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A UKRAINIAN SCHOLAR IN POLAND:
NOTES IN THE MARGINS

Fieldnotes are liminal – betwixt and between – because they are between reality and thesis, between memory and publication, between training and professional life

Jean E. Jackson (1990: 14)

The epigraph is not random; it reflects the current intention to write a text, which would be partially a scientific interpretation based on my fieldnotes, and partially my reflections and subjective impressions obtained from fieldwork in Poland. Reflexivity as a method of anthropology inspired me to write this report. I consider my whole stay in Poland as fieldwork which I conducted using participant observation. Therefore, I rely on James Clifford's approach to the field as *habitus*, the aggregate of embodied trends and practices, not just a physical place, as well as interpretation of field research as embodied spatial practice (Clifford 1997).

My research in Poland started in September 2014. The internship at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Warsaw (IEiAK UW) was realized within the Polish Government Program for Young Scientists (Program Stypendialny Rządu RP dla Młodych Naukowców), in 2014/2015. I then continued my internship thanks to the financial support of the V4EaP Scholarship Program, financed by the International Visegrad Fund, where I was a research fellow during 2015/2016. I worked under the supervision of my colleagues from IEiAK UW, Prof. Magdalena Zowczak and Dr. Magdalena Lubańska, as a participant of two more projects focused on religious questions in Ukraine and Poland, which were financed by the National Centre of Science (Narodowe Centrum Nauki). I also cooperated closely with Dr. Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology at the Polish Academy of Sciences.

The biggest challenge for me was the fieldwork, which had to be carried out in a foreign country and in a foreign language (I started to learn Polish language upon my arrival from Kyiv in Warsaw in September 2014). Previously, during my M.A. and Ph.D. studies in Ukraine, I had conducted field research working within the group of 5-30 researchers. According to the Ukrainian tradition of ethnology and folklore studies, such group work in the field is called an “ethnographic expedition”, or, depending on the composition of the research team and research goals, it is referred to as an historical or folklore expedition (Hrymych 2008: 147-149). The expeditions which I participated in lasted from one to three weeks. Members of the research team would have a questionnaire and each scholar was obliged to investigate particular cultural phenomena (for example, funeral rites, wedding rites, folk medicine, etc.). Such expeditions made it possible to survey relatively large areas (e.g. 20 villages in 10 days) and to undertake ethno-linguistic mapping of the studied phenomena. At the same time, this kind of work did not allow for using participant observation or becoming involved in the life of a local community.

In Poland I worked in the field alone. I almost immediately felt the difference between the fieldwork done in a team and conducted individually. It meant not only the opportunity to carry out participant observation in local communities, but also to experience a huge responsibility for everything I did and said. Although I met a lot of hospitable people who were willing to help during my field trips, there were a number of unpredictable and unpleasant situations. In the course of my fieldwork I became interested in the question of interaction with interlocutors while entering their environment, as well as various modifications of their narrations due to the other national and confessional identity of the researcher¹. Thus, I aim to discuss whether a different nationality is a burden or an advantage, and whether it has an effect on interaction with people when a Ukrainian scholar conducts research in Poland.

My field initiation in Poland started in Biały Bór in the Western Pomerania. Following this I undertook research in Przeworsk and near Przemyśl, on the Polish-Ukrainian border, and finally, in Włodawa, a town on the Polish-Belarusian border, on the River Bug. These are three different areas, in which I felt differently, had different relationships with the interlocutors, stirred different emotions and came to different research results. All of these regions are characterized by a multi-cultural and multi-religious past: the presence of Jews before World

¹ Here I would like to refer to Anna Wylegała’s article (2013), based on her research in Zhovkva (Ukraine) and Krzyż (Poland). Through self-reflection as a Polish researcher in Ukraine, the author raised the issue of the methodological aspects of research in a situation where a researcher has different cultural and national identities to that of his/her interlocutors. Reading Wylegała’s reflections about her fieldwork in Ukraine, I was constantly thinking about my fieldwork in Poland. In my opinion, we were in different positions towards our interlocutors, despite the common sense of “otherness” in our fields, being a scholar and a foreigner.

War II, and the Holocaust at the time of the Nazi occupation, forcible resettlements of Ukrainians in 1944-1946 to the Soviet Union, repatriation of Poles from Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine in the same period, and Operation “Wisła” in 1947, during which 150,000 Greek Catholics and Orthodox followers (Ukrainians, Lemkos and Boykos) were forcibly evicted from the south-eastern regions to the north-west of Poland, to the so-called “Returned Lands” (Ziemie Odzyskane).

