IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY:
THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CULTURAL WORLD
AMONG POLISH IMMIGRANTS TO THE NEW WESTERN TERRITORIES

The case of migration which I will describe here is in some respects peculiar. Its specific character was the outcome of a political event. The essence of the matter was that a group was forced to emigrate from its own territory to a new one, which was almost simultaneously, and involuntarily, abandoned by the community which had previously defined its cultural character. None of the generally known theoretical models of migration can be applied to these events. We should not expect assimilation, accommodation, integration, segregation or any of the pluralistic situations in a case of this kind, because the immigrants found themselves in uninhabited territory. However, this territory was not deserted in the cultural sense; it was not a domain of Nature. It was culturally organized, because its former inhabitants left almost untouched the material structure of their world, which later became the new environment of the immigrants.1

What, then, would be the object of reference for the immigrants to help them in the reconstruction of identity? Could it be the abandoned native land and its culture, which did not fit into the material structure of the new territory? Or should the immigrants perhaps have continued the tradition of their new territory - for them a strange place which they treated as the property of somebody else, namely the former population?

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1 On the significance of territory in the formation of identity see Smith 1986.
As a result of political decisions made in Yalta and Potsdam in 1945, 1.5 million people were displaced from Polish lands east of the River Bug to the newly acquired Western Territories, while simultaneously the German population of these territories was forced to leave. The right to leave the Soviet Union, which incorporated land previously belonging to Poland, was open to Poles and Jews who in 1939 had lived within the Polish borders. They were allowed to take their livestock, equipment, and two tons of luggage per family. The new Polish government tried to organize this migration along the same lines of latitude, so that people would find climate, geographical environment and other physical conditions similar to those to which they were accustomed in their old territories. The urban population moved mostly to big cities in the Western Territories (mainly Wrocław), but the majority of immigrants were peasants who settled in villages and small towns.

Not long afterwards the German population of the land incorporated into Poland was, by the terms of the Potsdam Treaty, expelled. In 1945, within the administrative borders of Poland, there were 3.5 million Germans. Among that number, 1,239,000 lived in the Sudeten region, where I carried out my research. In the Middle Ages, Lower Silesia belonged to the Piast dynasty, who were related to the kings of Poland, and it was inhabited mostly by Slavs. This region largely changed its character over the centuries and became overwhelmingly German: in the twentieth century there were only a few people in Lower Silesia who declared their identity to be Polish. In 1945 the Polish authorities found only 7,000 such people, so this region was decidedly German as far as population and culture were concerned. During the first years of Polish administration of these territories, practically all the Germans were forced to leave. They had to abandon their homes and leave behind all their property, with the exception of personal hand-luggage. The German emigrants thus left behind the material structure of their culture, untouched and undestroyed by the war. In their place came the Polish population, which consisted mostly of whole communities displaced from behind the River Bug, mainly from Eastern Little Poland and Podolia. As a rule whole villages and small towns were removed to one particular area. At the same time other settlers from different parts of Poland and from abroad came to the Western Territories. The two main groups consisted of immigrants from over-populated central and southern Poland and returning emigrants from France (Markiewicz and Rybicki 1967).

People from the Eastern Territories comprised the majority of immigrants, and they arrived in integrated communities, usually with a priest as spiritual leader. They brought with them their material and spiritual property. These predominantly rural communities were accustomed to traditional self-sufficient agriculture which, in the excellent soil of Eastern Poland, provided an adequate means of subsistence. These people also had a strong sense of national identity and of patriotism, and a keen political

2 Fieldwork was conducted in the town of Lubomierz, Lower Silesia, in the autumn of 1986.
awareness. They decided to leave their native land because it was annexed by Soviet Russia, which was considered an age-old enemy and which represented an alien political and economic system. But their feeling of identity linked them strongly to their former land.

In contrast, the settlers from central Poland did not constitute an integrated group. They settled individually and frequently ran away, back to their former homes, sometimes taking with them some of the goods formerly belonging to the Germans.

The returning migrants from France were an interesting group, which consisted largely of coal-miners who had migrated in the first quarter of the twentieth century for economic reasons and who had worked in French mines. In France they passed through a difficult period of accommodation, during which they partly assimilated to French society and partly preserved their Polish national identity. Strong competition in the French labour market made them aspire to obtain maximal wages for hard work — a cult of work itself, of discipline, and of efficient organization. In the period of economic depression in the 1930s many of them adopted the communist ideology, which was later associated with patriotism after the outbreak of World War II. After the war a large number of these people returned to Poland, responding to an appeal issued by the communist authorities, who regarded them not only as qualified coal-miners but above all as an important political force, because they were already convinced of the rightness of communist ideology and ready to realize it in practice. Such an attitude was quite exceptional in Poland at that time, since the vast majority of the nation was hostile to communism. Several tens of thousands of these miners settled in the city of Wałbrzych (Markiewicz 1960).

