

# **"A Pole Can Die for the Fatherland, but Can't Live for Her": Democratization and the Polish Heroic Ideal**

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An apparent contradiction has emerged between popular characterizations of Poles as patriots and the striking lack of enthusiasm Poles have shown toward the nation in recent years. These different orientations toward the nation can be reconciled, however, by examining underlying attitudes toward authority and freedom. Simply put, the difference depends on whether or not there is a clear enemy to fight, hence the expression, *Polak potrafi sie bi? dla ojczyzny, ale nie potrafi dla niej zy?* (a Pole can die for the fatherland, but can't live for her).<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I view Polish notions of heroism during a particular historical moment--the early 1990's, as post-communist reforms were set into motion--and from the perspective of a particular generation--young Poles in or just completing secondary school. I argue that even within this very particular period of state and supranational reform, certain cultural frames, themes, and dispositions remained prominent in young Poles' negotiations about their national identity, and help to explain the decisions they made about their present and their future. The article helps to fill a gap in recent scholarship on nations by focusing on national identity as it is experienced in everyday life. I shift the focus downward, to explore the effects of social movements on individuals whose attitudes and actions in turn shape higher levels of organization.

Poles have a story they tell themselves about themselves--that they are strong when they face an enemy, but during 'normal', peaceful times, they are argumentative, they cannot agree, and everyone looks out for their own interests. The article explores displays of Polish heroism, including sacrificing one's life for 'great ideas', maintaining one's convictions regardless of the circumstances, and appearing to be compliant with the system while continuing counter-hegemonic activities through unofficial channels. It also examines periods of disenchantment when Poles splinter into the smallest units, doing what is best for themselves and their families. Both the heroism and the disenchantment reveal Poles' assumptions about individual and state responsibilities.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Krakow, the historical and cultural 'heart' of Poland, and Lesko, a small town in the Bieszczady Mountains of southeastern Poland, I examine young

Poles' perceptions of heroism and the nation in relation to specific contexts of learning, including films, school lessons, and family histories. Particular cases show how national ideologies are changed or contradicted by the situations young Poles find themselves in, and provide an explanation for generational, regional, and class differences in perceptions and experiences of national identity. The contrasts between romantic notions of heroism and the experience of everyday life are particularly great for those living in rural Bieszczady.

Although the Poles with whom I worked tended to criticize the concept of nation, they nevertheless made use of certain cultural frames to help them understand the nation and their responsibility to it. The understandings youths developed about themselves and others are likely to have long-term effects on the kinds of institutions that become established in Poland and on Poland's relations with other national and ethnic groups. The article thus provides a baseline for continued research on the adjustment to democratic and market reforms by examining not only official rhetoric about the nation, but also how these messages are used by members of the nation.

### **Nation: the state vs. the people**

My first conversations with young Poles illustrate the challenge of investigating national identity 'on the ground'. I was in Kraków, a city reputed for its strong affiliation with pro-national policies, valued for its historical and cultural artifacts, and often regarded as the symbolic 'heart' of the nation. Nevertheless, my first tentative questions about to?same?? narodowa---national identity--were more often than not met with sarcasm. "Why are you asking us about that?" young Poles asked, "those are old ideas, nobody cares about them really. They are just not interesting to us." This tendency to reject the nation as a significant category is in itself interesting, especially in the context of Poles' reputation for strong patriotism. It leads to questions about the conditions which promote or discourage identification with the nation. It also highlights the need for a reexamination of the dynamics of political legitimacy, ideology and belief.

Elsewhere, nations and nationalism have been examined with little regard for how individual members of the nation understand and negotiate nationalist rhetoric in their everyday lives (notable exceptions include Borneman 1992 and Sutton 1997). Gellner (1983), Anderson

(1983), and Hobsbawm (1990) emphasize the historical conditions which caused the nation to become a significant category of identification. They show how the past is retold and reshaped to suit the purposes of institutions of leadership. Anderson (1983), for example, focuses on generalized subjects whom he calls the 'cultivated middle class' who learn from 'print-capitalism', state bureaucracies, and centralized school systems. Thus, from this perspective, it is the state that constitutes the nation, defining which traditions and symbols frame contemporary experiences.

