

CHRIS HANN

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Halle (Saale)

Germany

## THE WISŁOK PROJECT, 1978-1985

*In Memoriam: Tamás Hofer, 1929-2016*

### **Introduction**

In a frequently cited article first published in 1968, Tamás Hofer contrasted the deep, intimate knowledge of the national ethnographer or ethnologist with the “slash and burn” practices of the Western anthropologist (Hofer 2005). Trained in Hungarian *néprajz*, Hofer was one of its most brilliant representatives for more than half a century. He also read widely in socio-cultural anthropology and his jointly authored study with Edit Fél is the definitive account of the social organization of the Hungarian peasantry in the pre-socialist era (Fél and Hofer 1969). Yet Hofer was adamant that *néprajz* was a separate discipline. Dialogue with the international comparative discipline was a good thing, but it should not diminish the value of the research carried out “at home” by an ethnographer who shared the national culture of those whose beliefs and practices were the object of the study. My teachers in social anthropology in Cambridge took it for granted that anthropology was a comparative social science, but Hofer’s “slash and burn” metaphor contained an implicit reproach. The social or cultural anthropologist who, having completed one empirical project, moved on promptly to tackle another in a quite different location, could not hope to match the in-depth knowledge of the national ethnographer who (like Hofer himself in the case of the village of Átány) grew up in the same society as the villagers and returns to the same location again and again for years to achieve a deeper awareness.

I begin in this way because, though I was not aware of Hofer’s article at the time, my early career in anthropology makes me an epitome of the fickle comparativist. For my doctoral research I learned Hungarian and spent almost two years in that country (1975-1977). My subject was the transformation of peasant

farming. Having studied economics as an undergraduate at Oxford, the Hungarian version of “market socialism” seemed to me and many other observers an attractive alternative to the rigidities and inefficiencies of central planning. I was advised throughout this project by Mihály Sárkány, a junior researcher at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, who specialized in “social ethnography” (*társadalomnéprajz*) and had recently combined the approaches of Marxism and Western economic anthropology in the framework of a teamwork investigation of socialist transformations in a northern Hungarian village (see Bodrogi, ed., 1978).

I carried out fieldwork in a very different region of Hungary, characterized by flexible forms of cooperative. Property rights had been undermined by nominal collectivization, yet in practice I found that family farming was flourishing. The new socialist institutions were committed to assisting private households (with fodder supplies, mechanical services and marketing) in their accumulation strategies. The village of Tázlár prospered as never before in these conditions. Looking back nearly half a century later, even villagers strongly opposed to socialism ideologically concede that the decades of market socialism were a golden age in the history of their community (Hann 1980, 2015).

My two years in Hungary were enabled by the British Council through its official programme of cultural exchanges. This meant that, after returning to Cambridge, I still had two more years of funding from the Social Science Research Council at my disposal to complete my dissertation. However, at some point in the academic year 1977-1978 I approached my supervisor Jack Goody to explain that I really did not want to sit in Cambridge for two full years. My alternative suggestion was to spend a year in West Berlin, where Lawrence Krader was the professor of anthropology. Krader had just published his definitive edition of the ethnological notebooks of Karl Marx. I was interested in this scholarship, but also attracted by the idea of living in Berlin.

Jack Goody was sceptical – what was the point, he asked, of going to “sit at the feet” of this eccentric American Marxist? He encouraged me instead to consider using my last year of funding to carry out more fieldwork. We quickly agreed that Poland was the obvious choice, because it would allow me to compare the condition of non-collectivized peasants with the story I knew from Hungary. Moreover there was an obvious practical way forward. I had met Andrzej Paluch in 1974 when he was a visitor in Cambridge, hosted by Goody. From an institutional base in the Jagiellonian University’s Institute of Sociology, Paluch was working on the history of British social anthropology. He responded positively to my tentative enquiries by post. I remember having to invent an excuse for taking up residence in Kraków and sending Paluch a research proposal to investigate the new working class in Nowa Huta. It proved difficult to organize any official invitation or supplementary funding, but eventually Andrzej indicated that I should simply travel to Kraków using a tourist visa. That is what I did in October 1978, having

submitted the manuscript of my Hungarian monograph to Cambridge University Press earlier that same month<sup>1</sup>.

