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Poland Looking West

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In 1985, Czeslaw Milosz said in an interview, “The importance of the movement in Poland, of Solidarity, is that it is not just a Polish phenomenon. It exemplifies a basic issue of the twentieth century. Namely, resistance to the withering away of society and its domination by the state. In the Poland of Solidarity, owing to some historical forces, there was a kind of resurgence, or renaissance, of the society against the state.

Quite contrary to the predictions of Marx, this is the basic issue of the twentieth century. Instead of the withering away of the state, the state, like a crab, has eaten up all the substance of society. Destroying society, as a matter of fact. As a workers’ movement, Solidarity resisted this. Whether various societies that have been conquered by the state will awaken in the future, I don’t know. The movement in Poland presents a hopeful pattern.”

Communism was the ultimate expression of state power, and it ate away and destroyed society, observed Milosz, but this sinister process also “exemplifies a basic issue of the twentieth century,” meaning to one degree or another, it was a universal problem. It still is. With increased surveillance from the state, and its power to micromanage or interfere with nearly all aspects of our lives, we’re entirely at the state’s mercy. In the US, the government can prevent us from flying without explanation, and it can even summarily disappear or kill us. Typing a word, we must look over our shoulder.

Culture, cuisine or crime, society is whatever evolves naturally from the people, and the state is the uber structure over all that vitality. The more infantile a population, the more it thinks it needs a paternal state, but free men will always rage and rebel against an all-intrusive government. In each Communist country, many did just that, though even the slightest dissent was met with the most barbaric punishment. Innocents were also round up by the paranoid state.

Thirty-one years after Milosz' statement, is Poland still a promising bellwether? Seems like it traded one empire for another. Instead of being a Russian thorn against the West, it has become NATO's point man against Russia. It is lobbying to have foreign troops in its territory to deter against "Russian expansionism," though that would only increase the likelihood of such an aggression. To its disappointment, its effort to host American missiles fell through. It lost 74 soldiers in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, fourth highest among Uncle Sam's vassals.



Clothing Store in Luban, Poland.

On a recent, brief visit to three Polish towns near the German border, I saw quite a few signs of Poland's infatuation with the USA. In Luban, there's an Uncle Sam's **Ice Cream**, with the depicted vanilla and chocolate soft serve looking strangely like long screws. A clothing store displays a large image of **Manhattan** with a dozen taxis. There's a **Manhattan Bistro**. Luban's many one-room casinos also evoke that land of MTV and Hollywood fantasies, with Café **Vegas** showing a freeway and skyscrapers of... Los Angeles. "**JACK HOT**," "**HOT FUN**," "**LUCKY SEVEN**," "**LUCKY SLOTS**," "**VIP ROOM**," all these Polish casinos have American names. It's as if luck and America are the same, though of course you nearly always lose in these joints.

In Zgorzelec, **Bar Kalifornia** features the Statue of Liberty superimposed over Manhattan and the American flag. In a window, a small manikin sports a red, white and blue **outfit** with stars and stripes. In tiny Wignielec, population 3,072, a boy's bomber jacket outside a store has American flag patches. Everywhere I went, I heard American pop music. On one station, the announcers even spoke English between songs. Needless to say, everything Russian has been purged from the landscape. On some menus, there is the pierogi ruskie. Filled with mashed potato, it's as sexy as mashed potato.

Decades of Communist destruction of society has left its marks in Poland. East Germany had the West to help it recover, but Poles had to catch up by themselves. As of 2014, its GNI per capita of \$24,710 was roughly the same as Russia's and Hungary's, but behind the Czech Republic's \$28,020 and just over half of Germany's \$46,850. Crossing from Gorlitz into Zgorzelec, I could immediately see the differences between the two nations. The Polish buildings were in poorer shape, the shops were homelier and there were many fewer places to eat and drink. Almost none had a menu outside to attract clients. Even the service was different.

Spotting an inviting restaurant, I walked in to find a lady at a table. Since she barely looked up, I assumed she was a customer. I went to the counter to pick up a menu then peered into the kitchen to see an old woman, whom I waved at. I sat down. After about two minutes, the first lady stood up, turned around and said to me, "Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" It turned out she was the waitress and cashier.

The place was more bar than restaurant. Middle aged men would walk in, order a tall draft of Okocim then drink at a table mostly in silence, though they all seemed to know each other. Sauntering in, a guy said hello to everyone and shook their hands. Seeing me, he shook my hand also. I had a plate of soothing **pierogi** filled with a pork paste for just \$2.20. An honest bowl of tripe soup with bits of ham and vegetables set me back \$1.90. The decors flaunted plastic chandeliers and velvet curtains with tassels and frills. On the walls were postcard-sized, mass-produced paintings of rustic scenes. It was kitschy all over, but worn and faded, like an old, affable whore. I like you, too. Dipping half a pierogi into sour cream, I felt very at home and comforted. On TV, there was a Turkish soap opera that was dubbed by a single male voice. Everyone sounded the same.

