

# Ethnographic Training in Borderland: Students Fieldwork, Serendipities, and Tight Limits of Polish University System

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*“Anthropology can be practised in many different ways, the science is a pluralistic and historically variable project. We do not have to, or even we should not follow life sciences, as our task is to create local knowledge affecting a very specific constellation of cultural meanings.” (Lubaś 2011:35)*

## Introduction

In the spring of 2009, in late April and May, by the Głębokie lake situated right next to the northern city gates of Szczecin, a group of students departed on their first two-week ethnographic fieldwork training session. Laden with backpacks and with saddlebags strapped to their bikes, they headed off towards the nearby *terra incognita* that for many research seasons - up until the spring of 2011 - was to become their place of scientific exploration for several years of research.

In order to be able to set off from Głębokie lake, the students had spent the whole academic year preparing. They had participated in a series of lectures and tutorials on methodology of ethnographic research, as well as in seminars informally called Ethnographic Laboratories. These were the most important elements of our academic strategy of education aiming to prepare students to practise ethnography outside the university walls. Laboratories as a research teaching class is nothing new in Polish ethnographic academic centres. It occurred for the first time in the programme of ethnographic studies at Warsaw University.<sup>1</sup> In the scheme of the laboratories we created in Szczecin, we tried to combine strategies to com-

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1 This form of work where ‘research is accompanied by an educational experiment involving the inclusion of ethnology students in fieldwork expeditions, prepared for this purpose over the course of a two-year “Ethnological Laboratory”’ is described in detail by Łukasz Smyrski (Smyrski 2005, 9–20).

municate with students by taking inspiration from the Manchester School of Max Gluckman (Barnard 2006: 128-131) and from the style of discussion of Bronisław Malinowski. As Fredrik Barth explained, “in his seminars Malinowski was famous for demanding a *problemstellung* – a concept he claimed was untranslatable into English, but that embraced both the question that was asked and the manner in which it was framed” (Barth 2005: 28). These provocatively raised questions, publicly discussed at the London School of Economics, were the core of Malinowski’s course and were definitely a benchmark for the development of our own propaedeutic key: the key through which we finally created our course’s shape. This model was characteristic only for the laboratory seminars on the emerging Polish-German borderland which we conducted in our Szczecin centre. Unfortunately, its wider implementation proved impossible on account of a lack of personnel and finances for student training – a prosaic feature of the centralised machinery of money allocation within the Polish academic system (the dean knows better what to do with the means available for students’ practical training: this money is needed for faculty expenses, such as pipe-fixing and enlarging employees’ parking areas, for instance).

### **Szczecin ethnology and its direct background: borderland, town, transborder suburbanization**

The Chair of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Szczecin University is a small entity founded in 2006. Since the very beginning, our ambition was to carry out extensive field studies on the resurging Polish-German borderland after EU and Schengen Zone enlargement. Ethnological or anthropological research in this area has not developed in a greater degree in spite of a growing interest stimulated by the animation of economic grass-roots relations and the reactivation of settlements in the neighbouring country, specifically Polish settlement in towns and villages in Germany. It seemed also obvious to us - Warsaw and Poznan dwellers - that the basic and first area for any ethnographic training would be students’ own region of origin. Most of them were raised in the Polish-German borderland with its ‘borderland identity’ and dramatic settlement history; an area with its own cultural heritage, noticeable in the area, but marginalized in public conscience (Ładykowski 2011a, 2011b; Kaczmarek, Ładykowski 2012a, 2012 b).

Among our numerous motivations, the most important is the fact that it is now, at this very moment, that we can witness how a new social space, a multi-ethnic borderland, is being created right outside the western outskirts of Szczecin. This is a phenomenon not occurring in any other part of the German-Polish border. The special characteristic of this phenomenon comes from the size and localization of Szczecin, the only large Polish town situated to the west of the Odra River. Moreover, it occurs in the new socio-economic situation which occurred in the German

province in the immediate vicinity of Szczecin, an area that after German reunification is characterised by a relatively low GDP, a high rate of permanent unemployment and a declining population caused by low birth rate and a large increase in young generation emigration towards much wealthier western Lands and large German cities. German municipalities in the vicinity of Szczecin are among the poorest in the country. At the same time, on the Polish side of the border - despite equally significant socio-economic problems, mainly poverty and unemployment - the prevailing atmosphere of 'neoliberal dynamism'<sup>2</sup> distinguishes the region from East German stagnation.