Taking such a 'top down' perspective makes it difficult to explain why certain stories, symbols, and memories make sense to people and provide the basis for a feeling of unity among members of a nation. A number of authors have argued for the importance of reflexivity in the analysis of national identity, and even in self-identity (see Anderson 1983, Giddens 1991, Hobsbawm 1990, Mach 1994, and Smith 1991). But upon what basis do people consider themselves members of the nation? Anderson develops a compelling, yet abstract argument for the correspondence between attachment to nation and religious or kinship ties, in that all three have a strong affective dimension that can motivate self-sacrificing loyalty. My point is that understanding how this occurs requires examining the nation from the perspective of individual experience, because what constitutes identity is so often situated and personal, and thus wrapped up in locality and kinship. As Smith contends, "it may be possible to manufacture traditions and to package imagery, but images and traditions will be sustained only if they have some popular resonance, and they will have that resonance only if they can be harmonized and made continuous with a perceived collective past" (1991:159).

Recent events in Poland show the limited persuasiveness of state rhetoric that does not resonate with popular beliefs and experiences. Kubik (1994) illustrates that the state's attempt to coopt national symbols in the 1970's and 1980's failed to inspire the support of most Poles. Instead, the juxtaposition of the ideal of national sovereignty and the universalism of communist ideology only highlighted the contrast between them. Those same national symbols, when used by the opposition instead of by the state, helped to create the remarkable unity that characterized the Solidarity movement. The new twist to the story is that the popular opinion of Solidarity plummeted when Solidarity was elected into positions of leadership in 1989 and 1991, and in 1993 and 1995 the former communists gained the majority in parliamentary and presidential elections. These shifts in leadership suggest that Poles' distrust of the state is more deeply rooted

than their dislike of communism. A powerful theme in Polish national identity is resistance toward any kind of centralized authority.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of national consciousness (*wiedomo?? narodowa*) has been of central interest to Polish social scientists. Often, they have taken a social psychological approach, and examined identity in terms of 'attitudes' (*postawy*) or 'mentality' (*mentalno??*), (see Gryko 1989[on the sociological theory of Cha?asinski]; Ossowski 1967; Znani?cki 1990). Thomas and Znani?cki, in their classic study of the Polish peasant, define attitude as "a process of individual consciousness which determines real or possible activity of the individual in the social world"(1984:58). Their project is to link psychological processes and social action to economic and social conditions. Mentality refers to less conscious ways of thinking and feeling that derive from collective experiences, conditions, beliefs, and customs (Buchowski 1994a, 1994b; Koralewicz and Zi??kowski 1990; Opara 1992). Sociologist Stanis?aw Ossowski wrote extensively on the concept *ojczyzna* (fatherland) which he treated as "the correlate of certain psychic attitudes, together with the cultural heritage of the social group" (1967:203). Thus, he defined fatherland in terms of affective, cultural distinctions rather than territorial boundaries.

Ossowski's definition of national identity (he used the Polish term *ojczyzna*, which may be translated as 'patria' or 'fatherland') highlights both ideological and local attachments; 'ideological *ojczyzna*' corresponds to nation constructed through collective rhetorical forms, while 'private *ojczyzna*' is based on direct experience of locality. In the early 1990's, young Poles tended to disregard, or even reject, the ideological dimensions of national identity. Nevertheless, their private attachments remained strong. Significantly, sentiment toward place tended to be expressed in terms of attachment to the people who live there and only secondarily in terms of the terrain itself. Thus, young Poles in post-communist Poland tend to reject national ideology while remaining loyal to their 'private *ojczyzna*'.

Recent studies of Polish national consciousness continue to focus on psychological tendencies shaped by shared historical experiences and conditions (Buchowski 1994a, 1994b; Marody 1991; Opara 1992; Wawrzkiwicz 1990). Specifically, Buchowski (1994a, 1994b) shows the relevance of nationalism, Catholicism, and consumerism to anti-communist resistance and to recent systemic reforms. Marody (1991, 1992a, 1992b) emphasizes that new factors, in particular economic conditions, perpetuate Poles' sense of alienation from institutions so that even freely elected leaders fail to overcome the traditional distrust felt towards government

officials. She also emphasizes the tension between individual versus collective interests which frame so many debates in Poland. It is important to emphasize that while these studies identify long-standing patterns, they do not assume inherent, primordial traits. Rather, these patterns emerged under particular historical circumstances, and continue to provide a model for behavior even though conditions have changed considerably.

### **Nation and the Heroic Ideal**

Overlapping discourses in Polish literature, social commentary, and popular journalism grapple with the issues of what constitutes the nation and how members of the nation should act. Often, poets and novelists have acted as public, political figures responsible for shaping the affective community of the nation (classical authors include Adam Mickiewicz and Henryk Sienkiewicz, contemporary authors include Tadeusz Konwicki and Czeslaw Milosz). Usually, the politicization of literary figures has been attributed to Poles' limited access to institutional political power in the context of foreign domination. Poland was partitioned among the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian empires from 1795 to 1917, occupied by Germany during World War II, and controlled by the Soviet Union after the war. Polish writers have defined the nation as the 'true' affective community in opposition to the state and other institutions of power associated with illegitimate foreign control. Classic patriotic texts such as Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve) emphasize the importance of keeping the idea of the nation alive in literature and everyday thought, even when the fact of a sovereign nation is unattainable. In these texts, the primary characteristic of the Polish hero is that he (or sometimes she) willingly renounces his individualism for the benefit of the group, but he does so through profoundly individual action.

