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Three Lives of a Cemetery: the History of a Military Cemetery in the Village of Marcinowa Wola in Masuria[1]

The process of shaping contemporary social structures in Masuria started in 1945, when this territory was incorporated into Poland. This was also when nearly the whole population changed there. Most of the previously dominant German and indigenous population left this territory, and settlers from different parts of Poland, including Kresy Wschodnie, and people resettled as part of Operation Vistula, came in their place. There appeared, as Anna Szyfer put it, "… a unique, nearly laboratory possibility of watching social processes" (Szyfer 1998: 44), with cultural and civilisation patterns of different groups of people clashing. This is how a new type of society formed, which today can be called post-migratory. Its character was to a large extent affected by the varied course of migration (Sakson 1998: 37). Apart from the population who came there voluntarily, based on individual decisions or as part of organised group, there were also people on whom the resettlement was imposed. This, but also other factors, such as civilisation promotion or degradation, the composition and the size of different social groups in a given locality, and the state policy towards the newly created community all had an effect on the rate of the process of developing new identity among the local inhabitants.

During the anthropological research conducted in 2015 and 2016, the Author made an attempt to reconstruct this process in the village of Marcinowa Wola. It has almost 300 inhabitants, and it is located in Masuria, Miłki Commune,

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[1] The paper focuses on one of the issues the Author discusses in her MA thesis, namely the process of identity formation in a post-migration society and the course of the appropriation of a sacred object. Research into this issue was conducted in 2015/2016.

Giżycko District. It was selected based on previous observation of the village. Marcinowa Wola stands out among neighbouring villages mostly due to the level of activity of its inhabitants: it has a few social organisations, and people living there are highly interested in local affairs. These observations led the Author to a conclusion that there may be a largely crystallised sense of local identity in the community in question.

The analysis was based on in-depth interviews conducted with inhabitants of the village and people connected with it. The research covered representatives of three generations living in the village after the Second World War. In order to build up as complex an image as possible, the respondents were selected so as to include both persons involved in social activity and neutral persons. The issues raised concerned the local awareness of the respondents and their attitude towards their place of residence as well as the places from which they or their families came after the war[2]. Grassroots activities undertaken by the inhabitants, aimed at the improvement of the local social integration, protection of the cultural heritage etc., were also analysed.

Research Area

It can be assumed that Marcinowa Wola is a typical locality in The Western and Northern Territories. Just like elsewhere in the territory, its population changed after the Second World War, and in this particular case the change was complete. The last German citizens who had lived in the village left in the 1950s. The village was also a very attractive destination for postwar settlers coming to the so-called Recovered Territories. It offered relatively new and large buildings erected in the 1920s as part of the extensive rebuilding of the areas ruined during the First World War (Karczewska, Karczewski 2005: 104), and the Second World War spared it. Thus, the first newcomers appeared in Marcinowa Wola as early as in 1945, soon after the front had moved away[3].

The first wave of settlers consisted of the inhabitants of areas neighbouring East Prussia before the war, i.e. the areas near Białystok and Łomża. Soon they were joined by people from Central Poland. Over a few years, some families from Polish Kresy settled there, and in 1947 also families resettled as part of Operation Vistula. During the first years after the war, the new inhabitants were very mobile and they had a sense of temporariness. The group of

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2   Note that all quotations from the interviews conducted are in italics so as to distinguish them from quotations from the literature, which are included in quotation marks.

3   Information obtained during the field research conducted.

newcomers from the former Polish territory was dominated by young people, often counting on 'a stroke of luck'. Having security in the form of a family house, they could freely look for good homesteads, without worrying too much about their future. An intensive process of appropriation started.

The Process of Appropriation

Appropriation can be defined as 'taking possession of, creating, and granting meaning' (Poniedziałek 2011: 22). It is a response to the sense of strangeness that accompanies those coming to a completely unfamiliar place, and it has one of the following forms: creation, adaptation, destruction, or oblivion. The first three are active ways of affecting the environment. Creation can be understood as filling space with one's own symbols and introducing known, native elements into the surroundings. Adaptation means adjustment of the existing elements to the requirements of the community and granting them new functions. Destruction can be treated as physical reduction or removal of an object. Finally, oblivion, as a passive measure, consists in passing over the presence of a foreign cultural landscape and leaving it be. It is connected with pushing the existence and significance of old products of culture outside the social awareness (Poniedziałek 2011: 23). The process of appropriation means the negation of historical, artistic, and aesthetic values of the taken-over space, and viewing it in utilitarian terms only (Mazur 2000: 827). In consequence, foreign cultural elements no longer have any sentimental value as they are only useful when they can be exploited.