This area is currently a unique place of the settlement and economic infiltration of the Polish population accompanied by the phenomenon of a growing activity of German citizens on the Polish labour market in Szczecin. Thus, Szczecin is likely to become a transnational labour market playing an important role in relation to the whole area of historic Pomerania not limited to its Polish part. The constant increase in the West Pomeranian agglomeration is the consequence of a rapidly growing status. Szczecin suburban growth is having a direct impact on the changing ethnic structure right behind the western border of the country. Shrinking East German villages and towns accept new Polish residents who resettle from Szczecin into its direct vicinity. Thus the emerging Polish-German borderland (without any historical prototype in the region) has become a transborder suburb. And this may slowly turn it in the future into not just a transborder, but a transnational city.

## Designing the laboratory

While creating our new formula of an ethnographic laboratory, we drew inspiration from our own student experiences gained in our home academic ethnology centres. Łukasz Kaczmarek, during his ethnological studies at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology AMU in Poznań, twice took part in research entitled 'The German stereotype as seen by Polish citizens from the borderland' conducted under the supervision of Jacek Schmidt in the form of practical ethnographic classes in Ośno Lubuskie and Gryfino. Paweł Ładykowski, a Warsaw University alumni, had a two year laboratory course (Smyrski 2005:9-20) supervised by Lech Mróz during research in the Vilnius region of Lithuania and Lauda

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2 'Neoliberalism' is understood here metaphorically, similarly to how this ideology is treated by the 'neoliberal' politicians governing Poland for years who, by referring to 'free-market values', 'democracy' and of course 'solidarity' only when it is convenient for the interests of their political parties, effectively blend 'Friedmanism' and 'Keynesianism' in a nationalistic-populist mixture, while continuing to avoid whenever possible any public consultation with citizens, or turning it into a parody. Therefore, this peculiar 'neoliberalism' we would treat as a manifestation of 'economic axiology' (Kaczmarek 2012) in social perception.

(Czajkowski, Ładykowski 1993: 58-65). Next he led his own student research labs in Latvian Latgale and Estonian Setumaa (Ładykowski 2001). The rich experience gained from student courses on the ethnographic methodology of fieldwork research and the traditions of the two ethnological centres, supplemented by our own experience of research work,<sup>3</sup> enabled us to create foundations for the entirely new course at the Szczecin ethnographic laboratory department.

In the academic year 2008/2009 at the Chair of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, we started a series of classes in the form of a Laboratory. It consisted of purely seminar classes, in other words the Ethnographic Laboratory, in combination with lectures and tutorials in the realm of methodology of ethnographic research. More importantly, all three of these elements were practised in parallel in the almost two week research trips held every semester during the course. We were responsible for the subject matter of the course, and arranged it in such a way that it was then practised and researched by the students. Also the logistics of the whole project and the gaining of financial resources for its implementation from outside the university were also our own responsibility.

We then faced an important task of teaching students how to practise ethnography directly in the research field. The issue is not trivial, as you need to combine many mutually contradictory aspects; there are at least a few hot spots in this topic also.

### **Ethnography in Academia**

One of the fundamental matters that usually become an issue in this kind of projects is a chronic lack of financial resources to carry out fieldwork. The cause of this is a total misunderstanding of the specificity of ethnographic field study by the Polish academic authorities, including Szczecin University. The modern perception of ethnography in Poland does not help either; for over 50 years, it has been perceived as unscientific and not a proper foundation for research, not only by society but, sadly, also by academics. This is because

‘(...) ethnology, which has retained the ethos of long term fieldwork based on a prolonged investigator’s stay in the reality explored by him, was relegated to the role of folklore and could be associated with traditionalism and backwardness, with its typical ethnographic research method becoming associated with

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3 Łukasz Kaczmarek specialises in political anthropology and ethnic studies. He has conducted research on plural society and identity constructing in Fiji (2000-2005, Kaczmarek 2008), and research dedicated to postcolonial society power relations and social mobility in Jamaica (2009-2012).

Paweł Ładykowski, in addition to researching the Polish-German borderland which is the base for his habilitation work, for many years has been specialising in the anthropology of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and the subjects of former USSR countries.

the pure monographic description of a village, 'counting the rails in the fence' and writing about cultural relics and superstitions, in other words about problems having very little in common with the present and therefore that are not really important.' (Straczuk 2011: 264)

What has been omitted and ignored is what has long ago changed in '(...) the basic paradigm of the discipline, which was based on encountering cultural foreignness and building (not always equal) relations "us - them". Anthropologists have embarked into areas that used to be only explored by sociologists (in Poland - author's note), and this blurring of formerly existing differences has started debates on 'sociological' issues such as: state, politics, authority, bureaucracy' (Straczuk 2011: 262). The value of running research in the form of an ethnographic student-workshop is not appreciated by the academics, causing it to be perceived as secondary and of very little value in comparison to the rich array of sociological research methods dominated by surveys.<sup>4</sup> In ethnography, on the other hand, this is considered the worst possible tool. In this discipline, 'field research experience is the essence of anthropological work: there is no anthropology without empirical knowledge since all theoretical conditions come from an ethnographic encounter with a man who is granted the right to think and construct his world in a different manner than we do' (Straczuk 2011: 266).