When Poland regained its sovereignty in 1918, writers and scholars began to problematize the category of 'the nation'. Authors debated what makes Poles different from everybody else, while simultaneously questioning the importance of the nation. Witold Gombrowicz, one of the most celebrated and controversial literary figures of 20th century Poland, argued that any schematic framework that defines a person's characteristics also limits freedom and creativity. He criticized Polish nationalist writers such as Mickiewicz who romanticized self-sacrifice for the collective good, calling on individuals, and artists especially, to resist being fit into preexisting categories. At the same time, however, his journals (written

for publication) contain extensive meditations about the influence of his nationality on his writing (see Gombrowicz 1973, 1988, 1989, 1990). The issues that Gombrowicz raised about the individual's relationship to the collectivity remain current in Poland today. In an interview with American anthropologist Michael Fischer, Polish philosopher Leszek Koczanowicz explains "Polish identity is to some extent...in a constant state of schizophrenia, you know, to show some sources of identity and at the same time to show that the sources are exhausted or meaningless" (Fischer 1993:231).

In *The Polish Complex*, Tadeusz Konwicki (1982, originally published as *Kompleks Polski* in 1977) juxtaposes 19th century resistance fighters who sacrificed their lives in the battle for an autonomous Poland with conditions in communist Poland. The place of heroism was less clear in the 1970's, when much of Poles' energy was sapped by the absurd situations they faced every day, including interminable lines and unpredictable shortages. Nevertheless, the novel asserts that defeat comes only when people accept their fate in silence, when they no longer ask questions nor complain. Resistance, even if futile, is portrayed as worthwhile. The central problem for Konwicki remains the influence of history and habit on the Polish character, and the political implications of this relationship. In a 1991 interview with political journalist Adam Michnik, Konwicki criticized Poles for forgetting "facts from our history which are uncomfortable to us, which don't fit our always molded portrait of a society of angels in the center of Europe, ceaselessly wronged by bad neighbors" (Michnik 1991:10). He expressed concern about the "spiritual poverty" (*ubóstwo duchowe*) and "impoverishment of internal dispositions" (*niezamowność dyspozycji wewnętrznych*) of Poles.

During the early 1990's, issues under debate in popular periodicals included Poland's relation to the rest of the world, the harm done to Poland by forty-five years of communism, and the changes necessary for success (as individuals and as a nation) in the new system. Many articles challenged traditional characterizations of Polish national identity. For instance, they criticized collective feelings of innocence about ethnic discrimination (Michnik 1991), justifications of *kombinowanie*, or finagling (Mokotowski 1992), messianic claims that Poland has sacrificed itself to save the rest of Europe (Biełkowska 1993), patriotic pride based on the activities of a few historic heroes (Bratkowski 1992; Zaworska 1992), and feelings of inferiority in contrast to the more developed West (Biełkowska 1993; Małewski 1993; Ogorek 1992). Less

commonly, articles called for a return to romantic patriotism as the only means to improve Poland's position in the world (Małowski 1993).

In sum, reflections about the relationship between individuals and the collectivity, as well as the influence of historical experiences and conditions, are central discourses in Polish literature, scholarship, and journalism. Patriotic claims and metaphors remain a counterpoint in most discussions, even when authors assert that traditional patriotism does not work in the present context. One recurring motif (which proves central to my discussion of the national identity of young Poles) is the separation between the institutional and 'the people', where the former is regarded with distrust by the latter. In contrast to unreliable institutions, one's personal social connections can be trusted and depended upon.

Further, Poles' basic attachments to locality and to kin groups are most strongly enlisted in support of the nation when there is an enemy that clearly threatens both the local and the national realms; once that enemy is gone, so is the primary motivation for uniting as a nation. Instead, support remains focused on the narrowest of groups: friends and close friends. The following cases consider young Poles' responses to the messages they receive about the nation and heroism. They show that loyalty to the nation through honor, bravery, and resistance makes little sense in post-communist Poland because there is no enemy to fight, but orientations toward freedom and authority continue to underlie strategies for dealing with new kinds of restrictions on economic prosperity and individualism.

