

Poland is a wide open space, exposed to winds that blow from East to West, bringing with them armies and destinies. The suffering of its Pope; its national pride; its escape into the arts and culture;

A Polish story of collective amnesia

REPORT

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the devastation of its identity through communism and displacement of its borders. " Hence we Poles have learnt to find joy over in a parallel life"



My maternal grandmother lives in Warka, a large town set among oaks and birches, some sixty kilometres south of Warsaw. Just by her house flows the Pilica, a tributary of the Vistula, bursting and green after the rains, lazy and sandy in summer. When I was a child, in the Seventies, we loved playing there in the winter, sliding down the only hill there to break the ice among the willows on the river bank. For myself and the other children, that hill was as high and steep as a real mountain. And moreover, the slope was scattered with giant rocks difficult to manoeuvre around, and at the bottom there was the cottage belonging to a woman – called Wierzbicka – who chased off the children and their sledges with a stick.

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One day, at Christmas, I crashed into one of these rocks and beneath the snow saw some strange markings. I dug down, and came across carved griffons, raised hands and lions. I ran to tell my grandmother, and she told me how, once – to me it seemed centuries before – they used to put coins on the eyes of the dead Jews. Grandmother did not know what lay behind that ritual. In the town no-one wanted to speak about the Jews; talking about them brought fear. Only later did I learn that Warka had been a town of Jewish majority, that the rocks on the hill were graves, and that the coins served to protect the newly resurrected from the blinding light of the day of judgment. Only this year, my mother admitted that as a child in the Fifties she looked through the ruins of a synagogue for traces of blood of Christian children killed to make the Jewish Easter bread – indicating that this was talked about at home, even after Auschwitz was exposed.

So, my Poland is also this. A dimension that



cannot be photographed, a world not found in the images of any reportage, not even here. A world of dreams, memories, especially eliminations, which cut deep into the flesh of a land to which the twentieth century brought only misadventure, deportation to the lagers and gulags, slaughters and ethnic cleansing for millions of people. And it is of this buried Atlas, of this underworld river that I want to talk, in a story that runs parallel to the frames of images that run alongside. They are memories from my family album, but they could belong to anyone from Poland. The journey is far from easy, because it touches sensitive nerves. But it is a way to understand a key-nation of Europe: the relationship with its awkward neighbours, Russia and Germany, the suffering greatness of its Pope, its national pride, its escape into literature, cinema and theatre, the devastation of its national identity through Communism and displacement of its borders.

Look at them. They make up a compact but uncertain mass, lacking any pored-over retouches, a block hacked out by the mighty powers, like an African colony. These borders are not at all natural. Post-war Poland is a country shifted *en bloc* three hundred kilometres to the west of its 1939 borders. This shift, desired by those who won the war to punish Germany and reward Russian, has

brought about an uprooting, a castration of the national identity. Not only was there the disaster of the Generelplan-Ost of the Nazis, who wanted to replace all the Slavs and Jews between the Oder and Dniepr with German colonies, the final solution for the Jews, the displacement of 20 million Poles to Siberia, the germanification of four million and the extermination of the rest; but there was also, at the end of the war, the occupation of "alien" land to the west, cleared of their German populations in retaliation, and then filled with refugees from the East. But what particularly triggers the unrest of my people was the loss of the lands in the east, the very abode of the national memory: spaces seamed through with Mickiewicz, Milosz and Kapuscinski, Lithuanian homeland forests, running waters and marshes, sleepy villages and multiethnic towns.

Europe knows nothing of the wounds of these places, the people wiped out and moved in in millions from one region to another by engineered uprooting right until the mid-Fifties, when Stalin died. From 1945 on there was the horror. Floods of Poles moved to the Ukraine, terrorised by the inhabitants' hatred towards them, the former owners. Waves of Ukrainians sent to the East on carts for animals, only to die in what should have been their own land but instead was just a vast nothing, become desert by planned economy,