This approach is visible on a larger scale in the case of sacred and historic objects, such as the analysed cemetery from the First World War located in the centre of Marcinowa Wola. Based on years of observation of this cemetery one can clearly see the change in the symbolism assigned to a place of worship. Cemeteries are relatively permanent. It happens that some necropolises are completely removed, but in most of the cases these places manage to survive for decades despite having been abandoned and devastated, and change their meaning over the years. Appropriation is a long-lasting process spanning a number of generations.

The Cemetery

The First World War cemetery in Marcinowa Wola is the largest feature of this kind in the Miłki Commune. About 300 Russian soldiers were buried there in two mass graves, together with about 160 German soldiers buried in one mass

grave and in individual graves. All those soldiers died during the fights in late 1914 and in early 1915. It is a terraced cemetery: there are cemetery lots on three levels, and on the top level, situated along the main road of the village, there is also a cross with an inscription in German dedicating the burial ground to German heroes who died fighting for their country. The perception of this place changed considerably between the postwar years and today. In this paper, each of the ways of understanding this place by the local population is referred to as a different life of the cemetery.

The First Life

The first life started right after the war. During the Second World War, the cemetery was not destroyed. Only after 1945 was the base opposite the entrance liquidated. For unknown reasons, its lowest part with an inscription in German was spared, and it has been preserved until today. The cross was also removed, which is recalled by one of today's inhabitants of Marcinowa Wola as follows: *After the war, they destroyed the cross that stood in the cemetery. Because it was Russian or German. They tore it down and broke it*. It is difficult to say whether this was only a grassroots initiative or perhaps an element of the then policy of the *deprussianisation* of the Recovered Territories. What matters is the fact that this was the only damage done to the cemetery as the graves remained intact. According to most respondents, the burial place of soldiers was relatively peaceful over the following years. The gravestones were to be preserved, however, without adequate protection: *But there used to be gravestones* […] *so wide, surrounded with T-elements* […]*, and you could go down the stairs there. But they were not taken care of*. It is particularly important concerning the fact that the other cemetery located in the village – a civil project located far from the buildings, surrounded by pastures and farmland – suffered a completely different fate. This cemetery was used and taken care of by the local population before and during the Second World War and, to some extent, also after it as long as the pre-war inhabitants stayed there. New, postwar settlers never used it as they had the parish cemetery in neighbouring Miłki at their disposal. According to the records, the civil cemetery suffered serious devastation and plunder after the war. […] *the village one was vandalised. I remember that there was a fence, a metal fence. There were also concrete gravestones, with surrounds. People took them, pulled them out and took them as, pardon my language, troughs for cows. They used these concrete elements*. In the following years, the area was used as a grazing land for cattle, and then it was left unattended. Today, there are very few gravestones there, and the whole area is overgrown with dense vegetation, which is nearly impenetrable. You can also find elements indicating that people spend their free time there, such as traces of bonfires.

It is interesting why the First World War cemetery has not been devastated in a similar way. Perhaps the reason for this was its location near the buildings. The inhabitants could have felt embarrassed by the presence of their neighbours, and this stopped them from damaging the place. A special role in its protection could have also been played by a man living nearby, who is recalled by some of today's respondents. The man came to Marcinowa Wola as a forced labourer during the war. He had no fond memories of the period: he frequently talked about how badly he had been treated. Still, he was always very sensitive to any indication of lack of respect for the cemetery. This is what one of the respondents said about him:

> Coming back from school, we would sit on the wall [of the cemetery] […]. And he would always say: 'Go away, brats! Don't vandalise it! Because', he said 'I can remember. I can remember the German fields, I can remember Germans. I was hit on the face by a German more than once', he said. 'But Germans lie here, Russian soldiers lie here, and you can't go there'.

