

## Polish Identities at the End of the Twentieth Century: Transgressions of Traditional Paradigms

Eugenia Sojka

Institute of British and American Culture and Literature University of Silesia Katowice, Poland

It is said that "an unexamined life is not worth living" and that "he who does not know history is destined to remain a child" (Cicero: 126). Both statements stress the importance of self knowledge and knowledge of the past so important in defining who we are. We live at the end of the 20th century which has been a complex and a difficult period for Poland and Europe. Nationalistic policies of several countries led to wars and millions of casualties. Theories of national, racial and ethnic superiority have been responsible for many atrocities in Europe, just to mention the horror of the Second World War and the slaughter of millions of Jews, Slavs, Poles, and Gypsies on racial grounds, or recent ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. In previous centuries due to imperialistic policies of several

(European countries Poland lost independence for one hundred and twenty three years. Our fight against European oppressors has had a long history. No wonder many Poles are puzzled when asked a question about a European character of Polish identity and about the totalizing notion of European identity. At the end of the Millennium when the discourse of globalization has been gaining a lot of popularity, the discussion about the complex nature of identity and national identity in particular has enlivened again. Many wonder whether it is worthwhile to discuss the problem of national identity in the increasingly migratory, globalized, post-national world. Perhaps the notion of nomadic or transnational identity would be a better term to use, as some critics claim (Deleuze & Guattari 1983). It is true that one of the major components of identity is national affiliation. A nation, however, as Europeans tend to believe, is not a "natural and immutable formation" based on such "shared collective values," "unifying signifiers" or "exclusionary myth[s] of national unity" as language, race, ethnic exclusivity, religion, or even plurality and multiculturalism (Ashcroft 1998: 155). Contemporary plural and multicultural societies question all exclusionary myths of national unity as nations are "always likely to collapse back into sub-divisions of clan, 'tribe,' language or religious group" (Ashcroft 1998: 149-150) which happens when they are no longer held by a unifying myth promoted by those who are in power. The concept of a nation is in fact, as Ashcroft points out, "the ideological caprice of a ruling class" (1998: 152) which deliberately confuses the idea of the nation with the practice and power of the nation-state and hence manipulates society and incites the development of the powerful forces of nationalism. Other critics remind us that each national identity comes loaded with inherited cultural baggage derived from their peculiar histories (Green: 1995). The notion of national identity is then a complex phenomenon, constructed out of a number of inter-related

components—ethnic, cultural, territorial and legal-political. Each component signifies bonds of solidarity which serve to bind together members of a national community (Evans 33). The word "constructed" is crucial in all of the above reflections on nation and hence identity.

In order to examine the concept of "Polishness," of some idealized, unified concept of Polish nationhood, of Polish national and cultural identity, it is imperative to look at historical and cultural forces constructing and shaping the notion. Identity does not "exist prior to [its] articulation in historically specific, and situational, discursive contexts" (Butler 1990:9) which by nature undergo constant changes. History reminds us about strong metanarratives/myths that have been unifying us for ages. They encompass our collective memory, common history and cultural capital; great moments unite us, shared recollections provide a bond; challenges define us as people; some events cause great pain and suffering; some seen as triumph in fact had dreadful consequences. Nevertheless, they unify and integrate us, give us a sense of belonging and a sense of our own uniqueness as a people. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that nations are imagined communities, constructed, invented rather than handed down to us by our ancestors.

Ideas of Polish Nationhood: Historical Survey

I. Between the 10th and 14th century, the unifying elements of Polish identity were: territory, ethnicity and religion. The acceptance of Christianity in 966 by the ruler of the state soon to be known as Poland is symbolic of the entry of Poland on to the stage of history. It is also the entrance into the world of Western Christendom. Medieval Poland was much rather a territory over which the House of Piast rulers exercised their authority rather than the area within whose borders the people spoke Polish. The major group in the territory belonged to powerful Slav tribes struggling successfully against pressure from the Germans in the west. The choice of Christianity as a religion by Poland's first historically recorded ruler Mieszko I was significant as it was the inauguration of Poland's links to the west. The building up of a strong centralized and modern state was the aim of many early Polish rulers. The Polish struggle against Teutonic Knights created proto-national sentiments and the historic victory at the Battle of Grunwald (1410) marked the end of the Order's military dominance in north-east Europe. As Slavs, Poles formed a breakwater against the tides of Teutonic immigration—as Catholics they were the outposts of western culture in its confrontation with the Orthodox East.

