

JURAJ BUZALKA
Institute of Social Anthropology
Comenius University
Bratislava
Slovakia

A JOURNEY TO PRZEMYŚL THANKS TO EUROPEAN ACADEMIA

In this reflection I wish to discuss how my professional career was shaped by fieldwork in Poland and what the conditions were that allowed me to benefit – along with other East Central European anthropologists of my generation – from European integration. I believe the generation of academics born in 1970s has benefited greatly from the post-socialist changes and contributed to the more cosmopolitan profile of their respective national traditions. An important element of the development of this profile was collaboration and exchange across Europe, not least between neighboring national academic settings. I think the relatively successful synthesis of national tradition with Western theoretical debates that have proliferated Eastern Europe after socialism has been particularly achieved in Polish anthropology and ethnology.

Polonia Globalis

I began writing this contribution in the city of Binghamton, located in Upstate New York, a three and half hour drive north-west of New York City. The rented house where I was initially recalling memories of my doctoral fieldwork was located just a walking distance from the neighborhood called Polish Heaven. This heaven is part of the larger suburb known as First World. It reminds about the times when waves of economic migrants from Eastern Europe searched for a better place to live. Most of these were Poles, Slovaks, and Ukrainians. Their destiny was analyzed in the classical work *Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Znaniecki and Thomas 1958 [1918]), one of the basic readings in European sociology and anthropology.

The presence of the children and grandchildren of these East European immigrants in the city of Binghamton is nowadays harder to see at first sight. One can

nevertheless recognize them by having a brief chat in shops, restaurants, or over a beer in First World Binghamton. The bars and pubs there represent nostalgia for the golden age of the city before it was affected by most recent intensification of globalization, especially the closing of a shoe making factory, machinery and computing factories (the famous IBM was founded in the city before it moved to Silicon Valley) and the reduction of the defense industry caused the effects that might be easily compared to post-socialist development in many parts of Eastern Europe. No surprise the winners of 2016 Presidential Primary Elections in the Broome County, of which Binghamton is the center, were populists Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. One of Trump's former wives, Ivana, is a Czech emigrant from communist times and Senator Bernie Sanders was born to a Jewish father who had emigrated from the town of Słopnice, near Nowy Sącz. The emigrant story of Sanders's father coming from the multireligious and multiethnic region of pre-war Małopolska especially reminded me about the topic on which I was researching in 2003-2004 and which also remains the key concern of contemporary academic analyses, that of modernity and tolerance. As my good friend from the field, Wojtek Kalinowski, used to joke with friends: "Jurek arrived in order to observe us like monkeys. He was paid to drink with us and for this year-long holiday he is expected to receive his doctorate".

Context of the fieldwork

I visited my future field site for the first time in January 2003. Sent by my new *Doktorvater* Chris Hann, who accepted me as his doctoral student at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (MPISA) in Halle/Saale, Germany, I arrived to observe the Greek Catholic Jordan ceremony. To the best of my knowledge, I have been privileged – or cursed, depending on one's point of view – to be Chris Hann's only student who was sent to revisit the areas he had already studied (Hann 1985). It turned out to be extremely productive for my fieldwork to be Slovak by nationality, as neither of the confrontation camps I researched – Polish or Ukrainian – could have questioned my neutral position in their cause.

I left Slovakia two years earlier before embarking on my doctoral studies. My farewell with home followed the defeat of the autocratic rule of Vladimír Mečiar (1994-1998), which changed the position of Slovakia as an isolated country not only *vis-à-vis* Western Europe but also with regard to its Visegrad neighbors that had been at that time far ahead with process of European integration. Thanks to a scholarship from the Open Society Foundation, British Commonwealth Office, and Sussex University I studied for an M.A. in Anthropology of Europe in 2001 and 2002. As a former graduate in political science and journalism from Comenius University in Bratislava (1993-1999) and Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, I was eager to learn about anthro-

pological perspectives on what to my dissatisfaction political scientists analyzed as “political culture” and national ethnographers had not had a conceptual clue about. I also felt very frustrated by the poor opportunities which at that time academia in Slovakia was able to offer and preferred working with the far more stimulating think-tank sector with an obviously clear ideological agenda. I very much appreciated the integration of my country to European Union and although my perspective on the development of Europe has been expanded since then to include a far wider set of cultural and economic “variables”, I consider the enlargement of the EU to be to the major benefit of East European citizens and even more so to academia.