This example shows the difference in the way former inhabitants of the village were perceived by individual settlers. Many of the people who came to Marcinowa Wola in 1945 and later might have viewed the pre-war local community as a completely foreign and thus less valuable group. *This cemetery is so overgrown because it's German, there is not a single Pole there*, as one of the respondents described the situation of the civil cemetery. A collective term 'Germans' was used, associated with a hostile nation because of the war. A completely different approach was adopted by the former forced labourer. Staying in Marcinowa Wola during the war, he got to know the then inhabitants of the village and even though he did not remember them well, he perceived them as people deserving respect. This approach translated into respect for the cemetery.

Perhaps these factors made the settlers shift from devastation to the tactics of forgetting. From the physical point of view, this is the mildest appropriation approach, however, from the perspective of memory, it is equally ruthless as destruction. Negating the existence of the cemetery and depriving it of any features distinguishing it from the surrounding landscape question the very historical presence of the community the cemetery belonged to. As it was accurately noted by Jacek Kolbuszewski,

> […] graves are explicit signs of ownership of a given area, and so their devastation and complete erasure are kinds of magic gestures that are supposed to deny the fact that this land used to belong to people buried in it (Kolbuszewski 1996: 19).

A sacred place gets removed from awareness, and the area of the cemetery, even though it is located in the centre of the village, symbolically ceases to be a part of it. To the inhabitants, the cemetery is dead.

The Second Life

The place is brought back to life in the 1970s, when the second postwar generation becomes adolescent, meaning people who were born in Marcinowa Wola or who came there as children. They have been watching the cemetery overgrow for years. The place is still excluded from the life of the village, which may be an irreparable loss to the youth. As it has already been deprived of its sacred function, young people cannot see any reason not to adapt the cemetery to their needs. It becomes a place where they meet. Memories of this period turn out to be very vivid:

> And this was our cultural centre. Almost everything happened in this cemetery… Mostly in the summer. […] Generally, our discos and meetings took place on the top level. It was fun, it was joyful, the music was playing. We didn't use the middle level, it was very short, and there were a total of three levels. And, of course, there were many graves, weren't there? […] But at the front there was this square, where we didn't step on any graves. […] And the largest section on the bottom. This was where we had bonfires.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to determine to what extent adults – parents and grandparents – approved of this. There were some objections, but they must have been voiced so weakly that they did not bring about almost any effect. According to one of the respondents, these actions resulted in the destruction of the gravestones: *There used to be nice gravestones there, and everything, but they destroyed them, smashed them. This was when those parties in the cemetery started. It was a disaster. I'll say it again – it was a disaster.*

From today's point of view, however, it should be noted that this was a very important stage of intensive adaptation of the forgotten feature. Zbigniew Mazur describes such adaptation as: "a stage of overcoming strangeness, settling in the new environment, and finally accepting it as one's own" (Mazur 2000: 845). The change in the purpose of the place allowed it to be re-integrated into the area of the village. However, the second life of the cemetery did not last long: young people soon became adults and stopped using it. A transitory period started; the cemetery overgrew again, and the inhabitants stopped visiting it: *My mother once told me that it was so overgrown with bushes that no one entered it, and at night everyone was scared.* Over the following years, though, the whole

locality changed considerably. The sense of stability started to form among the inhabitants already in the 1970s, and it grew more intense in the 1980s. There emerged a common belief that they would stay there for longer and that it was worth making investments, renovating run-down houses, and taking care of the appearance of the farmyards and the whole village. Isolated attempts to tidy the cemetery up were made, however, probably due to lack of resources, both human and financial, they did not produce any lasting effects. Only an external initiative managed to restore this place to its former state.

The Third Life

In 2010, the cemetery was renovated on the initiative of the German War Graves Commission in Kassel in collaboration with the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites, and the Polish-German Foundation 'Remembrance'. The gravestones were restored, bushes were removed, and a cross with the preserved fragment of the base with an inscription in German was placed in the middle. Thus, the original sacred meaning of the cemetery was restored, and the cemetery received another life. The third stage of appropriation started, which is described by Zbigniew Mazur as follows:

> the last and the most important stage, meaning the adaptation of the foreign cultural heritage by recognising its symbolic dimension and introducing it into one's own system of cultural communication. It involves initiatives aiming to recreate or reconstruct the symbols destroyed during the first stage (Mazur 2000: 845).