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the war and the hunger siege that Stalinism held against the farming classes. Gulag survivors who no longer knew where to return. And then the innocent minorities, the mountain dwellers of the South known as Lemki and Bojki, judged ethnically as treacherous and deported by force from their ancestral lands to be left scattered, dying from nostalgia in grey, windy horizon-less plains, in damp ancient Communist blocks under the control of the secret services. My aunt Janina is 61. She was just six when

forced to leave the Ukraine (that piece of the Ukraine which used to be Poland) with her mother, two suitcases and her little six-month old brother. It was the winter of 1946 and her father had been lost in Germany. They loaded her onto a goods train, and the journey from Lviv to Lublin lasted two months, sixty days to cover two hundred kilometres. The convoy was continuously being parked up on a siding somewhere, where the Soviet soldiers could steal from the refugees at will. In those same days, Janina's father came back home on foot from a German prisoner-of-war camp. He had no idea where to search, and just wandered around in the blizzard asking for information. His city too had been cut out of Poland by the new borders. He chose to wait at the railway on the eastern front, near Przemysl. He waited for days on end, until the convoy arrived and he was able to embrace his stunned family in tears. My paternal grandmother came from what is today Bielorrussia, in those days Polish territory, where in September of 1939, at the time of the arrival of the Germans from the West, the Soviet troops broke through from the East to divide up Poland with Hitler. The KGB had more experience from the allies in the decreed extermination, and lost no time. Within two years, a million and a half people disappeared. In 1945, at the end of the conflict, my grandmother had to leave too,



being Polish. They sent her to the West, to eastern Pomoria. When she arrived there with her husband, she discovered that their house had been inhabited until shortly before by a German family made to leave. They found everything as it had been left, the churns of milk, the quilts of the beds, the old Prussian cupboards, the cutlery, the pictures, the books, the letters. There too were ghosts, shadows, absences, odours of others, an oozing of events that impregnated reality. And still today, in those areas, people in houses from the pre-war era live as if sitting on their suitcases, as if the old house-owners might come back at any moment. Still without homeland, unable to cling on even to the memory of their lost land, unable to feel their adopted land as their own.

Poland is a wide open space, exposed to winds that blow from East to West, bringing with them destinies, armies. To the East, the bottomless chasm of the former Soviet empire. To the West, the no-man's land, in which, instead of feeling closer to Europe, you feel further because the uprooting swells. Towards the German border almost nothing has changed, the roads are still those of the millenary Reich, with their sheets of cement that know the tu-tun of the *Drang nach Osten* panzers, the massive advance of Germany towards the Vistula. Here the question is not "who are you", but "where do you come from". But few remember. To the West, many have lost their memories. Nostalgia hurts.

Perhaps silence is written in the destiny of my country. No-one knew the name of the *rabbi* Mendel of Warka, my maternal grandmother's town, because *rabbi* Mendel did not speak to the Poles, nor even to the Jews. They say that when the nephew of the great Magid of Kozienice, from the far side of the birch wood, met the *rabbi* from a local village for the first time, they just sat on their stools for hours, without saying a word, just to get the measure of things. Of the rumours of that place, of the aromas of the bread-baskets on Jewish Easter day, nothing remained except for my grandmother's tales: until everything was created anew in Jerusalem, in the orthodox quarter of Mea Sharim, a perfect reproduction of the dream. I found them all, even my grandmother as a child in her white blouse, playing in the road. My Poland is somewhere else.





Onto its terrible memories fell silence, things not said, allusions, a parallel reality forced on us by Communism, in what the Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal defined as “noisy loneliness”. In that limbo, meanings seemed to have emigrated to the opposite of the words representing them: “freedom” actually meant oppression, “liberation” was agony, “ignorance” was force. Even the word “future” was loaded with anxiety and military undertones. The eye of Big Brother fell on everything, like the culture palace in Warsaw, created only to be viewed from afar; a nail driven into the city’s flesh, symbol of an enduring destiny tied to the immediate, immense Soviet homeland. There, the most innocent felt as guilty as Jozef K., without even knowing why. We have learnt to find joy over in a parallel world. Theatre, opposition, travel, study. This secrecy, this clandestinity, gave a unique flavour to reading, to love, to life as a whole. All was pervaded with that strong flavour of resistance, even the reading of a book. To be “against”, then, meant first of all aesthetic resistance against a hell which, wrote Zbigniew Herbert, was “a wet hole, an assassin’s dark alley, the hovel called the palace of justice, Mephistopheles soaked with vodka”.

Then, onto these silences came the market economy, killing off what remained of the submerged memory of the country. The children have forgotten the struggles of their fathers, history has disappeared, the young get bored hearing about the war of liberation or heroic episodes like the relief of Warsaw. The survivors of those times, full of ideals of freedom, are too embarrassing for them, they speak the language of yesterday’s world, a language of people who still believe they can change the world. Today, a large part of the political class is not interested in remembering. The year 1989 was neither revolution, nor catharsis. The old power recycled itself, got its hands on the factories, shifted wholesale over to democracy. Illusion to perfection, a change in name to be able to continue. Since that time, I have realised, in Poland no-one wants to speak of yesterday, but only about tomorrow; and consumerism and ex-Communism are a major force in this wide relentless operation of collective amnesia.