### **First season: 1978-1979**

It was an interesting time to arrive in Poland. Morally and spiritually, the nation was ebullient following the elevation of Karol Wojtyła to the papacy. Materially, things were less buoyant. In Hungary I had grown accustomed to more or less Western standards of consumption (at subsidised socialist prices – an ideal combination). But I remember my first surprise when I discovered that, in the whole of Kraków, it was impossible to find a copy of the standard Polish-English dictionary (I eventually got hold of a copy by ordering it through the Polish consulate in Budapest). I also had difficulty in finding accommodation in Kraków. I was the proud possessor of my first car, a second-hand Łada purchased in Cambridge with savings from my grant, but it was very difficult for a foreigner to purchase fuel – not to mention anti-freeze, when the temperature suddenly dropped in early December. I took some language classes at the UJ<sup>2</sup>. Andrzej Paluch managed to arrange canteen tickets for me at the Institute of Sociology. Still, I recall my first winter in Poland as difficult, especially in comparison with my Hungarian experience. It did not occur to me or to Andrzej, based as he was in his social anthropology niche within the Institute of Sociology, that I should establish links to scholars at the university's Department of Ethnology. Andrzej and his brilliant team of young colleagues (they included Marian Kempny, Jan Kubik and Zdzisław Mach) were not at this point engaged in any empirical projects. I could not

---

<sup>1</sup> In my office at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, in a large cupboard, there are two or more boxes marked "Poland". They contain a variety of papers (notes, diaries, newspaper cuttings, photocopies) and photographs. I am at present, as I write this essay, a long way from that office or indeed any scholarly library. Some details of this text may not be factually accurate, but it is genuine in the sense that it represents the Wisłok project almost 40 years later as it has engraved itself in my memory. Had I been able to open that cupboard in writing this essay, I would almost certainly have seen in the disorderly documents many more names I would have included in this paper: scholars whose articles I read, friends who helped in practical ways; and some persons who fell in both of these categories. It is possible that I met Andrzej Paluch only in spring 1975, and the 1980 animal census in Wisłok took place in June, not July. But access to the cupboard would have guaranteed a narrative much longer than requested by the editor. For all its imperfections (and the sad confession that my cardboard box falls short not only of the riches of Malinowski or Józef Obrębski but also of the minimal standard that we expect our Ph.D. students today to fulfil), this account has its own authenticity.

<sup>2</sup> Although I worked hard throughout my time in Poland to master the language, I was never as successful as I had been with Hungarian. In the cities, people usually spotted me as a foreigner fairly quickly. It was much easier in the village, where my Polish must have often sounded strange, but not so much stranger than that of other educated outsiders. I certainly missed a few jokes but by 1981 I could read fluently and follow almost all the Polish I heard, including Sunday sermons in Wisłok delivered by the Komańcza priest. I corresponded with some families for years using Polish, but I was never good enough to compose academic texts or to deliver lectures in Polish (I console myself with the thought that Malinowski never lectured in Kiriwina).

expect them to be interested in my ideas to make comparisons with rural Hungary. I was disappointed to realise that there was no equivalent of Mihály Sárkány to be found anywhere in Poland, i.e. a scholar who looked to Western social anthropology, in particular economic anthropology, and sought to operationalize these approaches in the countryside of his own society. The only scholars I encountered doing this kind of work were other foreigners: Frances Pine in Podhale and Carole Nagengast in the region of Mielec.

