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Notes from the Ground...

Notes from the Ground: Poland, circa December 2000 by Gilbert C. Rappaport

The Boleslaw Prus bookstore across the street from the University is supposed to have the best collection of linguistics books in Warsaw, so there I went. I knew this store from as far back as my first visit to Poland in 1977, but the linguistics books were nowhere to be found. A young man, who could well have been a university freshman working part-time (a bourgeois horror completely alien to life under the communist régime), was performing that boundary-crossing function of sales consultant (helping the customer) and security officer (ensuring that the customer doesn't help himself ... to the books). So I asked him in just the sort of formulaic phrase we teach in first-year language classes, 'Excuse me, sir, where are the books on linguistics?'. But clearly he didn't really understand linguistics as I did, as he diffidently pointed to the dictionaries on the far wall. 'No, I'm very sorry, those are dictionaries, I am looking for books on linguistics, about language'. He looked a bit perplexed, so with an edge perhaps pushing the envelope of what we teach in first-year Polish, I followed up: 'I can tell you, sir, that 20 years ago linguistics books were over there in the corner, behind you'. He fixed a stare on me and replied 'You know, sir, 20 years ago I wasn't even born yet.'

This vignette, from my trip to the country three years ago, encapsulates a dynamic that followed me during my visit to Poland this past December. While I could not help relating what I saw to a completely different society which formerly occupied this same space, the Polish People's Republic (1944-1989), that past is but an abstraction to today's youth. Not that there is no interest in that alternate universe; in fact, it is enjoying a certain vogue. Museum exhibits display artifacts from the period (for example, ration cards, political propaganda). Reference books providing anthropological descriptions of the period include



*Conflict of interest? Gigantic cellular phone advertisement in juxtaposition to historic St. Mary's Church in Krakow, Poland, December 2000.*

a better fix on what will concern people in the future (NOT politics! NOT the ancient history of twenty years ago!) and how they relate to that future (more optimistically than their parents, focused on their individual futures, although volunteer work for a favorite cause is common). The irony of communism is that it truly did create a collectivist mentality ... as society united in opposition to the regime. That unity (or 'S/solidarity') is gone, along with the regime it opposed.

Poland has always been more of a time-sensitive abstraction than a physical place. This quality is captured in the initial line of the national anthem ('Poland has not yet perished, as long as we are alive'), sung originally by legions under General Dabrowski at the service of Napoleon, as they fought for a non-existent Poland in places such as Italy and Austria. One communist-era joke has a vodka-sodden drunk standing on a street corner, stinking of booze, cheap cigarette in his fingers, sinking in mud and trash, almost indistinguishable from the detritus of his environment, muttering to

*The Polish People's Republic for Beginners*, co-authored by the famous dissident, later politician Jacek Kuron, and *Lexicon of the Polish People's Republic*, by a youngster under 30, whose life experience prepared him about as well to pen *Lexicon of the Roman Empire*. With those my own age I can joke about the old days and refer to the old street names (from before the war, changed under the communists, and changed to something yet again after 1989). One friend launches into imitating the political speeches of Wladyslaw Gomulka (First Secretary of the United Polish Worker's Party, 1956-1970), which always puts me in stitches; and I pass on jokes from that world that I have stored in my mental archives to those who have not heard them (or, more likely, have forgotten them). But I also had considerable contact during this trip with young people, my peers' children, with whom I have a friendship independent of that with their parents. From these young people I can get

himself: 'I love Poland. But just not one like this!' I recall spending a remarkable evening last year in Vancouver with Polish emigrants of three generations: one a Jewish doctor who survived the war in the camps and the forests and made it out immediately after, first to England, then to Canada; another, the son of a communist, who left a victim of the government's anti-Semitic campaign in 1968; and the third a young Pole who left for Canada ten years ago. They knew completely different countries and grew up in completely different contexts. What was a formative experience for one (the war, Stalinism, Solidarity) was completely alien to the others. It was eerie for me because I, an outsider, had more intellectual knowledge of the continuity than they did, without, of course, the personal experience of any of them. My situation has been the reverse of these emigrants: the observer returns to see a new country, itself layered like a palimpsest, with communist-era slogans etched into

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the stone of buildings adorned with ads for the latest Celtic pop music or Pizza Hut. The co-existence on the street of the church and mammoth advertising for cell phones and beer have this same flavor, as medieval institutional spiritualism and the modern-day Mammon of the free market uneasily share public space and compete for the attention of the faithful consumer, who dutifully pays obeisance to both.

