

Gloomy Landscapes. Everyday Strategies of Identity in 1960s Poland. A Case Study

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Landscapes can incarnate ideas and ideologies, they can become sources for discourses of different types, and they can be the ground stone for identities too. For Barbara R. the thousand lakes and the never-ending forest of Northern Poland were the landscapes of her childhood, but they also provided her with a precise image of the world, an image that was a main piece of the identity she had to build in order to survive in the strange conditions of post-war Warmia and Masuria. The two regions, very close from a geographical, historical and even administrative point of view, were parts of Ostpreußen, the former German province of Eastern Prussia that after 1945 was divided between Russia and Poland. Most of their inhabitants fled or were deported to Germany. Thousands of people expelled from the Eastern Polish Regions, now under Soviet rule, came to settle in those former German lands, trying to come to terms with a new homeland that was alien and strange to them.

But unlike many of her neighbours, Barbara R. was born there, in this same territory, not very far away from her present home. She and her parents were, in the official statistics, “autochthonous”, part of the alleged Polish natives who had survived centuries of German oppression and who were purportedly waiting for the “return” of the area to the motherland.

Materials of memory

Barbara’s remembrances of childhood and youth are preserved at the Western Institute (*Instytut Zachodni*), in Poznań, the capital city of the Wielkopolska region in Poland, together with more than 800 diaries and memoirs. Such diaries and memoirs are notations of the time or subsequent recollections mostly written by people who settled, after the Second World War, in the former German regions ceded to Poland at the Potsdam conference, the so-called “Northern and Western Regions”. The memoirs were collected by means of diverse competitions that had been announced in radio and newspapers and by posters and advertising. The outcomes were sometimes published, but seldom in their full version.

The contests were based on a methodology initiated by Florian Znaniecki and developed by his disciple Józef Chałasiński. In the post-war years such competitions grew into a consistent strategy of Polish sociology and resulted in an incredible accumulation of results in many archives and institutions in Poland. The extensive dimension of the phenomenon led scientists to create a new category for this genre: “methodology of mass memoirs” or simply “mass memoirs”. Changes in sociological methodology in Poland in the eighties and the rejection of almost all research made under socialism after the changes of 1989 resulted in a cer-

tain scepticism towards, or at least oblivion of these memoirs. With the growing importance of biographic methods in the social sciences, including history, such materials deserve more attention.

The process of collecting the memories began shortly after the end of the Stalinist period and the beginning of reforms in Poland in 1956. The Western Institute prepared a contest in order to gather material about the new settlers in the Western Regions. Three contests were held until 1970, each of them showing some specific aspects. The first competition was launched in December 1956. Exploiting the increased freedom of expression, the promoters of the memoirs competition encouraged settlers to write down autobiographical texts describing their arrival to the Western Regions and their life there. The settlers seized the opportunity with joy. For the first time they could speak freely about facts they felt as epic, for the first time they could express their views about political repression and the terrible events of the first years after the immediate settlement. They wanted to tell the world about their traumatic experiences and, in the mood of the day, they felt they could do it. Zygmunt Dulczewski has affirmed that: “after all these years, people really wanted to talk” (Interview with Z. Dulczewski, December 8, 2000). There was a flow of letters to the Institute, not only sending memoirs, but also congratulations for the idea. When the competition was closed, 227 memoirs had been received and 205 were assessed after having fulfilled the necessary requirements. The collected memoirs are very diverse, but almost every one of them begins with a reference to the end of the war. Some of the writers had been in concentration camps or had served as slave workers in these parts of the new Poland and decided to stay where they were, while others were very young and came to the Western Regions looking for adventures or a better life. Some subjects are very well depicted in the memoirs: the settlers’ move into the region, settlement problems, conflicts with Soviet soldiers, plundering of every kind of goods, the last German inhabitants and their expulsion, the physical and psychological situation of the population, and the beginning of adaptation to the new territories.

