

## **POLAND'S CLOSEST NEIGHBOURS OFFICIAL COMMUNIST STEREOTYPES AND POPULAR MYTHS**

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Pregledni članak

Review

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*The author's opinion is that the bitter legacy of Communism in people's minds should become a subject of investigation for ethnologists, historians of culture, or sociologists. That is what he is trying to prove throughout his article.*

Gaining control of the Central and East European countries, laid waste by the war and occupation, was a relatively easy task for Stalin's armies; it was an equally simple matter to establish there by force compliant regimes, thus reducing the countries in question to the status of Moscow's satellites. It was much more difficult, however, to stay in power in those countries, against the will of the oppressed and terrorized nations. Therefore, classic methods of mutual isolation were applied, of the same kind as those widely used in prisons and penal colonies. Another technique involved the control of the population movement, the way it was done in Soviet Russia between the World Wars, with the accompanying propaganda rhetoric based on a paranoid fear of strangers. When the main waves of "repatriates" had crossed the borders, passenger traffic between countries of the "Block of Progress" was promptly curtailed. All attempts at illegal emigration were subject to prosecution and exemplary punishment, and the few dramatic instances of flight to the West were officially condemned. Who would dream about leaving the mother country, labouriously building socialism, except a traitor, a parasite, or a criminal? The loyal citizen would stay at home, bent on rebuilding the country after wartime destruction. Even if citizens from one group or another were allowed to emigrate, it was done surreptitiously, without publicity.

That state of perfect social immobility could not be maintained over the several decades of communist rule in our part of the continent. Soon the control system imposed by the rulers began to crack. The number of exceptions to the rule, enforced by administrative and police methods, grew in particular countries of the "Block" from year to year. Nevertheless, the authorities stubbornly clung to the principle that the right to travel abroad, even to the nearest neighbour-state, was a rare privilege, granted by the authorities at their own discretion. To be sure, as the years went by, the principle of universal isolation evolved into a system of concessions and special cases. Still, foreign travel and contacts, even between closest neighbours, were a domain of

unfulfilled dreams, longings, frustrations, myths and stereotypes. Today they provide an extensive field of study for a researcher investigating recent history of culture in our part of the continent.

Who, apart from persons charged with special and secret tasks, was allowed to go abroad from Poland towards the end of the 1940s and in the early 1950s? Top-ranking athletes had a chance to travel - in teams, carefully guarded by nearly as numerous "attendants" and "sports activists". Their task was to promote socialist sports, thriving under the auspices of the new rulers. A victory on the field or track was publicized like a battlefield triumph, that is, if the opponents were not by any chance Big Brother's team. Of course, fraternal relations united us with the other people's democracies in the stadiums, too. The achievements of such heroes of internationalist sports, appointed by decree, as the Czech runner-militiaman Emil Zatopek or the cyclist Ružička, were surrounded with an atmosphere of hysterical praise.

Only after October 1956 did "fraternal" rivalry in the stadiums and rings give way to events which often allowed viewers to vent their national frustrations. During a famous boxing championship, members of the Polish team led by Feliks Sztam became almost national heroes, having defeated several Soviet competitors. The public also showed ostentatious support for Hungarian boxers when they fought the Soviet champions. However, when teams from the "Socialist Block" contended against Western rivals, the reaction of the Polish viewer was not at all unambiguous. This was often due to the coverage of the event by the official media, bordering on hysteria, with clear political and propaganda overtones.

The travellers of the early 1950s included also a handful of officially recognized artists. "I have seen Stalin!" announced a famous pianist in her report from Moscow. The so-called "Congress of Intellectuals" organized in Wrocław in the second half of the 1940s provided various foreign luminaries of culture, who had come to our country under the watchful eye of their companions, with an opportunity to appear in the mass media. Visitors from the neighbouring, "fraternal" nations were not given much publicity, that is, except the delegation from the East, with Ilya Ehrenburg, never parting with his pipe.

Neighbourly contacts of a "plebeian" type were arranged in the form of mutual visits of groups of Stakhanovites from "fraternal" factories, and so-called "friendship trains". Both types of contacts involved participants carefully selected by the party authorities, while the programmes of the tours were subordinated to the idea of showing the visitors as little as possible. The cognitive effect of such projects was indeed close to zero. After all, their only function was to reinforce in the minds of the participants a uniform, propagandist, false image of the uniform and monotonous non-reality of the "Peace Block".

As regards individual and collective mountain tourism, concentrating - out of necessity - along our border with Czechoslovakia, the authorities attempted to restrict it to routes allowing maximum control to the Frontier Guard. To this end, stringent regulations were issued concerning permits to move about in the border zone, required

from the visitors. The police and the Frontier Guard treated every stranger coming into those regions with ostentatious suspicion. Even more carefully protected were the eastern and western borders. The latter was for many years - so we were officially told - the line through which "imperialist agents" might try to infiltrate our country, even though East Germany was full of Soviet troops and, later on, a "fraternal" German Democratic Republic was established there. The hysterical atmosphere of officially recognized danger was also created along the beaches of Poland's 500-kilometre coast.. The sand was regularly ploughed so as to make it difficult for potential saboteurs to conceal their tracks. There were whispers about bold escapes by sea to Sweden. The Danish island of Bornholm was the destination picked by two Polish airforce pilots, Jarecki and Jazwinski, who escaped there aboard their fighter planes. As for the eastern border, it was not clear what it was that the official propaganda feared, but it was the most closely guarded of Poland's borders - mainly by Soviet soldiers and their alarm systems.