## **Polski Honor**

Polish honor was portrayed to me in a film, *Pan Wołodyjowski*, which I watched with Kuba, a twenty-two year old trade school graduate from Lesko. The film is an adaptation of the third novel in Henryk Sienkiewicz's patriotic trilogy. In these 19th century novels, historic struggles for Polish sovereignty provide the backdrop against which idealized Polish heroes fight foreign villains. Kuba told me that he saw *Pan Wołodyjowski* once during a history class at school. In *Pan Wołodyjowski*, the hero (Wołodyjowski) and another knight are sent to protect a castle on Poland's eastern border against Turk and Tartar invaders. In a church ceremony, the knights vow they will not abandon their post until they triumph over their enemy or die trying to protect Poland. After withstanding several attacks by the invaders, the knights receive a message

from the king to abandon the castle because a compromise agreement gives the Turks control of southeastern Poland. Rather than retreat, the two knights, in compliance with their oath, blow up the castle and commit suicide. Kuba called the film a lesson for every Pole about how to love his country. I told him I didn't understand. Wouldn't it have been better if the knights had chosen to live so they could continue to defend the country? Kuba explained that the knights acted with bravery and honor and that keeping one's vow is the most important thing.

The film, and Kuba's reaction to it, illustrate several aspects of Polish honor. First, honor is closely related to defending the nation in armed conflict and not hesitating to die in battle. Second, it involves placing the collective good before one's own, as demonstrated through loyalty, honesty, and responsibility. Third, honor is not simply a matter of acting appropriately, it also requires thinking and believing the right things. Those 'right things' are defined by both social convention and the Church. In other conversations I recorded, young Poles linked honor with acting morally, listening to one's conscience, and prioritizing collective benefit over personal profit. Similarly, in her linguistic analysis of Polish terms related to bravery, Wierzbicka says that their strong link with warfare and predominantly positive connotation emphasize the "important role that memories of struggles for freedom and independence play in Polish culture and in the Polish collective consciousness"(1992:216). Compromise, by contrast, tends to have strongly negative associations, as seen in Woodyjowki's refusal to hand the castle over to the enemy (see also Wierzbicka 1992).

If this were the end of the story, it would appear that the Polish heroic ideal continues to provide young Poles with a valued model for behavior. I return to Kuba to demonstrate that while the idea of honor continues to be a significant evaluative concept for youths, young Poles have rarely, if ever, faced situations that demand honorable behavior of them. As a result, the concept gets transformed in ways that seem to contradict the ideal entirely. Over the summer of 1992, and through the following winter, Kuba expressed his patriotic feelings to me. He called Poland the 'best nation' and spoke proudly of Polish *gościnnosc* (hospitality) and bravery in warfare. In February 1993, he said he is used to life in Poland and does not want to live anywhere else. In March, he took a bus to Paris. When I finally received a note from him the following autumn, I learned that he had joined the French Foreign Legion. I have not seen him, so I have not been able to ask him directly how his recent actions relate to his patriotism, but I have a hunch that he would still defend the value of honor.

Knowing more about Kuba's situation helps to explain why he acted as he did. When I first met him, he was trying to avoid mandatory service in the Polish army which he considered a waste of his time. He complained that the Polish military is poorly equipped, weak, and does not do anything. Instead, he lived at home and went on long bike rides. He did not want to work either, he explained, because during the summer there is too much to do which does not require earning or spending money. Still, his mother was getting tired of supporting him while he 'did nothing'. Once it started getting cold and bike riding lost its appeal, he found a job as a clerk in a friend's store. He liked working because it got him out of the house and away from his mother's complaining, but he was barely earning \$100 a month, too little to help out with the family finances. By contrast, Kuba's younger brother was sending considerable sums of money home from France where he was a legionnaire. Kuba said he could not understand why his brother would willingly join a foreign army, but he also expressed envy and jealousy. Kuba had been the 'good' son when he had a job as a miner in Silesia, and would send money to his parents. Now, his brother was favored. More and more, Kuba talked about the challenge of basic training for legionnaires, where only the strongest both physically and mentally succeed. He said they open a bank account for you and put money in it every month which you don't even need to spend because they give you everything you need--food, clothes, and a place to sleep. He contrasted the poor conditions in the Polish military where soldiers are paid only a few dollars a month.

