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KIERUNEK – WSCHÓD! A PERSONAL DISCOVERY OF POLAND

Having conducted fieldwork among such diverse groups as anarchists, border guards, expellees and ministry officials in Poland over recent years, I have been asked by the editors of “Lud” to come up with a not so much a scholarly, but rather personal account of my experiences of doing fieldwork in Poland. I am grateful to “Lud” for the opportunity to reflect upon my personal Polish-German history and my encounter with Poland and Polish anthropology. In effect, this has become less a story about Polish ethnology and cultural anthropology, and instead one about encounters, processes of learning and gradual development on my – West-German – part. I will begin my personal account not with a fieldwork episode but with the early encounters and imageries of Poland that framed my expectations. These, I argue, were not particularly specific to me but mirror a widespread attitude towards the Eastern neighbor.

Having been born in the mid-1970s in South-West Germany, Poland for me was a strange place somewhere hidden behind the German Democratic Republic, which in fact was yet another strange place. My parents and I had visited our friends in East Berlin twice when I was a child, and I was convinced that during each of our visits it had been raining and the whole scenery had been grey, foggy and misty. This memory was so vivid that I was in fact surprised when a few years ago I accidentally found photographs from our visits to East Berlin and our friends’ dacha and discovered that during each of our visits the sun had been shining and we had had the most beautiful weather conditions. Memories are framed, and in this case literally clouded, by cultural imageries and symbolic geographies. Moreover, to perceive of the countries behind the Iron Curtain as grey, sad and gloomy was nothing specific to me. Rather, many people of my generation, who had few or no links to the “other side”, had no emotional attachment to the unknown “brothers and sisters” or the “lost territories” and therefore did not share the phantom pain which many of the older generation felt. Our imaginations about the lands behind the Iron Curtain were mostly informed by

their memories and narratives and also by their fears and warnings, for example about GDR border guards. Within this imagery, Poland, it seemed to me, had to be an even grayer and foggier place than the GDR, with constantly drizzling rain and inhabited by unhappy and bad-tempered people.

I first set foot into Poland in 1995, when my cousin convinced me to spend our holidays there. We took my parents' car, a red VW Golf, which left my parents convinced that they would never see their car back again. My father, a teacher, even asked one of his pupils of Polish descent to write a note saying "For sale due to engine damage". He suggested sticking the note to the car window in order to deter potential thieves. My cousin and I were too embarrassed to use the note. Still, we were ourselves not unimpressed by prejudices and stereotyping. Harald Schmidt's "Polish jokes" – he was the host of a late night show in the 1990s – were only a culmination point in a long German tradition of looking down upon the Eastern neighbor. We spent a lovely time in Świnoujście and traveled along the coast to Gdańsk, the former of which led me to the conclusion that it is biologically impossible to pronounce Polish words unless having grown up in Poland and having familiarized your tongue and vocal chords from earliest age on. At least we were a good laugh for those Polish young men who taught us to pronounce "Świnoujście".

Three years later I was already in the midst of my studies of European ethnology at Humboldt University, Berlin. One day a leaflet on the bulletin board in the Department of European Ethnology caught my attention: "Who wants to spend a semester in Poland or Hungary?". Remembering my failed attempts to pronounce Polish words years ago, I felt immediately challenged. The two Polish cities on offer within the TEMPUS program were Warsaw and Poznań, and my choice was pragmatically motivated: should this exchange semester turn out to be a bad idea, it would only take me three hours to get home to Berlin from Poznań. Moreover, Poznań seemed to me to be better suited to make friends due to its size of 500,000 inhabitants, compared to the huge capital.

Due to the lack of other potential exchange students, I got the place; there was only one other applicant, who was also successful. The grant included a more than generous stipend which left those other students who also spent a semester abroad green with envy. The amount of the stipend was probably in inverse proportion to the popularity of the Polish and Hungarian destinations at the time. In fact I was often asked by friends and family why on earth had I chosen Poland as a destination and not some nice warm country with a language where I could make myself understood.

