

## The People in the Forest: Personal Memory as a Locus of Culture

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**Abstract:** This paper explores personal recollections of the author's childhood experiences in the countryside in Poland. It discusses the significance of the forest in Polish culture, symbolizing closeness to nature and the earth. Historically, the name Poland is said to be derived from *pole* "field" and *polana* "a clearing in the forest", pointing to the origin of the tribe of *Polanie* "Poles". The experience of the countryside, and of the forest in particular, is focal to Polish family life, in customs such as foraging for wild mushrooms and berries in the summer, a ritual practiced even by city-folk. The author argues that personal memories of childhood are carried by an individual throughout life as a locus of culture. They are specific experiences to which cultural values attach, accruing through the details of the experience. They become sources of strength and reference points in life. Although the values that these experiences instantiate may be universal, the aggregate instantiation of these values in specific experiences is part of the uniqueness of culture.

**Keywords:** Cultural values, forest, history, identity, locus of culture, nature, personal memories, Poland, Polish culture

### 1. Introduction

The stimulus for this presentation comes from my recollection of a term paper written by my college roommate at the University of North Carolina, Lora Berg. When taking a course on Polish literature, she wrote a paper about the imagery of the forest. That choice of topic struck me, because being Polish myself, I had never considered my love of the forest as being anything unusual. I had not perceived myself as being "Other". But suddenly I realized that from the perspective of an American urbanite – even one of Polish background, as my friend Lora was – this Polish predilection for the forest could be perceived as a foreign cultural value, or at least, as something out of the mainstream of a typical American's experience. Looking back at this sudden "othering" of me by my roommate, I also realize now that the individual person is the locus of culture. In this presentation I would like to explore this insight – that is, my own fragmentary but pivotal experience of the forest as a locus of residing Polish cultural values.

### 2. The People in the Forest

When I was six years old, my grandparents obtained the right to lease a piece of land. In the communist Polish People's Republic of the 1960s, this was no small feat. Two things secured them this right. Firstly, as Rector of the Academy of Physical Education, a sports university in

Warsaw, my grandfather Stefan Wołoszyn was a VIP. Secondly, with the help of my Russian-born great-grandmother Shura (Alexandra Łoś), my grandmother Lidia was able to prove that our family had lost our homestead farm in Belarus, near Brest (Brześć), just across the border with the Soviet Union. This land had been under Polish sovereignty before the Second World War. Thus, we were entitled to compensation.

We leased a piece of land 52 kilometers outside Warsaw in the village of Rybienko Leśne, which picturesquely translates into English as “wooded fish place” or “a place full of fish and situated in a wood”. This description is very apt. The village was located on the River Bug – spelled the same as the English word “bug” and pronounced similarly to the English word “book”, a pronunciation identical to the Polish words *Bóg* “God” and *buk* “beech tree”. The river flows from Ukraine and Belarus into Poland and joins up with the Vistula (Wisła), the longest Polish river, just north of Warsaw.

It was on this River Bug that my grandfather had spent his childhood in Belarus, happily splashing and fishing with his three brothers and two sisters. As for the woods, Rybienko was indeed a well-wooded place, full of magnificent pine trees interspersed with oaks and birch trees. Along the water, there were also some weeping willows. And there were green and golden fields nearby, cultivated with potatoes and rye by the local farmers, a typical landscape of the open plains of Mazovia (Mazowsze), Poland’s heartland and the birthplace of Frédéric Chopin. We were the first newcomers from the city in the village, and the local farmers nicknamed us “the people in the forest” (“ci z lasu”). This was because our plot was not agricultural land, but quite literally a piece of the forest, consisting only of sandy soil and pine trees. It was deep in the woods, about a kilometer from the village itself. This humble piece of land became my grandmother’s dream fulfilled and for me, my childhood’s paradise.

We did not quite abandon city life. During the weekdays and during the winter, we stayed in the city. My grandparents were university professors and my parents were busy young doctors. But on weekends and during the summer, we did what so many Polish people – and also Russians – do – we spent our time in the countryside, “in the womb of nature” (“na łonie natury”). As a child, I ran around in the woods, barefoot and barely supervised. Even after my parents and I moved to London, I would regularly be sent home, on a long airline haul all by myself, to stay with my grandparents during every school holiday, for a total of about three months per year. “Home” was in the center of Warsaw, but more often, “home” meant, “in the middle of the woods”.

