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EMIGRATION, EXILE, AND RETURN: CONDUCTING ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN POLAND

As a Polish American anthropologist, now based permanently at the University of Central Florida, I feel honored to be invited to contribute to the Special Issue of the distinguished “Lud” journal on its 100th Volume Anniversary. I welcome the opportunity to explain my interest in returning to Poland to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Kraków, Warsaw and Gdańsk, and my intellectual trajectory to pursue the challenging topic of the politics of gender and reproductive rights, so troubled and controversial since the fall of state socialism. Having grown up in a Roman Catholic family, I have experienced personal and intellectual transformations which ultimately fueled my interest in Polish gender politics and church-state relations. Thus, I believe that to properly contextualize my desire to conduct research in Poland, this reflexive essay has to begin with my accidental exile when I came to Florida in late November 1981 as a tennis player on the girls’ national team, and was “trapped” in the United States. Indeed, I never intended to leave Poland.

The accidental refugee

I was born and grew up in Częstochowa, the home of the Black Madonna icon and the Jasna Góra monastery. I completed elementary and part of high school in the public state socialist education system and concurrently attended religion classes at the local Catholic parish, as was typical for children of most Catholic families at that time. At the age of eight I began playing tennis at a local tennis club. As my skills improved, I reached the number two ranking in the category of “junior girls” in Poland by the age of thirteen. Consequently, I was fortunate to be selected by the state to join the Polish National Junior Tennis Team. I qualified to travel abroad only occasionally, but in November 1981, our team of six

players – three girls and three boys, ages 14 to 18 – was sent to compete in the Orange Bowl Junior World Tennis Championships in Miami Beach, Florida. On December 13, only two weeks after our team’s arrival in the United States, I learned that due to the escalating political unrest linked to the increased oppositional activism of the Solidarity movement, the communist state had imposed martial law. In our Florida hotel room, we watched images of Polish unrest repeatedly shown on US television in breaking news footage, but because we did not speak English (I studied only Russian and German until then) none of us knew exactly what was going on, and, more important, what the implications were¹. Discussing the matter with our coach was out of the question. We hardly knew him, and the rumor on the team had it that he was “handpicked” by the government to travel with us and to make sure we all came back.

But the martial law crackdown in Poland made it seem too dangerous to go back. Indeed, on the second day of the unrest, I received a phone call at the hotel from an old family friend in New York, Lucien, who asked me: “Do you understand what’s happening in Poland?”. Lucien immigrated to the United States from Poland after the war in the late 1940s. He urged me not to return with the team, but to come to live with his family in Queens, New York, until the political situation in Poland was sorted out. Other players on our team were also making clandestine arrangements to stay in the US. In the end, the coach returned to Poland with only one of the six players (the youngest girl).

Since I never intended to leave Poland permanently, I waited in New York for the turmoil in Poland to subside and an opportune moment to return home. I resisted suggestions from well-meaning Polish Americans that I should ask for asylum on political grounds, worrying that such action might make it impossible for me to return. When it became clear that martial law would last for some time and the future was uncertain, I made a decision to stay in the US. It took nine years before the situation was stable enough for me to return to Poland and see my family in 1990. A decade later in 2000 I began my doctoral research in Kraków and Warsaw.

Interest in gender politics

My interest in the anthropology of gender, and reproductive rights and policies in particular, emerged long after I settled in the US, and began to observe the

¹ Earlier that year I was contacted by one of the older tennis players from another city whom I knew superficially but who asked if I would put her up overnight in my Warsaw studio where I lived in the state-subsidized housing for tennis players the last couple of years before my arrival in the United States. I learned that night that she was an activist in the Solidarity movement and was distributing clandestine literature. I was too young and naïve as well as uninformed politically to understand her efforts or to appreciate the gravity of the situation.

growing contentiousness of such issues (both in the US and in Poland) as well as reflect on my own experiences. Similar to many of the participants in my research, when growing up in state socialist Poland I took it for granted that abortion and contraception were available, despite my own Catholic religiosity and the strong public presence of the Catholic Church even during the state socialist era. Although Poland lacked the full range of family planning options, controlling one's fertility was nevertheless standard and expected. From my perspective as a high school teenager, both knowledge about pregnancy prevention and the availability of abortion and contraception were important, as none of my friends among school or tennis peers wanted to become pregnant at an early age. The moralistic tone around reproduction so prevalent in today's Poland was largely absent during my time there.