However, in the region of my research, near Jelenia Góra, there were very few returning emigrants: the dominant group was made up of immigrants from east of the River Bug. In the first year after settlement they co-existed with the Germans, although relations were not good. The Soviet military authorities treated these territories as an occupied country, collecting and removing valuable items to Russia, such as machinery and other useful equipment. It was not long before groups of people, including criminal elements from other areas of Poland, came to pillage the goods left by the Germans. The immigrants in turn found houses and households very different from those to which they had been accustomed, and so found it difficult to make themselves at home in the strange environment. Lack of skill rendered them unable to make much use of the equipment and machinery — such as mechanised farm equipment — which remained.

Before the war, the region of Jelenia Góra had been quite advanced agriculturally and popular with tourists, but the newcomers preferred to rely on their old system of agriculture. The settlers found the German method of agriculture strange, even incomprehensible, and many wanted revenge on the Germans for what they had done to the Poles during the war. The result was a peculiar 'we are the masters now' mentality which led them to expect that the Germans should work for them. Units of the Polish army and police maintained order generally but also made sure that the Germans worked hard and did not resist the Poles.
After a time the Germans were returned to Germany, leaving the as yet unadapted Poles to work the area. Most of the settlers from central Poland ran away, taking equipment from craft workshops, but those from the east had nowhere else to go and so were forced to remain. They tried to impose their traditional way of life in the new place, but without success. Agriculture deteriorated, for traditional methods were not efficient in the poorer soil of the New Western Territories. Moreover, there was a common conviction that the Western Territories belonged only temporarily to Poles, and that at any moment the Germans would come back. Such a belief created a feeling of uncertainty which did little to foster a constructive attitude. It was thus very difficult for the immigrants to find their feet in the new land. Emotionally, the consciousness of their tradition linked them to the abandoned country in the East. This sense of displacement was reinforced by the fact that the new land was in essence German. The towns had a strange architecture: buildings were large, multi-storeyed and built of bricks and stones, in contrast to the low wooden buildings with thatched roofs to which the immigrants were accustomed. Tools and machines were useless to their new owners. Furthermore, the former German community had been almost twice as large as the new Polish one. The towns and villages there seemed too vast for their new inhabitants.

Paradoxically, such an attitude was supported by the policy of the central authorities. Of course, the authorities were very interested in strengthening the presence of the Poles in the Western Territories. Nevertheless, on the one hand, they did not understand the problems involved in social and cultural adaptation, or the immigrants' need to regain identity; and on the other hand, peculiar features of the central administration were particularly unfavourable to these needs.

First of all, the Western Territories were very well preserved in comparison with the other parts of Poland which had been virtually destroyed by the war. They were equipped with all the material requirements for sophisticated living - good roads, railways, electricity, running water, etc. - and therefore they did not need reconstruction. Consequently, during the first few years after the war no money was invested there, so no changes were possible - even if there had been any social forces interested in such changes.

Secondly, the efficiency of communist authorities depends on the degree of centralization. The decision-making process in political, social and economic matters is monopolized by centres of power dominated by the Communist Party. The Party itself is organized according to the Leninist principle of 'democratic centralism', which means that policy-making bodies (central committees or regional committees) elect leaders (in an open vote, usually approving the choice made by the Politburo), who then have exclusive rights of decision and control.

In central and local administration, which is controlled by
the Party, all orders come from the centre and must be obeyed. In both social and economic affairs these directives are not general but very detailed and do not allow local managers much flexibility or margin for their own decisions. In turn these local leaders, subject to Party discipline, and obeying orders, execute the same monopoly power over their domains, uncontrolled by local communities. There is no legal, democratic mechanism by which communities or individuals can influence the decision-making process unless the individuals themselves become officials and gain power in the centralized structure. Such a principle applies not only to vital political matters but to all aspects of public life and, especially, to all the economy. No public activity, individual or collective, is allowed without permission from the authorities (local, regional or central as the case may be, depending on the importance of the matter from the point of view of the central power elite). Officials in the Party and administration are accustomed to operating only in this centralized system of clear rules which they understand, and in which they are at the same time powerless executors of orders from higher officials and all-powerful dictators of their own domains, be it a region, a town, a village, a factory.