II. Between the 15th and 18th century, the Church provided a vital impulse towards political unification. Polish state expanded embracing vast territories in the east. The marriage of Queen Jadwiga of Poland and Jagiello, Grand Duke of Lithuania, led to the formation of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the union of two states containing in addition considerable minorities speaking German, Latvian, Yiddish and other languages. Although many languages were spoken within the borders of the Commonwealth there was only one political nation: the nation of the Polish gentry or the szlachta. Polishness was constructed on the

bas, is o~ c1ass regardless of ethn~c origin ~r )an.~agc s~oken. The Polish gentry nation included groups of various ethnic origin which, however, cultivated Polish patriotism. Jagiello aimed at uniting East Central Europe into a supranational federation and hence promoted the idea of identity regardless of ~ language and ethnicity. It was the time of development of Polish literary culture. Mikolaj Rej and Jan Kochanowski wrote in Polish extolling the wealth and political and religious . freedom of their native land. Cultural identity was created by writers and artists. In pre-partition Poland common territory and common political tradition kept the 'nation' from falling apart; community of language, however, played a secondary role. Polish gentry nation of late 17th and 18th century is known for its *sarmatyzm* - a feeling of self-centeredness, a belief that the Polish gentry's character, constitution, culture and customs are superior to those of the rest of Europe (Sarmatians of classical times were regarded to be ancestors of Polish gentry). Polish gentry, however, is also known for its factiousness, irresponsibility, egotism, divisiveness, intolerance towards those who think differently, impatience, irrationality, and a quarrelsome nature. Its irresponsible actions and the tradition of "*liberum veto*," which was considered an epitome of

( freedom in fact paralyzed the working of our parliamentary system and led to the weakening of the Polish state and eventually to its partition by foreign powers. At this time in history, Polishness was signified by belonging to a gentry class, *sarmatism*, political tradition and territory.

III. The 18th century marked a strong impact of the Enlightenment and French Revolution on the concept of Polishness. Ideals advocated by the motto "Liberty, . Equality and Fraternity" eventually led to the recognition of rights of non-noble citizens. The Polish Constitution of May 3, 1791 made it even probable that there would emerge a Polish territorial nationality based on the citizenship of all , inhabitants rather than on their class, linguistic background or ethnic considerations. A new concept of nationality, however, was developing in the atmosphere of Romanticism with its ideas of liberal democracy. It stressed a common language and culture as the hallmark of nation rather than political unification on the basis of class and territory. Ideals of freedom eventually applied to lower classes. There came a national awakening of non-noble intelligentsia and then slowly of the peasantry. The great Romantic poets promoted the concept of Poland's national mission (Poland was regarded as the most civilized Slav country) and a philosophy known as Messianism - Poland was cast in the role of the Christ of the nations and the country's resurrection equated with the eventual establishment of international justice. What followed was a development of territorial patriotism and ethnic nationalism.

IV. 1772, 1793 and 1795 - three partitions of Poland. The country was deprived of independent statehood. The tragic situation led to the birth of the Polish insurrectionary tradition (Kosciuszko's Uprising (1794), formation of Dąbrowski legions, fight alongside Napoleon's armies in Italy); the last

partition inspired 2 major insurrections against the Russians in 1830 and 1863, and an action against Prussians and Austrians in 1848). These are remarkable examples of bravery and devotion to the country and the nation in the history of Poland. They function for many as unifying signifiers of Polish love of freedom and independence.

Apart from the insurrectionary tradition, a Polish variety of cultural nationalism called Organic work was responsible for constructing Polish identity at the time. It encouraged a creation of economically and culturally vigorous nation within a framework of political subordination. It meant the emergence of regional patriotism - maintenance of the language and the cultivation of literature, learning and the arts, maintenance of local self-rule and furthering the prosperity of the Polish community. Poland had disappeared from the map in 1795, yet the idea of a Poland lived on in the actions of the inhabitants.

