IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY:
THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CULTURAL WORLD
AMONG POLISH IMMIGRANTS TO THE NEW WESTERN TERRITORIES

The case of migration which I will describe here is in some
respects peculiar. Its specific character was the outcome of a
political event. The essence of the matter was that a group was
forced to emigrate from its own territory to a new one, which was
almost simultaneously, and involuntarily, abandoned by the commun-
ity which had previously defined its cultural character. None of
the generally known theoretical models of migration can be applied
to these events. We should not expect assimilation, accommodation,
integration, segregation or any of the pluralistic situations in a
case of this kind, because the immigrants found themselves in unin-
habited territory. However, this territory was not deserted in the
cultural sense; it was not a domain of Nature. It was culturally
organized, because its former inhabitants left almost untouched the
material structure of their world, which later became the new
environment of the immigrants.[1]

What, then, would be the object of reference for the immig-
rants to help them in the reconstruction of identity? Could it be
the abandoned native land and its culture, which did not fit into
the material structure of the new territory? Or should the immig-
rants perhaps have continued the tradition of their new territory -
for them a strange place which they treated as the property of
somebody else, namely the former population?

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[1] On the significance of territory in the formation of identity see
Smith 1986.

As a result of political decisions made in Yalta and Potsdam in
1945, 1.5 million people were displaced from Polish lands east of
the River Bug to the newly acquired Western Territories, while
simultaneously the German population of these territories was
forced to leave. The right to leave the Soviet Union, which incor-
porated land previously belonging to Poland, was open to Poles and
Jews who in 1939 had lived within the Polish borders. They were
allowed to take their livestock, equipment, and two tons of luggage
per family. The new Polish government tried to organize this mig-
ration along the same lines of latitude, so that people would find
climate, geographical environment and other physical conditions
similar to those to which they were accustomed in their old terri-
tories. The urban population moved mostly to big cities in the
Western Territories (mainly Wrocław), but the majority of immig-
ants were peasants who settled in villages and small towns.

    Not long afterwards the German population of the land incorp-
orated into Poland was, by the terms of the Potsdam Treaty, ex-
pelled. In 1945, within the administrative borders of Poland,
there were 3.5 million Germans. Among that number, 1,239,000 lived
in the Sudeten region, where I carried out my research.[2] In the
Middle Ages, Lower Silesia belonged to the Piast dynasty, who were
related to the kings of Poland, and it was inhabited mostly by
Slavs. This region largely changed its character over the centur-
ies and became overwhelmingly German: in the twentieth century there
there were only a few people in Lower Silesia who declared their
identity to be Polish. In 1945 the Polish authorities found only
7,000 such people, so this region was decidedly German as far as
population and culture were concerned. During the first years of
Polish administration of these territories, practically all the
Germans were forced to leave. They had to abandon their homes and
leave behind all their property, with the exception of personal
hand-luggage. The German emigrants thus left behind the material
structure of their culture, untouched and undestroyed by the war.
In their place came the Polish population, which consisted mostly
of whole communities displaced from behind the River Bug, mainly
from Eastern Little Poland and Podolia. As a rule whole villages
and small towns were removed to one particular area. At the same
time other settlers from different parts of Poland and from abroad
came to the Western Territories. The two main groups consisted of
immigrants from over-populated central and southern Poland and re-
turning emigrants from France (Markiewicz and Rybicki 1967).

    People from the Eastern Territories comprised the majority of
immigrants, and they arrived in integrated communities, usually
with a priest as spiritual leader. They brought with them their
material and spiritual property. These predominantly rural commun-
ities were accustomed to traditional self-sufficient agriculture
which, in the excellent soil of Eastern Poland, provided an
adequate means of subsistence. These people also had a strong
sense of national identity and of patriotism, and a keen political

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[2] Fieldwork was conducted in the town of Lubomierz, Lower Silesia,
in the autumn of 1986.

awareness. They decided to leave their native land because it was annexed by Soviet Russia, which was considered an age-old enemy and which represented an alien political and economic system. But their feeling of identity linked them strongly to their former land.