In 1966 the Institute launched the second contest, the one to which Barbara sent her memories (more on that below). The third contest took place in 1970, in cooperation with the Friends of Memoirs Society and the Society for Development of the Western Regions, both in Warsaw. As part of the state-sponsored celebrations of the “25th Anniversary of the Return of the Western Regions to Poland”, the organizers wanted to collect “materials showing the social, economical, and cultural changes in the Western Regions”. They wanted – as Dulczewski writes – to obtain new materials in order to compare them with the first competition, presenting the whole process of settlement from the

first “pioneers” to the new “inhabitants” (Dulczewski 1978: 184). This was the conscious attempt to illustrate the huge leap forward of the country, in particular of the western territories, as proclaimed by the government. The outcome was really impressive in number: 747 memoirs fulfilled the necessary requirements. Although representations of everyday life in these memoirs are very accurate, the political circumstances at that time did not allow honesty and frankness in the written accounts. This were the years when increased political repression and an intensifying economical crisis led to a new worker rebellion, which eventually again forced the party-leadership to step down. Probably due to this political background, many of the memoirs look, in comparison to the previous competitions, dull and grey.

Memories of young settlers

The second competition, which began in March 1966 and closed on 31st October 1966, was directed to “the young generation of Polish autochthons (natives) in the Polish Western Regions” (Dulczewski 1967: 430). Under the word “autochthons” promoters understood “inhabitants of the territories who were born there after their parent’s settlement or who came to the regions when they were only a few years old”. This time, the contest was organized by the Western Institute together with the cultural journal “Nurt”. The motives to send contributions were very diverse: aside from economical incentives (the prizes for the top-memoirs were very high), we see literary ambitions, therapeutic storytelling and the typical teenager wish of self-representation. Another peculiar reason was that many of the writers were students motivated by peers or who had been assigned to write memoirs as homework by their teachers. This makes these memoirs more liable to comparative analysis than the settlers’ memoirs, which were more heterogeneous because the settlers had no official lines to follow. But on the other hand they lack the latter’s frankness in autobiographic expositions.

The Institute this time received 167 memoirs. Among them are very interesting memoirs of teenagers with personal or social problems, which compare to those of Western mods and rockers, hooligans, and beat musicians, girls with despotic parents, orphans, etc. Some youngsters who were “repatriated” after 1956 from the former Polish territories in the east wrote about their difficulties in settling in the new environment and the prejudices they faced in being called “Russians”. Of special interest are memoirs of young “natives”, children of former German citizens recognized as ethnic Poles. They described how in their communities they were considered “Germans” and, therefore, subjected to discrimination and prejudice. Most of them tried to lay out in their memoirs their complicated and volatile identities, their fight for their right to be a Pole, and their avoidance to show their “German” side. Living in their own land, they had become foreigners. Some of these children were born in mixed marriages, usually to a “native” mother and a Polish father. As a rule, these

marriages were terrible, e.g. a husband who blamed his wife for being German and who mistreated her and their children. Sometimes, these problems ended in the suicide of the wife (the mother). Those children used the memoirs to tell these traumatic stories, maybe as a way of getting rid of their past.

A native girl

Barbara R. participated in the 1966 competition. In a letter to the organizers, she declared that she did not write the memoirs specifically for the competition, but because “in life there are moments when people need to analyse the past, maybe aiming to fill at any price their dull void, to try to explain to themselves why they wasted half of their life”. She wrote in her memoirs “about everyday life”, and it seems that she understood very well what the mission of the competition would be because, “maybe this everyday life is the best image of Polish Warmia’s new natives. Banal everyday life, joy, sadness, work, love, mean life, a life that is strongly linked to our homeland, a homeland that is built here, on Warmian land”.

Barbara was born on 27th September 1939, at the very beginning of the Second World War. In the little village where she was born German was the language of everyday communication and only later she discovered that Polish remained spoken in the church and that her grandmother wrote a “black book” (a diary?) in Polish. Besides, according to her, one of her grandfathers came probably from Lithuania.

When the Germans retreated from the advancing Red Army and the front reached the village, the mother fled with Barbara to a little town in the neighbouring region, Masuria, where they sought refuge. Some Soviet soldiers helped them find a home there and she remained in this village through all of her childhood. Times were hard, the war had finished and the first “szabrownicy” (plunderers) came. Together with her brother she took the whole town as a playground. Her first playmates were casual acquaintances, every time new ones because natives “travelled with transports beyond the Oder into the Reich and settlers often moved”.