In Bratislava I had good luck to work under the supervision of Juraj Podoba, a Brno University graduate, who unlike his “folkloristic” colleagues had learned about Western anthropology. He also introduced me to works by the Czech emigrant anthropologist Petr Skalník, who had tried unsuccessfully to re-establish himself in the rigid post-socialist Czechoslovak academia. Thanks to Podoba’s visit to Cambridge in early 1990s, I also learned about his fellow academic from Poland, nowadays the internationally very well-recognized Michał Buchowski.

When I traveled to London for the first time in the very late 1990s in order to attend language classes, I relied on Polish emigrant networks. A friend of a friend, whom we called Sejlór, an illegal immigrant from Gdańsk I had never met before, let me stay in his room and assisted me in finding the place to stay on my own. The closeness of our languages helped me greatly at a time when English was entirely new to me. Juraj Podoba recommended that I contact Frances Pine at Cambridge, the anthropologist closely tied to Poland, as well as sociologist John Eade at the University of Roehampton who was very interested in post-socialism. I did not feel confident enough to meet Frances Pine at that time, not mentioning Chris Hann, another anthropologist of Poland (among other countries) whose works had already been known to some English readers in Eastern Europe but rather ignored by national ethnographers.

Juraj Podoba is my current senior colleague in Bratislava. He often referred to his generation as unable to fully benefit from the fall of communism for their professional career. He encouraged me to seek inspiration elsewhere in the West but also remain active at home and contribute to the domestic academic and public discourse. I was lucky to meet Chris Hann who consistently held a less critical opinion about the national traditions of ethnology in Eastern Europe than Juraj Podoba (2005) did. This was certainly because of his familiarity with the far more developed Hungarian and Polish scholarship under socialism and a knowledge of the peculiar professional history of some GDR academics after the Wende, but also due to his “Eurasian” project (Hann 2016). This experience (and – thanks to the EU – the gradual loosening of my dependency on national patrons and finances compared to my less internationally experienced colleagues) further immunized me *vis-à-vis* tensions between national parochialism and comparative anthropo-

logy that still affect Slovak academia. This entire educational endeavor obviously happened thanks to post-socialist changes and the chances some of my generation benefited from.

From the field to book

I applied for a doctoral position with a proposal concerning religion and civil society. According to my supervisor, the ancient city of Przemyśl was the most appropriate place for studying the role of Catholicism, nationalism, and politics in post-socialist Poland, largely deprived of its once flourishing ethnic and religious minorities. The city was a historical and contemporary center of the Roman Catholic Poles and a small group of Greek Catholic Ukrainians who saw it as the historical seat of their creed. A narrative by a cosmopolitan historian about Przemyśl's past would certainly evoke both an open gate and a crossroads – between East and West, between eastern and western Christianity, between eastern and western Slavs, and, since 1 May 2004, between the European Union and what lies beyond its eastern border. Yet some patriotic Poles saw the city as being on the “eastern wall” (*ściana wschodnia*) of Poland and Latin Christianity. Poland's state boundaries and national histories have been drawn according to the logic of east-west confrontation, and Przemyśl's position at the crossroads has helped shape its very landscape.

South-east Poland was not only interesting in terms of its religious and ethnonational landscape, but also due to its physical, rural surroundings. I was lucky to begin my research in one of the least industrialized regions of this part of Europe where the actual peasants did not represent just remnants of the agrarian past, but who to this day have kept cultivating their own land, at least along with receiving wages elsewhere. I was clear about my interest in the category of post-socialist people I later called post-peasants; conservative people suspicious of secular and liberal society but at the same time able to benefit from some of modernity's developments.

My book was based on fourteen months of fieldwork I carried out without interruption from early summer 2003 until late summer of 2004. In my book (Buzalka 2007) I conceptualized “post-peasant populism”. As I argued, this post-peasant populism is not about the peasantry; rather, it can be defined as a type of modern political culture based on a non-urban social structure and imagined rurality. It is opposed to capitalist, cosmopolitan, and secular worldviews and life-styles, and it offers an alternative “moral” model for economic development. I argued that the politics of commemoration constituted this post-peasant populism in everyday life. Two elements, a “traditional” social structure surviving from an agrarian era on the societal scale – with large-scale transformations like state socialism and post-socialism contributing to the solidity of this structure –

and what might be observed locally as a combination of identity narratives, collective memories, and rural ideologies jointly made up what I called post-peasant populism as a mobilizing force.