In ethnographic practice a researcher faces his interlocutor directly. Not only that, but also, as Justyna Straczuk notices:

'in ethnographic encounters, the relation between an investigator and his respondents is reversed: an investigator is not an expert who knows better and sees more, because from the "scientific" perspective the one who investigates 'from the point of view of the absolute' (Bourdieu, Wacquant 2001) is transformed into a figure as 'naive as a child in dense darkness', left at the mercy and grace of people encountered on the way, asking the dumbest questions possible, exposing themselves to misunderstandings and awkwardness' (Straczuk 2011: 268-269).

4 The return of sociology to the scientific and academic world after 1956 in Poland was evidenced by a great enthusiasm for quantitative methods, which carried the positivist promises of a modern, objective and reliable research method. As Antoni Sulek pointed out, the 'surveying' of sociology had an impact on the nature of the discipline not only on a methodological level, but also an epistemological one. Survey was a 'comfort that did not require the investigator (as the field researcher) to personally contact a sometimes embarrassing or burdensome reality - a sociologist could remain at his desk, while at the same time interviewers were travelling to different parts of the world' (Sulek 1990: 9-10 as cited in Straczuk 2011: 263). Since then, research questions have actually been adjusted to methodology, and therefore the issues investigated have tended to become those that could be explored by survey, which is mostly human responses to standardised questions formulated by the sociologist. In this way most often, instead of investigating reality, it is the researcher's vision of it that was tested' (Sulek 1990: 15 as cited in Straczuk 2011: 263-264).

## **Time and its significance in ethnographic fieldwork**

Another extremely important issue that affects students' fieldwork and therefore its quality is the limits of time that can be dedicated to this activity. Formally, degree programmes provide research fieldwork only to a very limited extent. Fieldwork is expensive and therefore university authorities carefully monitor that its duration does not exceed 4 weeks, the minimum educational standard as defined by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. On many occasions, when in vain we tried to get funding for our students' practical classes, we were suggested to give up the idea of fieldwork outside the city and to work around the law through fulfilling the formal education requirements by organising fieldwork locally, that is in Szczecin. The authorities then claimed that they would not need to finance these practical classes, since it was enough simply to pay their tutors. Because of such an approach, research practices in various and frequent cases become more of a tourist trip, in substantial part paid for by the students themselves, during which they can only get to know some local differences/cultural attractions and are not able to try to conduct proper ethnographic research.

Although we were limited by the same time restrictions, we tried to create a multi-sited research project. We wanted to teach students not only the techniques of doing research, but also those necessary for constructing an entire project and create the ability to conceptualise research questions. We were aware that this first experience in creating a research project can become a point of reference or have far-reaching instructive value for students. Therefore, the students were 'constantly' involved in the issues associated with the project and not just in the 'hot' period during the research travels. Fieldwork and the issues it involves were discussed in a number of classes, with debates concerning both the methodology and theory of research, as well as the issues that stemmed directly from their personal experience of fieldwork.

## **Our first moment of serendipity<sup>5</sup>**

During the preparations for the first departure the proposed discussion issues were quite universal, of the kind one can always debate and in addition be sure they should cause a lively reaction from students. The localisation of our academ-

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5 "Serendipity means making a discovery by accident or the ability to make happy and unexpected discoveries by accident. The author of this term is British writer, Horace Walpole (1754). The construction of this neologism was based on a story described in an old Persian tale 'The Three Princes of Serendip', in which the princes were permanently making discoveries which they had not sought. Serendip is an old name for the island Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) derived from the Sanskrit «Sihaladvipa», the Lion Island." The term "Serendipity" in: Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, Sixteenth Edition, revised to Adrian room, HarprInformation, 2000; see also Merton, Barber, 2004: 1-2 and Shapin, 2004)." (Konecki 2005:27).

ic unit was helpful in the selection of the topics presented for discussion. Szczecin is a city that only from 1945 by dint of a decision of the Potsdam Conference became Polish (Ładykowski 2011: 173). We only discovered the importance of the consequences of this fact while discussing issues in the labs with students, the majority of whom originated from Szczecin and the surrounding areas, therefore - as opposed to us, from our own areas of interest - from the borderland. The purely accidental raising of the issue of contemporary Polish - German relations and a preliminary analysis of the evolution of the present day identity of Szczecin residents caused extremely different and emotional reactions from students. These ranged from declaring clear negativity towards their neighbour, to its culture and language, through a total indifference to their home town (Szczecin), to expressing a desire to leave the city as soon as possible and settle down in other urban agglomerations in Poland. A very few exceptions were students who presented an open attitude towards neighbouring cultures, especially German, and showed interest and some knowledge of their own city and region. In many cases, these opinions were not expected by us to be those of anthropology students who had consciously chosen their field of study and passed courses inculcating them in the assumptions of a discipline that seems to be imbued with cultural relativism. In addition, through these discussions we learned more about Poland and the young Polish generation, since we both come from cities where "local patriotism" is widespread, often in an insufficiently critical way.