V. Inter-war period. The Polish state re-emerged in 1919 from the peace settlement following WWI. Poland turned out to be a country of many ethnic minorities: "14.3 per cent of the population were Ukrainian, 3.9 per cent Belorussian, 10.5 per cent Jewish, and 3.9 per cent German" (Millard 202). Nation building at the time was connected with state building. One idea of Polishness was proposed by Józef Piłsudski (federalist solution and anti-Russian stand; concept of Polish linguistic-cultural nation). Another nationalist project was proposed by Roman Dmowski (anti-Gentian stand; idea of Poland as an integrally national state; denying national identity to borderland people). It was a period of Polish ethnic nationalism. The nationalist project was a mobilizing ideology for the masses. Language and culture became unifying features of Polishness.

VI. During WWII there was a renewal of the romantic, heroic strand of Polish nationalism characteristic of the first part of the 19th century. Examples of brave resistance against the oppressor proliferated - they are considered to be unifying signifiers of Polishness.

VII. After 1945, the situation complicates. New Poland was largely homogenous, in regard of both ethnicity and religion. There are, however, two visions of Polish national identity: the communist and the oppositional one. The official communist vision promoted the idea of nation-state with limited sovereignty and loyalty to the Moscow center (the USSR was considered the savior and guarantor of Poland's national and state sovereignty against German imperialism. It agreed to the idea of the nation with the sole permitted ideology of socialist internationalism. It believed that private property, the family, the state, the division of labor, scarcity, competition, exchange, nationality, class struggle and money will be transcended in the final stage of communism through the creation of the era of abundance and hence complete freedom. Brotherhood and equality will reign. According to Marx, ethnic

nationalism and even racial differences were to be ultimately transcended by communism. History showed how problematic the philosophy was.

The opposition rejected the link with the east as a threat to national being of

Poland. It stressed the idea of freedom both religious and political. The communist ideology weakened patriotic feelings. During communist times there

l

was a policy of undermining of respect for Polish struggle for liberty, for Polish national uprisings. Books were published on national irresponsibility and immaturity. Such texts as Aleksander Bochetiski's History of Stupidity were awarded prizes. A vision of an anarchic nation was created and ridiculed. Intelligentsia was systematically downgraded in the society. History was distorted in official communist school curricula. The young generation was expected to lose respect for Polish cultural identity. The communist civilizing mission held a belief that even cultural identities will disappear as a new cosmopolitan world society is formed. This version of Polish identity stressed allegiance to communist ideology. The anti-Soviet riots in 1956 proved, however, that nationalism was stronger than communism. The oppositional vision of Poland was grounded in traditional attachment to Roman Catholicism and Christian values, to the memory of heroic past, a sense of national pride, successful resistance to repression and Polish culture. This stress on spiritual community was intensified by the election of Pope John Paul II in 1978. The birth of the Solidarity movement in 1980 was the beginning of major political reforms. In spite of the declaration of martial law (Dec 13, 1981), the movement that remained underground, was back into the political arena in mid 1988. Solidarity's victory in partially free elections in 1989 led to the first Polish non-communist-led government in the contemporary era. The process of system transformation aiming at a democratic political system based on capitalism has started. A stress on the return to recognition of historic links with western Europe followed.

After 1989, there was no unified vision of Polish nation, and hence identity. Right wing groups/ parties promoted a nationalist approach attempting to mobilize population with various nationalist themes: nation (sometimes the Catholic nation), its strong ethnic base and its organic unity; these groups reveal a hierarchical patriarchal view of society and marked xenophobia. They insist on de-communization as essential to cleanse the nation polluted by the experience of communism (Schnook (Christian National Union) Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe and KPN (Confederation for Independent Poland). The non-nationalist approach is advocated by SDRP (Social Democratic Party) and PSL (Polish Peasant Union). They perceive a nation as "a civic association of common laws and shared history and culture" (Millard 212); they promote a patriotic approach that is democratic but also pragmatic and rational. They're committed to democratic process, the rule of law, and tolerance of minority interests. They have been working towards the idea of accession to the European Community as a means of enhancing Poland's status, security, and economic position. In the 1990s there has been a stronger support for secular, reformist,

