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Anna Wylegała: Memory, Memories and Rootedness: A New Polish Community in a Formerly German Town

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Abstract¹

This paper presents processes of inter-generational change in the fields of local historical memory and local identity in a small town in western Poland. Before the war, the town was part of Germany and was populated exclusively by Germans. After the war, Germans were displaced and in their place new settlers arrived – repatriates from the former Polish eastern frontier and inhabitants of neighbouring Polish villages. As part of the ‘Regained Lands,’ the town became a kind of social laboratory during the communist period. A completely new community was created in what had been a social vacuum. Two generations of inhabitants of the new Polish western and northern territories were brought up in the entire community’s repressed historical memory and the repressed personal memories of their parents and grandparents. What is the current shape of local historical memory in the town and were the new settlers successful in building a new community and a new homeland? How do different generations of the community remember their town’s past, how much do they know about it and to what extent do they identify with it? To what extent do people of various generations feel at home in a town in which before the war there were neither Poles nor Polish culture? The methodological framework of the research is based on oral history and the methods of qualitative sociology – biographical in-depth, semi-directed interviews and participative observation. Preliminary results show that the process of constructing a new community has been successful, however, for different generations it is an absolutely different community. For the oldest interviewees, it is a community of coercion, whereas for younger people it is the community of birth, which is fully accepted. The new community is based mainly on its rootedness in space, not in time. People feel truly attached to the place where they live, but do not have any special bonds linking them to the past of the town. While the oldest interviewees generally ignore the past in silence, the younger are less or not at all aware of it. At the same time, certain processes of constructing imaginary relationships with the Polish past of the region are taking place.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the process of change in the fields of local historical memory and local identity in western Poland. The ‘Regained Lands,’ the current north-western territories of Poland, were populated almost exclusively by Germans until the war. After the war, as result of international decrees, those territories were incorporated into the new communist Polish state. Over 3.5 million Germans were forced to leave their homes, while another 3.5 million had already left at the end of the war.² In return, over 1.7 million inhabitants of the former eastern territories of Poland, which were incorporated into the USSR, settled in the region.³ Other large groups of settlers were people from central and western Poland, who decided to move in search of a better life, land and work.

The ‘Regained Lands’ became a kind of social laboratory during the communist period. Completely new communities were created in their social vacuum. People coming from various regions and with various experiences were brought together and forced to build new local communities. Moreover, they were subjected to strong communist propaganda which was aimed at creating the conviction that there was an ‘immemorial’ affiliation of those territories to Polish culture and statehood.⁴ Topics such as expulsion of the Germans and former ‘small homelands’ left in the east were forbidden. Two generations of inhabitants in the new western and northern territories of Poland were brought up in a situation where the entire

1 The research for this paper was conducted thanks to the support of the Center of Urban History of East Central Europe in Lviv, Ukraine.

2 Madajczyk, Piotr: *Niemcy polscy 1944–1989*, Warszawa: Oficyna Nowa, 2001; Frantziuch, Marion: *Socjologiczne aspekty problemu wypędzenia Niemców*, in: Orłowski Hubert, Sakson, Andrzej (eds.): *Utracona ojczyzna. Przymusowe wysiedlenia, deportacje i przesiedlenia jako wspólne doświadczenie*, Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1996, pp. 143–170.

3 Urban, Thomas: *Utracone ojczyzny. Wypędzenia Niemców i Polaków w XX w.*, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 2007.

4 Sakson, Andrzej: *Niemcy w świadomości społecznej Polaków*, in: Wolff-Pawęska, Anna (ed.): *Polacy wobec Niemców. Z dziejów kultury politycznej Polski 1945–1989*, Poznań, Instytut Zachodni, pp. 408–429.

community's historical memory and the memories of their parents and grandparents had been repressed. For those communities, the fall of communism meant more than important external changes and political, economical and social transformation. It also represented a release of the repressed memory and created the necessity of building a new one in a completely changed situation; a situation characterised by the availability of information, the neutrality of the state, the presence of former inhabitants of the region coming to visit it and – of equal importance – the opportunity to visit one's former 'small homeland.'