I do not want to minimize the obvious contradictions in Kuba's life choices, but I do want to emphasize some underlying consistencies between his claims and his actions. Ideally, honor entails doing good works for the nation, and even renouncing one's individualism for the good of the group. But ideal honor also involves defending the nation against real adversaries. Kuba seeks adventure, to confront challenges, and to prove himself, as have many Polish freedom fighters and knights. No such opportunities present themselves in the Polish army. If Poland were fighting a war, Kuba would probably have joined the army eagerly. However, during this period of peace, the primary challenge for most Polish families is earning enough to pay basic expenses. Mandatory military service makes it impossible to do a better paying job and, as Kuba found, the work that is available for unskilled workers in Poland does not pay enough to live on anyway. As a foreign soldier, Kuba can help in the honorable task of supporting his parents. In a recent letter to me, Kuba wrote, "I had to emigrate and I have resigned myself to that. I don't

think I would want to stay in France, but who knows?"<sup>3</sup> All things being equal, Kuba would have remained in Lesko gladly. With the demise of state supported industry, however, he had little chance of making a reasonable living in his native town. Since the nation has regained its sovereignty, he has no opportunity to defend it in battle. Instead, his loyalty to his family remains paramount. In a way, he renounced his individualism for the good of his family, but like the ideal hero, he did so through individual action. He serves in an army he has chosen rather than be forced into mandatory military service he considers useless.

Without a clear outside enemy to fight, young Poles find little opportunity to express classic notions of heroism, nor do they find those ideas especially applicable to their everyday problems. Instead, different priorities emerge, particularly a preoccupation with material well-being. For instance, Staszek (a technical school graduate) observed that instead of modeling themselves after the "knight" as they did in the past, now Poles seek to emulate the "businessman". For the businessman, the motivation for profit supersedes honor. Another student explained that an earlier generation believed in "Bóg, honor, ojczyzna", (God, honor, fatherland) but young people now owe nothing to Poland because it does not provide them with the means to satisfy their basic needs. He and his classmates complained that the Catholic Church forces them to believe and the government forces them to serve in the army, but both institutions are mostly interested in maintaining their own political and economic power. Similarly, Wierzbicka (1992) comments on some graffiti that changed the patriotic slogan to "Bóg, handel, ojczyzna." As she explains, "handel basically means 'trade', but in everyday Polish it has the negative connotations of undignified profiteering and an absence of ideals" (1992:443). The altered meaning of the expression is striking, and suggests an ironic awareness of the way material concerns have replaced patriotic ones.

### **Learning to Wait, Learning to Fight**

Much of what young Poles know about Polish heroism is based on the patriotic struggles of earlier generations. Many have grandparents who fought to free Poland during World War II; some were killed, and some who survived were deemed 'traitors' by the communist regime and thus arrested or deported. Others have parents who faced arrest and discrimination for their opposition to communism. Such stories shape young Poles' perceptions of the nation, but their

lack of first-hand experience of war contributes to their uncertainty about the place of heroism in contemporary Polish society. Nevertheless, extensive discourse about the subject persists in history and literature classes at school. Below, I examine a literature lesson on the patriotic classic *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve) by Adam Mickiewicz. The discussion shows that certain messages about passive resistance, waiting, and freedom remain current today. Because Poland is no longer dominated by a foreign regime, however, classic modes of resistance provide the basis for attacks on the freely elected Polish government.

Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) is considered one of the greatest Polish Romantic poets. He, together with other Romantic authors, helped to develop an idealized concept of the nation which was distinctly linked to Catholicism and to political sovereignty. He advocated resistance to the foreign occupiers of Poland, and argued that freedom should be preserved as a psychic state within people if it could not be manifested politically. Significantly, Mickiewicz spent most of his life outside of Poland, even though he considered himself a Polish patriot. Born in Lithuania, he never even saw Warsaw or Krakow. He was exiled to Russia for his activity in a secret society, and then in 1829 moved to Western Europe, where he stayed for the rest of his life. He wrote most of his patriotic texts while in exile (as have many Polish literary figures since then). A strong advocate of independence movements for all nations, in his final years he fought for Italian Independence and fought against the Russians in the Crimean War.

I observed a lesson entitled "the portrait of Polish society and its evaluation in scene three, part three of *Dziady*." at a technical school in Nowa Huta, a workers' district on the outskirts of Krakow (it was built in the 1950's as the ideal city within the communist workers' state). Throughout the literature lesson, Pani Su?kowska had her students read passages from the play, and then asked questions about the historical context and the symbolic significance of the text. She encouraged students to draw meanings from the play, and relate them to the contemporary situation. Scene three of *Dziady* takes place when Poland is under control of the Russian czar. First, the class discussed a passage where poor Poles stand by the door, representing their marginality, where they debate what they can and should do about Russian domination. Pani Su?kowska asked, "a romantic drama need not have a sharp connection with what?" and the students responded in unison, "reality." The discussion of the passage continued; Poland is not free, but direct armed opposition to the czar will lead to death. For the time being the most effective protest against the czar is through poetry because it keeps the goal of freedom alive

until armed conflict becomes possible. One student pointed out the messianic nature of the story. When encouraged to explain, he continued that "Poland lives in the land of darkness," but God sees Poles' suffering and will reward them. Also, since God is the highest authority, it is not important for others to know they are heroes.