I often ask cabbies if they've been driving for a long time. Polish cabbies are happy to talk, but you have to get them started. There isn't the extreme egalitarianism found in Australia, where you sit in the front seat and they don't take tips (and even round off the fare downward), but the Polish cabby doesn't like to feel that he is working for you (both driver and passenger are addressed as 'sir/madam'). '20 years', I heard once. Pause. 'I had it better then', he volunteered. 'Excuse me, sir?', I asked in disbelief. 'It was better for me before', he replied. Thinking of the fashion for things retro mentioned above, I asked, 'So you miss the commies (komuna)?' 'You know, sir, it isn't that I

to bear the brunt of the competition, which they may not view as fair or in their interests. While the state budget is burdened by a tremendously high cost legacy of communism (retirement pensions, disability, and other entitlement programs), discretionary spending is being drastically curtailed. Political competition is increasingly exposing corruption and incompetence in the government which discredits the post-Solidarity elements whose coalition is presently running it. The president, a post-communist who lied about his educational background during his previous campaign and is widely felt to have nothing of substance to say, consistently leads public opinion polls as the most trusted public figure (because he says it so well). The post-Solidarity government will surely be replaced by post-communists in the next parliamentary election. The story (perhaps apocryphal) goes that in 1990 or so the Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Klaus, was hosting an American delegation which was there to observe the transition. 'Too late', he replied, 'It's already over'. Is the transition in Poland over? Most people fervently hope that it is not.

My visit to Poland in December, my seventh, was prompted by an invitation to speak at the Second

miss them, but things were easier for me. Democratic socialism, that's what we need, not this Wild America that we have now. Have you seen how many cabs are waiting at cab stands? Then we were in short supply, I could call the shots. I could pull up to a cab stand, and pick my customers. I would tell them, I'm going to Wola [a Warsaw neighborhood], who wants to go there? Now the customer is in charge. That's the way it should be, of course, but, you know, sir,' his voice trailed off, 'it was better for me then'.

Despite the stereotype among Poles that 'the ethics of cab drivers' is an oxymoron, cab service in Poland in my experience was excellent, with polite and competent drivers, fine cars (often Mercedes), and computerized telephone dispatchers who deliver a car to your door in a few minutes. But, as in many sectors of the economy, there is an oversupply of quality goods purveyed by numerous firms at, alas, high prices. Moreover, merchants feel threatened by competition with generally foreign-owned mass marketing chains and with each other. Farmers already feel threatened by the European Union, and all the more so by the prospect of membership. There is a disconnect between the political elite which identifies progress as incorporation in European and global structures, and local merchants and producers who have



*Prof. Rappaport presents conference organizers, Adam Przepiorkowski and Piotr Banski with a Panna Maria, Texas t-shirt.*

Annual Conference on Generative Linguistics in Poland. The linguistics community in Poland is scattered in different cultures (the university versus two Academies of Sciences; Polish studies versus English studies versus linguistics). This conference was conceived by young linguists to bring these different communities together, as well as bridge the gap between work done in Poland and that done abroad. My presentation was scheduled last, so I took the opportunity at the conclusion to formally thank the organizers for their hard work, and I presented them with something symbolic of the Polish-Texas connection: official T-shirts from the Historical Society of the Panna Maria community (southeast of San Antonio), recognized by the U.S. National Register of Historic Sites as the first organized Polish settlement in the United States (see photograph). Back in the seventies people had heard about Panna Maria, Texas. Now it has been eclipsed in people's consciousness by Brussels, Santa Barbara, and the like.

Oh, and if are you looking for books on linguistics in the Boleslaw Prus bookstore in Warsaw, they are in a basement annex. That hadn't been born twenty years ago either.

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