It was in 1997, in the semester prior to my first academic visit to Poland, that I first met Michał Buchowski. He was a guest professor at the Department of European Ethnology in Berlin at the time and his class included an excursion to Poznań. Apart from the embarrassing fact that our student group failed to find the Old Town on the first day, this excursion actually encouraged me to pursue my

plan to study in Poznań the following semester. Michał later agreed to supervise my M.A. and Ph.D. theses and we cooperated within our FP7 project on “Football Research in an Enlarged Europe” (FREE) between 2012 and 2015.

The German-Polish border was only 60 km away from Berlin, but in our imagined geography it was a world away. In fact, this distance was the basis of a popular quiz Polish friends used to play with Western visitors. The image of the Far East was extremely pervasive among almost all the people I knew, myself included. Reading some of the almost classic accounts on the cultural construction of Eastern Europe many years later, I still feel strangely found out, such as in Larry Wolff’s (1994) *Inventing Eastern Europe* or also Maria Todorova’s (1997) *Imagining the Balkans*, to name but two.

While I had been positively surprised during my 1995 visit and also during a later short stay in 1997, both visits had taken place in summer. Winter, I was convinced, was expected to be harsh and deep; Eastern, almost Siberian. Since my stay was supposed to begin in February, my mother urged me to buy a new winter coat which would keep me warm during the long Polish winter. I guess all of us had something like “Peter and the wolf” in mind when we thought about winter in Poland. Well, surprisingly winter in Poznań turned out to quite un-Siberian. Berlin winter and Poznań winter take place about 300 km apart from each other, hence few differences could be observed (my super anti-Siberian coat provided great service during a much later stay in the Canadian winter).

I left Berlin for my exchange semester on a cold and misty February morning by train from Lichtenberg station. When the train approached the border, I nervously memorized my Polish survival words. While still in Berlin, I had attended Polish classes for linguists that were also free of charge at the time for students from other departments. After one semester I was able to recognize and translate incredibly complicated grammatical forms, but unfortunately I was not quite sure yet how to properly pronounce them. On the train to Poznań I had planned to greet the border guard in Polish as an audible proof of my good will and openness towards the East. Needless to add that my well-prepared *Dzień dobry!* (good morning) came out as *Dziękuję!* (thank you), when I finally handed my passport to the Polish border guard. I felt incredibly stupid.

The Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the time did not offer any classes in English, and since my and the two other exchange students’ Polish was far from sufficient to follow classes in Polish, the department suggested that we meet with members of the faculty each separately to discuss their research topics, and the department organized a weekly class at the Department of Sociology in English for us. We also joined a class on Polish history that had been organized for a few US exchange students at the Department of History. I vividly remember this history class, as it showed me quite plainly how little I had previously known about Polish history and about the entanglements of Polish and German history. As a West-German, I had obviously learned a lot about (West-)German national

history, but also about French, British and US history (the Russian revolution was omitted by my right-wing history teacher, who refused to talk about Lenin). This Polish history class opened up an entirely new perspective of European history, and it was embarrassing proof of how little knowledge about, and interest in, Central-Eastern Europe existed on “our” side of the continent.

I was lucky that at the time there were very few exchange students in Poznań, and I lived in a dormitory where few people spoke English. Both the Polish students and also later the anarchists, whom I researched, quickly and, I have to add, very patiently, integrated me, both in linguistic and in social terms. Although I and the other exchange students did not attend classes, we took part in other activities, such as the *inicjacja*, the departmental party for first-year students. The Polish students’ self-ironic play with elements from anthropology and ethnology and the playful and creative way that also forged their departmental identity made a lasting impression. Generally, the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology seemed to specifically attract students who were alternative, creative, unconventional, and open, and many students were proud to emphasize these specificities as something that distinguished them from other academic disciplines. This kind of self-image felt familiar for me as a Berlin student of small-town Swabian descent.