The initially timid political thaw after Stalin's death in the spring of 1953 brought a certain intensification of foreign contacts of the Poles. Apart from athletes with the official stamp of approval, also selected representatives of other spheres of public life began to get an infrequent chance to make group visits abroad under "exchange" schemes. One needed to find a "fraternal" institution of an athletic, academic or professional character, which would be willing to send an invitation for a group of Poles (specifying their names) and officially undertake to cover the costs of their stay. In theory, the "fraternal" institution on the Polish side would have similar responsibilities. Preparations took months and years of laborious exchange of letters. On both sides of the border, appropriate party and security structures would spend a long time pondering the question whether permission to organize this kind of exchange should be granted and if so, to whom. The official name given to this kind of contacts was usually "fraternal exchange of experience". Drawing up the programme of a visit dragged on interminably. Usually, it was nearly as pompous and artificial as in the case of the famous "friendship trains" and mutual visits of kolkhoz workers and Stakhanovites.

There evolved a special category of contacts in the form of conferences organized for academics from the "Socialist Block", representing various disciplines. They took place in the capital cities or in health resorts and were usually attended by one and the same group of people who enjoyed in their home countries a political monopoly on representation of their academic milieus in contacts with "fraternal scholars", and in particular, with the "Soviet comrades". As a rule, academics from the capital cities were given priority when it came to the selection of participants, regardless of their actual qualifications. Official approval was usually needed for the "cooperation" between institutions, research centres or schools, located in the capital city, with their "mirror-image" counterparts abroad, also based in the capitals. In exchange programmes and conferences of this type, preference was typically given to technical disciplines and institutions concerned with propaganda and ideology. Characteristically, for years on end the system discriminated against universities - even ones with a long tradition of excellence - in favour of institutes affiliated with the

academies of sciences in the respective countries. It was, namely, assumed that the latter should have the monopoly on scientific and research cooperation with the outside world. As the years went by, there began to form within particular disciplines a category of scholars consisting of professional participants in international conferences. These were sometimes people of questionable morals and unquestionable skills in getting their names entered into participant lists. Regrettably, many of them were directors - but in reality often little more than figureheads - of various academic institutions whose activity in some cases boiled down to mass production of reports. Members of that group had known one another for years. They exhibited an increasing tendency to treat their academic meetings solely as social events, with all expenses paid. At any rate, their supposed consultations and joint planning of scientific cooperation did not usually make much sense anyway. The Soviet partners arbitrarily decided about research programmes and schedules, from which they would often back away later on. This phenomenon was especially marked in the humanities.

In the sphere of popular consciousness, it was not until the mid-1950s that the first trips to the Slovak Tatras, still restricted to the elites, began to play some cognitive role. After the period of forced isolation, the Slovaks and the Poles knew next to nothing about each other. For the Polish tourist, the sub-Tatran holiday resorts between Tatranska Kotlina and Štrbske Pleso appeared to be an oasis of prosperity and civilization. The nearby towns of Poprad and Liptovský Mikuláš, to say nothing of Kežmarok, were out of bounds, due to stringent police regulations. Slovak groups explored Zakopane, which they perceived as a bustling metropolist. These were still very modest beginnings.

In the first half of 1956, the number of tourists traveling to communist countries slowly began to grow. Even so, our southern neighbours, that is, Slovaks, Czechs, Hungarians, Bulgarians and Rumanians were still a long way off. Despite the official reconciliation between the Kremlin and Belgrade, Yugoslavia remained terra incognita for Poles, for political and economic reasons alike: Josip Broz - Tito's land lay in the magical "dollar zone".

In spite of the new situation after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Polish October, the authorities were not going to renounce control of the citizens' foreign travel. Apart from the tedious procedure of issuing passports, governed by secret regulations, another seemingly insurmountable obstacle was the non-convertibility of the zloty. The amount of foreign currency (even that of a neighbouring, communist state) that one could purchase from a bank on the basis of a special permit was so small that it became vital to find a partner abroad who would invite one on a reciprocal basis. Permits for currency purchase (called, misleadingly, "allowances") were granted, obviously, first of all to people going abroad on business and to participants in group tours organized by a handful of travel agencies.

Nevertheless the tourist convention signed with Czechoslovakia in 1956, and group holidays on Lake Balaton, in Mamaia and in Varna, made available in the same year - theoretically - to the general public, allowed Polish society to gain some

knowledge of our southern neighbours. In spite of the official prohibition, more and more tourist buses from the sub-Tatran region of Slovakia would reach Cracow. Our tourists would likewise venture with an increasing confidence into the officially forbidden zone between the High and the Low Tatras. This was particularly the case with bus tours organized by enterprises for their employees, which should move about faster and more easily, without arousing the suspicion of the police.