In fact my own understanding at the time (and also in retrospect) was that the Polish socialist state was secular and implemented reproductive rights, which were formally part of the gender equality rhetoric. In Polish schools I experienced a strong sense of gender equality, both in the classroom and in sports, where girls and boys were typically given a similar degree of attention, encouragement, and discipline from teachers and coaches. Later during my research in Poland, I found that similar experiences were often explained by participants in my study as stemming from the state socialist regime's approach to gender equality. This involved granting important women's rights, including reproductive rights, as well as equal rights to education and employment by the state. The kind of "state feminism"² experienced in Poland and other nations in the Soviet region starkly contrasted with the prolonged struggles for women's rights in North America. Since my exposure in the 1980s to the history of the North American feminist movement, I began to appreciate women's vulnerability in settings where access to reproductive rights is restricted.

Interest in research in Poland

When the transition to Polish independence began in the early 1990s, I watched with both interest and trepidation how rapidly the church dismantled access to reproductive rights, including abortion, contraception, and sex education in Poland. I wondered, how could this be? After decades of access to these services, what kind of forces does it take to roll back long-standing rights? And where is the Polish feminist movement to resist these restrictions?

² My research participants saw "state feminism" as a double-edged sword – on the one hand, many valuable rights were handed down to women by the regime, and on the other hand, these top-down gains could be easily taken away.

Just as the majority of the US public rejoiced about the fall of communism, I questioned the nature of the democratization process that was under way, and the effects of these changes on women's access to health care. It is from these questions that my research interests emerged during the late 1990s, and later came to fruition in the 2000s in my doctoral work. In fact, my doctoral committee at the University of Colorado, composed of five anthropologists (including a Polish-born anthropologist Longina Jakubowska) and a sociologist, under the direction of Donna Goldstein, was eager for me to pursue these increasingly urgent scholarly questions. I also believed I was well positioned to return to Poland to conduct this research.

As a refugee, my exposure to North American scholarship and feminism has made me a keen "insider-outsider" observer of my culture of origin (Sherif 2001). Traditional anthropology used to assert the importance of being an outsider – being distanced from one's proposed culture of study. But more recently our discipline has recognized the advantage of training anthropologists with more complicated identities who themselves have experienced emigration, exile, and return. Although a "partial insider" researcher faces a challenge to avoid making assumptions or quick judgments in the field, anthropologists have also noted clear advantages as "insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depth of understanding" (Clifford 1986: 9). Indeed, during fieldwork in Poland, my dual identity was simultaneously challenging and a place of privilege as I constantly negotiated the boundaries between enjoying the familiarity of my home country and maintaining the scholarly distance of a researcher. In the end, I believe that my partial insider status and fluency in the Polish language were essential in facilitating my acceptance as a researcher.

Fieldwork experiences: 2000-2015

Altogether, I conducted 25 months of anthropological research in Kraków, Warsaw, and Gdańsk between 2000 and 2015. I approached my fieldwork with three distinct but interrelated research questions: 1. What are the effects of postsocialist democratization in Poland on reproductive rights, policies, and access to health care?; 2. How are the categories of gender and reproduction used in the political agendas of the Catholic Church and the state?; 3. How do women experience these shifts, and what coping strategies do they employ to navigate the new system?

I began preliminary fieldwork in summers of 2000 and 2001 in Kraków and Warsaw. Especially helpful at that time was anthropologist Zdzisław Mach, the founder and director of the Institute for European Studies at the Jagiellonian University, who believed my topic was valuable and timely, and generously offered me an affiliation with the University. This affiliation in turn helped me to secure a year-long Fulbright Fellowship to research reproductive politics in Poland in 2002.

In my fieldwork I brought together voices of multiple actors, including experiences of women, doctors, and reproductive rights advocates, and the perspectives of the Catholic clergy and laypersons engaged in work on behalf of the church. I conducted participant-observation and in-depth interviews with 123 women from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. I spent a substantial amount of time in day-to-day activities with study participants in their homes and other social settings, including social outings, religious events and gatherings, horseback riding and pottery classes, and work-related gatherings. I also spent time in the offices of nongovernmental organizations, in particular groups which focused on reproductive rights and health issues.

