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Fear and loathing on the border

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Mid-fieldwork impressions of a budding border ethnographer



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Women are weak, emotional, and incapable of front line service. Ukrainians are liars, Lithuanians – thieves. Homosexuals are a perverted group of mentally insane individuals, an abomination to the human race. Priests are pedophiles. Jews – detestable infidels, sneakily ruling the world. The Western liberals are a condescending, hedonistic, and privileged bunch, living with no laws or rules. Poles who emigrated are ‘fakes’ and traitors, and Germans, well, let’s just look at our history, need I say more? Violent Chechens are terrorists; ‘dirty’ refugees a lazy, corrupt, dishonest and disease-ridden horde; mafia-supporting Vietnamese pose a threat to our economy; and Muslims, unassimilable, intent on raping not only our women, but also our enviable, pure, white Polish Catholic culture...

Lately these and many more likewise statements have been uttered around me with a frightening frequency and impenetrable assurance. It has been challenging, also since I myself can definitely check off a few of the above-mentioned ‘boxes’.

I am now nearing the end of my third month of almost six-month long fieldwork period in the Polish/German border region, where, as the cornerstone part of my PhD, I’m working with the formation created solely for the purpose of border protection: [Polish Border Guards](#). For my project I focus on the tactical echelon of the organization, spending a predominant part of my time here accompanying street-level officers on patrols and familiarizing myself with their daily reality. By now, after over 500 hours spent in a hermetic culture of the formation, I feel robbed of my initial naïve enthusiasm and openness, and forced to often internalize the perception of harsh, propagandistic judgment and ostracism, the extreme distrust and cautiousness permeating the border dynamics. Do not get me wrong – I did not actually start to see the world through the eyes of officers who surround me, or take on their ideology. Rather I began to share the feelings and

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reactions that so often outline their perceptions: the isolation, anxiety, mistrust and pressures that dictate behaviors necessary to survive here – the omnipresent restraint and suspicion. Yes, I am here to get a taste of their world, to show the aspects of border protection previously not accessed. Yet I remain fully aware of my ideological alienation, exacerbated by the systematic lack of trust and psychological disconnection from my research subjects. At one point, quite recently, I texted one of my supervisors: “I truly am a stranger in my own land”, juxtaposing the expression of my own feelings to the [work of an American sociologist Hochschild](#), who, in a stark contrast to her own ideology, spent significant amount of time researching the extreme right-wing Tea Party Movement in the US.

I have never first-handedly experienced such wide-range amount of hatred, loathing and contempt – especially directed at the people and values I personally identify with, those of liberal tolerance and equality, open borders, multi-cultural acceptance and re-distributive prosperity. For the first time in my life, and over such a long stretch of time, I have been surrounded almost exclusively by people who represent a political ideology directly opposing mine. In many ways it is a trying yet rewarding, new experience – undoubtedly in our ‘normal’, daily routines, we tend to surround ourselves with those with whom we mostly agree, and dismiss or reject individuals who support values we deem detestable. Here my role presents itself with a previously unexplored by me approach. I am not here to talk about how I see the world, or convince anyone against the views they already hold. Unable to behave as I would in the ‘real world’ of possible debates, dialogue, or ideological negotiation with those with whom I disagree, I continuously attempt to understand the standpoint of individuals surrounding me, and the source of their opinions and norms. Putting aside my own identity and beliefs, albeit aware that I myself present by their definitions an object of much contempt, with unwavering determination I hope to reveal the mechanisms that create the behavioral guidelines of those, who, as the tactical frontline, the street-level officers, are essentially the hand that implements the country’s migration policy. These are the people who decide who belongs and who doesn’t, and it is by their actions that the unwelcomed ‘others’ are defined, their presence rejected, and their lives altered forever, at times with the most grim consequences. I keep wanting to truly unravel: What guides their assessments? What underlines their logic of principles and action?

At this point, still in the midst of my fieldwork, I am in ‘too deep’ without opportunity to distance myself to what is happening, so my answers seem simultaneously too simple and too complex. Perhaps we could link these mindsets to lack of exposure or limited education; to the homogenous, hermetic culture of white, Catholic Poland, still so full of resentment and bitterness over its history; or to the propaganda of the party currently in power, populist and nationalistic in its sentiments. Possibly the explanation lies in the nature of the formation, linked to the decades long anti-military state agenda, or hatred and detestation, so clearly expressed towards them by the society. To the worsening working conditions, lack of existential security, feeling of abandonment by those above them who make the crucial decisions managing their reality. Likely there are other possible interpretations, but similarly to many ethnographers in early stages of academic career, I admit to being, at last to some extent, consumed, at times even [overwhelmed by the field](#). It is clear I will need to gain some distance before being able to properly [reflect and theorize](#) on the meanings and implications of my experiences – experiences that at times caught me off guard with their intensity.