Just as my presence in Kraków was largely an accident, shaped by Jack Goody and Andrzej Paluch, further accidental connections determined the location of my field research from Spring 1979. My introduction to the Polish language was a Linguaphone product called *Mówimy po polsku*. It was lent to me by Claude Rosenfeld, a Parisian geographer who I had met by chance in Hungary. Claude had friends in Warszawa, and they had a distant acquaintance who, after the turmoil of 1968, had dropped out of higher education in the capital and disappeared to live in the Bieszczady Mountains. After gaining agricultural experience through working on State Farms, Krzysztof Ołtarzewski had decided to go one step further. With his wife and young son, he had acquired a private farm and substantial plots of land in the village of Wisłok Wielki, in the *gmina* of Komańcza. I had no idea what conditions were like in this village; but it was the only contact I had and so, when the weather improved and my communication skills were minimally adequate, I drove out to find Mr Ołtarzewski in his new village. I think this must have been at the end of February 1979, because I have a recollection of returning (after just a few days) to my rented room in Kraków on 1<sup>st</sup> March, the Welsh national holiday, exhausted and in need of a shower.

Krzysztof Ołtarzewski was a complex man. I was grateful to him for welcoming me into his house and teaching me the rudiments of farming (including the preparation of his rye field, and later the potato patch). But I was also aware that it would be impossible to get to know this village well if I could grasp only his vantage point. I soon learned that most of the 60 households were newcomers to the Wisłok valley. The original inhabitants had been deported in 1947, though a few families had returned in the late 1950s. The new immigrants were all Polish, but they had diverse regional backgrounds between Rzeszowszczyzna and Podhale. All houses had been electrified and the village was easily accessible thanks to a new asphalt road that ran parallel to the border with Slovakia, linking Komańcza in the east to Dukla in the west. But in other respects it was poorly developed. Only a couple of farmers had tractors. There was no piped water infrastructure, so we washed our dishes in the stream. The old Greek Catholic church of Lower Wisłok had been appropriated by the Roman Catholic parish in Komańcza, and its presbytery served as the village school. Krzysztof was a militant atheist who worked on Sunday if he felt like doing so, and was not sympathetic to my attending church services while living in his house (which had been the dwelling of a prosperous Ukrainian household prior to 1947).

There were several other drawbacks to living with Krzysztof Ołtarzewski. He would not accept any rent, but of course my labour power was at his disposal. This was not worth very much (though you did not have to be skilled to plant potatoes or sow rye by hand). More annoyingly, I had to be at his beck and call with my car. At the beginning it was instructive to learn that to obtain essential items of equipment, or just to maintain important networks, it was necessary to make long journeys through the mountains to Sanok (the *powiat* centre) or Krosno (the *województwo* centre). But this soon became tedious. I wanted to spend more of my time in the village and get to know other households. This was difficult because Krzysztof despised his neighbours. He had particularly strong prejudices against the few Ukrainians who lived concentrated in Upper Wisłok, a few kilometres from his house. But he also had the city intellectual's disdain for all the other Poles in Wisłok (not least for his immediate neighbour, who was derided for his surname – Filozof!). And on top of these tensions, Krzysztof was a drinker. Whenever vodka was available, life in his household became particularly difficult.

Although he lost patience with me from time to time (just as I did with him) Krzysztof understood that I could not carry through my research if I carried on living under his roof. We remained on friendly terms after I moved out to live with an elderly Ukrainian couple in Upper Wisłok. This connection was another accident and a real stroke of luck, because the insights I gained through living with Michał Opryszko could hardly have been more different from those I obtained in the house of Krzysztof Ołtarzewski. Michał had lost his two daughters when Polish soldiers burned down his home in 1946. He would never be drawn on sensitive political issues, including Polish – Ukrainian relations, but one of his neighbours in Upper Wisłok made no secret of his UPA sympathies. Yet this neighbour's daughter had married the son of an immigrant Pole. Both languages were used in this house, which was large and relatively well equipped because the household head had worked for some years in Canada. I particularly enjoyed visits to cottage nearby that was entirely lacking in modern facilities and occupied by an elderly Ukrainian couple who had returned to their native village from the Baltic coast in the late 1950s. Bazyli Szariak (again I give the name in the Polish form – my command of Polish was still shaky at this time, and given those circumstances there was never any question that I would invest seriously in this Ukrainian dialect) said that he could never adjust to the different air of the lowlands. His happiest memories dated from the early 1940s, when he was a forced labourer on a large farm in Bavaria. Bazyli was an eccentric character who played the violin and had erected a huge wooden cross in the middle of his main field, which he believed to have been the site of a major battle between the Russian and Austrian armies during the First World War. I was struck by the high degree of self-sufficiency attained by this old couple, who made very little use of modern technology; but even they bought their bread from the socialist cooperative shop opposite the Milasz house.