Kubik (1994) identifies three underlying conceptions of Polish romanticism: the power of words (and hence the poet), the power of human will and emotions which proves to be equal to or greater than reason, and the characterization of Poland as the "Christ of Nations" whose suffering ensures the safety of the rest of Europe. Similarly, the literature lesson emphasized that fighting may take many forms, and that conversation and poetry can be the most effective way to build awareness until an opportunity arises to take more radical action. Further, Pani Su?kowska stressed that romanticism need have nothing to do with reality, but rather may be equated with feelings greater than life and death, or even a kind of ecstatic insanity. For instance, Norwid, the hero of *Dziady*, is possessed by spirits and sees visions, but this allows him to recognize the value of fighting for the oppressed nation. The play emphasizes the spiritual side of opposition which encourages people to act on the basis of their own convictions; those who do so are promised a reward in the afterlife. Throughout, the ideal of fighting against an enemy that denies the nation its freedom remains the central aspect of Polish heroism.

At the end of the lesson, students were asked to relate *Dziady* to the present situation in Poland. They discussed a passage which compares the nation to lava--the nation appears cold, hard, and dry on the surface, but a fire burns underneath. Pani Su?kowska encouraged students to reflect on the symbolic significance of the comparison. One student said that though the nation may appear stable on the outside, inside it is hot and ready to burst. Another student explained that the nation is ready to fight when aroused. Pani Su?kowska prompted them, "they [Poles] never agree to...", and a student finished "niewola (captivity)." When asked to relate the passage to the present, students discussed Poles' negative orientation towards government due to the lack of stability and political disputes. Pani Su?kowska suggested this means the fire is on the outside now. At the end of the lesson, she asked whether Poles can unite only in tragic situations. No one answered so she herself replied that the situation need not be tragic, though often Poles do not unite unless times get difficult.

Students' interpretations of the present suggest that the play provides no direct model for what should happen when patriotic goals are achieved by the living (as opposed to those whose

sacrifices are rewarded in the afterlife). It is like trying to learn about marriage from romances that elaborate the courtship and the first kiss, and end with the proposal. What follows is supposed to be paradise, so no clues are given as to how to make it so. Regarding the present, youths say that Poles expected their lives would get easier and better if communism were replaced. They wanted a higher standard of living like they saw in capitalist countries in the West. Few were prepared for unemployment, skyrocketing inflation, or high prices. As a result, the lava continues to bubble, even after the goal of national autonomy has been attained. Poles are still waiting for liberation in the form of their own economic security. In the meantime, certain patterns associated with periods of waiting persist. Young Poles express reluctance to think about the future. Their long-term goals are only vaguely formulated, and they make little overt effort to achieve them. They prefer to 'wait and see' what opportunities might emerge and enjoy their free time with family and friends. But they are not completely passive; like the poor Poles at the door in *Dziady*, they stand ready to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves.

### **Contemporary Anti-heroism**

The two cases I have presented so far show the problematic relation between historic models of heroism and the situations young Poles face in post-communist Poland. Nevertheless, certain underlying orientations toward individualism and collective responsibility continue to shape responses to everyday situations. In this final case, I focus on Aneta, a student at a lyceum in Kraków, who has the attributes of a new kind of leader, only partly modeled after the romantic hero. Although she criticizes traditional models of patriotism, she remains concerned about the nation and anticipates helping to shape the future of Poland. I discuss Aneta's life story in relation to a recent film that captures the disillusionment of the post-communist period. I contrast her aspirations with the mother-hero ideal, and consider her opinion of two contemporary political figures.

In 1993, Aneta was in her third year at one of the most prestigious college preparatory schools in Kraków. Though a talented student, she tended to downplay academics in favor of animated stories about vacationing with friends in Zakopane, acting in a youth theater, and spending time in cafes while *na wagary* (cutting school). At seventeen, she had already held a

variety of temporary jobs, ranging from selling advertising to tutoring English. While students at her school tended to be well informed about politics, Aneta was actively involved in political campaigns and in school politics. For example, during the parliamentary elections in 1991, and again during the elections in 1993, she and her friends put up campaign posters. Aneta explains, "at first we went there to get some work hanging posters to make some money. Later, when we began to talk with these people we decided to get more involved, and now we are going to conduct surveys [about] how to reach us [young Poles] so that we will really go and vote. It sounds pretty interesting." Though initially motivated by financial gain, Aneta quickly became interested in the campaign and in the particular policies of the Democratic Union (UD) because it seemed the most receptive to the concerns and interests of young people.<sup>4</sup> Aneta places great emphasis on what she finds 'interesting'. Her models for behavior include what she likes about Polish culture and what she has learned about the West from her own experiences abroad and with foreigners.