I believed it was religion – having a form of institutional Roman Catholicism in south-east Poland – that enjoyed a prominent position in this interplay of local and societal forces. As a guardian of memories, national histories, and moral order, institutional religion in my view exceeded the conventionally defined “national populism” centered on ethnic nationalism and illiberal politics that were diagnosed the primary malady of post-socialist transformation, especially by political scientists. In line with the research of my colleagues from MPISA, especially Vlad Naumescu (2007) whose work ran parallel with mine across the border in Lviv, Western Ukraine, I also argued that although being one of the important sources of tensions, religion in regions such as south-east Poland nurtured tolerance. My girlfriend of that time, Mira Fornay, now a successful director of two feature films premiered at world-class festivals, prepared some sections of her debut script *Foxes* (2009) – dealing with emigrant life of two East European sisters in Dublin – on the basis of observing the *kultura małomiasteczkowa* of Catholic Przemyśl that I was studying ethnographically.

Since the completion of my “Polish” book in 2007 I have begun work on steel workers and local economy in Slovakia. Nevertheless, my interest in Poland has never left me. I have tried to visit Przemyśl every summer for at least a few days and have developed contacts with academic colleagues across the country. Over the years I have realized how much this peripheral part of Europe has changed, particularly in terms of infrastructure. Numerous churches that exclusively dominated the landscape during my fieldwork have gradually been overshadowed by renovated schools, new pavements and roads heading to the very last villages, and recently by the comfortable highway connecting the region with more advanced parts of Europe and the border with Ukraine. Both city center buildings and private homes across the countryside are far more shining in colors than the previously dominant gray I remember from early 2000s. My observation of impressive progress contrasts with the general feeling of many locals in Przemyśl and other eastern peripheries of the EU that not so much has changed around them and not much can really change in their life. New heating in their houses, new windows and another used car replacing the older, flat screens and smart phones, not to mention far nicer everyday surroundings such as public and private toilets, new playgrounds for children, and sport facilities, pubs and cafes, did not make them feel much better in this most prosperous part of the former socialist world. Since I began my fieldwork in the region, south-east Poland has developed into by far the best place with regard to quality of life. In my current work I am struggling with how to grasp this East European paradox of ongoing grumbling self-pity and apparent prosperity at the same time.

While visiting Przemyśl I often tried to contact the director of Południowo-Wschodni Instytut Naukowy and historian at Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Zawodowa, Stanisław Stępień. Dr. Stępień helped me with initial contacts, especially among local Ukrainian elites. As I was particularly interested in the life of ordinary people, I had been lucky to meet a local journalist Olga Hrinkiw – who currently employs three women in her charming craft bakery on the main square – who introduced me to the life of the local Ukrainian community. I had also a chance to spend substantial periods of time traveling through rural areas with a Ukrainian philologist and journalist Bogdan Huk. My contacts in the field were also developed thanks to the friendship with Wojciech Kalinowski at Przemyska Biblioteka Publiczna (who since 2006 has been the editor of “Przemyski Przegląd Kulturalny”), as well as his circle of friends and colleagues. I received a lot of help from Polish philologists Andrzej Juszczak and Agnieszka Klubka, both local activists and intellectuals, whose activities have been challenging the religious-conservative image of the city.

My most vivid memories from the fieldwork are also those I spent with young Ukrainians. We used to travel across the entire Podkarpacie County, from the Bieszczady Mountains to Hrebennie. We visited former Ukrainian villages, tserkovs, and cemeteries, religious and ethnic festivals, attended private parties. We took hikes in the hills but also looked for remains of the Ukrainian past in the towns such as Jarosław and Sanok. We were eating *kielbasa*, *żółty ser* and bread, drinking vodka and singing folksongs on main squares as well as in borderland pine forests. Contact with clergymen was more complicated, especially the Roman Catholic ones. I found it more difficult to interview them even in comparison to the local Polish nationalists especially known for their anti-Ukrainian activity in the early 1990s.

Another type of memories is related to intellectual scene of Przemyśl. Contacts with locally based painters, historians, and linguists also made my fieldwork in Przemyśl intellectually stimulating. The repertoire of local cuisine and public services has significantly improved since I lived in the city, but very good Galician specialties have always been available in local restaurants. The wine lists have progressed a lot since I was choosing wine in taverns according to color. The skills of locals in making *nalewka* – particularly *cytrynowka* made of *spirytus*, honey and lemon juice – and the home-made *śledź w sosie śmietanowym z jabłkiem i ogórkiem* that tastes so good on dark bread with chilled vodka will always remain prominent in my sensory memories. One of my less pleasant experiences of fieldwork took place at the border crossing in Medyka when I was returning from Lviv. On a bus ride the local *mrówki* – as the petty commodity traders are called – felt offended by my refusal to help them with smuggling some contraband vodka and cigarettes. They reported me as a suspect smuggler to the custom officer and I had to go through a humiliating frisking.