and pro-European left-wing parties rather than the parties of the right. Peasant politicians are concerned about joining European Union. Increasingly against Polish agricultural products, Catholic Church favors joining EU as the potential site of a new Polish "civilizing mission" (Millard 218), although at the same time opposes western materialism and sexual morality: European Christian democratic and social democratic values seem to prevail. Poland, however, is torn between those who believe in culture/identity organized around spiritual values (religion, freedom, national solidarity) and those for whom identity relates mainly to social, economic, and political changes; In the 1990s, Poland has been hailed as a country of democracy and free market; a totalitarian ideology is replaced with multiple economic theories, solidarity with competitiveness, and the belief in spiritual values with business/economic interest.

What is the vision then of a Polish nation and Polish identity at the end of the twentieth century? This was one of the questions I asked in a questionnaire that I conducted in May 1998 among 40 Polish students, aged 23-24, in their final year in the Department of English, University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland. I also interviewed 20 members of the older generation in Silesia, aged 65-85. Sixty-two percent of the respondents were of Silesian background. My intention was to trace differences between the two groups who were asked to express their views on the complex nature of Polish and European identity, globalization and patriotism. The students had a theoretical background to analyze their identities. The other participants had no such advantage. There were three major questions asked: How do you understand the concept of Polish identity? What is your notion of European identity? How do you perceive patriotism?

#### Results of the Questionnaire

The older generation can be viewed as traditionalist. Describing their identity, they stress the uniting power of the memory of the heroic past of Poles, memory of liberation movements, and the tragedy and hope of Great Emigration (Mickiewicz, Slowacki, Norwid, Chopin). Their words express ideas associated with the traditional romantic paradigm: national pride and readiness for sacrificing everything to the nation, love of freedom and independence -they refer to the values as an embodiment of patriotism; they point to the role of Poland in defending Europe against Tartars, Turks and Bolsheviks; Two respondents hold a belief in the martyrological Messianism, a leading role of Poland in the world. Words they live by are "Duty above all else"; the local dialect is considered by 80% of respondents to be the major constituent of their identity. Values they hold dear are linked to their lifestyle shaped by Christianity: Importance of family, respect for another human being, and the ideal of tolerance. God, honor, and the nation are the most important concepts by which they live. Respondents identify themselves with the region, (they stress the ethos of hard work and family values) but the region is considered to be an

inalienable part of Poland. The Polish cultural identity and ethnicity hence is crucial to them. The young people were small children at the time of the summer of 1980, the beginning of social and political protest in Poland, and they were still very young when after June 1989 when democratic elections brought political victory to Solidarity. Eighty-five percent of the respondents reveal an awareness of the new discourse on the concept of identity and their answers are colored by this knowledge. They are aware that "national identity is gradually absorbed by the concept of globalization," that national and international values intermingle. Words they live by are: "Think globally, act locally." They are very critical of the "traditional notion of Polish identity" but very few attempt its definition. They are practical; they would not sacrifice their life to the idea of Polishness. They want to get good, well-paid jobs, not necessarily in Poland. Some of the responses are exemplary:

"Polish identity: Christianity + historical martyrology + 'we want NATO' -end of story." "National identity is what you got on your passport. Cultural identity is what you got in your head." "I grew up in Poland and fed on US movies. I like spaghetti and Mexican food. I have an African feel for rhythm and I look a lot like a Hindu. Who the f\* \*k am I? There is a lot more to the concept of identity than your birthplace and your nation."

Only three students mention the importance of family and living in accordance with religious beliefs. Fifty percent of respondents point out that the regional and local is more important to them than the national identity: "My region comes first as a part of Poland and Europe." Five percent of students do not identify themselves either with Poland or with the region: "I don't identify myself with the region I live in; I don't even identify myself with Poland. I feel like a part of the world and definitely as a part of Europe. I'm European!" "When in Poland I identify myself with my region, when in the Western Europe-with Poland and when somewhere else I identify myself with Europe. I identify myself with people I love, not with the territory I inhabit."