The mental image left by this kind of exploration had a rather remote connection with reality. I am not in a position to assess the impressions of Slovaks and Czechs visiting Poland, or the way out citizens were perceived by the population of the sub-Tatran regions of Slovakia. Speaking about the Poles, however, their prevailing stereotype of Czechoslovakia was shaped by the provincial, borderland areas of that country, with numerous holiday resorts and infrequent, small towns. We began to see the Czech and the Slovak as a good-natured, provincial type, dressed with an unsophisticated simplicity, leading a comfortable, if unreflecting and conformist existence, ready to buy Polish spirits and sausage. The small, old towns of the Slovak Spiš with their poorly stocked, state-owned shops seemed to us a shopping El Dorado in comparison with Poland, afflicted with permanent shortages under Gomulka's rule. We were impressed by the attractive clothes, footwear, or sporting goods. Citrus fruit, available in the "Potraviny" shops, was a sight we were not accustomed to. We could not help admiring the tactful ways of the shop assistants and the higher standards of culture in everyday life. The red stars placed obtrusively on public buildings or even, occasionally, church towers, were certainly a bit irritating. But then, watching historic buildings or picturesque landscapes was not the principal objective for most of the Polish visitors to the zone opened up by the tourist convention. No sooner had the trans-border contacts started than the visitors began to use this opportunity to obtain hard-to-get commodities. Initially, it was for their own needs; later on - for mercantile purposes as well. Visitors coming to Poland from the south showed precisely the same type of attitude.

Both the social composition of visitors from Czechoslovakia and the cultural characteristics of the accessible "tourist - convention" areas contributed to the distorted image of the two neighbours of ours. Both Prague and Bratislava were too far away for an average Polish visitor to avoid misconceptions. The dominant stereotypes were built on contacts with the borderland region, provincial and marginal in character. As a matter of fact, many people did not realize the ethnic specificity of our southern neighbours. Confusing Czechs and Slovaks was commonplace: people would travel to the "Czech Tatras"! "The Czechs are keen on Polish women," boasted an office girl from Myslowice on her return from Smokovec.

The Soviet intervention in Hungary boosted the popularity of the Magyars in Polish society, triggering many symptoms of solidarity. Memories of General Bem and the related romantic tradition in Polish literature instantly came back, and the Poles recollected the hospitality and kindness of the Hungarians during World War II. Gradually, however, the tragedy of the Hungarian uprising gave way in the popular thinking to the images of holiday resorts on Lake Balaton and the department stores of

Budapest, offering a fabulous- in comparison with the Polish shops - selection of goods. It was not the "Golden Prague", but the late-19th-century Hungarian capital that enchanted the Poles, despite the red stars displayed everywhere. It offered an appearance of the old-style European civilization, so well remembered from fathers' and grandfathers' tales. "Oh, a New Year's Eve in Budapest, at last!" - exclaimed many years later the poet and writer Agnieszka Osiecka, satirizing the Poles seeking cheap fun on a trip abroad, licensed by the authorities. In Hungary, getting to know a foreign country ceased to be the principal attraction for Polish tourists even faster than in the case of Czechoslovakia, giving way to greedy shopping. Talk about the traditional Polish-Hungarian friendship began to mix with rather unpleasant experiences from direct contacts of Polish visitors with Hungarian society. It turned out that "we were not wanted there". Reportedly, the shrewd Hungarians were glad to see tourists in their country - but ones coming from Germany. A poor Polish tourist - so we heard - reluctant to part with every single forint, was not welcome. As the volume of mutual contacts increased, the social and professional composition of the visitors from both countries changed rapidly. Gradually, the Hungarian currency became hard to obtain from the bank for zlotys. Foreign exchange was not a problem, however, for various marginal groups, constantly increasing numbers, which engaged in informal trade between Poland and Hungary. In the early 1960s, the big cities of southern Poland became the target of a veritable invasion of Hungarian citizens, mostly of Gypsy origin. They offered for sale clothes and delicatessen foods in market places and railway stations. The image of a heroic Hungarian fighter, combating AVO secret policemen and bleeding to death in the streets of Budapest was gradually replaced with the familiar figure of an arrogant, brown-faced street vendor, laden with bags, and his overweight lady, cigarette in her mouth, offering armfuls of women's underclothes in a railway-station passage. There are reasons to believe that an equally unflattering stereotype of a Pole stalking Rakoczi Street was being formed in Hungary at the very same time. Providing the visitors with poor-class services was a profitable business in both countries. "Nicht alkohol! Nicht sex!" Polish merchant-tourists heard from a retired lady who had converted her flat into an illegal lodging house in the 1970s. The furnishings consisted of foam-rubber mattresses placed on the floor, with bedclothes that had not been changed for weeks, refreshed by the parsimonious landlady by means of sprinkling with deodorant.

The "Roman riviera" and "Bulgarian Riviera" were also becoming a holiday area accessible to travellers from Poland. At least till the end of the 1950s, most people got there with organized groups. Allowing the citizens to travel individually, even to countries of the carefully cordoned-off communist block, was a decision the authorities in Poland needed a long time to take. Visitors from the two Balkan countries were rare in Poland in those years and so there were no popular stereotypes associated with them. Their capital cities did not have the appeal of great metropolises. The small and not very interesting Sofia was a long way off from the sea, and Bucharest was also situated off the tourist routes leading to the place of Ovid's exile. The Balkan stereotypes did include, on the other hand, certain goods considered to be the local speciality: first of

all Bulgarian fur coats, slippers, gloves, folk-style vests, and, later on, the greatest hit of the merchant-tourist trips: synthetic karakul furs, so-called astrakhan, sold by the metre. One should add to these local souvenir production, like gaudy "carpet-type" handbags, earthenware, or brownish caps fashioned cleverly out of bracket fungus.