Most of my data collection in summer 1979 continued to focus on peasant farming, which was extremely unproductive in comparison with everything I had experienced in Hungary. But after getting to know these Ukrainian families I gradually developed an interest in the ethno-national complexities of this region of the Carpathians. I was struck by the fact that the east Slav households in Wisłok all declared themselves Ukrainian although, according to the extensive literature produced by Polish national ethnographers, they should have used the term *Łemko*.

### **Second season, 1980-1981**

I left Wisłok Wielki in late July 1979, unsure if I would ever return. My funding was now exhausted. I spent the rest of that summer submitting my dissertation in Cambridge, before taking up my first regular job, back in Budapest. For the academic year 1979-1980 I was employed as a language editor at the "New Hungarian Quarterly". I defended my Ph.D. in November, married, and was successful in a Research Fellowship competition in Cambridge, which brought me three years postdoctoral funding from the next academic year. This meant that I could resume work in Wisłok, for that first year was not enough to give me the materials I needed for a book. In July 1980 I drove from Budapest to Wisłok and renewed my friendship with a *Komańcza* agronomist as he visited all the households of Wisłok to conduct the annual animal census.

But I did not return straightaway to live in the village, for several reasons. The most pressing was consideration for my wife, who needed access to libraries in order to complete her degree course in Budapest. She devised a project on the *Karaim* minority that could be written up in Warsaw, where she also had an old family friend able to assist us with practicalities (we stayed in his apartment for our first month). I was happy to use the library at Warsaw University and deepen my knowledge of the history of *Łemkowszczyzna*. I had collegial relations with two of Poland's leading rural sociologists, Zbigniew Tadeusz Wierzbicki and Bogusław Gałęski. But I was no more successful in the capital than I had been in Kraków in developing links to ethnologists. Although I read the work of Maria Biernacka (1974) on the postwar transformation of villages in the *Bieszczady* region, I made no attempt to contact her.

The year 1980-1981 was dominated by the rise of *Solidarność* and economic chaos. My wife and I were inconvenienced by the fact that, as foreigners, we had no entitlement to ration tickets. Fortunately, as a Hungarian citizen, she was not obliged to change hard currency for a visa as I had to. As in 1978-1979, I was obliged to leave the country every three months and return with a new visa. We used trips to Berlin and to Budapest to stock up with provisions, but also to visit the village of Wisłok, and to observe a meeting of *Solidarność Wiejska* in Poznań

(where I had the honour to be received briefly by Professor Józef Burszta). We celebrated All Saints in Wisłok, and went back again to see in the New Year as guests of Krzysztof Ołtarzewski (it was one of the coldest nights I have ever experienced). But when we took up residence in the village in April, we moved into the modern house of Michał Milasz, in the geographical centre of the community, opposite its post office and shop.