In contrast, the settlers from central Poland did not constitute an integrated group. They settled individually and frequently ran away, back to their former homes, sometimes taking with them some of the goods formerly belonging to the Germans.

The returning migrants from France were an interesting group, which consisted largely of coal-miners who had migrated in the first quarter of the twentieth century for economic reasons and who had worked in French mines. In France they passed through a difficult period of accommodation, during which they partly assimilated to French society and partly preserved their Polish national identity. Strong competition in the French labour market made them aspire to obtain maximal wages for hard work - a cult of work itself, of discipline, and of efficient organization. In the period of economic depression in the 1930s many of them adopted the communist ideology, which was later associated with patriotism after the outbreak of World War II. After the war a large number of these people returned to Poland, responding to an appeal issued by the communist authorities, who regarded them not only as qualified coal-miners but above all as an important political force, because they were already convinced of the rightness of communist ideology and ready to realize it in practice. Such an attitude was quite exceptional in Poland at that time, since the vast majority of the nation was hostile to communism. Several tens of thousands of these miners settled in the city of Wałbrzych (Markiewicz 1960).

However, in the region of my research, near Jelenia Góra, there were very few returning emigrants: the dominant group was made up of immigrants from east of the River Bug. In the first year after settlement they co-existed with the Germans, although relations were not good. The Soviet military authorities treated these territories as an occupied country, collecting and removing valuable items to Russia, such as machinery and other useful equipment. It was not long before groups of people, including criminal elements from other areas of Poland, came to pillage the goods left by the Germans. The immigrants in turn found houses and households very different from those to which they had been accustomed, and so found it difficult to make themselves at home in the strange environment. Lack of skill rendered them unable to make much use of the equipment and machinery - such as mechanised farm equipment - which remained.

Before the war, the region of Jelenia Góra had been quite advanced agriculturally and popular with tourists, but the newcomers preferred to rely on their old system of agriculture. The settlers found the German method of agriculture strange, even incomprehensible, and many wanted revenge on the Germans for what they had done to the Poles during the war. The result was a peculiar 'we are the masters now' mentality which led them to expect that the Germans should work for them. Units of the Polish army and police maintained order generally but also made sure that the Germans worked hard and did not resist the Poles.

After a time the Germans were returned to Germany, leaving the as yet unadapted Poles to work the area. Most of the settlers from central Poland ran away, taking equipment from craft workshops, but those from the east had nowhere else to go and so were forced to remain. They tried to impose their traditional way of life in the new place, but without success. Agriculture deteriorated, for traditional methods were not efficient in the poorer soil of the New Western Territories. Moreover, there was a common conviction that the Western Territories belonged only temporarily to Poles, and that at any moment the Germans would come back. Such a belief created a feeling of uncertainty which did little to foster a constructive attitude. It was thus very difficult for the immigrants to find their feet in the new land. Emotionally, the consciousness of their tradition linked them to the abandoned country in the East. This sense of displacement was reinforced by the fact that the new land was in essence German. The towns had a strange architecture: buildings were large, multi-storeyed and built of bricks and stones, in contrast to the low wooden buildings with thatched roofs to which the immigrants were accustomed. Tools and machines were useless to their new owners. Furthermore, the former German community had been almost twice as large as the new Polish one. The towns and villages there seemed too vast for their new inhabitants.

Paradoxically, such an attitude was supported by the policy of the central authorities. Of course, the authorities were very interested in strengthening the presence of the Poles in the Western Territories. Nevertheless, on the one hand, they did not understand the problems involved in social and cultural adaptation, or the immigrants' need to regain identity; and on the other hand, peculiar features of the central administration were particularly unfavourable to these needs.