In the little town, the settlers took the power: “He who knew and wanted, could rule”. There were permanent conflicts over nationality: “People were not Masur or Warmiak, they were ‘szwab’ [a pejorative word for “German”]. They were not Poles but ‘warszawiak’ [from Warsaw], (...) or from Vilnius. Nobody concealed that they were there provisionally.” She started school, because she wanted to learn Polish. She admits that she spoke only a mix of Polish, German, and Russian “dialects” from different regions. This is a patent sign of the enormous plurality and anomia of the new local society, where communities were very different and no clear ethnic majorities could be identified. However, integrative processes were already running: She learnt in school, among other things, the famous verses “Who are you? A little Polish child”, i.e. the Polish children’s nationalist catechism ever since the late 19th century.

She adds that she “learnt to speak in literary Polish very fast”. In order to do this, books from the library were her “best aid”.

Barbara gives a very interesting account of the arrival of a transport of Ukrainians (Lemkos), deported from southern Poland. “Children with flowers welcomed a transport of the Action W (the proper name was unintelligible, let alone understanding the objective of such action). Tired, distrustful people rode the freight cars. Our flowers died on the tracks, thrown away with discretion. (When I read ‘Glow over Bieszczady’ I did understand those sad faces. For them, the war ended only on our platform.)” [“Gloom over Bieszczady” (Łuna w Bieszczadach) was a popular novel written by Jan Gehrhard, where the deportations were described for the first time]. One day, her father, who had been a prisoner of war, came back. After a few weeks, he and her mother decided to split up and he moved to Germany. Her mother told her: “The war has poisoned us. We have become strangers.”

Barbara frequently addresses aspects of her national identity and of her ties to her homeland in her memoirs. She did not find friends in school because of her “nationality” (“I was abused with the word ‘szwab’”) and she tried to defend herself recounting the name of her grandparents and great-grandparents (all of them had Slavic names). Her mother could not manage the situation either and she never talked about the past. But she also never considered the possibility of emigrating to Germany because “her motherland was the land of her forefathers”. As former German citizens, they would have been allowed to settle – a special permission from Polish authorities provided – in Western Germany. This chance of migration was, in the hard conditions of post-war Poland, a dream for many natives and a source of permanent conflict with the Polish settlers, who did not have this opportunity.

After the incidents in school, Barbara’s family spoke only in Polish at home, in fact “we did not speak dialect”. They started to speak German poorly, but they still had problems with both sides since the native people of Warmia and Masuria despised them for wanting to be Poles and the settlers considered them Germans. “I felt myself more Polish than some of the settlers, always griping about the motherland, the government, the system.” So the first source of her identity came to be the landscape – the town, the region. She constantly describes the sadness and the beauty of Warmia, using these geographical identifications to affirm her right to be Polish too. Some legends she heard excited her imagination and because of this “necessarily we wanted to know the past of our town”. She looked for the past in postcards and books because there were not many monuments left in the town: an old basement was blocked by water, a new administrative building was erected where the castle had been...

After graduation she decided to become a nurse (“only a year of studies, free of charge dormitory, uniform...”) and left home for school. When she arrived at the place of study, which was her first travel

into the unknown, she was so overcome by fear that she considered going back home. But again the landscape helped her: she looked through the window and saw such a wonderful view (“a fairy tale landscape”) that she decided to stay.

In classrooms and dormitories there were “nationality issues” too. Some Masurian girls isolated themselves from the rest by forming a German-speaking group, while some other “natives” – as Barbara herself – tried to find their place in the general community of the school. A Ukrainian girl was constantly abused and made responsible of “all crimes of the fascist band UPA”. In class they talked about war nurses’ duties and Barbara writes: “I felt in their words [the other girls’] not the fear of the war, but the security that these lands are alien. It hurt me. I never delimited Poland: there in Poland, here in Masuria.”

After finishing her studies she found a job in a neighbouring town. She lived in a hostel for single nurses. The bed she was given had belonged to a girl who had committed suicide only a few days before. Her work disappointed her, mainly because of the difference between theory and practice. People around her were not tolerant about her being Lutheran: “a Good Pole is a practicing Catholic,” they said and even she heard once that “Luther was a devil with horns”. Under this pressure, she gave up her religious practices. But the landscape was again an element of joy. Trying to get rid of a bothering “admirer”, she got used to walk and explore the town, making the castle, the parks, and the streets a part of her life.