We built three small houses on our wooded piece of land. To be exact, they were actually three plots of land combined into one, all fenced together. One belonged to my grandparents. Another belonged to my great-uncle, my grandmother’s brother, Leon Łoś, and his wife Aniela. They were survivors of the Stalinist labor camps, the Gulag. The third one belonged to my grandmother’s best friend, the great Polish philologist Renata Mayenowa, whom I called Grandmother Renata, and her husband Józef Mayen. They were Holocaust survivors. The old generation had suffered greatly during the war. Now it was a time of peace, and we all felt very close to each other, enjoying the Polish summer.

### 3. Foraging

There exists a purely Polish phenomenon. If you drive out of the city and into the countryside on a fine summer's day, you will see people sitting by the roadside on a folding stool, with jars and baskets full of something. These are local farmers who have got up early in the morning and gone into the forest to pick the freshest berries and mushrooms. They sit by the road selling this wild produce to latecomers, city dwellers who do not wake up at the crack of dawn.

Drive along a little further and sooner or later you will stop by a wood. It doesn't have to be a big forest. It could just be the local wood, a few square kilometers, or maybe even a smaller grove. Surprisingly, you will see quite a few cars randomly parked by the roadside, as if they have been abandoned. Your goal is to search for an unoccupied patch of forest and likewise blissfully abandon your own car. Then you hop joyfully into the woods to indulge in the favorite Polish pastime – nay, addiction – mushroom picking!

I certainly knew all my mushrooms by the time I was eight or nine years old. Indeed, armed with my newly acquired skill of reading, and mushroom atlas in hand, I was the biologist of the family! I relished identifying the edible species and telling them apart from the poisonous ones. I was the designated “mushroom inspector”. No poisonous mushroom could make it past my scientific eyes and onto the dinner plate. Yes, admittedly, every summer there are reports in Polish newspapers that some family has died of mushroom poisoning. That does not at all deter countless other families from happily abandoning their cars and spending the entire day foraging in the woods.

### 4. ‘Polanie’ - The Tribe That Tamed The Forest

The name “Poland”, in Polish “Polska”, is derived from the tribal name “Polanie” (“the Poles”), which in turn comes from the word for field, “pole”, and for forest clearing, “polana”, both cognate with the English word “field”. At the time of the Roman Empire, two thousand years ago, much of the land in this part of north-eastern Europe, up to 95%, was covered by forests. This part of Europe was considered wild and barbarian and had not been conquered by the Romans. Even to this day, approximately 40% of Poland is wooded, contrasting with average figures of only 10-20% in Western Europe.

In the midst of this ancient forest, the inhabitants of this land cleared small fields for agricultural use. According to the Polish-British historian Adam Zamoyski (2011, p. 7), Roman merchants, who used to come here from the South already in the 1<sup>st</sup> century in search of amber, called the “gold of the North”, noted that this land was inhabited by “peaceful agricultural people, living in a state of <village democracy>”.

The Polish people feel an emotional attachment to “polska ziemia”, meaning “Polish land” or “Polish earth” (the word “ziemia” is cognate with Latin “humus”). They feel part of the tribe that domesticated this earth for agricultural use, and also, that eventually integrated their country into what came to be felt as “Europe” and “Western civilization”.

For example, Polish schoolchildren are taught this rhyme about the famous Renaissance astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (Mikołaj Kopernik), who was the first to prove that the Earth revolves around the Sun:

Wstrzymał Słońce, ruszył Ziemię,  
 Polskie go zrodziło plemię.  
 “He stopped the Sun, he moved the Earth,  
 The Polish tribe gave him birth.”

Copernicus’ book *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* [“On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres”], published in Latin in 1543, is widely considered as a milestone achievement in the scientific development of Western civilization. Polish schoolchildren are taught to feel proud of this contribution of Polish culture to the growth of Europe. By the time I was eight or nine years old, I was quite aware of and proud of this Polish cultural mythology.

## 5. The Individual as a Locus of Culture

The little girl growing up in a Polish forest did not envisage where life would carry her. She had no idea that at ten years old, she would be a schoolgirl in London; at twenty, a university graduate in North Carolina; at thirty, a professor of Slavic linguistics in New York; at forty, a professor of English applied linguistics in Hong Kong; or at fifty, a professor of English and intercultural communication in Macao. Even today, she cannot fully foresee who and where she will be at age sixty. But wherever she has gone, she has always carried inside her a piece of the Polish forest. This is what I mean by saying that the individual, even in all of her particularity, is a locus of culture. So what does carrying the Polish forest inside me mean to me?