Academic contacts

It was only after I returned from the field and began working on my dissertation that I learned more about Polish colleagues. At that time Professor Michał Buchowski approached me in fluent Slovak in Halle. The discussions with him have always been pleasant and stimulating. He definitely does not confirm the stereotype of grumbling East European professor and as the most visible representative of anthropology from our region he does an excellent job in the field of European academic diplomacy.

The first from among the Polish colleagues of my generation with whom we have established fruitful collaboration is Agnieszka Kościańska. I met her at a conference in Halle organized by Frances Pine and João de Pina-Cabral in May 2003 when we both were Ph.D. students. We have collaborated on several smaller projects, including summer schools and exchange of students between our departments, but have always been hoping to prepare something bigger, based on our long-term partnership. The hope is still with us despite our growing engagements with management at our departments and our own research agendas. In Warsaw I have also had good contact with Ewa Klekot and Łukasz Smyrski. Discussions with these colleagues have made me aware of the strong legacy of Polish ethnology and I have also learned a lot about the recent social history of the Polish capital thanks to them. The materials from rural areas around Tarnów provided by Anna Malewska-Szałygin (2008) – offering a perspective on politics that is innovative in “our” tradition of ethnology – made me look again on my own conceptualizations. My former colleague from MPISA, Agnieszka Halemba, who joined the Warsaw Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, has been a great source of advice and help for more than a decade. I greatly welcomed her decision to undertake new fieldwork in Eastern Slovakia and Transcarpathian Ukraine (Halemba 2015). Thanks to all my colleagues in Poland I have realized their national tradition of ethnology is more elaborate in terms of topics and theoretical inspirations than the one my colleagues have cultivated in Slovakia. I have also realized that this national tradition does not necessarily need to be considered contradictory – or eventually mutually exclusive – to cosmopolitan anthropology.

Over many years I have regularly visited and consulted with colleagues Jacek Nowak and Marcin Lubaś at Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Waldemar Kuligowski from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań became one of my favorite Polish academics, especially after I had a chance to discuss our common interests with him over the beer while attending the meeting of Polish Sociological Society in 2004. I particularly regret that Ewa Grzeszczyk (2003), the promising sociologist with whom I had a chance to meet several times, tragically passed

away. At various conferences I have enjoyed conversations with the sociologist Tomasz Zarycki from Warsaw University. His recent account (Zarycki 2015) on dual stratification order in Poland, prepared in reaction to the perspective offered by the renowned scholar of Poland, David Ost (2015), belongs to sorts of readings every academic enjoys.

Among more recent ties with Polish academia, I particularly appreciate my emerging collaboration with historians. Two distinguished scholars, Jerzy Kochanowski and Włodzimierz Borodziej from Warsaw University, made me re-think some ideas about local economy I attempted to develop while reading the works of anthropologists dealing with late socialism. After starting to read Kochanowski's work on the black market in socialist Poland (2015), I realized once again how much benefit the collaboration between anthropologists and historians can bring.

Compared to Slovak or even Czechoslovak ethnology – but also sociology or history – the Polish world is far larger. I began to realize this fact soon after learning how important the academic literature in Polish was for those Czechoslovak intellectuals during normalization period (1969-1989) who wanted to do their jobs more honestly. As the case of Czechoslovak ethnology shows, one of the solutions of this political pressure was the escape to the national past (Schefel and Kandert 1994), but this had costs during the post-socialist period. Although Polish (but also Hungarian) works were later replaced by Western scholarship, the neighboring national “islands” of relative academic freedom, contrasted with Czechoslovak normalization, remain important reference points for those in my country who wished to overcome socialist and post-socialist academic parochialism.

Being a member of a rather marginal community of anthropologists in Slovakia that pushes its ambitious members to cross disciplinary as well as linguistic boundaries, I nevertheless also see some limitations of the far more populous Polish academia. The high numbers of Polish translations of key anthropological texts one can find in bookstores signal not only the vitality of national market but also certain level of self-subsistence ignoring the hierarchy of global academic knowledge. Some interesting proposals by Polish colleagues I have had a chance to evaluate confirm this potentially unbalanced ethnocentric tendency.

Nevertheless, due to the fruitful synthesis of cosmopolitan anthropology and national ethnology in Poland – on the symbolic level visible in at least two Polish departments (in Warsaw and Poznań) representing the largest anthropological institutions in the EU east of Germany – I see the transformation of East European academia more clearly. It has been my pleasure to partially witness and very slightly participate in this European success of Polish anthropology.

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