I came back to Poznań two years later with an ERASMUS stipend to conduct fieldwork for my M.A. thesis among Polish alternative culture and anarchists in and around the “Rozbrat” squat. During my first stay I had been struck by two, for me, seemingly incompatible facts: Why would Polish anarchists insist on a preferential and courteous treatment for women while on the other hand claiming equality and freedom for everyone? Why would Polish anarchists, punks, and other alternative groups fervently reject certain behavioral patterns, social structures, and institutions, but adhere to others that to my mind were definitely old-fashioned? This irritation led me to research Polish alternative culture’s relation to traditional values, which was later published in German in a book *Anarchie ist die Mutter der Ordnung* (Schwell 2005). Not only did I conduct participant observation and interviews with various actors, but I also followed their narrative legitimizing strategies and dug deeper into Polish history. I was fascinated by the power of historical narratives of a long-gone *Rzeczpospolita*, the noblemen of the *szlachta*, the way of life of the “Sarmatians” (all of which I had, again, never encountered in history classes in school), and the way they were used to formulate ideas, create imageries and inform actions in present everyday life and political actions.

Many Germans of my generation have grown up feeling uneasy when being exposed as German when travelling abroad, and particularly in neighboring countries, most of which had suffered tremendously during the Second World War. Poland, which had lost about one fifth of its population during the war, where more people than anywhere else in Europe were killed in German con-

centration camps, to me felt like an even much more sensitive place than, for example, France where my parents had so often urged me not to talk too loudly in German in public. Moreover, while France and the French were generally considered equal and civilized in public discourse, Poland and Poles were subject to popular jokes, displaying Poles as stupid, thieves, and generally inferior. A German orientalizing gaze towards Poles was dominant, drawing upon historical stereotypes and prejudices. The only difference to classical orientalism was probably that it lacked orientalism's ambiguous dialectic of affection and rejection – there was little desire towards the East, only expressed in a patriarchal gaze on East-European prostitutes.

In light of this historical legacy, I was surprised how little recent history played a role in everyday interaction with me. Only once was I yelled at for being German in a pub in Poznań by a drunkard, but German-Polish history never influenced my interactions with friends and colleagues or interfered with my fieldwork. I largely ascribe this to the fact that I engaged in the endeavor to learn Polish. Western Europeans, it seemed to me, who attempted to learn the language, were a rather uncommon sight, and I was often asked by locals for my “good reasons”. Did I have family in Poland? Had my family emigrated from Poland? Why else would I want to learn the language? I had the feeling that I had already earned some kind of respect for engaging in that difficult task. Many Poles I met would dwell on a self-imposed inferiority and a self-deprecatory attitude on the one hand and a celebration of the self, Polish creativity, and lust for life on the other hand. While the former often adopted the pejorative image of an alleged East-European “civilizational incompetence” and popular stereotypes about Poland or the East in general, the latter seemed to be an explicit negation and rejection of the very same Western stereotypes. This “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997) also appeared in the archetypes of the *nieudacznik* and the *kombinator*, two self-images which I found to be effective in a later research among officials in Warsaw dealing with EU matters (Schwell 2015).

In 2004 I was offered a job to conduct narrative biographical interviews with elderly people who had been expelled from the “Kresy” or other former Polish territories to Silesia after World War II. I conducted hours of interviews with these people in Silesia who told me their life stories. The project was led by the Institute for Saxonian History and Ethnology in Dresden and funded by the Saxonian Ministry of the Interior. These people had lived through unspeakable horrors, they had suffered from both German and Soviet occupation, had been deported to Siberia or had survived the Holocaust hidden behind a dresser. All of them had managed to come to the “Ziemie Odzyskane” and had lived in a house that had previously belonged to Germans. It was most striking for me that there was no bitterness towards me, and the Germans in general, in their accounts. All agreed that “they had to leave their home, just like we had to leave ours”. They all greeted me with great hospitality, sometimes with food, liquor and vodka. For

some, these interviews opened old wounds which made them cry during our conversations, others had found a way to narrate their story as if it belonged to somebody else, only sometimes disrupted by personal and very emotional confessions, such as when one man who grew up in what is today Ukraine said, very quietly: "I am still terrified when I suddenly hear someone speak Ukrainian in public behind my back". But there was also the old Ukrainian man who at first was too afraid to tell his story as it felt to him like an unauthorized counter-narrative to the official narrative, but felt relieved when he was finally able to talk. Similar interviews were conducted in Saxony with Germans who had to flee from Silesia. The results of the research project were published on an audio CD entitled *Dieser Schmerz bleibt* ("This pain remains") (2004). My Polish interlocutors' empathy towards their German counterparts, their joint feeling of mutual suffering that could have united their fates, had made a lasting impression on me.

