the letter, this fact speaks in his own favour and historical justice is on the side of repatriates rather, than settlers (from Central Poland).

According to the testimony of Jan Poźniak a “tradesman from Central Poland” took over half of his farm in a dishonest way, having bribed local officials⁴². An identity of Poźniak, supposedly semi-literate, is described by a person who actually wrote the text in his name as “demobilized soldier of Polish Army”⁴³. Poźniak’s justification of his rights to the farm left by German people was different than Czarnak or Piotrowski; he doesn’t mention any possession he would have lost in the East. Instead, he depicts his own contribution to the farm: “I healed a sick horse (...) I bought seeds of my own money”⁴⁴, but doesn’t disclose anything from his past. He is a person from nowhere. His opponent, even though supposedly coming from another region (Central Poland), seems to be more integrated to the local community (“his father in law is a distiller”⁴⁵)

“After demobilization follows grim and hopeless wandering in search of family and home”.⁴⁶

Olejniak is a person from nowhere too. He distances itself both from the settlers from central Poland (“all farms in this area were occupied by the settlers from central Poland”), as well as from the repatriates. Ostensibly, from the introductory part of his letter, he declares belonging to a group of “demobilized soldiers”, which, as it were, exempts him from the obligation to discover the roots in a geographical sense. Maybe these roots don’t exist anymore? “I lost what a man can lose — family and home”.⁴⁷

A succeeding part of this national puzzle are “locals” (“tutejsi”). This term is unstable as far as its axiological dimension is concerned: it can be marked both in a positive and a pejorative way. On the one hand, arriving repatriates situate themselves in the opposition to the “local population”:

“We (...) encounter rather mockery, contemptuous and harsh treatment, as well as reluctance from a part of the local population”.⁴⁸

On the other hand, a relation to local people is pointed out as an argument for assigning a farm already promised:

⁴¹ Idem.

⁴² AAN MZO 2/196/0/4/930, Jan Poźniak to the Military Settlement Department of Ministry of Regained Territories, Warszawa, 03.09.1946.

⁴³ Idem.

⁴⁴ Idem.

⁴⁵ Idem.

⁴⁶ Olejniak to Citz. Prime Minister Edward Osóbka Morawski.

⁴⁷ Idem.

⁴⁸ Jaroszewski et alii to Ministry of National Defense, 123.

“I signed below, a repatriate from behind the Bug (...) I remark that my son in law is a local”.⁴⁹

In the case of Maria Kuczma, her relation with locals is not even of kindred but more an affinity (son in law). It is not without significance. This ambiguity appearing in reference to local people is brought about by the vagueness of their national identity. On one hand they are undoubtedly Poles since they stayed after “verification” of their nationality, but on the other hand, their “locality” arouses suspicions of them being Germans — *Volksdeutsche*.

“80% of inhabitants are Germans (..) after verification it turned out that there are no Germans at all, and all are Poles-Silesians”.⁵⁰

Symmetrical ambiguity concerns immigrants arriving in the “Regained Territories”. On one hand, deprived of their own goods by war incited by Germans they obtain a recompense for their loss. On the other hand, farms deserted by Germans are the private property of people unrelated with warfare and war victims to exactly the same extent as the repatriates from East — being actually repatriates from East as well, according to an ironic law of historical-geometrical translation. Possessions left on the East are intending 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 becomes “Wild West” in a sense that during the time of the beginnings no official, state intervention and control was possible. This state of things was artistically elaborated in cinema, in a movie “The Law and the Fist” (1964) by Jerzy Hoffman and Edward Skórzewski. The settlers should have created and executed the law with their own means.

One of the differences between the history of “Wild West” in North America and of “Regained Territories” in Poland is that while Europeans conquering America were mostly not interested by the heritage of civilisations of Indigenous people, Poles “conquering” “Regained Territories” went after most of the goods that remained after Germans. The culture of Indigenous People was perceived by Europeans as less developed than their own, whereas the civilisation met by the Poles in new, western Polish territory turned out to be situated on a higher technological level than their own, left in Central Poland or in the East.

German real estates and its equipment quickly became objects of looting (*szaber*) and robbery.⁵¹ Specialized group of people making their living out of robbery got a name *szabrownik* (looter). Alfons Olejnik, a demobilized soldier of Polish Army, complains about his fate: “a demobilized soldier is left at the mercy of a looter”. At the final part of his letter, he repeats this expression: “a pauper left

⁴⁹ Maria Kuczma to Ministry of Justice, Inowrocław, 23.05.1946, in *Regiony* No 1/3 (1998): 124.