In the post-October-'56 period, the eastern border remained securely closed. Only occasionally did a group come from that direction: men in old-fashioned suits and, in winter, square-shaped caps with earflaps, who obeyed their chaperones and guides silently and humbly, followed the rigid programme to the dot and went back home without asking any questions. Their behaviour and, in a sense, appearance, did not differ much from those of even more infrequent groups from China, Mongolia or North Korea, steered from one historical site to another like clockwork toys. They did not inspire sympathy of the passers-by. Rather, they were stared at like some curious creatures. The newspapers and magazines of those times did not tell the readers much about those far-away societies: one could only find banal reports about the slant-eyed comrades who, despite the machinations of imperialists, went on building socialism - like ourselves. And we were certainly not moved to feel sympathy for the Communist dominated Asian nations by the noisy official propaganda from the early 1950s, based on the slogan "Hands off Korea!". Similarly, in the late 1940s, we were not impressed by the exploits of the Communist army of General Markos in Greece, defeated in the Grammos massif. Incidentally, the children from Greek Macedonia and later on from North Korea who were given shelter in Poland were kept in isolation. Society had no other opportunity to show compassion for the little victims than at official party rallies.

Changes in the wake of October '56 brought the first attempts at press reports from the USSR departing from the stereotyped view of the inhabitant of the Soviet Union and his daily life. For example, it had been a rule before that ethnic accents should be avoided in the texts. Thus it was possible to write about the Russians, but in many reports from the western part of the Soviet Union no mention was made about the Ukrainians or Byelorussians. No matter whether the Polish reporter was visiting Lithuania or Bashkiria, his interviewee was invariably a "Soviet citizen", also known under the more familiar name of "Soviet man". Any person who knows older Russian literature or short stories by our writers deported to Siberia might perceive a strange affinity between the latter term and the Tsarist Russian "earnest, Russian, Orthodox man", synonymous with an individual absolutely obedient to the Emperor. In one newspaper story I have even found a curious neologism *Radzianie*<sup>1</sup>. It was used to denote inhabitants of the Ukrainian oblast of Khmel'nitskiy! Only on rare occasions, when writing about traditionally exotic regions of the empire, was the journalist allowed to play on the theme of the native folklore of 100-year-old Caucasian highlanders or the peculiar culinary habits of kolkhoz workers with whom he had feasted in the Kirghizian steppe. In general, however, native cultures - "national in

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<sup>1</sup> "The Soviets" - a nominal form analogous to *Rosjanie* ("the Russians"), derived from the adjective *radziecki* ("Soviet").

form", although "socialist in substance" - were brought to the fore only in the coverage of performances given by folk ensembles, who danced with great precision, waving sabres or kerchiefs.

Now at last something more genuine was attempted in reports from the Baltic republics, sometimes even with subtle grotesque and critical undertones. At any rate, the banal truth was highlighted that the inhabitants of Tallinn comprise Estonians, and those of Riga, mainly Latvians, contrary to what might be expected. As travel agencies and trade unions began to organize group holidays for lovers of the "Soviet Black-Sea Riviera", we learned about crowds of Soviet holiday makers strolling through the streets of Sochi and Pitsunda in pyjamas and straw hats. All this, however, soon met with protests, inspired by certain departments of Big Brother's embassy. The careless journalists were reprimanded for their haughty attitudes. "What's that? Europeans inspecting the East?" asked with indignation the editor of one of Cracow's literary weeklies. Soon reports from Moscow were proliferating, in which the lavish design of the underground stations was praised. Everyone admired the distribution of delicious ice-cream, sold in Moscow streets even (!) in biting winter frost. Journalists took delight in the impeccable cleanliness of the pavements and the amazing purity of the metropolitan air. They wrote about the common habit of reading books and newspapers, which allowed thousands of Soviet citizens a nice and useful way of passing the time spent on queuing or commuting to work. At one point we read in several Polish newspapers a once that the Soviet man might not follow the fashion as slavishly as a Pole did, but you would not find in Moscow a single individual wearing frayed trousers, either. The frayed trousers must have been mentioned at some very important briefing for journalists at the central level.

Regardless of the official image of the Soviet hero, controlling the wildest freaks of sub-Arctic nature, in the genre of newspaper report - supposedly personal and subjective - there appeared a new figure, taken directly from sentimental stories á la Konstantin Paustovskiy. The good-natured Soviet person, untouched by the perfidious civilization of the rest of the world, extended warm welcome to every visitor, sharing with him all that he possessed. In Russia, of all places, a stranger should feel secure like at home. For one brief moment, the reader of such touching stories should forget about the dogmatic and bloody style of operation of Feliks Edmundovich Dzierzhinski and his successors, who "tempered steel" and exposed the plots of foreign spies and native "class enemies". In the cosy warmth of the samovar, the Polish reader would drift off into daydreaming, together with the Polish writer.

Meanwhile, both the Polish authorities and the citizens had got accustomed to the gradual relaxation of foreign travel regulations, for groups as well as individuals. A true liberalization, however, was out of the question. The system of several different categories of passports, allowing the bearer to visit particular socialist countries, the so-called "passport interests" attached to personal ID cards, and the newly emerging opportunities to travel to the enticing and hitherto anathematized "capitalist countries" would merit a separate discussion as an interesting cultural phenomenon. The tourist convention with Czechoslovakia was extended and now it comprised also enclaves in



the Sudetes and in the Beskid Niski Mountains. Further liberalization was supposedly torpedoed by the government in Prague. Because of the exorbitant rate of exchange of the dollar and regulations that made it particularly difficult to exchange zlotys into hard currency, it was at first only the richest who took advantage of the new opportunities to visit Yugoslavia - and also those who had good connections with the authorities. Rumours were circulating that the government and party elites had moved their exclusive holiday centres from Varna to Dubrovnik. Surely an Adriatic tan was classier than the Black-Sea variety!