Individual or collective attempts at introducing any changes or carrying out any ideas from outside the bureaucratic system are regarded as a threat to the monopoly of power. The same applies to any private initiative in the sphere of economy. Private enterprise not only does not correspond with communist principles but, more to the point, makes a break in the system of control and provides an owner with means independent of an official's decision. Therefore the system of laws, norms and regulations prevents individuals and groups from organizing themselves or doing anything in public life without being directed and controlled by the authorities. Local autonomy does not exist, and there is no means for activity independent of the bureaucracy.

Over forty years of this policy has deprived individuals and local communities of all subjectivity and initiative and, eventually, even of the will for creative activity. People have to obey orders, wait passively for decisions to be made by somebody else at the centre of power, and watch the results without a chance to try and organize their neighbourhood in the way they themselves think to be appropriate. Whatever happens is decided and executed by the bureaucrats. Therefore, when in the 1950s the Western Territories, together with the rest of the country, were subjected to industrialization, the people's attitude towards their land and their new life was in no way influenced. The reconstruction of an identity under the new circumstances requires the opportunity to unite in action, but atomisation and deprivation of subjectivity makes this process impossible.

What, then, was the view of the new world in the mind of an immigrant from the east? The four important elements of such a view were: 1) Former social space; 2) Present social space; 3) Other societies; and 4) The political system and political authorities.

1) The links between the immigrants and the country which
they were forced to leave were exceptionally strong. They brought to the new territories an idealized picture of their native land, the border-lands, which had been the scene of a long struggle with foreign powers for the freedom of the nation and freedom of religion. The Polish eastern lands symbolized patriotism, Polishness and Catholicism, the more so as they had just been invaded once again by a foreign power. Their idealized image portrayed these lands as the most beautiful country, with the richest soil, inhabited by good, friendly and hospitable people. The cities of eastern Poland were a symbol of genuine high Polish culture. The inhabitants of this country would never have left had they not been forced to by the political situation. They could not live under the Russian administration because Russians were, for them, a traditional enemy, both national and political. They left because they did not want to witness the destruction of their beloved land, but they continued to grieve for it.

2) The immigrants at first perceived the new land as a strange, hostile place, belonging to somebody else. They settled there because they had no other choice, but they did not, and could not, identify with it emotionally or put any effort into it, especially as they expected the return of the Germans at any moment. Soon, however, under the influence of the cult of the land, which is deeply rooted in the peasant mentality, they began to treat the land itself as their own property, the object of work and of value in itself. Land should be cultivated and give crops; it must not be wasted. This attitude was expressed in the strong resistance to attempts to introduce collective agriculture, which was regarded as an effort to deprive the owners of their legal property - a compensation for the land taken from them in the east - and also as posing a risk of the land itself being wasted in the state farms. Many leaders of this opposition came from among those people who had earlier spent some time in labour camps in the Soviet Union and had learned a lot about state farms through first-hand experience. However, this proprietary attitude to land did not extend to the material culture left by the Germans: German houses, households, tools, city-planning, small towns, even churches - nothing fitted into their symbolic world, and therefore did not become an object of creative activity. The whole cultural space was left to its fate, while the new inhabitants lived nearby in improvised buildings. They ran these new households provisionally so as to ignore the existing order, leaving it untouched. In the small towns most houses remained empty, and in those which were inhabited, only a few rooms were used. The policy of town authorities unintentionally favoured such passive indifference. Since the population of immigrants was much smaller than the former population of Germans, many houses were uninhabited. If damage occurred to any one house, the authorities preferred to order or advise people to move to another which was still in good condition, instead of providing the means and materials for repair. The damaged house was left to its fate. No wonder whole districts of towns disappeared after a time.

Churches were traditionally centres of social space and remained so in the new territories. But even in the areas where Roman Catholics had been in the majority before the war their
churches were treated by the immigrants as strange, German. Too many things were different, despite the similarity of religion. Architectural style and ornamentation of interiors were different, inscriptions, epitaphs and tombstones in cemeteries were strange, and even pictures and sculptures represented alien saints with unfamiliar names. The new community tried to introduce some changes which, however, did not consist in restructuring the interior or replacing the decoration but rather in adding their own interior design over the original German layer, which was left intact, but ignored. For example, the immigrants put up folk paper decorations for church interiors brought from their churches in the east, not caring whether the new decorations harmonized with the architectural style.