I found that my research interlocutors whom I invited to participate in my fieldwork were quite receptive to explore these challenging questions and generous with their stories and time. My work generated detailed narratives of life histories, memories of state socialism, reproductive desires and decisions, experiences with family planning and reproductive and sexual health care, and understandings and meanings of abortion policies, feminism, and women's activism around reproductive rights. I also sought the perspectives of doctors providing reproductive health care about their understanding of the rapid changes in family planning policies, and the ways they experienced and coped with these shifts. Research with Polish doctors proved more challenging since they were typically quite pressed for time and often felt overworked and underpaid, yet I was still able to conduct fieldwork with 26 physicians in their clinics or homes. Likewise, the importance of the Catholic Church in shaping gender politics motivated me to pursue interviews with the clergy. I found the clergy quite open to discuss the contentious topic of reproductive rights, and the role of the Polish church in politics. While my positionality as an anthropologist and a feminist observer was never concealed, it was clear that I was in no way threatening to them. One of the interesting experiences was interviewing Bishop Pieronek, the rector of the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Kraków and a prominent church spokesman. In a brief interview that Pieronek granted to my research in 2002, he offered telling insights arguing that "the state must regulate issues of morality until such time when the population is able to take on such a responsibility and until such responsibility becomes encoded in people's minds", highlighting the paternalistic role of the Polish church in terms not unlike those of the socialist regime³.

After completing my dissertation fieldwork as a Fulbright Scholar, I returned to Poland in 2007 to continue research on reproductive politics, this time as a Postdoctoral Fellow at Columbia University's school of public health. Merging anthropology and public health, I sought to further explore the perplexing finding of my earlier research – the rapidly declining birthrate among Polish women de-

³ Interview with T. Pieronek, Kraków, 2002.

spite the severe restrictions on family planning – a project I conducted in Gdańsk and the Tricity area. Later as a faculty member at the University of Central Florida I conducted further research in Warsaw on the politics of reproduction in summers of 2014 and 2015, this time focusing on the “in vitro” debate and the struggle of advocacy groups to secure regulation and state subsidies for infertility treatment against the opposition from the Catholic Church.

Research contributions

My long-term fieldwork in Poland between 2000 and 2015 resulted in a number of scholarly articles, but most importantly the publication of an ethnography *The Politics of Morality: The Church, the State and Reproductive Rights in Postsocialist Poland* (Mishtal 2015). My study offers a historicized view of the central contradiction of postsocialist democratization in Poland – that it is an emerging democracy, on the one hand; and that there is a declining tolerance for reproductive rights, women’s rights, and political or religious pluralism, on the other hand. In my book I hope to contribute the theoretical framework of moral governance, which expands the term “governance” used by scholars thus far, to explain how particular “moral” discussions and mechanisms have been used to enact individual surveillance and political intimidation to maintain legislative control over reproduction. I also show how moral governance is used in practice: how it manifests in specific processes and discourses used to shape policy changes, as well as in specific mechanisms of enforcement at the community and individual level.

Secondly, my book contributes a case study of unofficial biopolitics in Poland. Specifically, my research shows that despite the powerful set of surveilling and controlling mechanism in place after the fall of state socialism, this is not merely another case of Foucauldian biopolitics as a secular rationality of a liberal democracy promoted in the name of optimizing the state, but rather the nature of Polish biopolitics lies in its religious and moral governance promoted in the name of Catholic-nationalist state-building. However, it is one that does not fully succeed because women routinely resist the church’s strictures through various unsanctioned, individualized practices, including through clandestine abortion underground. These resistances are revealed at the individual level in illicit practices and decisions related to contraception, but they also inform the prolonged demographic decline at the society level.

Thus far my book has been received very warmly among both Polish and non-Polish colleagues, especially in anthropology and gender studies, but also in the reproductive health advocacy community in Poland. I have been urged by colleagues in Warsaw to have the book translated into Polish, which I already began to pursue, and thereby make my work more widely accessible in Poland.

Linking with the Polish scholarly community in Poland and abroad

Over the years, I have greatly benefited from many stimulating and ongoing conversations with Polish anthropologists (too numerous to list here), both those living and working in Poland and those living abroad. When I returned as a doctoral student to Kraków in 2000, I noticed that “finding one’s feet” (Geertz 1973) was challenging after a twenty-year long absence. But encouragement from local anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike helped me to quickly regain my balance and launch my research. At that time, Polish anthropology focused its efforts on other areas of research, and therefore questions of reproductive rights in Poland, in particular abortion politics, remained relatively unexamined ethnographically⁴. Thus, I received encouragement from Polish anthropologists at the European Association of Social Anthropologists conference held in Kraków in 2000 to pursue my topic. At the outset, two Jagiellonian University scholars, Hanka Orla-Bukowska (sociology and anthropology) and Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska (religious studies), offered great intellectual support as I began to develop my project in Kraków. In the area of my research interests the key early scholars who took up this controversial topic were, alas, few and outside of anthropology and included sociologists at the University of Warsaw, Anna Titkow and Małgorzata Fuszara, and legal scholar Eleonora Zielińska⁵. I drew inspiration from their work and had important conversations with Fuszara and Zielińska that shaped my understanding of the topic in significant ways.