In the 1960s and 1970s the Vistula-Dalmatia route became the domain of a specific group of people who wished to pass for tourists, while engaging in informal trade. Yugoslav shops tempted the visitor with imported western goods, even those their prices contrasted with those in Budapest or Varna. On the other hand, Poland became the target of a real invasion of visitors from Yugoslavia, who were attracted by the extremely high exchange rate of the dollar in our country. Shopping in Poland (for instance, in jewellery shops) provided sufficient inducement to undertake the long trip by car or by train to an otherwise not very attractive (in terms of climate) country in the north. It must be admitted that the swarms of those Mediterranean dandies, behaving in a somewhat provocative way, irritated us at times, especially when they displayed their grandiose manners of self-styled men of the world from the Dalmatian demimonde (who occasionally came into contact with our own underworld). It was particularly exasperating to see them elbowing their way through our shops, ever emptier towards the end of Gierek's years, making supercilious remarks in a language that was not totally incomprehensible to us. Gone were the times when we admired the brave citizen's of Marshal Tito's country, who had defied Moscow and succeeded.

The dislike of foreigners, coming to Poland in ever increasing numbers from other countries of the Communist block - and bringing along no hard currency! - was partly inspired and reinforced by the unofficial, whispered propaganda spread by the authorities. For many years the citizens were given to understand that the frequent shortages of goods were a result of mass-scale purchases by foreigners. In our shops and department stores, the "Yugos" contended for the scarce goods with Hungarian smugglers and noisy Slovaks arriving by the busload. Their shopping habits supposedly wrecked the market and were the reason of our economic hardships, including the negative balance of trade with other countries of the "Block". To be sure, similar opinions were circulated abroad about the Poles, who likewise travelled more and more. Bitter hostility towards "foreigners living at our expense" was also stirred up in the Soviet Union. Millions of pauperized citizens of that country believed that that was the true cause of their misfortune, even after the breakup of the Soviet empire. But back in the 1960s and 1970s, it was possible to buy some attractive merchandise in that country, too. Participants of bus tours brought back to Poland cameras, radios, TV's or household appliances - of mediocre quality, but cheap and easy to get. The first Soviet Radios had appeared in Poland even earlier, in the mid-1950s: strange chalice-shaped things with golden ornaments. The slightly exotic glamour of those goods was enhanced by the tales told by the people who had bought them in the department stores

of Moscow, Leningrad or Kiev. They had to ingratiate themselves with the ostentatiously rude shop assistants, who were obviously waiting for bribes. In all probability, a significant part of the informally imported goods reached Poland through the Soviet garrisons stationed in Poland. It was not until they were about to leave our country that we learned about the extent of informal contacts between the soldiers of officers with red stars on their caps, and Poles living in the vicinity of their barracks. However, it was just a harbinger of the real explosion of smuggling and bazaar trade along our eastern border that was to begin in the 1990s.

Another ever-growing category that accounted for a considerable proportion of informal imports to Poland from across the eastern and southern border comprised Polish workers, engaged in projects contracted abroad by Polish enterprises. Their special status entitled them to customs exemptions, and importation of hard-to-get commodities to Poland was by far more profitable than bringing back cash. Most of them were young people from the provinces. For decades, they played a significant role in the economy of their native villages or towns. The perception of their presence by the host societies - in Ukraine, Russia, Bohemia, Slovakia, Hungary or Germany - would yet have to be studied. The same can be said about the experiences and memories of our workers from the foreign construction sites. I have reasons to suspect that they did not have the best opinion of the inhabitants of the countries in which they temporarily worked. The other side, it would appear, reciprocated their feelings, complaining, as was customary, about the greedy Poles depleting the meagre stock of goods in shops.

In the early 1970s, the authorities decided to open the Polish-GDR border in the west. By way of experiment, the passport formalities were reduced to a minimum during the first months, while the new currency exchange regulations permitted the conversion of zlotys into east marks in unprecedented amount. In line with a joke popular in those years about the four legendary brothers (the three Slav brothers, Lech, Czech and Rus were now joined by "Enerdus", that is NRD-dweller (NRD stood in Polish for GDR), urgent steps were taken to evoke in collective consciousness a positive image of a friendly East German who despised the chauvinist past, in contrast to the western revisionist. Like the tourist-convention zones in Czechoslovakia before, now East Germany - near, tidier than Poland, and subsidized by the other communist countries - impressed the visitor with its infrastructure, social discipline and prosperity. The heavily bombed and not-so-beautifully rebuilt Dresden, Leipzig and East Berlin became a substitute for the West, which, on top of everything, offered more attractively priced goods. The wave of Polish visitors that engulfed the German Democratic Republic consisted mainly of inhabitants of villages and provincial towns from western parts of our country, thirsting for material goods which were hard to get in Gierek's Poland. Visitors of this type probably continued to dominate also in the years to follow. There were no tourist areas in the GDR sufficiently attractive to entice Polish tourists on a massive scale. One possible exception was the coastal holiday resorts across the border from Szczecin and Swinoujście. Visits of East Germans to Poland followed quite different patterns. Cut off from the West for a whole generation, having to no access