In the course of the debates conducted by us, we managed to unveil some of the reasons that could cause such declarations on the part of future ethnographers from Szczecin. One of the several important causes of the status quo occurring in Szczecin appears to be a well entrenched legacy of the historical narration that dominated in communist Poland (Ładykowski 2011a). Its philosophy was based on two pillars. First of all, it was aimed at maintaining a continuous reluctance to and fear of the western neighbour. The deep trauma in Polish society caused by the war and its effects was not without significance here. Secondly is the issue of the ideological legitimacy of the Polish presence in the Western Lands, referred to as the Recovered Territories. Post-war Polish Szczecin and its new residents were exposed to this historical propaganda politics. (Kaczmarek, Ładykowski 2012b). Although more than 20 years have passed since the change of socio-economic system in Poland, Szczecin remains in many aspects a town that awaits its own locally initiated transformation. Only then can the contemporary Szczecin identity be re-defined: until that moment it remains suspended (Kubicki 2011).

### **Polish - German micro-research teams**

This first unexpected discovery, which was actually made during academic debate, strengthened our enthusiasm for the idea to invite German partners for

the research and create mixed nationality micro-research teams, so that students could establish relations with both Polish and German borderland residents. We believed that this research project on the emerging Polish - German borderland was an opportunity for a cultural “therapy” for our students, and also an interesting didactic experiment for both of us. We started to look for partners with whom, at least partially, we would be able to establish cooperation in order to lead a joint research project.

A German ethnologist Hannah Wadle from Western German Freiburg came to our help when she volunteered to conduct research. Shortly after, Franziska Barthel from Meklemburg joined, a student of prof. Peter Dehne from Neubrandenburg University of Applied Science who was terminating her work on a thesis on Polish citizens’ immigration to the Uecker-Randow district (Barthel 2009). These two took part in the first fieldwork organised by us in Egessin in spring 2009. Later in our multi-sited research we were supported by a group of Slavic Philology students under the supervision of Ph.D. Marek Fiałek and a Social Geography group supervised by Nikolaus Roos from Greifswald University. During the whole process of organising the project and building a strategy to acquire the means essential to fund the entire project, we were advised and accompanied by Kamil Lis, an Economics and European Studies’ student at Szczecin University, who shared knowledge that was significant for us while working at Regionalen Agenda 21 Stettin Haff, an agency promoting citizenship and civic attitudes among the people of the region.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, we started to go ‘out’ into the field with these young people. We believed that mixed teams will give our Polish students a better chance to have a more natural relationship with their German peers. Also, according to our assumptions, their work would be more effective because Polish students would serve as ‘translators’ for German partners when talking to new Polish borderland residents. Their task was not only to render residents’ statements, but also to explain the entire context. The German students had a similar role to be ‘translators’ for our Polish students when talking to German residents of the borderland. We wanted this fieldwork to be multi-dimensional, to force them to constantly take the initiative in bilateral relations with their German partners. It was during the first research travel, which we treated absolutely as a pilot project, that the students were to communicate in a more or less natural way with their German partners (mostly in English)

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6 It is worth noting that in the meantime, that is within a few years of the entire research project, our young partners, such as Franziska Barthel (2009), finished their dissertations. After graduating, Nicolaus Roos entered a doctoral programme in Tuebingen where he is currently working on the project “TransBorder Szczecin”. Hannah Wadle after a yearlong research in Masurian Sztynort, began her anthropological doctoral studies in Manchester. Kamil Lis after graduating managed to get a place for a doctoral programme both in Szczecin and in German Tuebingen.

as well as with local residents (in their native languages). We felt that was a chance for them to get to know the area better, to recognise its nuances, to learn how to navigate through it, and with whom and how to communicate. Simply, they would start to understand and visualise the space of the borderland. We also hoped that the company of German peers would be an incentive for interaction, and even if there were no spectacular research achievements (interviews), everyday communication with their German partner would be a milestone in getting to know each other. Our expectations worked well in the cases of many, including those of German project participants.