Her “admirer” worked at the same hospital. He had been expelled from the now Soviet controlled former eastern regions of Poland. He was always yearning for his native lands. Barbara disputed with him when “he allowed himself to alter the Polish borders”, suggesting to exchange the Western Regions to Russia for Vilnius. When she defended the present borders, he tried to mitigate his suggestion saying that for her it would be better if the territories would go back to Germany. She cried. “I did not want any changes. The border problem was solved, in my opinion.”

This relationship did not last long. The man was overly self-confident and conservative: “of his future wife he expected fidelity, obedience, permitted entertainment, warm oven, and pots. Children!” Later on, she met a young man on a ball and fell in love. One day he came to the hospital to visit her. “He began to talk freely only when I praised the beauty of the town. He vividly told me how much connected he was to it. He knew every stone, street, path. He grew up here. Not even once he said: ‘in our Poland, Recovered Lands’. He, as me and thousands of boys and girls who grew up here say ‘Our town, our lands’. Border problems don’t reach us.” For Barbara, it was this attachment to his land that made the lad attractive to her. In an environment of frustrated settlers, who considered her an alien, this young man did not give any importance to these issues. And he loved the landscape, exactly as she did.

Landscapes and images of identity

The German philosopher Joachim Ritter defined *Landschaft* (landscape) as the Nature becoming present in the gaze of an observer who can feel it and experience it (Ritter 1974), a definition that is not only a re-elaboration of the German Romantic tradition but an affirmation of the individual and psychological character of the construction of landscapes. Landscapes are not facts, they are not the nature itself but the way the observer perceives nature. Landscapes are ideological constructions, built in the observer's minds, drawing upon discourses of very different origins and with many different purposes. As Edward Casey points out, representations of places are always linked to a specific historical context, and we can compare landscape painting (or writing) to other forms of representation (as cartography, for example) (Casey 2002). Nevertheless, different social groups give concrete meanings to landscapes that are, usually, limited to the cultural comprehension of the members of a given group. Communication through landscapes depends on a considerable degree of inter-group consensus that allows the decoding of the symbolic meaning of these images.

Simon Schama writes in "Landscape and Memory" that imaginations of different cultures have indeed constructed the proper landscape, an idea going back to Carl O. Sauer's work. The relationship of humans to nature has not only led to the destruction of the latter, but people's images and wishes have also transformed nature in a way humans thought nature should look like. On the other hand, landscapes have also given form to human imaginations, and they have influenced human beliefs and memories. Christopher Tilley describes the landscape both as a medium to act and as a consequence of action (including previous actions) (Tilley 1994: 23–5). Because if we understand the landscape as an image, then it has ideological as well as ontological implications concerning the way we think about the world.

Denis Cosgrove, in a recent article, while drawing heavily upon Kenneth Olwig's argument, affirms that "the German *Landschaft* and its cognates in the Scandinavian languages are still used as a descriptor for administrative regions in parts of northwestern Europe" (Cosgrove 2005: 60). Using Olwig's words we find that "custom and culture defined a Land, not physical geographical characteristics – it was a social entity that found physical expression in the area under its law" (Olwig 2002: 19). This archaic understanding of landscape was challenged during the seventeenth century. With the rise of romanticism and the objectivization of nature, which was to serve the purposes of the new secular religions, i.e. nationalism, positivism, and socialism, the understanding of landscape took a new form. The abstract, "scientific" commitment to the nation replaced the old notion of *Landespatritismus*. Consequently, the observer's gaze on the landscape was to be changed too. This change was, of course, uneven as not only marginal

territories but also certain social groups in core regions of the nation were brought only very late into this new form of consciousness.

A good illustration of this is the mixed Slavic-German population of Warmia and Masuria. For Barbara R., the protagonist of our narrative, the end of the old attachment to her region and the coming of the new more abstract one, the switch from Warmian regional belonging to the new Polish nationalism, and the necessity to re-define her identity as a primarily national one came along with a very real destruction of her old community and the slow rise of a new one. She had to find her place in the new society, but she could not renounce her regional identity so easily. In a state-socialist country such as the Peoples' Republic of Poland, where all public (and even private) life was under strong centralizing and homogenizing pressures, Barbara tried to link her (old) Land to her (new) nation by turning her view to the landscape.