to high mountains and a limited choice of holiday places at their own seaside, they started to visit Poland on a massive scale, coming to the Baltic coast and the lake districts in summer and to Zakopane all year round. On their way, they visited Poland's big cities, like Wrocław and, first of all, Cracow. They had thus become in a way a fixed part of the tourist landscape in many parts of Poland - quiet, well-behaved, disciplined. We also perceived them as affluent: their Trabants and Wartburgs clogged the undersized car parks of the Hel Peninsula. Within a couple of years after the opening of the boarder many of them established friendly relations with the Kaszub fishermen. Whole families would come to the beach and practice all kinds of sports and games in an admirably systematic fashion. Incidentally, it was East German holiday makers who brought naturism into that part of the Polish seaside. In the mountains and big cities alike, they always carried their guide books, maps, cameras and notebooks. No unfortunate incident involving those peaceful in those years and amiable in their own way neighbours of ours has come to my knowledge. In a well-known cartoon by Andrzej Mleczko, depicting the Main Market Square in Cracow, we see a couple strolling along the Cloth Hall, and a caption which says: "Wanda with a GDR tourist" (Wanda was the legendary princess who refused to marry a German knight). The few East German academics who came to Poland enjoyed the opportunity to use specialized literature brought from the West by their Polish colleagues; it had been inaccessible in their country for many years.

The authorities soon made attempts to take under control the boom in informal trade with the GDR, imposing stricter limits on currency exchange. Those measures were of little avail. The steady flow of all kinds of footwear, children's clothes, luxury foods and spirits, and ORWO films for colour slides, continued. The official administrative restrictions clearly remained a dead letter, since the customs authorities on both sides of the border remained passive. In the 1980s, trade in imitation denim clothes, sunglasses made by private manufacturers and the like products went on openly in the streets of Leipzig and other cities. The Polish visitors had come into contact with an unofficial network of intermediaries. Before Christmas, scores of Polish seasonal workers would bring into the GDR plastic Christmas trees and cartons of Christmas ornaments and coloured wine glasses of imitation crystal. Reportedly, the German authorities preferred to turn a blind eye on that contraband. Any restrictions would have further increased public discontent about Honecker's rule. Attitudes towards the Poles, or, for that matter, also the Czechs and Hungarians, who likewise visited the GDR for commercial, rather than tourist, purposes, were nevertheless positive. Only occasionally, people queuing at the delicatessen would protest when a foreign visitor pushed his way too energetically. It is small wonder then that the wave of xenophobic incidents in East Germany at the beginning of the 1990s came at first as a sharp shock to the public opinion in Poland. The case of the GDR may have been the first instance when communist propaganda had succeeded in instilling in the citizens the idealized image of a noble and cultured neighbour.

The image of our next-door neighbours, citizens of "fraternal" (in terms of ideology and system) countries, was presented to the Poles by official propaganda through at least two different channels: official and unofficial. The former intended to make the Poles feel ashamed and discipline them through the stereotypes it promulgated. Materials from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania, the GDR, or, first and foremost, the Soviet Union, were meant to contrast the supposedly overpoliticized, hypercritical, always complaining Poles with societies of the neighbouring states, living in perfect harmony with the authorities. They were decidedly harder-working, more systematic and honest, and first of all - ideologically correct. All this, we were told, earned the socialism-building societies their higher living standards. Consequently, coverage of the daily life of our neighbour states by the media carefully avoided any darker tones. If some criticism did appear, it had to be similar to the complaints about those of our domestic problems which the media were authorized to mention - such as red tape or imperfect distribution of goods, that is, problems resulting from the "dynamic growth and social development". Propaganda of this kind also stigmatized the supposedly typically Polish propensity for illegal "tourist" trade and violations of the currency regulations. Similar transgressions on the part of visitors coming to Poland from "fraternal" countries passed unnoticed for many years. The infrequent critical remarks were reserved for the now always ideologically orthodox Yugoslavia. Thus it sometimes seemed a proper thing to do to pass some sarcastic remarks about Yugoslav *Gastarbeiter* getting unduly rich in West Germany and about their Balkan chutzpah.

For a brief moment in Spring 1968, the image of a sober, sensible, plebeian and conformist Czech presented in our newspapers gave way to that of an irresponsible bohemian from the Prague intelligentsia, whose recklessness nearly brought him, together with the entire "Socialist Block", to the brink of disaster. Newsreels in Poland showed our soldiers, fulfilling their "internationalist duty" across the southern border, to the accompaniment of military songs. Soon, however, we were presented again with the image of a disciplined, "normalized" Czech or Slovak, who had given up the dangerous game he was playing. It seemed all the more easy since Gustav Husak's Czechoslovakia shut the door on Poland in panic, during martial law in Poland television ran with great relish Czechoslovak serials, showing the idyllic life of our neighbours from across the Carpathians and Sudetes, connoisseurs of wine and fine foods. The most outstanding gems of that genre included "Woman behind the Counter" - the story of a shop assistant from a Prague delicatessen - or "A House of Jay Hill". The message of the latter production boiled down to a simple conclusion: there is no place like (socialist) home.

The other, unofficial and supposedly spontaneous trend in propaganda about our neighbours consisted of subtle allusions, pretended information leaks, and rumours. They were meant to awaken distrust of the neighbours, who, so we heard, had already formed an unfavourable opinion about the Poles as economic partners. Reportedly, they also ridiculed more and more openly our civilizational backwardness. It was quite clear that they had egoistically reoriented their economies towards the West as a source

of hard currency. Certain conformist circles in Poland, entrusted with the task of infiltrating the Polish intelligentsia, expressed for many years the opinion that it was only the alliance with the powerful Moscow that protected us from aggression and greed of not only the West German revanchists, but also the hostile nations surrounding us on all sides - Czechs, Slovaks, "GDR-ians", Ukrainians, Lithuanians. Were it not for the Warsaw Pact, something terrible would have happened to all of us. ...It can be assumed that the same paranoid model was likewise applied in other countries of the communist block. Characteristically, the great arbitrator in dangerous conflicts, who protected us against "things taking a turn for the worse", was invariably the Kremlin. Media coverage of the joint exercises of Warsaw Pact troops exulted over the warm, spontaneous friendship of the boys in uniforms - those in the Vyazma and Ryazan fashion - with their Polish comrades. At the same time their tanks roared across the Mecklenburg lowlands, the long barrels of their guns pointed towards the West.