Along with Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Poland is rejecting the European Union's mandate to accept thousands of Muslim refugees. With recent memories of having their societies deformed and suffocated by Soviet Russia, these central European nations know only too bitterly how precarious national identity and autonomy is. In 1985, Milan Kundera pointed out, "When it comes to the misfortune of nations, we must not forget the dimension of time. In a fascist, dictatorial state, everyone knows that it will end one day. Everyone looks to the end of the tunnel. In the empire to the east, the tunnel is without end. Without end, at least, from the point of view of a human life. This is why I don't like it when people compare Poland with, say, Chile. Yes, the torture, the suffering are the same. But the tunnels are of very different lengths. And this changes everything."

Citing this difference, Kundera reminded us that Communist European nations were subjugated by Russia, and that's why they couldn't terminate their misery organically, from the ground up. When the masses rebelled against dictatorship, like the East Germans did in 1953, the Hungarians in 1956 or the Czechs in 1968, the Russians brought in the tanks. Kundera also asserted, "For a thousand years, Czechoslovakia was part of the West. Today, it is part of the empire to the east." Like the Poles, their fellow Slavs, Czechs also see an affinity and allegiance with the West, not Russia.

Having regained their identities, these nations won't allow Brussels to tamper with them. They will certainly stay in the European Union, however, since this association allows their

citizens to work in many wealthier countries. They want to export, not import, immigrants. Crossing into Poland, I noticed that the Turkish and Vietnamese food joints practically disappeared. I did run into **Bar Orientalny Restauracja**, however.

Its owner is one of only two Vietnamese in town. Tran has lived in Europe for 30 years, with the first three in the Czech Republic, where he met his first Polish wife. Following her back to Zgorzelec, he survived by selling black market cigarettes, then clothes, and was locked up several times. Tran started cooking 20 years ago, and now has a spacious restaurant. On the wall was a common New Year's greeting. It translates as, "MUCH WEALTH MUCH LUCK."

Working seven days a week, Tran leaves the house at 7AM and doesn't return until 10PM. Married to his second Polish wife, he has six kids altogether, with three grown ones working in Leipzig, Germany. His 20-year-old has a job across the river, since German wages, averaging €2,183, are three times higher. Tran has two Polish employees.

"I'd rather hire a Pole than a Vietnamese, to tell you the truth. If it's too busy, a Vietnamese wants a raise. If it's too slow, she wants a raise. That woman has worked for me for nearly eight years." Tran nodded towards the waitress and cashier. Square-jawed and assured without being pushy, he exuded a resilience that had allowed him to survive, and his relaxed charm was also evident. As a newcomer, you need to muster up all assets.

Tran never had enough money to fly back to Vietnam before 2010, but now returns annually for a month to see his aging mother, and to take the extended family to the beach. I'm sure he also gives quite a few people money. It's expected. By a miraculous coincidence, we come from the same block in Saigon, though he got there just after I had left. Tran has no desire to retire in Vietnam. "Everyone knows me here. I'm at home here."

"Don't you miss the food? Like a really great bowl of pho?"

"I can make it better myself."

A few Zgorzelec restaurants have German and English menus, but Orientalny Restauracja even boasts a Japanese one. "There's a Toyota plant not too far away, and their Japanese employees sometimes come in here. I also get a few Americans. They're on the basketball team."

Playing at a 3,500 seat arena, Turów Zgorzelec has two American players, Cameron Tatum and Kirk Archibeque. Tatum averaged 8.1 points a game during his last year at the University of Tennessee. He majored in Africana Studies. Archibeque averaged 13.1 points during his third season, his best, at Northern Colorado. Though not immigrants, these men have found a way to survive outside their native land. It beats becoming a mercenary.

Tran on how accommodating Poles can be, "If you ask for directions, they won't just show you but may walk you there. If there's an argument between a Pole and a foreigner, they will side with the foreigner, but it depends on which foreigner."

Last November 15th, Poland's Independence Day, a young priest, Jacek Miedlar, bellowed out a fierce speech to a flag waving crowd in Warsaw. Miedlar began, "Dearly beloved, the enemies of the homeland and the enemies of the Church are furious today because they see a huge, enormous army of patriots, army of nationalists, and army of supporters who have 'God, Honor, and Fatherland' in their hearts and are ready to give their lives for them. But I am more than convinced that leftist propaganda is trying its best to destroy us, to destroy the Church, to destroy the Polish nation. We cannot let them do it. We are the Church Militant. We are the warriors of Great Poland. They aren't even aware that the more they attack us, the more our pride grows!"

Is this paranoia? How besieged is Poland, really? It seems to me that what threatens Poland also endangers many other countries, and that's the subjugation of local needs to a master scheme cooked up far away by an elite that owe no allegiance to any nation. Going after immediate benefits, Poland risks long term damage. To avert disaster, it will need to stop supporting Uncle Sam's belligerence, appeasing Brussels and antagonizing the Kremlin.

Though the narrative that Russia invaded Ukraine is absurd, most Poles buy into it, such is their hatred of their long time nemesis. At least ten thousand Poles have even joined militias to prepare for an invasion. Clinging to that dangerously flailing zombie that's Uncle Sam, Poles might just see their worst fear realized.