An ordinary life

Barbara's new boyfriend was problematic. He was a longhaired youngster, always hanging around with other friends, playing guitar, smoking, without future. Barbara's friends did not want to allow "a mismatch" and they warned her of the boy. But, as usual in these cases, warnings were not listened to. She writes in a very beautiful way about their first real date. She was waiting in the park, she looked into the water. She did not see him, only his reflection on the water getting closer and closer. Finally they got together. He took her for a walk around the park – "... and I had thought I really knew it!" She became a member of the gang, met the other boys and hung around with them. But Henryk – her boyfriend – was not an easy person. They had problems because of his little frolics and affairs, because of his rudeness of character. Once he went away, looking for a better job in the Zielona Góra region, not far away from the border with the German Democratic Republic. When he came back, she tried to "civilize" him by giving him books and talking about movies. Finally they "became lovers". But she discovered, after the first night, that she was not "the first one".

During his absence, she had become friends with another young man in the gang who was very ill and finally died. It was a terrible situation. The Catholic priest did not want to celebrate a religious service because the dead boy's mother was Baptist. He compelled her to "come back" to the Catholic Church doing the penance of going on her knees before the coffin. After his death, the gang broke up, other problems arose. Barbara and Henryk wanted to marry but their parents did not allow them to do so. She got pregnant and eventually they married. But before that, Henryk's parents asked her to change her faith to Catholic, which she did.

Because there was a housing shortage in Warmia, they decided to move to Gubin in western

Poland, one of the divided towns at the border. There, the scene was terrible: everything was destroyed; there were rubbles everywhere, neglected buildings... She could not understand why the government did nothing to change this, at least for the political legitimization of Polish ownership of these lands. She describes how she stood at the bridge over the river that comprised the border and how she looked distrustful to the other side, to Germany. "Interesting, what is in their minds?" She was looking to "a normal town, without rubble, with neon lights, a lot of traffic, forests of television antennas on roofs, and behind me ruins, stumps of chimneys, frames of buildings. I was ashamed of this town and I wanted to do something, to change it. I repeated helplessly: 'why don't they do anything? Even as a sign of politics, to show how we care for our recovered lands. My God, how ashamed I am of this disorder! Surely, they think that we don't care for these 'foreign' territories.'" In Gubin life went on. It was not easy for Henryk to find a job ("He didn't want to find it", she wrote) and they had severe financial difficulties. Their son, Wojtek, had been born shortly before they arrived and this created an additional set of problems. But "early spring was a miracle. I discovered a lot of new bushes and trees. Peach trees blossomed near our house, walnuts... I always thought that all these fruits were from another world". Nevertheless, she felt like a stranger in Gubin, she missed her native Warmia. Although she wrote many times that there was no difference between Poles and natives, it is very significant that, when recollecting her nostalgia, she remarks that in her new town of residence there were no natives, "only settlers from different parts of Poland". Ethnic divisions did indeed play a role in her life, even if she did not want to acknowledge it.

People felt provisional there too, even so many years after the war. When she arrived, as Barbara put it, it was the beginning of normalization. The permanent presence of the army and the "well defended border" gave them "peace in our sleep", but at the same time produced a feeling of permanent tension. The possibility of war was here more perceptible than in Warmia where border problems existed "only in newspapers, radio programs, and on demonstrations". Spies, who had been only characters in books for her, were real in Gubin. This situation even affected the landscape, as she would contrast the noise of tanks and airplanes in Gubin to the silence ("*cicho*") of Warmia.

Her "family idyll", as she wrote, was interrupted by a group of teenagers, old friends, who visited their home. They were all natives; their idea was to cross the border and to reach Germany, their "fatherland". Barbara said that it was not a surprise for her because in each of their homes Germany represented a sort of lost paradise. She and her husband tried to discourage these boys, but they could not convince them of the dangers of the adventure. They attempted to cross the border, and a few hours later the police knocked on their door. Her husband was detained, accused of being an accom-

plice. They declared him guilty in court because "he was the only true Pole". The five youngsters got free and went back home, whereas Henryk was sent to prison.