The subject of my research was the religious culture in local communities and inter-confessional relations between Roman Catholics and Greek Catholics, as well as between Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians. However, during my talks with people about religious life there themes little related to religiousness came to light. My status as a researcher from Ukraine and even more so, my being a young single woman from Ukraine, gave rise to a number of curious situations in the field.

It is worth noting that those most open to dialogue and assistance in my research were the representatives of the clergy, regardless of their confessions (Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic and Orthodox) and nationality (Polish and Ukrainian). In virtually every local community where I intended to conduct research, priests provided support, asking their parishioners not to avoid conversations with me, which was very important at the initial stage of research.

In Biały Bór my interviewees belonged to the first generation of the Greek Catholic Ukrainians displaced by Operation “Wisła” and, additionally, I spoke to a small number of people from the second and third generation. In Włodawa and the surrounding villages my research was not limited to the Ukrainian Orthodox community and I also conducted interviews with Polish Roman Catholics. In the Subcarpathian Region, near Przemyśl, I worked mainly with mixed Polish-Ukrainian local communities (Roman Catholics and Orthodox), but also with the pilgrims who came there for *odpust*, connected with the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in August at the famous Roman Catholic sanctuary in Kalwaria Paławska.

Another challenge I had to face as a Ukrainian ethnographer who worked in Poland was history. It turned out that the collective memory of the people from the borderlands was not only deeply rooted in the history of the 20th century, but indeed in the whole historical context of the period before the partition of Poland. Moreover, my research revealed that religion greatly influenced the perception of history: the collective memory of Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic neighbors (or Greek Catholics and Roman Catholics) in the same local community was often different. In this regard, Polish-Ukrainian relations in the past, as well as reciprocal postcolonial traumas² left their mark on the strategies of communication between me and my interlocutors.

² Using the term “postcolonial” towards mutual historical traumas of Ukrainians and Poles, I mean, primarily, the historical domination of both Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires, and later the USSR, in the region where the current Polish-Ukrainian border lies. I also refer to the applications of Edward Said’s Orientalism theory to the culture of Polish eastern borderlands (e.g. Ladykowski 2015).

A key point in the study was the persistence of several stereotypes about Ukrainians which often accompanied my first attempts to become acquainted with potential interviewees. From my Kyiv perspective I did not have any knowledge about those stereotypes or persistent notions and consequently I failed to perceive many things.

The first stereotype which I faced during my fieldwork near Przemyśl was – among the Poles – an unequivocally negative image of Ukrainians as *banderivtsi*. The story about the UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army) and *banderivtsi*³ was often the first thing that potential informants would mention after identifying the “eastern” accent of my Polish. The first questions that I could hear from them were: “Will you ask about *banderowcy*?”, “Was your grandfather in the UPA?” or “I want you to apologize to me for Volhynia, and then we will talk”. I felt confused because I was asking about local sacred sites and pilgrimages, about mixed Polish-Ukrainian families and personal religiousness. Instead, I had to endure introductory talks about the UPA. Sometimes the conversation took quite unpleasant turns.

I emphasize here the important issue, for me, namely the gender and age-specific features of these conversations. All the offensive words, all the tension, all the demands made on me to apologize for the events of the past came from men born in the first two decades after WWII. I did not hear anything like this from an older man or a woman, a teenager or a young person of my age. Previously I had had no experience of transferring such stereotypes onto myself and an interpretation of Ukrainians as a homogeneous group that should bear collective responsibility for the past crimes committed by some representatives of the group. I will give an example of one of the most intense situations I experienced. Once I went to the house of a 57-year-old man, whom I had previously spoken to. However, during the second meeting just at the doorway he said he hated the Ukrainians and it was right that the Polish had tortured Ukrainians in Sahryń⁴. I was stunned but then I realized he was drunk and turned to leave. In this very moment, the man grabbed my arm, pulled me to him and told me to get out of Poland because there were already too many Ukrainians there. I got scared and ran to his neighbor who was also a Pole, a sweet older woman. When I described the situation, she was choked with indignation. I stayed in her house till the evening and listened about

³ *Banderivtsi* (in Polish: *banderowcy*) is a term derived from the name of Stepan Bandera. Originally it referred to his supporters, members of the radical OUN-B (The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists-Banderivtsi). The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) arose of the OUN-B in 1942. The UPA perpetrated mass killings of the Polish civilian population of Volhynia and East Galicia in 1943-1944. It continued its struggle against the Soviet authorities until the early 1950s. The UPA partisans were also called *banderivtsi*, as well as Ukrainian civilians who supported them. In the communist post-war rhetoric this term was extended to the persons of Ukrainian origin.