In this paper, I will present the preliminary results of my research conducted in a small town in north-western Poland (named Kreuz before the war, currently Krzyż). Before the war, Kreuz/Krzyż was a German border station on the frontier with Poland. It was populated almost exclusively by Germans; Poles lived only in the neighbouring villages. At the end of the war, most of the male population had already been killed on the front or were in Prisoner-of-War camps, while the remainder, together with the women, children and elderly, fled to Germany. Those who stayed were deported during the first post-war years. Those who arrived to these empty towns were mainly Poles deported from the former Polish eastern territories, emigrants from central Poland, settlers from neighbouring Polish villages and a small group of party nomenclature.

This research, which I have been working on since May 2007, anticipates the use of a cross-generational approach, namely interviews in families with representatives of each generation. So far, twenty interviews with the elder inhabitants of the town have been conducted (interviewees aged 71–93, among them seven women and eight men), as well as ten interviews with representatives of the middle generation (five men, five women, aged 39–61) and several less structured talks with members of the younger generation. The methodological approach follows oral history standards and the technique of the biographical in-depth, semi-directed interview.⁵ At the same time, the research includes participative observation while staying in the town for longer periods of time, taking part in local celebrations of state, religious and local holidays, and non-biographical interviews with local leaders (teachers, town council members, priests, librarians).

The goal of this research is to answer the question about the current shape of the local historical memory in various generations of the community. My understanding of the notion of historical memory follows the works of Habwachs and Szacka.⁶ However, adding the 'local' before 'historical' indicates that the subject of the research is remembering a local, not national or any other more widely understood past. What interests me is what and how the inhabitants of Krzyż remember and know about their town history and its former inhabitants. How do people evaluate the political and territorial changes since 1945 which led to their settlement of the 'Regained Lands' today? What is the image of the civilian German population encountered on those territories in 1945? What is the attitude toward Germans today, especially when they come to visit their former homes? To what extent do people of various generations feel at home in this town, where before the war there were neither Poles nor Polish culture?

2. The Elder Generation

In my paper, I will focus mainly on the interviews with the oldest generation since the current stage of research for this part of the material is the most complete one. The oldest generation is the only one which personally encountered the previous inhabitants of the town in their place of residence and who were witnesses to the transformation of the German town into a Polish one. In their case, one should talk not only about collectively and socially understood memory, but first and foremost about personal memories, later influenced by collective imagination; and probably because the war and first post-war years in Krzyż

5 Thompson, Paul: *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978; Helling, I.K.: *Metoda badań biograficznych*, in: Włodarek, J., Ziółkowski, M. (eds.): *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii*, Warszawa-Poznań: Wydawnictwo PWN, 1990, pp. 13–38.

6 Halbwachs, Maurice: *Společné ramy paměti*, Warszawa: PWN, 1969; Szacka, Barbara: *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2006.

are those people's most important biographical experience, it seems that the influence of official propaganda and collective imagination was rather marginal in this case.

The interviewees from the oldest generation are fully conscious of the German past of the town. Those who came from neighbouring Polish villages visited Krzyż before the war and thus knew it as a place from outside the borders, not Polish, but German. Also the repatriates do not have any illusions about who lived in the town before they did. Even after the Germans were completely expelled, the new settlers used things which reminded them of the former Germanness of the place everyday: school notebooks left by German children, kitchen items with German inscriptions on them and German mailboxes. Additionally, both groups met the German civilian population upon arriving in Krzyż; some people even lived together with Germans for a couple of weeks or months before the latter left for the west. Interestingly, the general image of Germans is rather positive in the memories of both groups. Only one person expressed open hatred and hostility toward Germans in general. Instead, a portion of the interviewees – mostly those coming from eastern Poland – felt sympathy for the civilian population that was expelled from their houses, just as they were expelled only some time before. Several issues can explain such a positive or at least neutral attitude. First and foremost, no one, apart from the one person already mentioned, experienced serious reprisals from the Germans. Interviewees from neighbouring Polish villages were German forced labourers during the war, but they were happy to work in small family farms or workshops (where they were treated very well), rather than in the work camps or large land estates. They spent the war far away from the German atrocities and met mostly 'normal,' 'average' Germans. The real war – the front experience and war damage – began for them with the arrival of the Soviet Army. For interviewees coming from the east, this was even more significant: those who were arresting, killing and displacing Poles to Siberia were Soviets, not Germans, and the Soviets were responsible for their displacement from the eastern frontier after 1945. In comparison to the Soviets, who were also perceived as barbarians and representatives of a hostile civilisation, the Germans' faults seemed much smaller.⁷