Aneta recommended that I see *Psy* (Dogs) because it shows the real Poland and Poles after communism, where the police (*milicja*) of the former system have become the police (*policja*) of the new democracy without changing their beliefs or corrupt methods, and the former communists have access to resources which makes them rich through capitalism. The characters in *Psy* find little place for idealism in their world. Instead, the film illustrates the confusion that follows the period of enchantment, when it is no longer so easy to determine right and wrong. Franz Maurer, the 'hero' of the story is a policeman under interrogation for his illegal activities. Nevertheless, he does not come across as a 'bad' man; he has ideals and fights for them, but he is not a hero because he can not remain untouched by the corrupt environment in which he lives. The film illustrates a sentiment felt by many Poles--that everyone was compromised in some way by the former system. Maurer shows no particular loyalty to Poland, but he demonstrates a private loyalty to family and friends. Nevertheless, his friends and family desert him. Aneta told me she liked *Psy* because it made her feel powerful for being Polish. Though Aneta characterized this film as very Polish, others have criticized the director, Władysław Pasikowski, for making American style films. I see both elements--the violence of American cops and robbers films and the Polish ironic humor of scenes where policemen pass around glasses of vodka at lunch time, complaining about how hard it is to get household repairs done

and joking about starting their own businesses. The combination suits Aneta, who also borrows from Western models of teenage life.

Aneta's story illustrates that young Polish females tend to know as much as males do about the Polish heroic ideal. This is confirmed in interviews, where both males and females told me about the ideal of fighting for the fatherland. Nevertheless, the vast majority of heroes in Polish literature and films, including the three I refer to here--Woodyjowski, Norwid, and Maurer--are male. In her book on women in the Solidarity movement, Long (1996) describes an alternate model of heroism for females. The female patriot is most often characterized as the transmitter of history and traditional culture, just as the primary role for women in Polish society is that of mother. Thus, matka bohaterka, the mother-hero, teaches children (whether her own or others), acts as provisioner, and engages in passive protest at home. She is regarded as an actor in the private realm, not in the public realm. Long illustrates, for example, that women helped in the strikes at the Gdańsk shipyard by locating food and making sandwiches for the striking workers, who were predominantly men. A notable exception, Anna Walentynowicz, was a welder who played an active role within the shipyard during the strikes. Similarly, Aneta has ambitions to act in the public realm.<sup>5</sup>

Aneta's view of heroism may be seen in her critique of contemporary political figures Hanna Suchocka and Lech Wałęsa. During a group interview in February 1993, Aneta spoke very highly of UD Prime Minister, Hanna Suchocka:

she has an incredible calmness about her, [you can see it] just by looking at her, the way she reads and presents herself. She is so amazingly in control, she is very well educated...More people like this are necessary, and not people who bring their personal biases to government [such as] what someone told them, or how they like this person or don't like that one, like it is at Belweder<sup>6</sup> with Wałęsa...all of that should be approached more objectively, not for oneself but for all of Poland.

Aneta's classmates agreed that Suchocka offers the kind of leadership the country needs--intelligent, in control, honest, and 'objective'. I do not think it is an accident that Aneta looks to a strong female politician as her role model. She told me on several occasions that she wants to

‘do something for the country’ and that ‘the future of Poland is in our [young people’s] hands’ even though she made fun of herself for expressing such idealistic sentiments (especially when she was with her friends). By contrast, she criticized President Wałęsa for overstepping his abilities.

Most young Poles I spoke with shared Aneta’s opinion that Wałęsa had the characteristics that make a good charismatic leader during times of oppression: despite the odds, he remained convinced of the righteousness of his goal and refused to compromise. However, in the context of representative government, he lacked the knowledge, objectivity, and cool head necessary for complex negotiation and compromise. Putting it another way, he had the skills to fight for the fatherland, but not to live for it. As Aneta explained in 1992:

Relations toward the president have changed drastically because in the past (even a year ago ) everyone thought that he had a mission to accomplish, and through that Poland changed...It's just that now he should have enough honor, he should be intelligent enough, to withdraw from it all. Not control anymore.