3) The world-view of the immigrants from eastern Poland was also shaped by the other groups of people with whom they had to co-exist in the new land. At first, immediately after the settlement, the Germans were the main problem. They were regarded as enemies who had destroyed Poland and on whom revenge should be taken. Hence the rise of the 'we are the masters now' attitude mentioned above, and the tendency to exploit Germans as a cheap but qualified labour force. However, the German way of life did not become the pattern for the immigrants, because it was, of course, too closely associated with the former enemy. For this reason, few elements of German culture were adopted, although such a course of action could in fact have helped the immigrants to adapt. After a time the Germans were expelled, whereupon they ceased to exist in the immigrants' consciousness as partners in interaction. They remained only as former but legitimate owners, the creators of a strange culture which happened to have become an unwanted environment.

By virtue of having involuntarily abandoned properties in the east, the immigrants demanded a privileged position in the new place. Being an integrated group, they usually dominated other settlers and thus controlled the community. In contrast, the settlers from central Poland were not a group in the sociological sense of the term, but rather an aggregate of individuals attempting to find their place in a new world.

Returning migrants, in turn, were treated very distrustfully by the immigrants from the east for at least two reasons: first, they were seen as foreigners, as Frenchmen, and secondly, they were communists, that is, enemies of traditionally accepted values and norms. Perhaps not surprisingly, the migrants returned that hostility, imposing on the immigrants the negative stereotype of a Pole which had once been attached to them in France (a Pole was a drunkard, an idler, incapable of working efficiently and in an organized way). Consequently, the returning migrants remained in enclaves and for a long time did not join the rest of the community.

4) The political authorities were also generally regarded as strange, foreign and hostile. They represented foreign, Soviet, raison d'etat, the interests of a different state and nation, and they were responsible for organizing and authorizing a new social order that was totally contradictory to everything that was believed to be Polish and right. Therefore, the immigrants opposed their religion to the atheism of the authorities, their cult of
national tradition and patriotism to communist class ideology. They openly defended their national identity, religion and private property, fighting, often with success, against attempts at the collectivization of agriculture. The immigrants were also characterized by a peculiar nationalism. Its cause was, of course, the principle of the adjustment of political borders to cultural ones. The immigrants' system of values so strongly linked them to their former land that their land became a central element of their symbolic culture. The native land could exist for them only as a symbol, because it was no longer the material base of their existence. However, that symbol so strongly influenced their world-view and actions that the new territory could not be accepted: despite being a material object of labour, the new land never became part of their culture. To accept it as their own would have been incompatible with their conception of land that really was their own, in their consciousness - the land which had been left behind. A coherent model of the world cannot withstand such disharmony. The effect of such a state of consciousness was an essentially nationalistic demand for the restoration of borders from before the war and for the return of all lands to their legal owners. That demand remained unsatisfied.

After the period of settlement in the Western Territories, some minor changes occurred in the social situation. The Stalinist period brought an attempt at the collectivization of agriculture, which resulted in its almost total ruin, at least in the region of my research. The authorities also tried to industrialize the region. This process was subject to central administration and was based on a labour force and technical personnel brought in from other parts of Poland, while local communities were left to their passive indifference. Moreover, industrialization ignored the interests and desires of the local people. Villages and small towns looked exactly as they did at the time of settlement, although their general condition deteriorated. The people lived mainly by traditional agriculture and were very poor.

When Gomulka took power in 1956, he waived compulsory collectivization and tried to stimulate the economic development of the Western Territories. That was the time of intensive state propaganda promoting the ideology of the intrinsic Polishness of these lands, now christened 'The Regained Territories'. However, this propaganda was not accompanied by actions which would have made possible any social activities of a genuine and spontaneous character. The authorities, still thinking that all initiatives should be taken by the political centre, continued to recruit local political and administrative leaders from outside the region. The lack of opportunity to organize and develop local and individual economic and social activity did not favour the community associating with its new land, nor the redefinition of its identity. The older generation still lived as it had always done, in an aura of the past. Their hearts were in the east. The lack of goals and
chances for activity, together with the absence of traditional community support, were the cause of a particularly severe anomie and social pathology. Alcoholism assumed astonishing proportions, especially among the younger generation. Individuals of initiative emigrated to big cities in different regions of Poland, but the rest lived on passively, showing no enterprise.