First of all, there is the home hearth. This is quite literally a fire, the fire in the fireplace. It is not so far removed from the ancestral fires of the hunter-gatherers. We light the fire with wood from the pines that grow outside, perhaps with chopped fallen branches, and with twigs and pinecones. The burning wood crackles and leaves a smokily fragrant ash. We bake potatoes in the ash under the fire and their skin becomes charred with embers. In the fire, we roast sausages and onions on barbecue skewers. We sit around the fire chatting happily, quite unmindful of the passage of time. We tell stories about our past, re-living every retelling, even though we may have heard the story before. The fire makes our cheeks glow. Eventually we feel drowsy and lulled. The sleeping cot is only a few feet away and woolen blankets wrap up all the warmth. We drift peacefully into the realm of dreams.

When I carry this memory with me, all is well with the world. It is my undisturbed inner peace, my *shalom*.

Secondly, the taste of tart blueberries. Botanically, they are called huckleberries or edelberries; they are smaller and more intense than the cultivated kind. They grow on tiny shrub-like plants on the forest floor, with distinctive small green leaves. Sometimes you can find a whole patch of them and pick the same several square meters for hours. A jar of berries, so easy to buy from locals at the roadside, could have taken hours to pick. When we eat them raw, our tongues turn purple. When we return from the forest, our fingers have indigo-colored stains. And a favorite summer dish is dumplings with cooked wild blueberry filling, eaten with sugar and cream.

This intimate relationship with wild food is a tactile, visual and olfactory experience. Memories hit all the senses. The hunter-gatherer’s food is hard to come by. It takes a long time

to forage enough berries to eat one's fill. Perhaps that is why, in Polish food culture, there is a "waste not, want not" mentality. You never leave uneaten food on the plate. In my family, if a child leaves some food on his plate, he will either be scolded by his parents until he finishes, or the adults will eat the leftovers. My grandfather Stefan used to say, "Lepiej żeby się żołądek zepsuł, niż żeby dary Boże się zmarnowały" ("It is better even to get an upset stomach than to waste the gifts from God.")

Finally, that peculiar Polish ritual of mushroom-gathering. What it has produced in me is a mind-map. This is something I used to share with Mariola Kowalska, a local girl from Rybienko, who was my best friend. We used to know each bush and tree. Mushrooms are fungi which grow out of an underground structure called a mycelium. Each species of mushroom is symbiotic with a specific species of tree. As the village gradually expanded and slowly became a popular summer resort, sometimes a new house would be built among the trees by incoming city dwellers eager for their own piece of country life, fencing off a patch of land as private property. Mariola and I would mourn the loss of our favorite mushroom patches, and watch enviously through the fence as the new owners would enjoy their edible treasures. There were dainty yellow *chanterelles* (in Polish, "kurki"), sweet-smelling brown-capped *funghi porcini* (in Polish, "borowiki" or "prawdziwki"), and many other kinds of mushrooms, each with its distinctive look and taste. Some would grow under pine trees, some under birch trees, some under oaks. Sometimes, if there was a house or road construction nearby, it would disturb the mycelium, and the mushrooms would stop growing under that tree. Perhaps the builders were quite unaware they had caused this loss of habitat.

What this instilled in me is the value of reverence for nature. I remember another example from harvest time in the village. I watched several farmers, some old, some young, go out to the fields with traditional scythes to harvest the rye. Their joy was palpable. They did not mind the effort at all. They were focused on the success of their crop. "How I love living in the countryside and breathing the fresh air!" one of them exclaimed with complete sincerity. When we are close to nature, it feels good to be alive. We appreciate the hard work that brings food to the table, and we savor the food. And most of all, we revere the miracle of life, the great natural rhythms and cycles that bring life into being, and the enjoyment that life brings.

Feeling the warmth of home; cherishing the gift of food; respecting the grand cycles of nature and the miracle of life – of course these values are not exclusively Polish. Culture can be experienced in an infinite variety of ways. However, for me, one of these ways is to carry inside me my memories of the "Polish land" – "polska ziemia" – a land of milk and honey, forests, rivers and fields.

## Reference

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**Author Note**

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