Consciousness of the past of the town, however, did not make the process of adaptation to the new place much easier. None of the interviewees came to Krzyż fully voluntarily and this fact obviously influences their attitude to the town as such. Various research shows that the most successful migrations – that is, migrations which resulted in a full reconstruction of the immigrants' social structures in the new place – are voluntary migrations in which immigrants feel that they can make decisions about their own lives.⁸ For the immigrants to Krzyż, it was the war which made them settle in this town and thus which changed their lives radically. For some of them, the severe economic conditions in their pre-war place of residence made them move to the empty and ruined town. The other group, the so called 'repatriates,' was made to leave their former houses on the east and then forced to settle in Krzyż. For them, the process of adaptation was particularly difficult. After the displacement, they encountered totally a different environment, architecture, landscape and living conditions. The longing for the homeland left in the east and feelings of impermanence – during the first few years after the-war, a new war was expected at any moment – provided in many cases a reason to dislike the new place. People did not want to settle in seriously because they still hoped to return.

In the case of the 'Poznanians' (settlers from neighbouring villages, inhabitants of the Poznan voivodeship) the feeling of alienation was much smaller. The German style of the buildings and everyday culture were not so different from what they knew from home. However, both groups of new settlers took part in the process of 'de-Germanisation' and then 'Polonisation' of the town, which in the case of the repatriates was also an attempt to make the new place of living resemble the old one. For both groups, the gradual process of adaptation to the new place was more a process of establishing the community's rootedness in

7 This paradox – a positive/ neutral image of the Germans and a negative image of the Soviets – has been widely discussed in research dealing with repatriates' biographical narratives: Kaźmierska, Kaja: *Doświadczenia wojenne Polaków a kształtowanie tożsamości etnicznej. Analiza narracji kresowych*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 1999.

8 A useful typology of successful and unsuccessful migrations can be found in: Mach, Zdzisław: *Niechciane miasta. Migracja i tożsamość społeczna*, Kraków: Universitas, 1998.

space than in history.⁹ The space was 'domesticated' by giving new names to the streets, villages, schools, taking down German monuments and building new ones, and transforming Protestant churches into Catholic ones. Feelings of belonging to the community were gradually created by getting to know neighbours, new friends and through mixed marriages between people from different groups of settlers. Even though the history was known, it could not be used as a basis for local identity and a new local community because it did not belong to the group as such. To assimilate the space, its history needed to be ignored in silence.

After more than 60 years, the place has obviously ceased to be completely 'new' and 'alien.' However, the memory of the first post-war years of instability and uncertainty is still alive among the interviewees. Additionally, differences in the way certain groups of settlers identify with the town are still visible. For interviewees who came from the east, the lost homeland and the experience of displacement is still very important. Their rootedness in space is still double – in many cases their orientation in the lost space of the hometown or village in the east is at least as good as their orientation in the space of Krzyż. Moreover, the oldest generation of interviewees still divide inhabitants of the town into people from the eastern frontier and 'Poznanians,' even though all of them define themselves now first and foremost as inhabitants of Krzyż.