First of all, the Western Territories were very well preserved in comparison with the other parts of Poland which had been virtually destroyed by the war. They were equipped with all the material requirements for sophisticated living - good roads, railways, electricity, running water, etc. - and therefore they did not need reconstruction. Consequently, during the first few years after the war no money was invested there, so no changes were possible - even if there had been any social forces interested in such changes.

Secondly, the efficiency of communist authorities depends on the degree of centralization. The decision-making process in political, social and economic matters is monopolized by centres of power dominated by the Communist Party. The Party itself is organized according to the Leninist principle of 'democratic centralism', which means that policy-making bodies (central committees or regional committees) elect leaders (in an open vote, usually approving the choice made by the Politburo), who then have exclusive rights of decision and control.

In central and local administration, which is controlled by

the Party, all orders come from the centre and must be obeyed. In
both social and economic affairs these directives are not general
but very detailed and do not allow local managers much flexibility
or margin for their own decisions. In turn these local leaders,
subject to Party discipline, and obeying orders, execute the same
monopoly power over their domains, uncontrolled by local communi-
ties. There is no legal, democratic mechanism by which communi-
ties or individuals can influence the decision-making process un-
less the individuals themselves become officials and gain power in
the centralized structure. Such a principle applies not only to
vital political matters but to all aspects of public life and,
especially, to all the economy. No public activity, individual or
collective, is allowed without permission from the authorities
(local, regional or central as the case may be, depending on the
importance of the matter from the point of view of the central
power élite). Officials in the Party and administration are ac-
customed to operating only in this centralized system of clear
rules which they understand, and in which they are at the same time
powerless executors of orders from higher officials and all-power-
ful dictators of their own domains, be it a region, a town, a vil-
lage, a factory.

Individual or collective attempts at introducing any changes
or carrying out any ideas from outside the bureaucratic system are
regarded as a threat to the monopoly of power. The same applies
to any private initiative in the sphere of economy. Private enter-
prise not only does not correspond with communist principles but,
more to the point, makes a break in the system of control and pro-
vides an owner with means independent of an official's decision.
Therefore the system of laws, norms and regulations prevents indiv-
iduals and groups from organizing themselves or doing anything in
public life without being directed and controlled by the author-
ities. Local autonomy does not exist, and there is no means for
activity independent of the bureaucracy.

Over forty years of this policy has deprived individuals and
local communities of all subjectivity and initiative and, event-
ually, even of the will for creative activity. People have to
obey orders, wait passively for decisions to be made by somebody
else at the centre of power, and watch the results without a chance
to try and organize their neighbourhood in the way they themselves
think to be appropriate. Whatever happens is decided and executed
by the bureaucrats. Therefore, when in the 1950s the Western
Territories, together with the rest of the country, were subjected
to industrialization, the people's attitude towards their land and
their new life was in no way influenced. The reconstruction of an
identity under the new circumstances requires the opportunity to
unite in action, but atomisation and deprivation of subjectivity
makes this process impossible.

What, then, was the view of the new world in the mind of an
immigrant from the east? The four important elements of such a
view were: 1) Former social space; 2) Present social space; 3)
Other societies; and 4) The political system and political
authorities.

1) The links between the immigrants and the country which

they were forced to leave were exceptionally strong. They brought
to the new territories an idealized picture of their native land,
the border-lands, which had been the scene of a long struggle with
foreign powers for the freedom of the nation and freedom of ·
religion. The Polish eastern lands symbolized patriotism, Polish-
ness and Catholicism, the more so as they had just been invaded
once again by a foreign power. Their idealized image portrayed
these lands as the most beautiful country, with the richest soil,
inhabited by good, friendly and hospitable people. The cities of
eastern Poland were a symbol of genuine high Polish culture. The
inhabitants of this country would never have left had they not been
forced to by the political situation. They could not live under
the Russian administration because Russians were, for them, a trad-
itional enemy, both national and political. They left because they
did not want to witness the destruction of their beloved land, but
they continued to grieve for it.