In connection with this event, Barbara wrote some interesting reflections on the identity of the five teenagers. In her opinion, the constant chitchat about Germany and its miracles at their homes made these boys wonder who they really were. But she never took their "homesickness" for real. "What homesickness? They are as young as I am. How have they become aware just now, after all this years, of their fatherland?" As it seems, judges and lawyers did not believe that these natives were "genuine" Poles either. For them, the teenagers were Germans, and in their own (nationalistic) view it was just normal that they wanted to go back "home" to Germany. For Barbara, however, this was ridiculous. She understood very well that such a view would lead natives to a German self-identification and to their refusal of Poland. Some time later, three of the boys who had tried to flee, emigrated legally to Germany.

After her husband's imprisonment Barbara had to work hard and decided to go back to her mother's home. She found a job at the local library there, and in her memoirs writes about the titles she read. It probably was a wonderful change for her to be between books. When her husband was released from prison, their relationship began to deteriorate. She got ill and had to go to the hospital, got pregnant, but had a miscarriage. Henryk left for Silesia to work at the coalmines and lived there with another woman.

While she was being treated in different hospitals, her son was in a *Dom małego dziecka*, a kind of orphanage. She longed for her husband to visit her all the time, in a masochistic attitude of love and hate, but he never came. Finally, Barbara went back to her mother's home and picked up her son in the town of Frombork. After a dramatic moment, because she did not recognize her son and the administrator of the orphanage at first did not allow her to take the child with her, they finally made it back home together. Once on the bus, Barbara gave some thought to what the old lady who had taken care of her son at the orphanage had said. She didn't like the boy's first name "Rajmund", because "How can you like Germans? Rajmund is a German name". She had tried to deny it but the woman had asked if she was a Masurian girl, which means, in this sense, a German. "Of course", writes Barbara, "I denied it". And there, in the bus, with her son by her side, Barbara thought about the problems he would have to face in the future: "Poor Wojtus. He doesn't even know what it means to be a Pole, a German, a Russian, and already they throw this burden on his back."

Around this time, Henryk was doing his compulsory military service, and Barbara used every influence she had to make him come back. But he had not changed and their problems remained. Barbara got a flat and met the neighbours. They were very good people and helped her with her son; she had no secrets for them except one. "I never speak about my nationality.

Even when she [her neighbour] asks, I deny it. 'I am a Pole', this will have to be enough for her. Why do I hide something I don't have to be ashamed of?" Barbara tells us that Mrs. (*Pani*) Basia [the neighbour] suffered deeply during the war working as a slave worker and losing home, parents, and childhood. She would never forgive. "*Pani* Basia maybe understands the problems of the people of Masuria, Warmia and Silesia, but she is not sure: maybe a common German with a little dose of fascist blood in his veins is hiding under the skin of a Masurian person. I can feel her mistrust."

This problem, so Barbara reasoned, was not only hers but she considered herself a symbol or an example for many others. "That's the reason for Warmians' bitterness and for their open rebellion and doubts. 'Who am I in truth, where is my fatherland?'" And the defence mechanisms of these people were hers too: "the wisest keeps silent, denies. Maybe it is not worth to say too much, we hide our true face under a mask of indifference: very fashionable." These mechanisms affected the most intimate and everyday acts: "[*Pani* Basia] will never discover my little lie, because sincere conversations on political issues will end, I will gently avoid every shocking topic. And she and I will feel stupid."

One day she found out that her husband had yet again an affair. In a scene worth of a bad novel, she went to the lovers' house and knocked on the door. Her husband answered. In his back, there was the girl, a very young girl (interestingly enough, Barbara was indeed very young too, but she probably felt older). As a consequence of this discovery, she fell sick. At the hospital, she met a Party secretary, who was ill too and decided to help her. She got a new job, Henryk finally left her and she decided to commit herself to her son.

There was the possibility to move. But Barbara did not want to: "*Tu jest mój dom*", "Here is my home". Even more, "my hometown is L. You may be born anywhere, even on an intercontinental train. But you always go back to the town of your childhood, where you experienced your first feelings and tragedies." And, as always, the landscape remained: "L. is very beautiful". She tried to teach her son to love the landscape and the local history and beauty as she had done in the past. A good occasion for this was the Polish millennium celebrations in 1966. They visited the exhibition "Thousand years of Warmian and Masurian culture". The child liked the models of castles and cathedrals, and the old weapons and swords that were on display. But "he looked indifferently to the fascist swastikas and uniforms... he knows that they lost the war but he can not imagine for how long the enemy trod this land". This shows that Barbara had come to accept the official view of Germans as invaders, as aliens. It didn't matter that her own father had been a German soldier. What was important was that she had to live here and to come to terms with the reality around her.