⁴ Sahryń is a village near Hrubieszów, Poland. It was one of Ukrainian villages which were burned down by Polish partisans from the Home Army (Armia Krajowa) during the armed conflict with the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. From the AK perspective, the Sahryń massacre was seen as revenge for the Volhynian “anti-Polish” operation by the UPA, and “self-defense” by the Polish population.

how good neighborly relations were before the war; about a school in which they all studied together – Polish, Ukrainian and Jewish children; about two Ukrainian girls her mother rescued during Operation “Wisła”; about Poles who, at the instigation of local communists, destroyed Ukrainian churches, though they occasionally attended them. My hospitable interlocutor described a mosaic picture of the perfect pre-war agrarian world on the margins of a former empire, a quiet multicultural paradise, which was destroyed from the outside by the German occupation and the Soviet authorities, causing trouble between the people *ab intra*. However, I found it hard to believe this world was really so perfect.

Due to such cases from daily life, gossip and insults, hints and lies, I finally became aware of the reciprocal historical traumas of Poles and Ukrainians that were incomprehensible and overwhelming to me. Neither living in Kyiv, nor communicating in Warsaw academic circles, had I encountered anything similar. After conducting my fieldwork in Poland, I realize that there is still a long way to coming to terms with the traumatic past in Polish-Ukrainian borderlands.

My nationality and gender induced the second widespread stereotype I had to face during the fieldwork. People often did not perceive me as a researcher. Instead, they considered me to be a pretty young girl from Ukraine, who spoke with a nice “eastern” accent and was looking for work as a cleaner, babysitter, caretaker, or for some sort of seasonal work. Some of them also thought I had come to find a husband in Poland and thus escape the war and the economic crisis in Ukraine. Some friendly women, particularly those who gave me shelter during my travels in the borderlands, made attempts to introduce me to older men or widowers, explaining that my marriage to a Pole, accompanied by a work permit and longer stay in Poland would give me a ticket to a better life.

Obviously, these persistent ideas also surfaced in communication with me because of their fear of a large influx of Ukrainian workers, caused by the political instability and economic crisis in Ukraine. All of my interlocutors asked me about the source of money for my stay in Poland and my research, complaining that evidently in the near future Ukrainians would take jobs from Poles. On the other hand, people often expressed their condolences over the armed conflict which continued to take place in Ukraine, and inquired about the course of events. Of course, I could not answer all their questions because I was no expert on the topic and I had never been to what the Ukrainian mass media call “the temporarily occupied territories” (parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions involved in the military conflict). Nevertheless in the eyes of my informants I was a “local”, the Ukrainian who had ran away from the troubles in her own country in search of a better life in Poland. Sometimes, to convince the people that I had professional education, a Ph.D. degree, and cooperated with Polish scientists, I showed them my invitation letters from the Warsaw University or from the scholarship program.

My fieldwork in Biały Bór deserves a separate story. In entering the community of the Greek Catholic Ukrainians displaced during Operation “Wisła” and

their descendants, I was assisted by the rector of the local Greek Catholic parish. For him I became one of their “own”, not an “alien” because I was also the Ukrainian, conducting research on the Ukrainian minority in Poland. He introduced me to the members of the parish and took me in his car to distant villages, to the elderly people – my potential informants. I had four visits to Biały Bór and during the last one a girl invited me to her wedding, which I eagerly accepted. Despite the hospitality and comfort of communication, in this community of the Ukrainians I always felt as a “different” Ukrainian, not one of them. My otherness was defined by the fact that I was not baptized in the Greek Catholic but in the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless I sometimes attended services at the Greek Catholic church, because the most important thing for me was the Ukrainian language of the liturgy and the Eastern rites. My position was somewhat surprising for the interlocutors because for them the institution of the Orthodox Church was associated with the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, which they perceived as a threat to the Greek Catholic Church. In addition, it was difficult to me to explain the church division in Ukraine and the number of Orthodox institutions, which significantly differ from each other.