2) The immigrants at first perceived the new land as a
strange, hostile place, belonging to somebody else. They settled
there because they had no other choice, but they did not, and could
not, identify with it emotionally or put any effort into it, esp-
ecially as they expected the return of the Germans at any moment.
Soon, however, under the influence of the cult of the land, which
is deeply rooted in the peasant mentality, they began to treat the
land itself as their own property, the object of work amd of value
in itself. Land should be cultivated and give crops; it must not
be wasted. This attitude was expressed in the strong resistance to
attempts to introduce collective agriculture, which was regarded as
an effort to deprive the owners of their legal property - a compen-
sation for the land taken from them in the east - and also as pos-
ing a risk of the land itself being wasted in the state farms.
Many leaders of this opposition came from among those people who
had earlier spent some time in labour camps in the Soviet Union and
had learned a lot about state farms through first-hand experience.
However, this proprietary attitude to land did not extend to the
material culture left by the Germans: German houses, households,
tools, city-planning, small towns, even churches - nothing fitted
into their symbolic world, and therefore did not become an object
of creative activity. The whole cultural space was left to its
fate, while the new inhabitants lived nearby in improvised build-
ings. They ran these new households provisionally so as to ignore
the existing order, leaving it untouched. In the small towns most
houses remained empty, and in those which were inhabited, only a
few rooms were used. The policy of town authorities unintention-
ally favoured such passive indifference. Since the population of
immigrants was much smaller than the former population of Germans,
many houses were uninhabited. If damage occurred to any one house,
the authorities preferred to order or advise people to move to an-
other which was still in good condition, instead of providing the
means and materials for repair. The damaged house was left to its
fate. No wonder whole districts of towns disappeared after a time.

Churches were traditionally centres of social space and re-
mained so in the new territories. But even in the areas where
Roman Catholics had been in the majority before the war their

churches were treated by the immigrants as strange, German. Too many things were different, despite the similarity of religion. Architectural style and ornamentation of interiors were different, inscriptions, epitaphs and tombstones in cemeteries were strange, and even pictures and sculptures represented alien saints with unfamiliar names. The new community tried to introduce some changes which, however, did not consist in restructuring the interior or replacing the decoration but rather in adding their own interior design over the original German layer, which was left intact, but ignored. For example, the immigrants put up folk paper decorations for church interiors brought from their churches in the east, not caring whether the new decorations harmonized with the architectural style.

3) The world-view of the immigrants from eastern Poland was also shaped by the other groups of people with whom they had to co-exist in the new land. At first, immediately after the settlement, the Germans were the main problem. They were regarded as enemies who had destroyed Poland and on whom revenge should be taken. Hence the rise of the 'we are the masters now' attitude mentioned above, and the tendency to exploit Germans as a cheap but qualified labour force. However, the German way of life did not become the pattern for the immigrants, because it was, of course, too closely associated with the former enemy. For this reason, few elements of German culture were adopted, although such a course of action could in fact have helped the immigrants to adapt. After a time the Germans were expelled, whereupon they ceased to exist in the immigrants' consciousness as partners in interaction. They remained only as former but legitimate owners, the creators of a strange culture which happened to have become an unwanted environment.

By virtue of having involuntarily abandoned properties in the east, the immigrants demanded a privileged position in the new place. Being an integrated group, they usually dominated other settlers and thus controlled the community. In contrast, the settlers from central Poland were not a group in the sociological sense of the term, but rather an aggregate of individuals attempting to find their place in a new world.

Returning migrants, in turn, were treated very distrustfully by the immigrants from the east for at least two reasons: first, they were seen as foreigners, as Frenchmen, and secondly, they were communists, that is, enemies of traditionally accepted values and norms. Perhaps not surprisingly, the migrants returned that hostility, imposing on the immigrants the negative stereotype of a Pole which had once been attached to them in France (a Pole was a drunkard, an idler, incapable of working efficiently and in an organized way). Consequently, the returning migrants remained in enclaves and for a long time did not join the rest of the community.