### **Our second moment of serendipity**

As we tried to create mixed micro-research teams, it turned out fairly quickly that many of our students were not enthusiastic about the idea.<sup>7</sup> The great amplitude of emotions started from clear manifestations of reluctance, through indifference, to a mild interest in this form of cooperation. Nevertheless, hostile and indifferent attitudes prevailed. What really helped to break the ice was the fact that among the German students there were many interesting and open personalities. No less important was also the fact that many German students could speak Polish pretty well, or at least had a communicative working knowledge of the language. Had we tried to follow the traditional structure of field studies, we believe we would not have achieved as much as we did in the first research trip; despite the fact that it did indeed turn out to be the time when the two groups could start slowly, and not without some problems, to get used to each other.

First of all, we accidentally revealed how students perceive their German neighbours before they even entered the homes of their informants for the first interviews. In this way, we were able to make them realise how important our own approach and cultural background are for researching and interpreting cultural phenomena, and why it matters to realise what our cognitive categories are in order to be able to appropriately distance ourselves from them. Secondly, we were surprised how differently we imagined young ethnology students from what proved to be the truth, as it turned out that they often not only present a lack of openness to culturally diverse neighbours, but even a very closed and reluctant attitude. It should be noted that our students who expressed prejudices and a lack of interest in their neighbouring culture were, according to our observations, much more open and interested in cultures and communities much more remote and very often very 'exotic'. Their unhurried entry into the field gave us both time to adjust and to get used to a situation that was new for all of us. Stu-

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7 Within three years (2009-2011), we organised nine research trips for 3 lab groups recruited from the consecutive years of students. In these took part about 40 Polish and nearly 20 German students.

dents were brought into a direct confrontation with their stereotypes and ideas about German culture in a situation of 'smooth coercive measures': in other words, they had to pass the course for which they had enrolled according to the rules that we set. Of course they wanted to do the best they can in order to get good grades, knowledge and experience, and to do it all in a positive atmosphere. So they tried and, willy-nilly, they had to open up.

For most of them, this field research was their first travel to Germany, despite the fact that it is only 20 km from Szczecin city centre to the border. Only a few of them had visited Berlin (about 150 km away), or other German towns on short trips, such as a school exchange. The strategies chosen by us to 'throw' them into the field began rapidly to show real results. First of all, the area itself - because of its geographical proximity and aesthetic similarities, along with very clear differences in mode of management, caused students to reflect on the complex modes of history and cultural diversity. After all, only a few decades ago, their own town and surrounding area were also German, and its basic shape and many of the buildings have not been significantly changed. Had history turned out differently, would the villages and towns around Szczecin be similar to those nearby - which are German? What is the difference between the Polish and the Germans: is it that on one side everything seems to be calmer, more orderly, we are not afraid to ride a bicycle on the street, people look the same but there is somehow less of them, some people dress differently? Is it all due to the fact that after German reunification, the local German governments are richer and even the unemployed have more money than their counterparts in Poland? Students reported their findings of this type and discussed them passionately. Soon it became clear that many of them are gifted observers, able to 'look under the surface', and the fact that they drew attention to many details allowed them to exchange thoughts and rebuild the social ideas they shared. They evaluated the age and condition of cars and buildings, they noticed that a lot of people would dress in the cheapest clothes available, that there are almost no shops in German villages, and that the ones in towns are low-cost chains. They noticed that in the villages to which they mainly cycled, there is much less traffic and hardly any children. At the same time, they were touched how Germans would often stop to talk to them and usually in a very polite manner. Suddenly, it turned out that some of our students had studied German at school, a fact to which previously no one had admitted, and very often, even without help from their German partners, they interacted and communicated with locals.

These experiences were devastating for the popular images of Germany in Poland popularised by the media (see Kaczmarek, Ładykowski 2012a). Our western neighbours are often presented as impoverished East Germans (from GDR), *Ossi*, whose sense of failure and humiliation after the reunification of Germany found expression in frustration, xenophobia and natural hostility towards migrants, including the Polish, and the support of neo-fascist parties (as the NPD is seen). In

addition, the common opinion about their bad taste (appearance), sense of superiority, restitutional views (fears of the 'buying' or 'recapture' of properties in former German areas). When in 2009 in Loeknitz cars with Polish registration plates burned, Polish journalists invaded the village and created news of an 'ethnic conflict'. Local residents told us how the journalists did not want to listen to 'what really happened'; that in this case it was all about a neighbourly dispute caused by new tenants smoking cigarettes and having barbecues on a balcony in their block of flats. They reacted really aggressively when admonished for it by pensioners whom they disturbed. Direct contact with the local community, with people who reported, first-hand, many events known from the media, helped our students to stimulate reflection on how big the gaps are in their existing system of ideas. Thanks to this, they distanced themselves from their own knowledge, also with regard to their own country. Their German friends with their openness and willingness to discuss and explain the observed phenomena contributed tremendously to the 'disenchantment' of the world on the German borderland.