These strong sub-identifications and vivid memories from the war (and lost homelands) do not create any challenges to the current situation. My interviewees – especially those from the eastern frontier – in no way see the postwar border changes as positive, but in their understanding there was no other solution at this time, and it is too late to change anything now. Usually, they do not visit their homelands even though it is possible today. When asked why, they answer that they do not want to see it in ruins and that it would not result in any good. However, they greet Germans coming to visit Krzyż with sympathy and understanding, somehow envying their courage to come back. It is important that among the oldest generation of my interviewees there is no fear of Germans who will 'come and take our houses' – the slogan so often used in western Poland before the referendum on EU accession. People are convinced that they are the legitimate owners of their town, and just as they do not harbour any inclinations to revenge, they are not afraid of others having them.

3. The Younger Generations

The younger generations – the generation born in the 1940s–1960s and the generation born in the 1970s–1990s – only know the war and first post-war years from family narratives, school, official propaganda (in case of the middle generation). This means that they did not directly experience the presence of other groups and cultures in their hometown's past, but through certain media transmissions. The war was not a direct experience for any of them; none of them remember Germans in Krzyż and the Germanness of the town as such. It is true that the middle generation played among the war ruins and remembers having things with German names and inscriptions from childhood. However, both the middle and youngest generation of the interviewees heard little or nothing at all about Germans in Krzyż. It was not an important topic in their families; there were no tales about living together with civilian Germans, even if their parents really experienced such coexistence before 1946. This situation was a direct consequence of the general attitude toward town history, neither hostility toward its German past, nor affirmation of it; it was simply ignored. The younger generations derived their knowledge of the town and regional history from official sources – school textbooks, official media and commemoration ceremonies on the local and state level. The middle generation in particular grew up in an atmosphere of very strong state propaganda which forced the vision of the immemorial Polishness of the 'Regained Lands' and anti-German agitation upon them. Quite often, this fostered a belief in the 'germanisation' of a small number of Poles in 'Regained

9 I understand rootedness here as the 'awareness of having one's own place in the world, having special references in the past, references [of an individual] which make up his/her sense of continuation, duration in time and space': Melchior, Małgorzata: Rootedness in place, rootedness in memory as exemplified by Polish-Jewish identity, in: *Sprawy Narodowościowe, Seria Nowa*, 2007 (Vol. 31).

Lands' before the war among the middle generation. The youngest generation, brought up at the end of the communist period or after 1989, learned history from different textbooks, where for the first time the post-war expulsion of the Germans was at least briefly mentioned. However, they repeat in part clichés about Poles who once were living in Krzyż and only afterwards were replaced by the Germans.

For the younger generation, this family history is something related, not experienced, and of course it influences their attitudes to the town where they were born as the first or second generation of new inhabitants. For those, whose parents or grandparents came to Krzyż from neighbouring Polish villages, the pre-war border is already unrecognisable. Whereas Krzyż, even though it was only 10 or 15 kilometers from their home village, was for the older generation in a foreign country before the war, for the younger interviewees it has been always part of their country. In some cases the youngest interviewees, mostly teenagers, even do not realize that Krzyż was in Germany before the war. Such ignorance is much less common among those interviewees whose parents and grandparents came to Krzyż from the eastern frontier of Poland. Most of them more or less know their family history, and are at least conscious that they have their origins in today's Ukraine or Belarus. Although the 'eastern frontier stories' were not welcome in the communist period, displacement was such a defining experience for repatriates that its memory was carefully cultivated in their families. However, even if the children and grandchildren of the repatriates know the history of their family arrival in Krzyż, it is still not their own experience. It did not change their own lives, they do not regret living here instead of in the east, and they feel no nostalgia. While talking about their friends or neighbours, they do not divide them into 'from the east' and 'from Poznań' because for them all inhabitants of Krzyż are simply from Krzyż.