My first visit to this community took place a year after the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the beginning of the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Before I started asking the people about the topics that interested me, we would chat for an hour or so about everything that was happening in Ukraine. I was touched by the fact that this community of Ukrainians was not indifferent to the tragic events in my country and expressed their strong ties with Ukraine. The local Greek Catholic parish collected money to treat the wounded, transferred medicines to Ukraine, and even sent an ambulance. During all these conversations people repeatedly raised the issue of the functioning of two languages in Ukraine: Ukrainian and Russian. I was often asked how I could personally succeed in reconciling my Russian and Ukrainian origin (my father is Russian, living in Ukraine since 1959, and my mother is Ukrainian), adoption of Russian as the second native language and a distinct Ukrainian identity. I was able to explain this only as a mirror comparing myself and my own bilingualism with their bilingualism and preservation of the Ukrainian identity in the functioning of two languages – Ukrainian and Polish, or only Polish in the next generations. As a Ukrainian from Kyiv, I was asked about a variety of things, for which I simply had no answer, but, according to the interlocutors, I had to have as a resident of the Ukrainian capital. For example, two elderly people (from the first generation, evicted under Operation “Wisła”) once asked me if Ukraine gave representatives of national minorities (the Ukrainians of diaspora) the “Ukrainian Card”, similar to the “Polish Card” issued by the Polish government to citizens of Ukraine of Polish descent. To my somewhat confused response that the Ukrainian state did not practice this, they commented that it would have been nice to get such a card as a proof of their belonging, though at present they were far from Ukraine.

In Włodawa, Lublin Province, the situation is different. The identity of the Orthodox community which I studied is based on post-memory of the events of 1938, when, within the framework of the pacification and Polonization policy in Chełmszczyzna and South Podlasie, the Polish authorities issued orders to destroy the Orthodox churches and confiscate Church property. For the Orthodox community of Włodawa this was the most traumatic and most important event, around which the memory of Orthodox believers was formed. Their confessional identity plays a greater role than the national one. Members of this community rarely defined themselves as “Ukrainians”. Most of them called themselves *prawosławni* (“Orthodox”) or *tutejsi* (locals), stressing that they spoke in *chachlacki* language, “in their own way”⁵. For them the word *chachlacki* was completely neutral, while not for me. Moreover, people were proud that they could talk to me, a Ukrainian, in this dialect, which had been used in their families for generations and was considered to be the language of religious experience. The trauma caused by Operation “Wisła” is also palpable in this community, but more among the second generation. However, the post-memory of another trauma, caused by demolition of Orthodox churches and persecution of the Orthodox Christians in 1938, is much stronger. In Włodawa I also came in contact with Roman Catholics, most of whom originated from confessionally mixed or Orthodox families. It was very interesting to observe so many Roman Catholic Poles, originating from Orthodox families (descendants of Orthodox grandparents), who felt connected with that tradition and occasionally visited the Orthodox church or went to the Orthodox monastery in Jabłeczna.

During my research in Włodawa I was never treated as a Ukrainian who has to apologize to Poles for the UPA massacres of Polish civilians in Volhynia in 1943. Yes, this issue was raised in the talks as well as in a discussion about Polish underground military activities against Belarusian and Ukrainian civilians on these territories. However, all of these conversations were relatively polite. Moreover, it seemed to me that people in Lublin Province looked at me not as a Ukrainian from Kyiv, but as a citizen of the former Soviet Union, someone from the East. For example, I was shown the old Soviet “Minsk” refrigerators, or “Rubin” and “Sapphire” TV sets with the words: “This one was brought from your eastern sites” or “My husband brought this TV set from Kyiv when he was in the Soviet Union with a Friendship Train”⁶. People also recalled their tourist trips to the Soviet Union in the 1970s, referring to the cultural and physical space beyond the River Bug as the East. And similarly I was, for them, “a person from the East” who was an object of interest. After finishing my fieldwork in Włodawa I stood on the bank of the River Bug, staring at the border posts – Polish and Belarusian,

⁵ *Gwara chachlacka* is a local dialect characterized by the mixture of Ukrainian, Polish and Belarusian languages.

⁶ The “Friendship Trains” (in Polish: *pociągi przyjaźni*) was a widespread form of Soviet and socialistic tourism between the member countries of the Warsaw Pact. That movement arose at the end of 1960s and flourished in 1970s, as a part of the USSR communist propaganda.

and thought: What is this border: the boundary between Poland and Belarus, between the EU and post-Soviet world, or the mental-cultural gap, or the boundary between two civilization models? I still cannot answer these questions...

I realize how little time for a proper research I had. Each of these three cases should be given more time since they left me with more questions than answers. In each of the three territories in Poland where I conducted my research, the situation of being an “alien” not only because of my status as a scholar, but because of my otherness as a foreigner from an unstable neighboring state whose citizens come to Poland *en masse* to study and to work, had an impact on the progress and results of my research. Topics related to religiousness remained in the background, because on finding out that I was Ukrainian, my interlocutors wanted to discuss the traumatic moments of Polish-Ukrainian history and current economic and political issues with me. However, I believe that my emotions and notes in the margins of the main study can be helpful for treating the reciprocal postcolonial traumas of Poles and Ukrainians as an important source of understanding and finding ways of coming to terms with our traumatic past and conflicts of memory.

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