4) The political authorities were also generally regarded as strange, foreign and hostile. They represented foreign, Soviet, *raison d'etat*, the interests of a different state and nation, and they were responsible for organizing and authorizing a new social order that was totally contradictory to everything that was believed to be Polish and right. Therefore, the immigrants opposed their religion to the atheism of the authorities, their cult of

national tradition and patriotism to communist class ideology.
They openly defended their national identity, religion and private
property, fighting, often with success, against attempts at the
collectivization of agriculture. The immigrants were also charac-
terized by a peculiar nationalism. Its cause was, of course, the
principle of the adjustment of political borders to cultural ones.
The immigrants' system of values so strongly linked them to their
former land that their land became a central element of their sym-
bolic culture. The native land could exist for them only as a sym-
bol, becuase it was no longer the material base of their existence.
However, that symbol so strongly influenced their world-view and
actions that the new territory could not be accepted: despite being
a material object of labour, the new land never became part of
their culture. To accept it as their own would have been incompat-
ible with their conception of land that really was their own, in
their consciousness - the land which had been left behind. A co-
herent model of the world cannot withstand such disharmony. The
effect of such a state of consciousness was an essentially nation-
alistic demand for the restoration of borders from before the war
and for the return of all lands to their legal owners. That demand
remained unsatisfied.

After the period of settlement in the Western Territories, some
minor changes occurred in the social situation. The Stalinist
period brought an attempt at the collectivization of agriculture,
which resulted in its almost total ruin, at least in the region of
my research. The authorities also tried to industrialize the
region. This process was subject to central administration and was
based on a labour force and technical personnel brought in from
other parts of Poland, while local communities were left to their
passive indifference. Moreover, industrialization ignored the in-
terests and desires of the local people. Villages and small towns
looked exactly as they did at the time of settlement, although
their general condition deteriorated. The people lived mainly by
traditional agriculture and were very poor.
      When Gomulka took power in 1956, he waived compulsory collect-
ivization and tried to stimulate the economic development of the
Western Territories. That was the time of intensive state propa-
ganda promoting the ideology of the intrinsic Polishness of these
lands, now christened 'The Regained Territories'. However, this
propaganda was not accompanied by actions which would have made
possible any social activities of a genuine and spontaneous charac-
ter. The authorities, still thinking that all initiatives should
be taken by the political centre, continued to recruit local polit-
ical and administrative leaders from outside the region. The lack
of opportunity to organize and develop local and individual eco-
nomic and social activity did not favour the community associating
with its new land, nor the redefinition of its identity. The older
generation still lived as it had always done, in an aura of the
past. Their hearts were in the east. The lack of goals and

chances for activity, together with the absence of traditional com-
munity support, were the cause of a particularly severe anomie and
social pathology. Alcoholism assumed astonishing proportions,
especially among the younger generation. Individuals of initiative
emigrated to big cities in different regions of Poland, but the
rest lived on passively, showing no enterprise.

Some favourable changes occurred after 1970, when the Polish
and West German governments signed a treaty which legalized Polish
administration of the Western Territories. This treaty resulted in
a significant relief of the feeling of uncertainty and the lack of
stabilization. Unfortunately, the treaty brought no significant
changes in the central administration, so it did nothing to in-
crease the opportunity for spontaneous organization at the local
level or the realization of individual initiative. Investment was
far lower than in other parts of Poland, and the attempts at indus-
trialization, undertaken with staggering incompetence and with no
knowledge of the social context, or even the features of the natur-
al environment, resulted in total fiasco. To the present day, in-
vestment remains at such a low level that to reproduce the present
state of material structure at the present rate of building would
take about 850 years. As a result of the predominant apathy and
the absence of social activity, coupled with a feeling of aliena-
tion from the established traditions of the area, the Solidarity
Movement received little support - or even response - in that
region. The new inhabitants continued to cling to the belief that
none of their aspirations would ever be realized: a feeling of
futility prevailed.