While for the oldest interviewees the space needed to be 'domesticated' in order to be accepted, for the younger generation this particular space is the only one known as their 'own' from the very beginning; it does not need any changes to become familiar and safe. They do not have any feeling of alienation toward German material culture – mostly because they simply have not noticed that something was German. The architectural features which were perceived as alien and strange by their parents and grandparents are simply local and obvious to them. Interestingly, Germanness sometimes appears in the form of vocabulary and passes unnoticed: people refer to an 'after-German' building, not necessarily meaning 'belonging to the Germans before the war,' but rather, 'old, good, solidly built house, which probably needs some restoration.'

As in the case of the oldest generation, the younger interviewees build their local identity more on rootedness in space than in time. They are proud of having been born in this particular place; they value the beautiful countryside, and feel attached to the town and their neighbourhoods. However, while their parents/grandparents had to create an attachment consciously by focusing on the place and ignoring history, which at that time and in those conditions was the only way to 'domesticate' the town, for the younger interviewees the attachment is natural. They are part of the community because they were born here and thus belong here. The situation of the older generation was not as obvious.

As has already been stated, the younger interviewees' attitude towards the former Germanness of their town is quite unreflective. They are, on the whole, aware of it, but on a rather superficial level. Instead, they situate town history in the frame of the regional history of Greater Poland. Even though, Krzyż was, in fact, never part of the historical region of Greater Poland (only after the war was the adjective denoting 'Greater Poland' added to the name of the town – Krzyż Wielkopolski – as it was to many names in the 'Regained Lands'). Historical events connected with the region, for example Greater Poland's Uprisings in 1918, are important events in their history for them. It is also visible in official celebrations and commemorations. During this year's celebrations of May the 3rd (Polish First Constitution Day, 1794) the honour guard stood by the monument of 'The Return of the Regained Land to the Motherland' located in the centre of the town all day. The guards wore uniforms of the insurgents of 1918, who never actually

fought in the area of Krzyż. As we can see, a lack of actual rootedness in time is not a problem; when it is needed, the relationship can be constructed.¹⁰

Younger generations of the interviewees rarely see Germans as the former inhabitants of the town; more often they treat them as neighbours from the other side of the border, potential economical partners and normal tourists. Such an attitude is mainly prevalent among the youngest people, raised in an independent Poland, and is quite similar to the attitude towards German in Poland in general¹¹. They did not experience the largest wave of German 'sentimental tourism' to western Poland in the seventies and hardly remember the second wave at the beginning of the nineties. Today, Germans coming to Krzyż as tourists are generally mostly normal tourists, coming to take advantage of the fresh air and beautiful countryside. Former inhabitants are already too old or, as with the Polish repatriates from the Eastern frontier, do not want to visit their lost homeland. The middle generation is somehow less enthusiastic about the Germans and the most prejudiced among all the interviewees. The oldest people were resistant to communist anti-German propaganda because of their direct contact with German civilians after the war; the youngest generation was not exposed to such an influence or was exposed to it to a very small extent; in contrast, the middle generation did not have any of those advantages and this can, in part, explain their distrust.

There is one element which is not observable among any of the interviewees, no matter which generation they belong to. None are fascinated by the German past and the Germanness of the town; none fully consciously accept the German heritage of the town as one's one, as is the case in Wrocław, Gdansk or in the Mazury region,¹² where intellectuals have discovered the German cultural heritage and have quite successfully integrated it into their local identity. There are several possible explanations for the lack of this process, so common in other parts of the 'Regained Lands.' The first is the geographical position of the town. Since its founding in the middle of the 19th century, Krzyż has been located in a borderland: at first on the border of the German region, and then on the border with the Polish state, and finally on the border of the Polish voivodeships. This made its identity and character quite fluid and receptive to change. The existing literature describes such places as easier to 'Polonise' after the war than places of uniform, decidedly German character. Another reason is the lack of German cultural artefacts of special value which could serve as the basis for such a fascination. Krzyż is a relatively young town (founded in the mid 19th century), and with the exception of two churches, there are no significant architectural monuments, nor were any famous Germans born in Krzyż. In a word, the Germanness of the town was quite easy to forget. Moreover, it seems that there is no influential group of people who would be interested in remembering and discovering Germanness there. In the aforementioned regions, where local Poles cultivate German cultural heritage, this process was started namely by the intelligentsia. In Krzyż local historians, teachers and cultural activists are fully aware of the town's German past, but do not see any special value in it.