The cemetery is now owned again: the foreign cultural heritage is no longer foreign and it has been included in the set of symbols represented by the local community. No one can say that this is a 'German cemetery' any more. Now inhabitants of Marcinowa Wola say: "This is our post-German cemetery". There are commemorative plaques in Polish and German in the cemetery, as befits a historical site one can or even should boast about in front of visitors. Thus, the cemetery has become an element of establishing one's own identity: something to be proud of and something representing the community to the outside world. However, it is worth noting that in order to reach this stage, the earlier stages seem indispensable: the initial forgetting of the cemetery and its early adaptation pursuant to completely different rules defined by the community. This is what an appropriation process looks like: it is impossible to omit any of the intermediate stages. It is also worth pointing out that the main feature of the cemetery emphasised

by the local inhabitants today is its historical and not sacred value, which is another typical characteristic of appropriation – it always follows the rules determined by the dominant community.

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Summary

Three Lives of a Cemetery: the History of a Military Cemetery in the Village of Marcinowa Wola in Masuria

Marcinowa Wola is a typical locality in Masuria (northern Poland), where a nearly total exchange of citizens took place after WW2. Polish and Ukrainian people coming here after the war had to deal with the sense of strangeness connected with the German presence in the near past. One of the ways of overcoming that impression was appropriation of their surroundings – an act of adapting the cultural landscape to their needs. A very vivid example of this process is the cemetery from the Great War located in Marcinowa Wola. The perception of this place among the local inhabitants changed dramatically over the years. Although it is located in the centre of the village, the cemetery was out of the social life during the first years after the war. As it was not treated as a sacred place any more, it was eroding and overgrowing for years. Everything changed in the 1970s, when the next generation became adolescent. Young people started to use the cemetery as their meeting place and in this way they adapted it to a new, completely different role. However, when the youth grew up, the place was once again forgotten for some time, and only recently

did the inhabitants see its value as a cemetery, however, not in sacred but historical terms. It can be assumed that it was assimilated as an element of their own heritage, which means that the process of appropriation has been completed.

Keywords: cemetery, cultural landscape, appropriation of landscape, Masuria

Streszczenie

Trzy życia cmentarza – losy cmentarza wojennego w miejscowości Marcinowa Wola na Mazurach

Marcinowa Wola to typowa mazurska wieś, w której po wojnie nastąpiła niemal całkowita wymiana mieszkańców. Przybywająca tu polska i ukraińska ludność, dotknięta doświadczeniami wojny, musiała przezwyciężyć wszechobecne poczucie obcości poniemieckiego miejsca. Jednym ze sposobów zmagania się z nim był postępujący akt zawłaszczania – przejmowania zastanych elementów krajobrazu kulturowego i adaptowania ich na swoje własne potrzeby. Celem niniejszego artykułu stało się zrekonstruowanie tego procesu na przykładzie cmentarza z I wojny światowej, na którym spoczęli żołnierze niemieccy i rosyjscy. Miejsce, jakie zajmował on w świadomości mieszkańców, ulegało na przestrzeni lat radykalnym zmianom. Mimo że zlokalizowany w centrum wsi, cmentarz w pierwszych latach powojennych pozostawał zupełnie wyłączony z życia społecznego. Zanegowany jako miejsce przynależące do wspólnoty, odarty z sacrum, przez długi okres niszczał i zarastał. Gdy dojrzewać zaczęło kolejne pokolenie mieszkańców, cmentarz, nietraktowany już od dawna jako miejsce święte, otrzymał nową funkcję – centrum spotkań towarzyskich. Jednak gdy młodzież dorosła, o miejscu znowu na pewien czas zapomniano. Dopiero niedawno mieszkańcy zaczęli dostrzegać jego wartość jako cmentarza – nie tyle jednak sakralną, co historyczną. Można mniemać, że został on przyswojony jako element własnego dziedzictwa, a zatem proces zawłaszczenia osiągnął ostateczną fazę.

Słowa kluczowe: cmentarz, krajobraz kulturowy, zawłaszczanie krajobrazu, Mazury

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