I have always understood Polish anthropology as not necessarily a distinct group of scholars based in Poland, but as part of the larger, international scholarly community. Several Polish scholars (and scholars of Poland) based in the United States have influenced my ethnographic analysis, in particular anthropologist Ewa Hauser, who is now on faculty at the UW’s American Studies Center. Hauser was at the time based at the University of Rochester, New York, but I first met her in Warsaw in 2002 while conducting fieldwork. I had many stimulating conversations with her, both in Poland and in the US, and she subsequently generously invited me in 2005 to present my research at Rochester’s Skalny Center for Polish and Central European Studies. It was at the Skalny Center where I had my first opportunity to present preliminary results of my doctoral work to a large audience of Polish-American anthropologists and other social scientists, as well as the Polish diaspora interested in postsocialist gender politics. The deep interest in the topic and the thoughtfulness with which the discussion ensued during this

⁴ A notable exception in the postsocialist scholarship is the ethnographic analysis of abortion politics under Nicolae Ceaușescu’s dictatorship in Romania carried out by sociologist Gail Kligman (1998).

⁵ Currently, important anthropological work in this area is emerging from Agnieszka Kościńska and Agata Chełstowska, both at UW.

event reaffirmed for me the timeliness and continued centrality of the question of women's rights in postsocialist Poland.

Likewise anthropologist Longina Jakubowska (University College Utrecht) has been for many years, and continues to be, an important source of intellectual inspiration. Although Jakubowska's ethnographic work in Poland focused on the gentry and questions of social capital and power, I greatly benefited from Jakubowska's contributions to my doctoral committee and from countless discussions I enjoyed with her over the years, starting from a memorable near six-hour conversation in Warsaw in 2002. Finally, during my postdoctoral work at Columbia University from 2006 to 2008 in New York I had the opportunity to meet UW-educated gender scholar Joanna Regulska, who showed interest in and encouraged my research efforts. Regulska's own analysis of women's rights vis-à-vis Polish democratization served as an important foundational knowledge for my own ethnography. At the time of our initial meeting, Regulska was based at Rutgers University, but has since taken the prestigious position of the Vice Provost and Associate Chancellor of Global Affairs at the University of California-Davis. In addition to her academic prominence, Regulska's involvement as a public figure in the Polish women's rights community also serves as an inspiring model of bridging academic work and engagement in social justice efforts in Poland.

In the recent years I have enjoyed expanding my work with Polish colleagues through collaboration with medical anthropologist Magdalena Radkowska-Walkowicz and her research team at the University of Warsaw. This collaboration has been in the context of my recent fieldwork in Poland focusing on the politics of "in vitro" regulation. Radkowska-Walkowicz and I have co-organized an international symposium on this topic at the Brocher Foundation in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2015, titled, "Between Policy and Practice: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Assisted Reproductive Technologies and Equitable Access to Health Care," and we are now co-editing a Special Issue of the "Reproductive Biomedicine & Society" journal based on the symposium. I find this collaborative effort immensely rewarding and value our collegiality as our joint projects of research dissemination and publication have been marked by some of the most interesting conversations about linking empirical work with larger theoretical questions.

For better or for worse, questions of reproductive rights, health and policies remain at the center of heated debates and political challenges experienced in Poland, and I look forward to continued fieldwork here and collaborations with Polish colleagues on this important topic.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka, the Editor of "Lud", "for her interest in my experiences as a Polish American anthropologist and inviting me to

contribute to this anniversary issue. Parts of this reflexive essay are based on my ethnography *The Politics of Morality: The Church, the State and Reproductive Rights in Postsocialist Poland* (Mishtal 2015). I have benefitted from interfacing with many more Polish scholars than the scope of this article permits, and from conducting fieldwork and maintaining professional relationships with numerous individuals in the Polish feminist community, many of whom while not scholars per se also generate important publications and reports that inform my own scholarship and the understanding of the Polish situation in the international scholarly community.

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