Barbara wanted to take her son hitchhiking with her to reveal to him all the beauties of the land, all of the things that were so important for her: landscape, nature. She writes that she had overlooked the charm of the forthcoming spring in that year because

of her everyday worries ("the strong smell of the linden reminded me that summer was already there and I had not been in the park or out of town"). When, at night, she heard the sound of the river she yearned for a getaway, "somewhere in a little Masurian village, by a lake in the *Puszcza Piskia*. I would like to live in an old, grey Mazurka's neat house, drinking milk, running bare-foot, and listening to legends about werewolves in the beautiful Masurian dialect in the evenings, about giant fishes inhabiting lakes, adventures of fishermen... But I can only dream, every pleasure costs and we need boots for Wojtus, a winter coat, fuel..."

Barbara wonders at the end of her memoirs, "is there anything higher in this everyday life, some lesson?" The answer is difficult: "I feel the weight of time, sorrow for a wasted youth, a bitterness left behind." But, indeed, there is something to be learned: "One's own imperfections are very difficult to perceive. If you recognize them you will live better, wiser. For my child, I wish he will be able to appreciate the most beautiful things of life."

Trying to make sense of life

Barbara R.'s case is an extreme one and probably not very comparable to other cases. Nevertheless, outstanding individual cases are very useful to understand how social processes work. In everyday life people have to develop different strategies in order to come to terms with the social space imposed upon them. In extreme conditions, such strategies reveal a lot about hidden power relations and the perceived pressures of the official world. The way individuals perceive official narratives can highlight how it was possible to challenge the power holders without being a political dissident or not even being conscious of it.

When Barbara R. wrote her memoirs – around 1966 – she made wide use of official national narratives. She accepted many clichés of the official political and cultural system such as the mythology of the Polish legacy in Warmia (like that Polish was spoken in the church, the Polish surnames of ancestors, that there were more Slavic than German names on grave stones etc.), the description of "Germans" as invaders, the view of the old Polish people in Masuria and Warmia as having survived the long centuries of "occupation" and the notion of the "Return of Warmia to the Motherland". She probably accepted all of this because she had no other choice left. Accepting a view of herself as "German" would have supposed cutting her spiritual bonds to the Polish people – first of all to her terrible husband – and rejecting her landscape, her marked territory, her private fatherland. She did not want (or could not) emigrate and live in another land and, in order to accept her reality, she had to adopt the discourses of identity that were offered to her. Alternative narratives, such as the old *Landespatritismus* or regionalism, did indeed exist but only as connected to the nation, as the time of potentially exclusive regional belonging had passed. The war and the nationalizing politics of the new Polish power did not allow the people of Masuria to further

their own regional and religious feelings, which had been typical for these territories until that time. But other narratives – such as of expelled Polish citizens – did not fit either for Barbara because she would not identify with their destructive views of the current order, which they represented (including the rejection of natives as Germans).

Her strategy of binding herself to the landscape as the best form of re-creating identity, which symbolically gave her above all the right to live in these lands, was very intelligent. The new settlers could regard the landscape as alien, but it was to change the established meanings of the territory, to narrate new stories, or old and forgotten ones. Barbara could describe the sadness of the Warmian landscape and compare it to the feelings of sorrow that she felt when she watched how the Polish medieval knight Jurand, who in the movie “The Teutonic Knights” is looking for his kidnapped daughter, comes to the Teutonic castle. The whole audience knew, probably because they had read Henryk Sienkiewicz’s classical novel on this story before, that Jurand is going to be tortured by the “German” knights. Of course, the action of both film and novel is localized in these landscapes and both of them draw a line of continuity between the medieval “Teutonic” knights and the recent German aggressors. In this way, Barbara could connect one of the main Polish national narratives – the German *Drang nach Osten* and the according Polish martyrdom – to her personal life, drawing upon established narratives to shape her ties with the society around her.

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