An analysis of the present situation allows us to distinguish
three generations with clearly different attitudes and aspirations.
The older generation of original immigrants is slowly retiring from
active life. They do not believe they will ever have a chance to
return home, although they would relish the opportunity to live as
they did before the war. They just want to end their lives in
peace and have no expectations.

The middle generation, the children of the immigrants, is
characterized by apathy and passiveness. The more ambitious among
them escape to the cities: the population of this area is decreas-
ing by one per cent per annum.

However, the third generation, the young people brought up in
the new land, is trying to build a new identity. Their model of
the world has changed considerably. For the original immigrants,
its most important elements were, as we saw, the native land, its
former owners, other groups of settlers, and the political author-
ities. At present, for the grandchildren of the original settlers,
the native land in the east belongs to a myth of origin and ances-
try: it is a symbol of and vehicle for tradition, but no longer a
living idea of a place to return to. The new land is their land,
in the sense that they were born and brought up there. It does not
symbolize the tradition of the community, nor continuation, but
nevertheless it does constitute the material ground and space in
which the younger generation wants to build its identity. They
have no problems with others, because all the groups of settlers
have by now united and integrated under a sort of cultural

dominance of the immigrants from the east and their descendants. This process of integration is one of the phenomena which are still to be investigated. For the time being, it is clear that the main role was played by those minor manifestations of social activity which were allowed by the authorities. United efforts in the building of schools, roads and churches, and mutual help on the farms, have also contributed to the integration of the communities. The Germans, in turn, are generally treated by the young people as the former legal owners of the land who have been expelled because of a particular course of historical events which could not be helped. The present situation has to be taken as such, and both Poles and Germans should accept it and organize their lives in accordance with the new circumstances.

The last and most important element of the world-view which shapes the actions of the younger generation is their vision of the political situation. The present political authorities are generally regarded as making this much-needed new organization of life more difficult. Both the incapacitation of society and the deprivation of initiative, as well as the unsuccessful economic policy, are judged negatively.

Nevertheless, one can see, perhaps for the first time since the war, some traces of human creativity in the region of Julenia Góra. More people are showing some concern about their houses and environments. Small private enterprises such as craft workshops, greenhouses, modern farms and new houses are being built, though these attempts encounter many difficulties because of the prevailing financial and administrative limits. What is important, however, is that at least there are now people who want to be active, to organize themselves, and who have found some point to and chance of success in such actions.

Conclusions

What conclusions may one draw from this process of seeking identity? The construction or re-construction of identity first of all requires, I suppose, a creative attitude on the part of the people. But such an attitude is only possible if certain conditions are satisfied, namely, legal and administrative conditions. A coherent world-view which generates actions is also necessary. Such a world-view, its elements, the way in which people interpret the reality of their lives, determines their images of goals, the chances and directions of activity, and consequently, the actions themselves. It is also essential that people have a symbolic ground, a tradition to which members of the group may refer in their actions. What could be such reference for the immigrants whose situation I have described?

They found themselves in a strange land. It was not a no man's land, a domain of Nature, waiting to be culturally organized. It was somebody else's land, the domain of a strange culture. Their own culturally shaped land, which was a natural base of

action for that peasant community, had been taken away from them. Furthermore, three factors counteracted the reconstruction and re-definition of their identity: the centralized policy of the author-ities, the obligatory character of the migration, and the feeling of temporariness together with an uncertain future. The chance for the younger generation stems from the disappearance of the second and third factors. Obligatory migration for them does not exist - they do not remember it, nor do they see their situation as temp-orary and provisional. They may find a symbolic basis for action in the global culture of the Polish nation and its traditions, in Polishness understood as a general concept, without reference to a specific land, as in the case of their forebears. So, given legal and economic conditions which would allow people to organize and which favour initiative, perhaps through increased activity there will emerge, after a break of half a century, a new, true, commun-ity in the Western Territories.

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