Meanwhile, decades passed and the "Block of Peace" underwent progressive, all-round erosion. Its member states more and more openly sought to do business with the West, for hard cash. As a result, their mutual economic contacts gradually lapsed into atrophy. In order to salvage their miserable "prosperity" and precarious stabilization, the "fraternal" countries unceremoniously began to dissociate themselves from their neighbours. propagandists became busy again, trying to evoke nationalist frustration. And so in the final years of Kádár's "goulash socialism", anti-Polish jokes and opinions spread in Hungary at an amazing rate. The lazy Poles queued for meat, as they were permanently on strike instead of working and did not want collective farming. "All you know how to do is strike and go for pilgrimages," gibed an East German official visiting Poland during the days of martial law. The Poles can afford to strike and play at "Solidarity" because imperialists from the West "send them parcels with Dutch cheese," trumpeted the Soviet propaganda. No wonder we have shortages of potatoes in shops, if we have to feed the Polish do-nothings, Bulgarian press persuaded the readers at a time when the days of Zhivkov's regime were already numbered.

The forms of human contacts that had evolved over the years, first of all holiday tours and, more generally, passenger traffic between the particular countries, underwent progressive degeneration. The state banks, which had always created barriers to currency exchange, now made it virtually impossible to obtain currency by legal means. International trains were besieged by bazaar traders. Buying ticket for an international connection required a real battle with the corrupt bureaucracy. A normal citizen who wished to take a trip or a holiday abroad, or even go to a neighbouring country on business, might not have been able to reserve a seat on the train or obtain the currency exchange allowance on time. Having finally boarded the overcrowded train, he would often be harassed by corrupt customs officials of various nationalities, trying to extort a bribe under one pretext or another. In the final years of communist rule in Central-Eastern Europe, travellers on international routes consisted for the most part of more and more audacious gangs of racketeers and illegal traders, commuting between the capitals of the "Socialist Block". The normal traveller had been forced out of that short-lived and highly problematic niche of freedom by an individual with the

energy and resilience of a rat. But, of course, the authorities did everything to prevent spontaneous, individual contacts between citizens of neighbouring countries. Particularly great care was taken to isolate the intelligentsia circles. Apparently, the "plebeian" type of contact was considered to be safer and easier to control. As a result, the criminal, underworld element was allowed to gain ground. In all probability, the bodies which policed public life considered this to be the lesser of two evils.

And so we entered the post-Communist era, together with our neighbours, with a heavy burden of mutual prejudice, personal frustration, and psychological deviation. The Poles, in addition, harboured excessive and unrealistic expectations that once the walls and barriers are torn down, we should easily find a way to communicate. But the decades of forced isolation had made us strangers. The authorities had succeeded in eradicating spontaneous, individual contacts between the member societies, making them vulnerable even to totally irrational gossip. Thus as late as in the early 1990s, some journalists from the disintegrating Czecho-Slovakia could claim with impunity that the shortages of salt and matches in the borderland towns to the south of the Carpathians were caused by Polish intruders. In the autumn of 1994, we heard from a group of Budapest journalist visiting Cracow that many young Hungarians believed Poland to be a country whose starving inhabitants queued for hours to buy meat and sausage.

The opening up of the borders did not signify the end of the anarchic, privately organized international trade, combined with smuggling. Just the opposite, it thrives in the emerging market economy, adjusting itself to the market situation. More and more ethnic groups become engaged in this kind of business, which is getting increasingly criminal and brutal. The economic underdevelopment of our part of the continent combines with the cultural backwardness of its multi-million communities, subjected for decades to police control, in an eruption of barbarity and organized crime. Central-Eastern Europe has entered a new phase of interethnic relations with the attendant stereotypes of the "stranger". In the future, those phenomena will probably also become the subject of scientific analysis.

The problem of manipulating the image of the closest neighbours in the Moscow-controlled part of Europe after World War II would merit close inspection both in Poland and in the neighbouring states. One valuable source of information would be provided by careful analysis of post-war newspapers, magazines and the few literary works inspired by the officially authorized contacts with the "socialist world". As has been mentioned before, particularly interesting data could be provided by the Polish workers, technicians and engineers who once worked at the construction sites abroad. It might also be helpful to approach the organizers and guides of the "friendship-train" and "experience-exchange" tours, as well as regular tourist trips. That is, if the persons concerned would decide to talk frankly.

Another problem awaiting exploration is the deliberate escalation of long-standing ethnic animosities, in Poland as well as in the other countries. The Balkan equivalent of the phobia about German revisionism, stirred in our country, was the

revived spectre of Ottoman Turkey. Its function was to keep up the weakening Russophilism of the Bulgarians. The mutual animosity between the Hungarians and the Romanians provided a valuable sociotechnical element, as did the Hungarian frustrations in Slovakia or the memory of the Sudetenland Germans in Bohemia. The instigation of national megalomania in Romania, the sullen resentment of the Bulgarians at the Macedonian border, or the Slavonic chauvinism directed against persons of Turkish origin in the Balkans awaits its investigators.