The next travel and its further consequences with the different groups of ethnography students have proven us that the implemented strategy began to bring positive results. Thanks to this lab experiment, some mutual partnership relations were established among students. The students who completed the first cycle of the laboratory volunteered in the following years just to be able to participate in the field trips with the younger students. Thus, our student research project on the emerging Polish-German borderland has become not a purely research project. It was a project during which students familiarised the matter personally and thus experienced the conditions of ethnography practice outside academia. But perhaps the most important aspect for us was the fact that they practised the hard way how can really be difficult self-education, during which one works on the constructs of visions that used to define one's current identity, outlook and beliefs, and vision of the world and one's place in it. The students began to be aware of the role of self-reflectiveness. Ethnography Laboratory gave its participants a chance to change their view of the world, a chance to become ethnologists.

### **The research tools' selection strategy**

Having limited time to conduct fieldwork we expanded the educational programme associated with it in such a way that students were constantly in contact with the issues concerning their research topic. The problem was how were they to collect materials for their papers. Having discussed the problem, we came to the conclusion that the usual techniques used in Poland would not push our students forward, but can even contribute to their discouragement. An ethnologist Agnieszka Halemba very accurately highlighted the problem of the Polish academic tradition of ethnographic fieldwork. As an ethnologist with experience

gained from both Polish and British educational system, she could competently recapitulate the problem.

I would like to add a few of my own reflections on the contemporary field research carried out by Polish investigators. When authors such as Bloch, Marcus or Firth write about anthropological *fieldwork*, they mean a very specific manner of field research, based mainly on a long-term participatory observation, which surely includes interviews with people, but also common activities like watching TV, work, fun, friendship, etc. This kind of *fieldwork* they want to reform, discuss, indicate its pros and cons. Of course, during such fieldwork an anthropologist can and in many cases should use interviews based on questionnaires and surveys, shoot a film or use other visual aids (for instance, discuss photographs with people). However it is believed that long term participation in everyday life is the most important but at the same time the most problematic element. From my experience what is called fieldwork in Poland is usually based primarily on interviews (underlined by Ł.K & P.Ł)” (Halemba 2011: 124-125).

Referring to the personal experience we had in Poznań and Warszawa we decided to radically break with the tradition taught and practised by us earlier of working mainly with questionnaires or sometimes surveys. During the discussion we had in Szczecin over the proposal for a new educational model of ethnographic practice, we reached the conclusion that ethnographic method is a result of the researcher's attitude and not only a convenient tool for obtaining information. Hence, it was important for us to prepare students to consider that while working with people they not only learn about them and their culture but, what is more important, about themselves. Because, during their individual fieldwork, a young student may or may not become an ethnographer. It is when and where their future is decided. This is why we realised that it was more important to induce an appropriate moral attitude in our students towards their interlocutors and to encourage that the need for daily ethical behaviour become their second nature. A mature investigator is conscious of his presence in the researched area and is aware of what it brings to the conversation, his interlocutors and to him personally.

This is why we felt that collecting materials is actually of secondary and not primary importance at least during the first field trip, especially given that we both seriously doubt that materials collected by a bunch of young, inexperienced and still lacking relevant expertise interviewers would be able to adequately interpret the collected data. Earlier, as students we were forced to use ready-made questionnaires, or at least to use suggested models for them, and to carry out at least two so called questionnaire interviews per day during the entire research trip. We were turning into collectors of unverifiable materials from our respondents, where there was neither the time nor the means to get familiar with the other person, our

interlocutor. We strongly believe that this led to a distortion of the whole idea of ethnographic research and created a wrong approach in students not only to the ethnographer's role, but also to anthropology as a science. This is because such a way of carrying out research does not leave any space for self-reflection. This is because there is no time to think through and reflect on the role of the *ad hoc* relations with informants. This, in turn, creates an illusion of real ethnography where collecting 'countable' data dominates over a conscious and unobtrusive presence among respondents. We rejected the model where material collected by students for research was by nature superficial. Such a state of affairs is caused by the short duration of the study (a maximum of two weeks) and also by its mass character, a group (more than a dozen people) of students working in the same area. In Szczecin, as opposed to Poznan and Warsaw Ethnology, our students did not have a chance to work with older students who had already had some fieldwork experience and it was important to make them realise what is, in our opinion, ethnography as a method and researcher's moral attitude. Since we could not refer to the experience of the Szczecin scientific community, we had to ourselves create a space for ethnographic knowledge coming from our first local researches. This situation was, on the one hand, a hindrance, but on the other it gave us a chance to freely create our own ethnography laboratory model.