⁵⁰ Stanisław Smolski et alii to Ministry of Regained Territories, 134.

⁵¹ Kulczycki, *Belonging to the Nation*, 104.

at the mercy of a looter”. And here, again, a distinction in financial status appears: “looter can have two houses (...) whereas I am not supposed to have any decent house”.⁵² The demobilized soldier is embittered since he came too late when all the deserted farms had already been taken. His economic status is much lower than one of looters, who seem to belong to the financial elite.

Women, Non-farmers, Invalids

Not often, but still, some gender-based personal identification occurs:

“we as women are too weak to oppose evil, we put ourselves under the protection of Citizen Minister, aware that the harm will be rewarded to us”.⁵³

The author of the letter perceives her social placement as a woman as not fully autonomous. She perceives herself as a member of a group (“we as women”). In a religious manner, in the name of the group she asks for help as in a classical form of supplication.⁵⁴ She motivates their demand by their impaired social position (“we are too weak”).

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

“farms illegally occupied by non-farmers (...) and so machines are idle in the hands of unprofessional people”.⁵⁵

This distinction is of a different nature than above-mentioned social status, even if it could refer to the same people. Stanisław Smolski perceives himself and his mates as qualified farmers, able to handle specialized machines that posed often a problem for farmers from the East who saw that technology for the first time. At the same time he doesn't belong in his opinion to a group of wealthy people:

“We are not able to settle with help of PUR [Państwowy Urząd Repatriacyjny / State Repatriation Office], since they are only for wealthy people”.⁵⁶

One of the letters from the research sample contained as an element of the author self-description his physical disability, most probably gained during his military service during the war:

“I (...) a repatriate from behind the Bug served in Polish Army, I am

⁵² Olejnik to Citz. Prime Minister Edward Osóbka Morawski.

⁵³ AAN MZO 2/196/0/4/930, Józefa Sewruk to Ministry of Regained Territories, Bydgoszcz, 14.10.1946.

⁵⁴ Dariusz Jarosz, “Supliki chłopskie z czasów kolektywizacji (1949-1955)”, in *Regiony* No 1 (1992).

⁵⁵ Stanisław Smolski et alii to Ministry of Regained Territories, 134.

⁵⁶ Idem.

as a handicapped (...) no farmhand, no farmer on this farm (...) after the harvest my partner threshes, but he does not allow me to thresh (...) and he says you Ukrainian you have nothing here (...) now we don't have bread".⁵⁷

In the testimony of Paweł Zawada several dimensions of personal cultural identity interlace. He belongs to the whole set of excluded minorities, from physical (as a handicapped), social (no farmhand, no farmer), national (Ukrainian), and economical aspect.

Conclusion

Analysis conducted in this paper intends the reconstruction of typical personal identities that emerge from the world presented into peasants' letter to the authorities on so-called "Regained Territories". A melting pot of dynamical identities produced a complicated network of identities rather than a map of a territory with well-defined borders. The volume of research sample is infinitive small in comparison to the number of testimonies of priceless scientific value, able to serve as a source for social, psychological, historical, anthropological, ethnological, linguistic, media and literary studies.

Abstract: A New Tradition. Construction of Cultural Identity of Farmers in „Regained Territories“ of Poland after the World War II in the Light of Their Letters to Authorities

After the Second World War Poland became a scene of huge immigration movement. One of the biggest waves flooded so called "Regained Territories" consisting of Western and Northern part of current Poland. The point of interest of the paper is the construction of the cultural identity of population settling in villages. The source for the research conducted was provided by national archives and has the form of letters sent by rural settles to the state authorities. Therefore a bottom-up perspective has been applied. After the textual analysis of the sample of 16 letters ten dimensions of cultural identity had been discovered, such as nationality, language, institutional affiliation, geographical origins, confession, political engagement, financial status, professional skills, physical shape, and gender. Some of these dimensions mingle creating types of cultural identity such as Pole-catholic, Mother-Pole, or Polish soldiers. Their opponents, described with derogatory terms, are Hitlerites, Banderites, German mistress, or looters. The research shows a precious historical and scientific value of peasants' letters, allowing to access to the information about a cultural self-identification of their authors.

Keywords: cultural identity, immigration, multiculturalism, communism, Poland, Regained Territories.

⁵⁷ Paweł Zawada to Ministry of Regained Territories, Prusinowice, 17.03.1947, in *Regiony* No 1/3 (1998): 132.