My Ph.D. research brought me back to Poland in 2003, but this time it explicitly included a German-Polish dimension. Just as in my previous research, I took the inspiration for my Ph.D. topic from life itself. Traveling back and forth between Berlin and Poznań, I had often observed German-Polish border guard teams jointly checking travelers on the train. Some of these teams apparently got along very well and also talked and joked together while waiting for the train. Others, on the other hand, seemed to spend most of the time wishing they were somewhere else. Why was that so? Who had ordered them to cooperate? What was the rationale behind that cooperation? And how did that rationale translate into practice?

I was granted permissions by both German and Polish border guard agencies to conduct fieldwork. Interestingly, the German border guard agency, the Bundespolizei, was much more reluctant than the Polish Straż Graniczna, which only asked me to not conduct research on undercover teams. Apart from that, the Polish senior officers were very open and cooperative. The German side, however, proved to be much more difficult. Finally, a letter from the then president of the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), Gesine Schwan, led to success. It turned out that the then president of the German border guards was full of mistrust, both with regard to my potential findings and towards his very own border guards.

The German-Polish border guard cooperation proved an exciting and dynamic field to study. Very little had been written in cultural anthropology, and only slightly more in other disciplines, such as political science and sociology, about cross-border police cooperation. I entered the field at a particularly sensitive and stimulating moment: my fieldwork took place more or less between 2004, when Poland joined the EU, and 2007, when Poland joined the Schengen area and stationary border controls were abolished in favor of mobile controls and increased intelligence. Polish-German border guard cooperation, which already looked back upon a long history that dated back to the 1970s, had never been as intense

and visually tangible as between 2004 and 2007. I was lucky that I could be of use for both the Germans and the Poles. Many of them had worked together, patrolled the border together, and stood side by side at the control post for hours, without being able to communicate more than a minimum of words and sentences that are necessary for a very basic border guard understanding (*drugi pas, stop, proszę paszport...*). With me in the car or the control box, they suddenly were able to ask everything that they always wanted to know about the colleagues from the other side.

While my previous research among anarchists and alternative groups in Poznań was first and foremost informed by my own irritations, research among border guards at the German-Polish border was different. Not only did it add an international dimension to my fieldwork, more precisely, a binational and a European one. The world of border guarding was generally strange to me, and by participating in Polish-German encounters and translating their questions and conversations, I learned what border guarding meant for each of them, which differences existed between them, how different perspectives were negotiated, or even failed to be reconciled in some instances. I learned about security and its importance for processes of Europeanization, but I also learned about how orientalizing practices and power relations also impact upon those individuals most willing to engage in cooperation and, sometimes, even friendship. I learned how external factors shape personal encounters, how historical legacies and pre-existing stereotypes may be negotiated by committed individuals, but how financial asymmetries, working conditions, institutional differences, and institutionalized mistrust obstruct most attempts to foster understanding. To escape the orientalizing of the Poles proved, in fact, difficult for both sides. It was not so much pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices that were obstacles to understanding, but the way they interacted with these external factors. Nevertheless, I was lucky to find in my fieldwork border guards from both sides of the Odra who put a lot of effort into the development of trust on a personal and not only cooperative basis.

Speaking Polish was indispensable throughout my fieldwork, and besides the linguistic element it was a source of knowledge and insights in itself. The mere fact that I tried to learn and speak the language granted me credibility with regard to the seriousness of my endeavor, both among Polish anarchists and German and Polish border guards. It was a tool to make myself understood and understand others, but also to fulfill a role in these people's lives. Just as they were experts of their fields, whose knowledge I tried to gain insight into, my knowledge of Polish allowed me to fulfill a function for them. Until I moved to Vienna, I helped my Polish interlocutors and friends from the Federacja Anarchistyczna to establish and keep contact with Berlin anarchists. Also the border guards, many of whom had been skeptical at the outset, welcomed my presence, arguing that "you can tell the superiors what is going on down here". The Polish border guards in particular lived in constant fear of their superiors and emphasized that it should be

no means be possible for their superiors to find out what they had told me. But also the Germans said they too felt powerless to voice concerns. My research, both sides hoped, would communicate problems to superior officers in an environment which first and foremost tried to make an impression of reconciliation, of efficiency, of absolute protection, of friendship, or of European security to the EU, the national governments or the local populations. It was published in a book entitled *Europa an der Oder* („Europe at the Odra”) (Schwell 2008).