Criticisms of Wałęsa reveal a more general tension between individual and collective responsibility. In this case, the essential feature of honor is placing the collective good over one’s personal gain. Instead, Wałęsa used his popularity to gain power for himself, giving his own fame and wealth priority over the good of the nation. In addition, Wałęsa’s popularity was not strong enough to counteract Pole’s distrust of the state; rather than bringing the legitimacy of Solidarity (which until then was seen to represent the nation) to the office of president, Solidarity and Wałęsa lost legitimacy through their association with the state.

In an interesting development in Aneta's story, during a recent visit to Poland, I learned that she has not pursued her political interests. Instead, she quit university after two years because she got a job putting together video clips for the Polish version of MTV. I think this is an accurate generalization about where Poland's most talented young people are putting their energies. Rather than working to improve

## Freedom at Last

In order to understand why nation can inspire such passionate actions, it is essential to examine individuals' emotions, motivations, and personal constructions of meaning. Young Poles associate locality with the people they feel the most emotionally attached--family and friends--and with their most intimate experiences--childhood and love. These attachments comprise a baseline for their life stories. The salience of the nation depends on the extent to which these private attachments are appropriated to represent the larger, more abstract, imagined community. In Poland, the attainment of national sovereignty removes the primary condition that motivated assertions of patriotism. Viewing things in this way helps to explain how Polish youth can reject the idea of the nation (the ideological *ojczyzna*) as having no meaning for them while still feeling passionate attachment to locality, and even to the country (their private *ojczyzna*).

A similar transition from romantic idealism to pragmatic disenchantment occurred during the interwar period, when Poland regained its autonomy after 123 years. In *Ku?nia M?odych* (1932), a periodical written for and by youths (most were wealthier urban elite attending college preparatory schools) one student wrote:

In many articles dealing with the question of contemporary youths, they constantly reproach us, that we look on life with terrifying sobriety, that we lack idealism, that we are too materialistic. The ideal of youths in the previous generation, raised in captivity, was to gain independence for *ojczyzna*... for this ideal they fought and died. For us, raised in Independent Poland, this problem does not exist. We, raised in a free state, do not understand life in captivity. Speaking Polish, our own government, the freedom to express our thoughts--these are for us our daily bread.

In the post-communist period, Aneta and her colleagues express similar sentiments. They, too, have little reason to think about fighting for the nation.

As much as the valiant freedom fighter remains an ideal, Poles are tired of fighting. Now that the enemy has been defeated, they want to devote their energy to creating a 'normal life' for themselves and their family. The Polish heroic ideal supports a kind of individualism that young Poles are using to make decisions about their lives. Most heroes act alone, motivated by their goals irrespective of the structural restraints around them. These attributes are being applied to

pragmatic and economic concerns, even though those who do so risk being accused of self interest. In general, prospects for urban youths are much better than for rural youths because jobs and educational opportunities are more readily available in cities. Those who have difficulty finding opportunities take advantage of another lesson learned from patriotic stories; they wait until a chance presents itself.

Poles concur that freedom is important, but they have a much harder time agreeing what freedom entails. I heard young Poles use the argument "now, there's democracy" and "now, we're free" (teraz jest demokracja, teraz jesteśmy wolni) to justify everything from smoking at school, to watching porno films, to choosing not to vote. It is here that the reluctance to compromise, one characteristic of standing behind one's ideals regardless of the cost, becomes a problem. Without a black and white world view, the basis for collective effort and agreement becomes difficult to find. Poles continue to resist systemic restrictions, even when they are established by a freely elected Polish state.

To conclude, the study illustrates that official rhetoric does not always reveal popular understandings about key concepts such as nations and heroism. Rather, it is important to see how these messages are received and used. This 'on the ground' perspective reveals a more complex, but a much richer portrait of national identity.

## Notes

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Poland from September 1991 to July 1993. I gratefully acknowledge IIE Fulbright and the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation for funding my research. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 96th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco in November 1996.

1. The term for fatherland is a feminine noun, and thus demands the feminine pronoun.

2. This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Poland from September 1991 to July 1993. I gratefully acknowledge IIE Fulbright and the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation for funding my research. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 96th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco in November 1996.

3. Pro prostu musiały wyjechać z czym się pogodziły i niewydaje mi się żebyśmy chciały zostać we Francji--ale kto wie?

4. Unia Demokratyczna was a center-left party composed of many of the intelligentsia active in Solidarity including Jacek Kuron, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Adam Michnik.

5. During a recent visit to Krakow, I learned that Aneta has not pursued her political interests. Instead, she quit university after two years because she got a job putting together video clips for the Polish version of MTV.
6. Belweder is the official residence of the president.

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