They point to Polish vices (proverbial quarrelsome nature, divisiveness, intolerance towards others) which reveals the influence of communist education. Eighty percent of students do not consider patriotism to be an important value. It is "an old fashioned concept" to them: "Patriotism is a trick played on your mind by the authority. No government on this planet should have the power of deciding human lives. Region is more important but purely on nostalgic grounds."

To the question relating to the idea of European identity, 95% of respondents answer that the notion of European culture and hence identity is abstract and elusive; students place European culture in opposition to the American one: "the values we Europeans hold differ from those shared by people in America."

"European culture is a mixture of cultures. European culture and identity are dangerous terms because they are totalizing, globalizing notions; they are generalizations, artificial terms."

"United Europe is anti-American and cares for nationalistic values only (think about EC members opposing Poland's membership in the Union)."

Eight percent of students point out that European identity and culture is a matter of economy rather than philosophy. Only three of them attempt to define European values; they do not specify them but say they are conservative and worn out. They also indicate differences between American and European values but do not specify what the values are. There is a striking lack of reference to history of European nations, religion and culture. The older generation stresses that European values are Christian but that they were distorted through relativist philosophies and ideologies and consumerism. They deplore young people's enchantment with the West. They stress they were fighting for Polish, not European identity.

## Reflections

It is not easy to define Polishness at the end of the Millennium. Polishness is a fluid concept; differences between generations are obvious. Polish territory, history, culture, traditions, language, ethnicity, and religion can be and are unifying signifiers of Polishness. There have been, however, various visions of the nation and hence various concepts of identity. The notion is in a constant change. It can be used in the plural form of the word only. Paradigms of Polishness undergo metamorphosis. Young people are seduced by theories of globalization, democracy, and a liberal vision of nation. Nevertheless, they are equipped with little or no memory of Poland's culture and history. This inability of young generation to define their identity contrasts with the older generation's strong views on the issue. Young people are faced with a free market of ideas. It is difficult to choose without knowledge of history and culture. It is also difficult to judge if there is no awareness of the way ideologies work. There is need to ask ourselves a question: do we live in a democratic society? Isn't it a time of growing social inequality and hypocrisy? Isn't democracy in the sphere of fiction? Who rules the world? Is it the corporate elite that undermines the freedom of the individual as a citizen in a democracy? Who encourages a worship of self-interest and the denial of the public good, the passivity and conformism? We need to examine our life, history and culture and not allow ourselves to be manipulated by others. Transgressing traditional paradigms is not necessarily wrong but we need to question all new and old ideologies, be critical

and doubtful of them. We have to remember that "[t]he examined life makes a virtue of uncertainty. It celebrates doubt') (Saul 1995: 190).

#### References

- ~ Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin. 1999. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Brock, Peter. 1981. "The Polish Identity." *The Tradition of Polish Ideas*. Ed. W.J. Stankiewicz. London: Orbis Books (London) Ltd. 23-51.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. in *Dictionary of Quotations*. 1961. London: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd. 125-6.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. 1983. *On the Line*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Evans, Martin. 1998. "Languages of Racism Within Contemporary Europe." Pages 33-53 in *Nation and Identity in Contemporary Europe*. Brian Jenkins and Spyros A.Sofos. London and New York: Routledge.
- Green, Michael K. 1995. "'Cultural Identities: Challenges for the Twenty First Century" Pages 1-38 in *Issues in Native American Cultural Identity*. Ed. Green, Michael K. New York: Peter Lange Press.
- Millard, Frances. 1998. "The Failure of Nationalism in Post-Communist Poland 1989-95. An historical perspective." Pages 201-202 in *Nation and Identity in Contemporary Europe*. Ed. Jenkins, Brian and Spyros A. Sofos. London and New York: Routledge.
- Nowak, Jerzy Robert. 1994. *Mysli o Polsce i Polakach*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Unia Katowice.
- Roberts, I.M. 1993. *History of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Saul, John Ralston. 1995. *The Unconscious Civilization*. Concord: Anansi.
- Sojka, Eugenia. 1998. *Questionnaire*. Unpublished.



The Politics of Culture