I would say that the general attitude of my interviewees to the German material culture can be defined as neutral. Just after the war, processes parallel to those happening in other areas of the 'Regained Lands' took place in Krzyż: monuments were destroyed, brick buildings were plastered, the interiors of Protestant churches were taken down and wooden verandas were added to the German stone or brick farms.¹³ However, it seems that even then this process, if one is not talking about official propaganda but about people's opinions and feelings, was not characterised by hatred towards a space which was German, but rather by a desire to make the space more Polish and familiar. The fact that German buildings were not destroyed, as in other places, but only remodelled, converted to a form which was acceptable to the new inhabitants, serves as evidence for this hypothesis. The best example is the German cemetery in Krzyż.

10 Obviously, this recalls Hobsbawm's 'invention of tradition': Hobsbawm, Eric, Ranger, Terence, (eds.): *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

11 Fałkowski, Mateusz: *Razem w Unii. Niemcy w oczach Polaków 2000–2005*, Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2006.

12 Łukowski, Wojciech: *Spółeczne tworzenie ojczyzn. Studium tożsamości mieszkańców Mazur*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar: Warszawa, 2002.

13 Czarnuch, Zbigniew: *Oswajanie krajobrazu. Polscy osadnicy w dorzeczu dolnej Warty*, in: Mazur, Z. (ed.): *Wokół niemieckiego dziedzictwa kulturowego na Ziemiach Północnych i Zachodnich*, Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1997.

While in many other places German cemeteries were barbarously destroyed, in Krzyż the cemetery was just abandoned as a harmless and unnecessary place. No longer cared for, it fell into ruin and was partially destroyed at the end of nineties – again, not because it was German, but because more room was needed for the neighbouring Polish cemetery. When asked about this event today, interviewees reacted rather indifferently.

4. Conclusions

Returning to the questions asked in the introduction, I would say that a new community has been successfully constructed in Krzyż. Of course, it is an absolutely different community for the different generations. For the oldest interviewees, it is a community of coercion; they belong to this community because of the outcome of the war,¹⁴ which was beyond their control. Had it not been for the war, they never would have come to Krzyż voluntarily. This circumstance greatly influenced their attitudes to the new place of settlement and caused problems in adaptation, which in the case of some repatriates still have meaning. For the younger generation, belonging to the community is obvious because they were born in Krzyż.

The new community is based mainly on rootedness in space, not in time. People feel truly attached to the place where they live, but do not have any special bonds linking them to the town's past. While the oldest interviewees were silently ignoring the past, the younger are less aware or even entirely unaware of it. At the same time, certain processes of constructing an imaginary relationship with a Polish past for the region are evident. The younger generation derives their knowledge about local history from official sources more than from family transmission, which in the case of the middle generation resulted in some prejudices against the Germans.

General attitudes toward Germans, those remembered by the oldest interviewees from the war times and those currently visiting Krzyż, can be described as positive. The oldest generation was hardly influenced by the official anti-German propaganda as the basis for their opinion was their predominantly positive personal contact with the German population. Moreover, their attitude towards Germans as former householders of the town is characterised more by sympathy than by fear or distrust. The youngest generation perceives Germans mostly as normal tourists, economical partners etc., and not as the former owners of their homes.

Thus, research has shown without a doubt that history and the past matter, but less and less with each generation. Whether this is positive or negative we will see in the near future.

14 For a definition of 'trajectory' by F. Schütze, see: Riemann, Gerhard, Schütze, Fritz: 'Trajektorja' jako podstawowa koncepcja teoretyczna w analizach cierpienia i beładnych procesów społecznych, in: *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 1992 (Vol. 36, issue 2) pp. 89–111.