The East-West asymmetries that so often lie at the center of many of my research projects have always been inscribed in my fieldwork encounters, my own position, and German-Polish collaboration and cooperation in more general terms. For my Ph.D. research I was glad to be accepted as a “Europa Fellow” at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), and this German-Polish Ph.D. program was hosted by the Collegium Polonicum in Ślubice. Viadrina University was proud to present itself under the symbol of German-Polish cooperation, and I was happy to be accepted to such an international environment. German-Polish cooperation at Viadrina, however, turned out to be wishful thinking for the most part. Few members of the faculty spoke Polish, few dealt with German-Polish or Polish topics. While on the Polish side in Collegium Polonicum more faculty members spoke German, many perceived of asymmetries that they felt to be expressed in financial, linguistic and cultural terms. Many German colleagues were reluctant to visit the other side of the river Odra, few went further into Ślubice than the Sphinx and Odra restaurants or the London Pub. Luckily, there were also others who shared a commuters’ flat in Ślubice or engaged in cross-border research, cooperation and friendship.

The academic life I encountered at Collegium Polonicum was very different from the small world of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology in Poznań, which, moreover, I had only encountered from an exchange student’s perspective. Academia in CP was much more formalized, traditional and constantly trying to keep up to an imagined Western ideal which the immediate West itself, Viadrina, was not able to fulfill itself. Ph.D. students were much less independent and autonomous in their research, and the generous funding from the German Ministry of Education and Research turned out to be a problem for some of my Polish co-doctoral students as it showed too big a gap in Polish academic salaries.

My job as an assistant professor at the University of Vienna entailed a greater geographical distance and less opportunity for long-term fieldwork. Moving from the geographical border to the border function and bureaucratic handling, I attempted to deepen my understanding of Schengen enlargement and the wider Europeanization process within an anthropology of the political by conducting interviews in Polish state agencies of internal security such as the National Border Guard Headquarters, the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, and the Police (see Schwell 2015, 2016). To date, my most recent fieldwork in Poland

took place in Poznań in 2012 within the framework of the FREE project during the European Football Championship in Poland and Ukraine. This short field trip took place in close cooperation with Michał Buchowski and Gosia Kowalska. The FREE project, inter alia, explicitly sought to scrutinize Eastern Europe as the Blind Spot of European Football, thereby reflecting wider social forces and asymmetries across Europe (our research has been published, amongst other places, in the FREE book series with Palgrave Macmillan, see Alpan, Schwell and Sonntag, eds., 2015; Schwell, Szogs, Kowalska and Buchowski, eds., 2016). I very much hope that there will be many other opportunities for such collaborative efforts in the years to come. However, it is those two big obstacles, which probably will sound very familiar to many, that have been preventing me from conducting large-scale fieldwork in Poland in the recent years: time and money. The university systems in Austria and Germany rarely allow for, or even support, field trips that would deserve the name.

To conclude, Poland has been with me ever since my first visits as a student. It is with me as a language which I have learned to love, but which also keeps getting more and more complicated the more I learn. Polish society, politics, and culture, within the wider field of Europeanization, continue to be important fields of research for me. I have been involved in many kinds of cooperative efforts with colleagues in Poland over the past years, such as reading and commenting on each other's papers, summer schools, as a participant in Warsaw or as a teacher in Sopot, co-organizing a panel at EASA with Anna Horolets, a teaching exchange with Agnieszka Kościańska, an excursion to Warsaw with Viennese students that would not have been possible without Helena Patzer, Ewa Klekot, Anna Horolets and Agnieszka Kościańska, the excellent cooperation within the FREE project with Michał Buchowski, Gosia Kowalska and their wonderful team, and all the many others that I do not have space here to mention. Last but not least, Poland also means places to visit and places to come back to; it means friends and memories, and it means that I can be sure to always find sofas to crash on in Poznań, Ząbki, Warsaw, Gdańsk and many other places.

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