Some favourable changes occurred after 1970, when the Polish and West German governments signed a treaty which legalized Polish administration of the Western Territories. This treaty resulted in a significant relief of the feeling of uncertainty and the lack of stabilization. Unfortunately, the treaty brought no significant changes in the central administration, so it did nothing to increase the opportunity for spontaneous organization at the local level or the realization of individual initiative. Investment was far lower than in other parts of Poland, and the attempts at industrialization, undertaken with staggering incompetence and with no knowledge of the social context, or even the features of the natural environment, resulted in total fiasco. To the present day, investment remains at such a low level that to reproduce the present state of material structure at the present rate of building would take about 850 years. As a result of the predominant apathy and the absence of social activity, coupled with a feeling of alienation from the established traditions of the area, the Solidarity Movement received little support - or even response - in that region. The new inhabitants continued to cling to the belief that none of their aspirations would ever be realized: a feeling of futility prevailed.

An analysis of the present situation allows us to distinguish three generations with clearly different attitudes and aspirations. The older generation of original immigrants is slowly retiring from active life. They do not believe they will ever have a chance to return home, although they would relish the opportunity to live as they did before the war. They just want to end their lives in peace and have no expectations.

The middle generation, the children of the immigrants, is characterized by apathy and passiveness. The more ambitious among them escape to the cities: the population of this area is decreasing by one per cent per annum.

However, the third generation, the young people brought up in the new land, is trying to build a new identity. Their model of the world has changed considerably. For the original immigrants, its most important elements were, as we saw, the native land, its former owners, other groups of settlers, and the political authorities. At present, for the grandchildren of the original settlers, the native land in the east belongs to a myth of origin and ancestry: it is a symbol of and vehicle for tradition, but no longer a living idea of a place to return to. The new land is their land, in the sense that they were born and brought up there. It does not symbolize the tradition of the community, nor continuation, but nevertheless it does constitute the material ground and space in which the younger generation wants to build its identity. They have no problems with others, because all the groups of settlers have by now united and integrated under a sort of cultural
dominance of the immigrants from the east and their descendants. This process of integration is one of the phenomena which are still to be investigated. For the time being, it is clear that the main role was played by those minor manifestations of social activity which were allowed by the authorities. United efforts in the building of schools, roads and churches, and mutual help on the farms, have also contributed to the integration of the communities. The Germans, in turn, are generally treated by the young people as the former legal owners of the land who have been expelled because of a particular course of historical events which could not be helped. The present situation has to be taken as such, and both Poles and Germans should accept it and organize their lives in accordance with the new circumstances.

The last and most important element of the world-view which shapes the actions of the younger generation is their vision of the political situation. The present political authorities are generally regarded as making this much-needed new organization of life more difficult. Both the incapacitation of society and the deprivation of initiative, as well as the unsuccessful economic policy, are judged negatively.

Nevertheless, one can see, perhaps for the first time since the war, some traces of human creativity in the region of Julenia Góra. More people are showing some concern about their houses and environments. Small private enterprises such as craft workshops, greenhouses, modern farms and new houses are being built, though these attempts encounter many difficulties because of the prevailing financial and administrative limits. What is important, however, is that at least there are now people who want to be active, to organize themselves, and who have found some point to and chance of success in such actions.

Conclusions

What conclusions may one draw from this process of seeking identity? The construction or re-construction of identity first of all requires, I suppose, a creative attitude on the part of the people. But such an attitude is only possible if certain conditions are satisfied, namely, legal and administrative conditions. A coherent world-view which generates actions is also necessary. Such a world-view, its elements, the way in which people interpret the reality of their lives, determines their images of goals, the chances and directions of activity, and consequently, the actions themselves. It is also essential that people have a symbolic ground, a tradition to which members of the group may refer in their actions. What could be such reference for the immigrants whose situation I have described?

They found themselves in a strange land. It was not a no man's land, a domain of Nature, waiting to be culturally organized. It was somebody else's land, the domain of a strange culture. Their own culturally shaped land, which was a natural base of
action for that peasant community, had been taken away from them. Furthermore, three factors counteracted the reconstruction and redefinition of their identity: the centralized policy of the authorities, the obligatory character of the migration, and the feeling of temporariness together with an uncertain future. The chance for the younger generation stems from the disappearance of the second and third factors. Obligatory migration for them does not exist — they do not remember it, nor do they see their situation as temporary and provisional. They may find a symbolic basis for action in the global culture of the Polish nation and its traditions, in Polishness understood as a general concept, without reference to a specific land, as in the case of their forebears. So, given legal and economic conditions which would allow people to organize and which favour initiative, perhaps through increased activity there will emerge, after a break of half a century, a new, true, community in the Western Territories.

ZDZISŁAW MACH

REFERENCES