### **Anthropology at home**

It is difficult to judge today whether the research carried out by our students in the years 2009-2011 in Szczecin and its German surrounding area was a form of *anthropology at home*. When we discovered that not all young Szczecin citizens would share our passion for the history of the city, and that ethnology students knew very little if nothing about it, this idea came to seem very intriguing to us. To attract and interest these young people in the world around them, that maybe because of its apparent familiarity was harder to see, we had to go together through this unexpected educational path.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen, in his book *Small Places, Large Issues* (2001), draws attention to an equivalence between research carried out on distant cultures and studies in one's own community. The key issue here is cultural distance, sometimes obvious because of the spatial or time gap separating a researcher from his subject. At other times, as in the case of *anthropology at home*, a researcher must create this distance on his own.

Surprisingly, carrying out research just over the border of our own country, just beyond the western suburbs of Szczecin, has enabled us to experience both perspectives. On the one hand, leaving Szczecin and crossing the state border just a few kilometres away, we were already in Germany and recognised it as a totally different socio-cultural space. At the same time, and this is quite unique, by stay-

ing within the emerging Polish community in Germany, we experienced a well-known and familiar environment. This experience proved to have serious consequences when we invited our Szczecin students to work with us there.

As has already been indicated, it happens very rarely, and it is with this type of event that we are dealing here, that we have a chance to observe a phenomenon that although now manifested in local everyday life, has a chance in the perspective of forthcoming decades to mark several important developments and changes at the European level. For the event tells us about the consequences of abolishing national borders.

In the case of Szczecin, a revolution has started bringing changes to the ethnic structure which was created as a result of the policy after World War II and thereafter perpetuated. The understanding of the world around us is reassessed at the local level. Although the process of changes in language and everyday decisions is slow, it appears to be impossible to stop. An important question is how the experience of Szczecin residents settling in the East German borderland districts will affect the attitudes of the remaining citizens of their home town.

A place we chose for our research is just outside the city gates of a Polish town in the East German countryside. Once again it turned out that geographical proximity can in no way be translated into knowledge of an area. The young ethnology students' journals written during their research provide an excellent illustration of the first experience of fieldwork. In the passages quoted below, students recorded the sense of alienation accompanying them throughout their first stays in Germany:

“What does the German landscape look like? At first glance it can be concluded that it is similar to the one we see every day. A proof for the above statement could be the fact that most of the buildings on the German side of the border are almost identical to those that are seen in Poland. What makes me almost certain of the architectural similarities? For one it is Polish- German history, from which we know that the region of today's Szczecin used to be German (now I begin to notice the first advantages stemming from reading texts about so-called Polish-German relations;) ). (...) When crossing the Polish-German border, what catches the attention is the state of roads, not resembling those we are used to. Interestingly, the areas we passed through are not part of a larger city, but still the roads even in such small towns are incomparably better than the ones seen on our side of the border. I would even dare to say that they are better than the ones in many big cities in Poland. Another difference which significantly distinguishes us from our neighbours is associated not just with landscapes or comfort of travelling, but mentalities. I mean there is a sense of overwhelming order on the German side. It is worth considering what makes people so willing to take care of the environment in which they live. Perhaps it is linked to policies imposing such a lifestyle, which in turn affects the mental-

ity of people who obey the system (as a matter of fact, how many people would take care of cleaning of their own free will?:P). Anyway, this is another example of the differences between us, but does it mean that it is worse? For some maybe yes, because these are Germans, but isn't it nice to live in such a clean environment without rubbish and a common indifference to what is happening around us - surely yes! As I noticed the mentality of people is not only reflected in the order in which they live, but also in the perception of those who disturb it! Unfortunately, in this case it is impossible to clearly identify the Germans' attitude towards strangers and foreigners. (...) Other differences in the Polish and German mentality can be noticed only a few kilometres after crossing the border, such as empty streets. No doubt it is not a nation where, in contrast to us, the surrounding area is treated as their property, where noise and improving mutual relations are something natural." (Extract from a Journal noted on Wednesday 22nd April 2009 during the cycling on the Szczecin- Eggesin route).

However, what we as educators and active researchers consider as our greatest achievement was presenting students a different perspective and incorporating them in a discussion about the place of research and the role that they play in the research process. Therefore, *anthropology at home* stopped being an abstract, theoretical notion from the manual but became a conscious research practice. It also meant understanding the sense of conducting a research in a well-known social context. The process of discovering the area of research and understanding their own presence in it, as well as dealing with the problems that accompany the first steps in the practice of ethnography beyond the walls of the university became the individual experience of each of the young participants. And these circumstances forced working in mixed teams. This is well illustrated in another extract from a journal of a different student:

"We tried to communicate with the local residents but we were soon brought back to earth when it turned out that not a single person we tried to talk to spoke English. This, as it may seem, normal situation (and how important from the point of view of an ethnologist as I already had a chance to notice) made me realise how essential it is to speak the local language of the researched area. After many attempts to communicate and receiving incomprehensible gestures, we realised our helplessness which, combined with the kilometres, led us to the brink of despair. In this critical moment for us, I again realised how beneficial a stressful situation can be for a human; having analysed our German knowledge we managed to cobble together a meaningful phrase. As it turned out, this momentary glimpse allowed us to communicate with the local. We didn't understand the answer but the gestures that we saw helped us to choose the right direction that we should follow. It helped us to reach our destination." (extract from a Journal, noted on Thursday 23rd April 2009 Loecknitz)"

This is when we understood that the subject of our study had changed its trajectory: we started to lead a parallel research to the one about borderland residents, focusing on the students taking part in the project. Their reflections about crossing their own limits when facing the strangeness, so unexpected for us, of their own neighbours turned out to be as rich a source of information about the mechanisms of the formation of the borderland as the research we made in the area.

### **Accidental discoveries - serendipities**

Accidental discoveries, unintended, revealed as if by chance, in social sciences are traditionally called *serendipity*. Perhaps this phenomenon tells more about our own assumptions and prejudices, but for us an unexpected phenomenon was the Szczecin students' declared dislike and reluctance towards the Germans and everything associated with them in everyday perceptions. We were surprised to find out that most of the students taking part in the research in many cases had never been to Germany before. The second intriguing discovery we observed was their ambiguous if not reluctant attitude towards their home town, Szczecin. Our expectations were based on our own ideas that we had of Szczecin University students, that is as a young intellectual elite who in the future will decide on the character and nature of their residence. This (along with a sad revision of our views of the role of young Polish intellectuals) confirmed our belief that a parallel (to the topic of borderland residents) subject of the research would be the notions of proximity and cultural alienation of our student-residents of Szczecin. For here emerged a key to answering the question: is the emergence of the Polish-German borderland at all possible and what is the model of the neighbourly relations that would as a consequence be created? Would it be a French-German model, in which there was a conscious 'reconciliation work' between neighbours, or the model of 'barely tolerable neighbours'.

### **Our failure**

The ethnography programme proposed by us included a compact, three year curriculum: lectures and tutorials on "Methodology of Ethnographic Research" (45 +15 hours in the first semester of undergraduate studies) aimed to familiarise students with the basics of ethnographic research, with the most important approaches and scientific texts related to the subject; 'Ethnographic Laboratory" (5 semesters of 30 h) together with an integral "Fieldwork Practice" (1 week in the second semester and 2 weeks in the fourth semester) devoted to the preparation, conducting and elaboration of the results of the student mini-research programmes with field research, the results of which were to serve as the basis for scientific elaboration (BA Theses) at the "Dissertation Seminar" (3 semesters of 30h).

Labs, Fieldwork Practice and Seminars were to be conducted in small (12-15 students) teams supervised by one experienced ethnographer-lecturer. In 2009, we introduced this programme to the curriculum of the Chair of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Szczecin University.

After the initial success of the idea, when apart from our programme to study Polish- German borderland, ethnology students also researched areas of the former USSR, the situation started to change. The University personnel policy and a reluctance to understanding the essence of the idea on the part of the persons responsible for allocating didactic courses for teaching staff, as well as an unwillingness to finance students' field explorations by the authorities of the Humanities Department at the Szczecin University led to a situation where, among others, initially student fieldwork was banned in the winter semester and then the idea that they should only take place during the summer holidays was introduced. Also, the courses were delegated to different persons (not necessarily with ethnographic experience), and for financial reasons the student groups became larger and job rotation for lecturers was introduced, which led to situations where a lab group that prepared to work in the borderland would be ordered to research a city. This led to organisational mayhem, and a situation where some of the essential classes were not taught at all and theses were written without conducting fieldwork research. The only exception has been our research programme on the Polish-German borderland, for which we fought and managed to obtain funding or direct support from external institutions together with organisational help from borderland communities and some local German governments. Although the remnants of the system designed by us still appears in the curriculum of the Chair of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Szczecin University, the idea has been misappropriated and distorted. Now students, as in many other academic centres in Poland, again enjoy fruitless trips.

## Conclusion

The educational ethnography practice project carried out by us in Szczecin is of course one of many possible choices, and we are not certain whether it is the perfect model. It was a kind of experiment which was the result of a series of discussions on the form and content of student ethnographic fieldwork practice. Of course, the location of the academic unit we both were working at was not without significance. Equally important was the attitude presented by the first year students at the Chair of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology in Szczecin. We managed to achieve a model of fieldwork practice firmly embedded in the local context, in accordance with the objective underlying the whole series of our actions. However, we did not succeed in the field of gaining political support and academic recognition for our students' training methods, a failure that

has a symbolic meaning in our “neoliberal times” of saving money on every occasion: a failure all the more bitter as these they could have been used to raise some Bourdieusian capital.

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