A truly fascinating subject would be the study of language issues, that is, the forms of communication between representatives of different nationalities in our part of the continent. One should bear in mind that the political circumstances and the philosophy of teaching languages in schools were for many years hardly conducive to the rise of a generation of polyglots.

For 45 years, the stereotypes harboured by the European nations within the Soviet block were subjected to manipulation. Such sociotechnical measures were meant to control social life in its entirety, regardless of the cost. Normal relationships between neighbouring nations degenerated into grotesque forms as a result of the attempts on the part of the authorities to isolate the societies from one another. Simultaneously, however, that unnatural, not to say pathological, situation was also influenced by the realities of everyday life. Their main component was economic underdevelopment coupled with excessive politicization of the system. Thus the vision of reality that had been formed in the minds of the inhabitants of our part of Europe was the joint effect of political and police manipulation, whose efficacy was steadily dwindling. On the other hand, the perception of reality was affected by the spontaneous endeavours of societies, trying to satisfy their needs in spite of the intentions of the authorities.

That intricate complex of socio-cultural phenomena should be seen, to a large extent, as part of modern European history, as contrasted with the present. Nevertheless, it does have consequences that may still be felt for quite some time. At any rate, by gaining an awareness of the historical factors, we shall become better equipped to deal with the legacy of prejudice, tension and persistent stereotypes in our mutual relationships. And, most importantly, this is the way for Europeans to get to know one another and learn about the collective psychosis to which millions of inhabitants of our continent were subjected for many decades.

Translated by Krzysztof Kwasniewicz

## POLJSKI NAJBLIŽI SUSJEDI SLUŽBENI KOMUNISTIČKI STEREOTIPI I PUČKI MITOVI

### Sažetak

U centralnim i istočnoeuropskim zemljama pod Staljinizmom, mogućnost putovanja u inozemstvo bila je smatrana kroz razdoblje komunističke vladavine rijetkom privilegijom dozvoljenom od vlasti. Putovanja u inozemstvo i međunarodni kontakti čak i među najbližim susjedima bili su u područje nedostižnih snova, frustracija, mitova i stereotipa. U početku su smjeli putovati samo atletičari i nekolicina službeno priznatih umjetnika. Nakon Staljinove smrti 1953. godine prvi sramežljivi izravni kontakti uspostavljeni su između grupa znanstvenika i specijalista u smislu "razmjenjivanja profesionalnoga iskustva". Posjete su se, međutim, trebale držati strogo programa, a sudionici su birani na temelju svoje političke vjernosti. Ovakvo se stanje stvari počelo postupno mijenjati nakon što je potpisan sporazum sa Čehoslovačkom prema kojemu su stanovnicima obiju zemalja dozvoljene kraće posjete preko granice. Te su posjete bile ograničene na usko područje na objema stranama planine Tatre. Ti prvi kontakti nakon Drugoga svjetskoga rata rezultirali su iskrivljenim poimanjem o Česima i Slovacima u narodnom shvaćanju. Gubici stvoreni komunističkom ekonomijom u svim zemljama ove regije imala je za posljedicu da je turističkim posjetama pridano značenje bavljenja krijumčarenjem. Ovaj je fenomen uskoro postao znatno primjetan kad je postalo moguće putovati za Mađarsku, posebno u njezin dojmljiv glavni grad Budimpeštu. S vremenom su se počela organizirati grupna putovanja tijekom godišnjih odmora u ljetovališta uz obalu Rumunjske i Bugarske koja su reklamirana kao "Crnomorska rivijera". To je u stvari bio prilično surogatni oblik luksuza. Turističke grupe iz SSSR-a su bez razlika bile sastavljene ili od priprostih radnika iz kolhoza koji su bili zastrašeni, pod stalnom prisмотрom i pažljivo sprečavani u bilo kakvom pokušaju kontakta s Poljacima. Zasigurno se slika sovjetskih gradova i njihovih stanovnika, prikazivana službenom propagandom, znatno razlikovala od uobičajenoga viđenja Poljaka. Uz to sovjetska je propaganda izbjegavala naglašavanje posebnosti kultura kao što su ukrajinska, bjeloruska, litvanska, kirgizijska: njihovi su stanovnici uvijek prikazivani kao sovjetski građani bez konkretne oznake etničke pripadnosti. Nakon što je sovjetski blok normalizirao odnos s nekadašnjom Jugoslavijom i dalmatinska je rivijera postala meta putovanja poljske komunističke elite koja je uživala najviši novčani status. Tek kasnije su i ostale društvene grupe počele slijediti njihov primjer. Turisti iz Jugoslavije su zauzvrat dolazili u Poljsku u sve većem i većem broju. Uglavnom su bili zainteresirani za kupovinu namirnica na veliko, što je bilo unosno radi povoljne razlike u tečaju dolara. U svim komunističkim zemljama javna je propaganda govorila građanima da su nedostaci osnovnih potrepština u trgovinama uzrokovani stalnim kupovanjem stranih turista. Ovo je hranilo uzajamnu netrpeljivost i predrasude. Posebnu ulogu u javnoj propagandi je odigrala DDR, prikazivana kao zemlja "dobrih Nijemaca", za razliku od Zapadne Njemačke koja je prikazivana kao neprijatelj narodima Srednje Europe. Turisti iz Istočne Njemačke su voljeli dolaziti u Poljsku, posebno na more i u planine i bili su poznati po svom primjernom ponašanju.