Witnessing human drama unfold in real time is difficult, and when one is limited in ability to act, can be even traumatic. I have watched (and on occasion, to certain extent, participated in) intense situations, such as arrests, chases, apprehensions, or expulsions of people attempting to cross border without required documents – so often clearly in desperate situation that forced them to accept inhuman, incredibly hazardous conditions. So many

times I was afraid my face would betray my actual feelings, and I grew progressively more concerned with 'protecting' my real thoughts. No matter how dreadful I found actions and behaviors observed, which included verbal and physical intimidation and violence, I knew it was of utmost importance research-wise to stay neutral in my reactions, and I could never let on to the officers around me how I truly evaluated given situations. After some time and increased exposure, I got desensitized enough to even start doubting myself: am I too sensitive? Too naïve? Perhaps this loathing and 'othering' is nothing new; after all, the laws stemming from people's desire or need to create groups are by default based on exclusion, and appear as old as humanity itself... Still, it was difficult to understand the amount of contempt, even hatred, expressed from one human to another on daily basis.

As incomprehensible as these dynamics appear to me, I think I do have one 'revelation'. I believe I now know what really rules the Polish border, what the loathing and contempt attempt to conceal. It is, in fact, fear.

On the most general level I am quite certain the fear underlining these trends of exclusion is largely grounded in the weariness of the impending, and to some extent already happening, large societal shifts of liberalization of values, standing in such harsh contrast with the traditional values of 'Polishness'. As the gays, feminists, and non-whites or non-Catholics are becoming more prominent, and voice their opinions in a progressive fight for their rights, many see these developments as directly threatening and disrupting the traditional Polish culture and ideology, polarizing contemporary Poland (see my previous blog [here](#)).

Yet the fear ruling street-level border protection appears to extend to other areas, perhaps less visible or obvious, but potentially just as troubling. What was most shocking to me, even amidst all this omnipresent hate and ruthlessness, was the fact that *I* was perceived as the source of fear for the people I was now working with, posing a threat beyond the values I represent on a personal, individual level. Their distress translated into far-reaching alienation, stigmatization, and ostracism of my person, which in the initial weeks of fieldwork weighted quite heavily on my psyche.

It was initially difficult to comprehend why all of the men and women I talk to and interact with seemed so anxious about my presence. In a way it is quite ironic that these dozens of strong, military-type, ruthless 'macho' men seem so terrified of one female anthropologist... Then, just a few days into my second post, I experienced a confrontation with one of the officers on a patrol I participated in. His harsh, interrogative and suspicious words made me realize the kind of threat I potentially pose to all officers who come into contact with me - apparently viewed by most as a potential agent of ABW (The Internal Security Agency), BSW (Internal Police Bureau), or CBŚ (Central Investigation Bureau). My credentials were questioned, CV disbelieved, and entire biography perceived as likely fabricated. As I learned, this would not have been the first time such situation took place. Under impression of constant surveillance in the working environment, which includes belief in wire-tapping of phones and computers, tailing of officers during their off-duty hours, unofficial investigations of their families etc. these individuals feel as if at any time, anything they do or say can be taken out of context and used against them in the worst possible way. These fears eventually have imprinted on me as well, and till now I believe my technological connections might also be under surveillance... There have been many times I felt as if I need to be careful during my phone conversations, or censor my emails. I have also become somewhat obsessed about safety of my field-notes, and arranged to mail them out in order to avoid them being intercepted, confiscated, also possibly resulting in my informants facing severe legal and organizational repercussions. In a way I started to feel like a heroine of a spy novel. Functioning in the world permeated by fear and insecurity is exhausting and physically and emotionally devastating. Using my own experiences and linking

them to reflections stemming from tensions arising from my positionality among the Border Guards, as described above, the oppressive reality in which they normally operate became much clearer to me: If I began to feel it after only three months, what can be said of people serving in the formation for over 15 years?

The cacophony of internal pressures and contradictions that rule the border creates a feeling of constant insecurity and uncertainty; it disables Border Guards as well as travelers from feeling safe, knowledgeable, or supported. The state officials, rather than empowered, feel vulnerable and deserted, fueled by their resentment and apparent powerlessness when making decisions. Alluding here to my title: this is indeed a very dark and pessimistic take on the psychedelic, irrational trip of Hunter S. Thompson's [Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas](#) – but one that is similarly senseless and truly escapes logic and reason.

On one of my most recent patrols we were driving through some of the most magnificent wild forests of the country: as it happens the Republic of Poland is one of the most forested territories in all of Europe, and a truly visually stunning place. As I looked around and took in the multitude of green, yellow, orange and red colors of autumn's birches, oaks, beeches, spruces and pines, lit with the sunshine seeping through the branches, I became overwhelmed with the heavy feeling of sadness, a strange kind of [hiraeth](#), if you will. What can be the future of this land of transcendent beauty, when its borders are so brutally ruled by fear and loathing?



Polish Autumn Forest

Note from the author

This blog was indeed written in the midst of fieldwork; however due to precariousness of my research position, the decision was made to postpone sharing on this blog until fieldwork was fully completed, which took place at the end of 2018

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