Michał had grown up in the village but had spent several years working as a miner in Śląsk. His wife Marysia was a *Góralka* from Zakopane. His mother was Ukrainian, but as his father was an ethnic Pole this family had managed to avoid deportation. Michał was a conscientious modernizing farmer, proud to own the first private tractor in the village. He was less enthusiastic about his recent appointment as *soltys* because this involved regular consultations with the *gmina* authorities in Komańcza, which took up time. But holding the office of headman meant that other villagers dropped by regularly, in addition to his relatives who lived nearby. In short, the Milasz household could hardly have been more different from that of Krzysztof Ołtarzewski and very suitable for fieldwork. The main reason for approaching Michał was the availability of suitable rooms on the top floor of the new family house, while he, Marysia and their three teenaged boys lived on the floor below. We paid a modest rent, had some privacy; and Michał was not the least bit interested in using my car. Their kitchen was the main public space. Television reception was very poor and the family did not use it much. I recall Michał's deep reservations about the workers' protests. Like other villagers, he wondered where Solidarność was leading, and bemoaned the fact that so many urban dwellers were evidently more interested in causing trouble than in doing an honest day's work. Although the priest tried from the pulpit to spread a more sympathetic image of the movement and its goals, criticism or apathy was the general tenor of village opinion. This, in combination with the tragic violent history of the valley, led me to title my monograph *A Village without Solidarity* (Hann 1985).

During the months up to September 1980 I visited almost every household, including the State Farm colony at the bottom of the valley. Security officers came out occasionally from Krosno to see what this unusual foreigner was up to in a *strefa podgraniczna*, but Michał reassured them that I showed no signs of being a capitalist spy. Officials in Komańcza were cooperative, e.g. in making available data on dispute settlement in the village. I grew to be on good terms with scholars in Sanok (Romuald Biskupski) and Przemyśl (Jerzy Motylewicz) after visiting libraries and archives in these locations. I recall a brief visit from two ethnology students from Poznań who were documenting roadside crosses for masters dissertations. I made further visits to Teodor Gocz, the charismatic Łemko-Ukrainian who had established his own local history museum at his name in the village of Zyndranowa, near Dukla. Yet my second year spent in Poland passed rather like the first in the sense that I developed no close links to academic

ethnologists. I met Jerzy Czajkowski at the remarkable open-air museum he directed in Sanok, and at some point I visited the most distinguished of all Łemko scholars, Roman Reinfuss, at his home in Kraków. But how could I expect them to do more than take polite interest in my project, devoted as it was primarily an analysis of the inadequacies of Polish agriculture in socialist conditions? I had slightly more substantive contacts with the Rzeszów sociologist Henryk Jadam, who had undertaken field research of a limited kind in Rzepedź, location of the socialist sawmill that was the largest employer in the region, and to which several Wisłok villagers commuted.

I saw Reinfuss once again towards the end of my stay, at the Zakopane Folk Festival which was very much his creation. I did not get to speak with him there, but enjoyed lodging with relatives of Marysia, my landlady in Wisłok. By a happy coincidence, this festival was followed by the national congress of Polish sociologists in Łódź, and this was my final port of call in September 1981. I recall thinking that the issues debated here by the social scientists were somehow much closer to my heart as well as my intellectual interests than the ethnographic heritage I had enjoyed in the wonderful scenery of Zakopane. Jadwiga Staniszkis gave an impassioned lecture about *Solidarność*, and Stefan Nowak offered sociological analyses of life under socialism that struck me as being just as original and convincing as the dissident diagnoses with which I was familiar already from Hungary.

I returned to Cambridge in October 1981 and spent most of the following year working on the book that was eventually published by Yale University Press in 1985. Although martial law was declared in December 1981, I made another short visit in October 1982 when driving through Europe to Turkey in Autumn 1982. This included a meeting in Wrocław with Adam Fastnacht, the most distinguished historian of the Sanok lands. I also revisited my friends in Przemyśl and Sanok. I was not purposely preparing the ground for later research; but in retrospect I see that it was a fortunate twist of fate that led me to Wisłok, where I stumbled by accident on the complex problematic of the Greek Catholic Church, Polish – Ukrainian relations and Łemko ethnicity – topics with which I engaged in more depth after the end of socialism (Hann 1997, 1998, 2002).

## Conclusion

I went back to Wisłok Wielki again in September 1985 to present Michał Milasz with a copy of the book that would not have been written without his hospitality in 1981. Not much had changed in the village, but Krzysztof Ołtarzewski had moved elsewhere and it was thought he might have died in a traffic accident. I have not seen or heard of him since. For several more years I made occasional visits to the Milasz family (we continue to exchange Christmas cards) and to

Ukrainians in the upper village. After 1990, Teodor Gocz in Zyndranowa offered his distinctive insights into the challenges faced by the members of ethnic minorities in postsocialist conditions that allowed Polish nationalists to raise shrill voices. But gradually my work shifted away from the mountains of Łemkowszczyzna to focus on Przemyśl. I made no further attempts to gather data systematically in Wisłok. My last visit was a very brief one in 2006. Two of the Milasz boys who I had known as teenagers had built new houses on family land, while the youngest was caring for his retired parents in the house that I remembered so well. I was impressed by the fact that this small village now had its own Roman Catholic priest and a new presbytery, and also by the much improved selection of goods in the village shop. Tourism had not had much impact on this community, I was told. It was disappointing to note that the post office had been closed.

The Wisłok project was effectively closed with the publication of my 1985 book. It is a very straightforward empirical study, overwhelmingly descriptive, with only one chapter devoted to history. Only at the very end did I engage in an explicit comparison with Hungary. It was not widely reviewed: a very foreign product for Polish ethnological journals to notice, but too exotic and parochial to attract much attention from the social sciences, including anthropology, either inside or outside Poland. By the time this book was published I had opened up a third field site in Turkey, with the aim of extending my comparisons further afield, to include developing countries of the capitalist world (Hann 1990). In the classifications of Tamás Hofer (2005), I was a rather extreme illustration of slash-and-burn category of Anglophone anthropology. In Hungary I have continued to revisit the village of my original fieldwork regularly and to consume (in modest doses) literature produced by members of the national ethnological community in the national tongue. I have not been able to keep up to date in a similar way in Poland (or in Turkey for that matter). But I am sure that, even when writing about the village of Tázlár, which I have now known for 40 years, I still get some things wrong, or take much longer to understand them than any native; and this is not, or at any rate not primarily, a simple matter of linguistic competence.

## REFERENCES

- Biernacka M.  
1974 *Kształtowanie się nowej społeczności wiejskiej w Bieszczadach*, Warszawa: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.
- Bodrogi T. (ed.)  
1978 *Varsány. Tanulmányok egy északmagyarországi falu társadalomnéprajzához*, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Hann C.M.  
1980 *Tázlár: A Village in Hungary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 1985 *A Village Without Solidarity: Polish Peasants in Years of Crisis*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 1990 *Tea and the Domestication of the Turkish State*, Huntingdon: Eothen Press.
- 1997 *Ethnicity in the New Civil Society: Lemko-Ukrainians in Poland*, in: L. Kürti, J. Feldman (eds.), *Beyond Borders: Remaking Cultural Identities in the New East and Central Europe*, Boulder, CO: Westview, pp. 17-38.
- 1998 *Postsocialist Nationalism: Rediscovering the Past in South East Poland*, "Slavic Review" 57: 4, pp. 840-863.
- 2002 *The Development of Polish Civil Society and the Experience of the Greek Catholic Minority*, in: P.G. Danchin, E.A. Cole (eds.), *Protecting the Human Rights of Religious Minorities in Eastern Europe*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 437-454.
- 2015 *Backwardness Revisited: Time, Space and Civilization in Rural Eastern Europe*, "Comparative Studies in Society and History" 57: 4, pp. 881-911.
- Hofer T.  
2005 [1968] *Comparative Notes on the Professional Personalities of Two Disciplines*, in: C. Hann, M. Sárkány, P. Skalnik (eds.), *Studying Peoples in the People's Democracies. Socialist Era Anthropology in East-Central Europe*, Berlin, Münster: LIT, pp. 343-361.